

Tour Report

Brazil's Big Five Photo Safari

19 October – 1 November 2022

Giant anteater



Jaguar



Brazilian tapir



Giant river otter



Compiled by Emma Healey

A trip including some of the highlights of Brazil, seeking out the 'Big Five' that can be found in these enormous wetlands: jaguar, giant river otter, Brazilian tapir, hyacinth macaw and giant anteater. Covering an area of 195,000 square kilometres (or 15 times the size of the Okavango Delta, for those who have been to Botswana), the Pantanal encompasses a lot of land, and we can only access a fraction of it, but the whole area is teeming with amazing wildlife. This trip visits the famous 'jaguar land' area of the North Pantanal and then travels by boat past the beautiful scenic Amolar Mountains to the south, where the focus is the giant anteater. An 'off-the-beaten-track' visit to Brazil, taking in some incredible sights along the way.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Cuiabá (via Sao Paulo)

Wednesday 19 October 2022

Most of us had travelled together from Heathrow, but the full group met up at Cuiabá airport.

Day 2: Transfer to Transpantaneira

Thursday 20 October 2022

On arrival in Cuiaba, we were met by our two guides: Marcos and Andre. We were shown outside, where we met our driver for the first section of the journey and were driven a couple of minutes round the corner to a restaurant for brunch before getting back into the minibus and heading for Santa Teresa. It took approximately one and a half hours to drive on tarmac roads to Pocone, and from there, we joined the Transpantaneira - a dirt road connecting Pocone and Porto Jofre. It's 147 kilometres long, has 122 bridges, and is a wildlife haven. As we began our journey, we started to see birds, including a rhea with six babies, various species of heron, and a mix of roadside hawk, savannah hawk, green ibis, jabiru and wood stork. In addition to the birds, we were treated to a lovely view of a young Brazilian tapir, which surprised us by appearing at the end of a field by the road. It came through the fence, and the guides thought it would come across the road to the water, but it was quite young and seemed to rethink its decision, running back through the field. We also saw a crab-eating fox, several marsh deer, and a couple of young coati which were foraging in the roadside lagoon for a while before crossing the road to follow their mother. After stopping to photograph them and some of the birdlife, we continued towards Santa Teresa (Southwild Pantanal Lodge). The goal was to arrive in time to visit the ocelot hide.



As we approached the lodge, the sky looked very menacing, and the light had all but disappeared. We spotted a marsh deer and a family of three great horned owls in a tree not too far from the road, but they were partially hidden by branches, and the low light meant it was difficult to photograph them. As we attempted to get a few good shots, a crab-eating fox trotted towards us and veered off into the bushes not too far away – what a lovely welcome!

We quickly found our rooms and then met in the dining room, but as the weather had not improved, we decided not to go out into the forest on the first evening. Instead, we relaxed with a celebratory drink after our long journey, before having dinner and getting an early night so that we would be able to make the most of the next day.

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As with most tropical locations, rain encourages frogs to come out and play or hunt, so a few of us got our cameras out and captured some frog portraits and other creative images before also heading off to bed.

Day 3: Southwild Pantanal lodge

Friday 21 October 2022

Thanks to our early night, we were all up early and ready to head out on a pre-breakfast walk along the road from the lodge. We stopped off and found the owls still in the same tree, and the light was slightly better, so we spent a bit of time with them. Some of the group decided to carry on with Marcos and see what they could find, but those who didn't feel comfortable with the muddy conditions came back to the lodge with myself and Andre, where we photographed the wildlife in the garden, including a crab-eating fox, capybara, kingfishers and some water birds. As the light improved, the birds started coming to the feeders; we watched and photographed red cardinals, saffron finches and others. Those on the walk had spotted some similar bird species and a marsh deer.



After breakfast, we set off for a boat trip on the Pixaim River. This was a great opportunity to get some portrait shots of storks, herons, wood rails and kingfishers, and we were also treated to a very good variety of ringed, Amazon and a pygmy kingfisher. A ringed kingfisher swooped in, giving us the opportunity to capture some diving and in-flight shots.



As we were coming to the end of the accessible part of the river, we spotted a giant river otter - our first of the trip. Andre revealed his hidden talent for imitating otter sounds, which enabled the group to get some lovely shots as the otter was clearly intrigued by whatever he was saying! A few drops of rain managed to get through, but thankfully nothing too heavy, so we spent a lovely couple of hours meandering along the river, photographing the wildlife.

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After we returned to the lodge, everyone enjoyed some free time before lunch. Some of the group made the most of it by photographing the local birdlife. There are some lovely trees along the edge of the river favoured by hunting kingfishers, so I advised those who were interested to wait and try and get some images of them. The free time was also an opportunity for the group to experiment with macro photography by taking pictures of the insects and flowers around the lodge. There were a few plants with many leaf hoppers, which were very obedient subjects. As well as these, we discovered a variety of jumping spiders, damselflies and moths.



While exploring the lodge, we noticed that one of the crab-eating foxes was hanging around close to the mango tree. As we watched it, it took some mangoes and ran back to the other side of the fence to eat them. Although it was nervous, it was not too bothered by our proximity, so we managed to get some lovely shots of an animal that you rarely see during the day.

After lunch, we decided to walk past the ocelot hide, into the woods, to look for birds, insects and potentially monkeys. After encountering a wave of mosquitoes we thought better of our original plan and went in search of other wildlife around the lodge grounds. Our intention was to find yellow-beaked red cardinals, saffron finches, and wattled jacanas, but we were visited by several other birds, including a beautiful woodcreeper. The constant noise from resident frogs, which had been invigorated by the rain, reminded us of a Scalextric set!

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By late afternoon, the clouds had cleared, and after some caipirinhas, we headed out to the ocelot hide.

There are never any guarantees with the ocelot, but we didn't have to wait long for a sighting. We had just sat down, when a beautiful spotty face appeared and headed to the logs. The ocelot made quick work of the food that had been put out, and within five minutes of the food being replaced, it was back for more! What a fantastic chance for to photograph this elusive species. On the two subsequent visits, the group could take some video footage of this beautiful cat. We then returned to the lodge for a shower, followed by dinner.

Most of the group took the opportunity for another early night, but I went outside with my torch to see if I could spot anything. I saw a tarantula in the tree outside, so I ran back to see if anyone was still awake. A couple of the group were keen to come and see it, so we spent some time photographing it as it moved around the tree.



Day 4: Transpantaneira - Porto Jofre - Jaguar Land

Saturday 22 October 2022

Our bags were packed and ready before breakfast at 06:30, so we said our goodbyes and left Santa Teresa at 07:00, starting the drive south. It's a long drive, which can take around five hours, so we try not to stop too frequently, but there was a lot to see.

On one of the stops, our driver spotted some beautiful scarlet blackbirds in some bushes. We also stopped for black collared hawks, spoonbills, caiman and storks. On a bathroom break, we saw hyacinth macaws, a toucan and a huge grasshopper!



We arrived at Porto Jofre just after 11:00, and the sun was strong. We had a few minutes while the luggage was loaded onto the boats, during which we spotted

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some capuchin monkeys eating mangoes from the tree. We tried to get some shots, but it was a mother with a baby, so they were very shy and jumped off into the forest.

Then it was time to hit the San Lauro River with our wonderful boat driver, Manoel. Just as we passed the entrance of the Three Brothers River, we came across six boats that had either stopped or were making slow progress along the riverbank, which piqued our excitement. After some searching, we saw our first female jaguar swimming along the riverbank, clearly looking for food. We stayed with her for around half an hour before heading to our new lodge for lunch. A fantastic first jaguar sighting!



We spent the afternoon on the river jaguar spotting, making our way down the Carmino River towards the three brothers and then continuing south. Around one corner, we were suddenly faced with a large male jaguar sitting on a beach. He had just emerged from the river and was drying off. For a few seconds he sat there, enjoying the sun's warmth, but then slipped out of sight – unfortunately, before the second boat had time to join us.



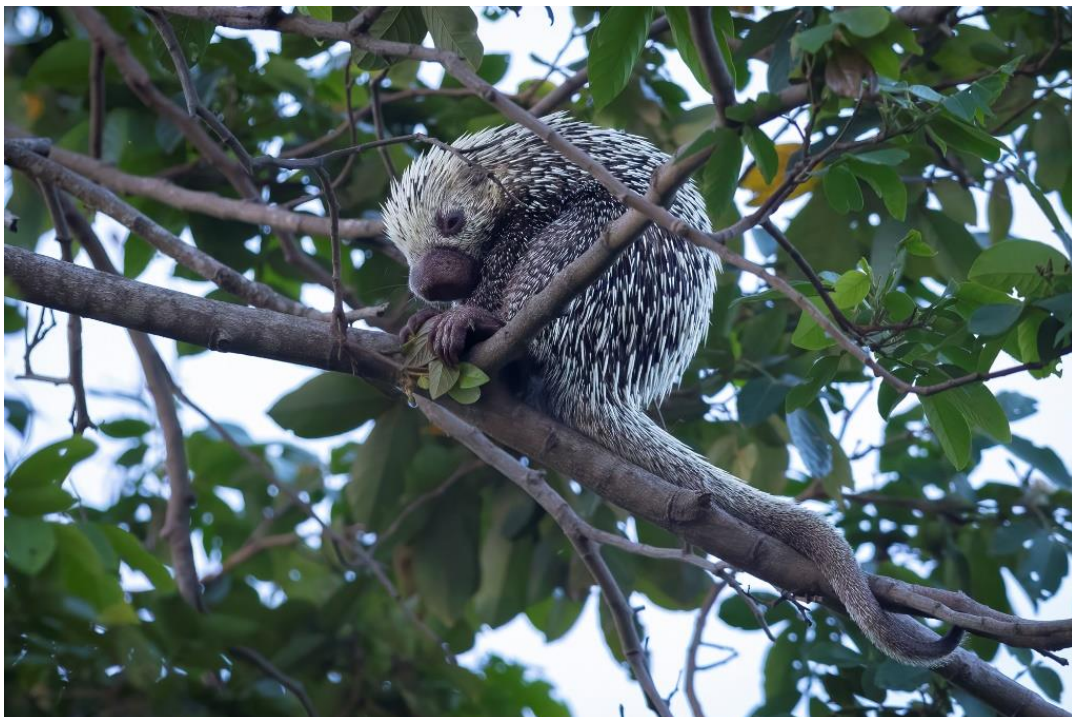
Further down the river, we passed several caiman, capybara, storks, and herons. Turning into a beautiful channel, we stopped to photograph a black vulture that was walking along a beach. Suddenly, we spotted something dark up ahead, bathing in the river in the fading sunlight. As we looked closer, we realised it was two Brazilian tapirs enjoying a cool bath in the water. We approached very slowly, but they were timid, and after swimming along a little way in the river, they got out and disappeared into the tall grasses.

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As we rejoined the Cuiaba River, a male Amazon kingfisher was standing guard at the edge of the channel. He let us get very close and take some lovely portrait shots of him. We made our way back towards the lodge, as the light was getting very low, and some different birds and butterflies started to emerge, including the blue morpho – much too quick to photograph but fantastic to see flying around. We also stopped for a capped heron perching in a tree in the last rays of sunlight. Speeding along the river, we spotted a porcupine in a tree very close to the river, so we turned and went back to photograph it. The light was feeble, but we couldn't resist such a fantastic sighting!



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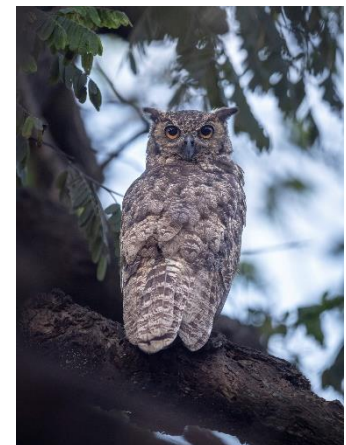
After dinner, a few of us went outside to photograph some scorpions with a UV light. As we were looking for them in the leaf litter, there were loud noises above, so Marcos went to investigate and found three porcupines eating the fruit in the mango tree above us. How exciting!



Day 5: Jaguar Land

Sunday 23 October 2022

We had an early start, with breakfast at 05:30. Before breakfast I had spotted a great horned owl in a tree and alerted the group. We got a few photos of it before sitting down to eat. Heading down the Carmino River, we were greeted by a range of herons, caiman doing their mating dance (vibrating the water above their middle), and plenty of small birds waking up to stretch their wings. The sounds at this time of the morning are really special - we were even treated to a chorus of howler monkeys, letting us know it was time to be up!



As we started down the Three Brothers River, we passed the channel known for great potoo and whistling bats. A boat was stopped nearby, as a Jaguar had been seen. We slowed, and waited, but couldn't see it, so we spent some time photographing the bats and the potoo before coming back out to the river. As we started to move, Manoel spotted the Jaguar moving onto the river on to a fallen trunk. She sat there for a few minutes, before swimming back across the river. We had beautiful views of her as she crossed and disappeared into the undergrowth.



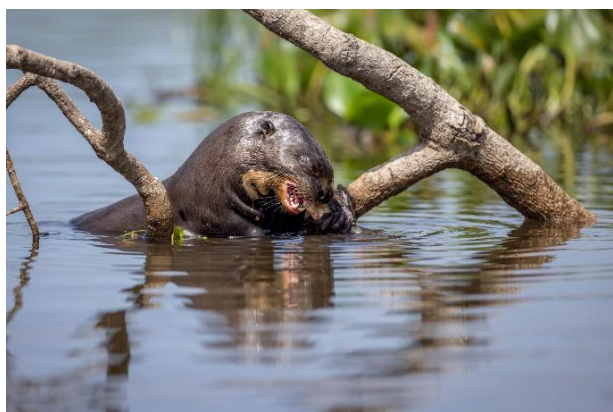
We continued down to the black channel - one of the most popular spots to discover jaguars in the Northern Pantanal. After a couple of minutes, Manoel spotted some giant river otters swimming up ahead. As we were lifting out cameras and taking the first photos of the otters, Manoel excitedly pointed at a jaguar in the water.

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The otters became very animated and started shouting to defend themselves against the jaguar. They rose out of the water and shouted into the water hyacinth. The jaguar slunk off on the bank and into the bushes. Despite her disappearing out of view, the otters remained unsettled and spent some time swimming up and down that stretch of the river to let her know they were there.

We moved further up the channel to see what else we could find and soon came across some boats, where we learned that another jaguar had been seen up a tree. We glimpsed a few spots through binoculars, but otherwise it eluded us, so we returned to where the otters had been. They were still there, and were more relaxed now having started fishing. We watched them catching catfish and took photographs as two of them decided to eat the fish within view.



Returning to the lodge for lunch, we were joined by Andrew - one of the resident naturalists - who gave us a presentation on jaguars.

After lunch and a rest, we were back out on the boats. As we were speeding down the Three Brothers River, we came across a juvenile savannah hawk, which was calling out, and then saw its mother on the next tree with a catch. As we slowed to watch it, the mother flew over and gave the food to its young. The juvenile started to peck at the meal and then ... dropped it! One of our group managed to get a shot of what turned out to be a frog as it fell to the floor. The poor young hawk was very upset about the whole incident.

We then turned into a channel, which had previously been too low to access, but after a bit of rain had filled up. We moved along it slowly in the beautiful light. A couple of rufous-tailed jacamars appeared, so we started to photograph them and slowly moved as close as we could to get a better angle.

On the way back, after slowing to photograph some parrots, we ran aground on top of some dense patches of water hyacinth and had to radio the other boat to come and rescue us! Luckily it was quite a fast manoeuvre, which also granted us some time to get out the macro lenses and photograph some impressive bugs living in the hyacinth. It's a great place to look for them, and generally you can see a wide range of dragonflies, damselflies, leafhoppers and more.



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We made our way safely out of the channel and into the wider riverways that would lead us back to the lodge. The light was stunning, and the sunset was promising to be a lovely colourful one, so we slowed to see what we could find along the way. A southern screamer perched on top of a bush gave us a beautiful silhouette, then a woodpecker stopped in a perfect position to provide us with another silhouette against a backdrop of pink clouds. Nightjars began flying around us in large numbers, so we stopped the boat to try and capture some images of them against the beautiful setting sun. You can't let a good sunset go to waste!



Day 6: Jaguar Land

Monday 24 October 2022

On the sixth morning, the sky was a lot clearer, suggesting that the light could be much harsher during the day. As the boats left the lodge, we very quickly came across a couple of giant river otters. They were very noisy, and their behaviour was quite erratic. It transpired that they were trying to confuse us to protect their young. After a while they calmed down and got on with another important job - breakfast! One caught an eel and the other a catfish, their common breakfast of choice.



We continued, only stopping when we saw howler monkeys and various birds in the lovely morning light, including a southern screamer, a young roadside hawk and a striped cuckoo. We reinvestigated the channel we had got stuck on the day before, but there was not much happening, so we turned back and went down to the black channel. There were no jaguars to be found – perhaps they were staying in the shade to shelter from the strong sun, so we made our way back up the river to the lodge for lunch.

During the break, Andrew gave the group a presentation on giant river otters. Then Emma helped some of the group to improve their photographic skills by showing them back button focus.

In the afternoon, we travelled west along the river and joined the much wider Cuiaba River. We went down the channel, where we had seen the Brazilian tapirs, and slowly made our way past some of the most beautiful scenery we had seen on the trip so far.

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As we continued, the landscape opened up on either side of us to reveal wetland areas, inhabited by snail kites, kingfishers, various eagles and storks - a buffet! We stopped to photograph the snail kites as they fished in the waterways, along with some kingfishers. One group went further down the channel and came across a crossing herd of water buffalo - a surprise sighting! Our boat took the afternoon slowly, enjoying the wonderful views and the birds in the sunshine. Suddenly, a fish jumped out of the water and into the boat (giving us a huge shock!) What a huge jump for a little fish.

As the sun was going down, we were all willing a jaguar to walk across one of the beaches in the beautiful light, but this time we were out of luck. However, we did find a skimmer and a family of capybaras before the light faded.

At the lodge, a few of us went out to battle the mosquitoes and spend some more time photographing the smaller residents with our macro lenses.



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As Monday had been a quiet jaguar day, on Tuesday morning we went straight down the Three Brothers River to the black channel, passing a capybara having a 'Pantanal massage' and a beautiful iguana basking in the morning sunlight.



Next, we came across the family of giant river otters fishing in the black channel, but we had no time to even point our cameras at them before a couple of boats passed us calling "rapido!" and pointing in the other direction. We turned around and followed them, speeding down to the edge of the Piquiri River, just in time to see a young male jaguar crossing to the other side.

He was calling a female, possibly his sister, but we couldn't see where she was. The jaguar stuck his head out of the water hyacinth again briefly, still calling for her, but then he disappeared up the bank and into the shade. After it was clear that he wasn't coming back. We returned to the black channel and the otters were still fishing, seeming very happy to pose for us while they ate their breakfast. After exploring the rest of the channel, we made our way back to the lodge via the Cuiaba River, where some capybaras and an osprey kept us entertained until lunchtime.

In the afternoon, Manoel received reports of a jaguar asleep in a tree along the black channel, so we made our way down the riverways towards the location. After looking for the sleeping cat in the trees along the channel, we finally came across an individual known as Stella sleeping on a branch in a non-accessible part of the river. We waited, with a great view but at some distance, but as cats do so well, she continued sleeping. She did move a few times, lifting her head to look at us, but didn't come any closer. We headed back up the river for our final night at the lodge, enjoying some caipirinhas as a pre-dinner farewell drink.



Day 8: Porto do Capivara to Flotel

Wednesday 26 October 2022

In the morning it was time to say goodbye to the team at Porto do Capivara and head to our next stop at the Flotel. We made our way down the Carmino River, stopping en route for an iguana basking in the sun on the edge of a bush. As we photographed it, it turned out there were (at least) three more in the bush, so we stayed for a while to photograph them. When we were iguanaed out, we moved on to Three Brothers River and made our way south towards the Piquiri River.

Just before the start of the Piquiri River we came across a lot of boats watching a jaguar crossing the river. We waited for a while, but it was in the undergrowth against the light, so we carried on as we had a destination to get to. The target this morning was hyacinth macaws.

Arriving at Piquiri Farm at about 08:30, we were greeted by some jabiru storks and a swarm of butterflies on the beach. As we were heading up to the farm, we climbed a wooden staircase, and ahead of us on the path we noticed something moving and realised it was a snake - our first sighting of the trip. The guides identified it as a tiger rat snake and we followed it along the ground for a while before it climbed into the branches of a mango tree and disappeared into the leaves.

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We walked into the main area of the farm, which had a number of palm trees filled with hyacinth macaws. We spent some time photographing the macaws, which were preening each other, interacting, and posing quite nicely for us. The light was fairly harsh, so we aimed for the birds in the bigger trees with a high canopy, which flattened out the light as much as possible.

Then everyone had some time to explore before we left - some chose to rest and have a coffee, some focused on the birds, and a few of us found a black and white tegu in the dead leaves to photograph as best we could. When there are no clouds, the light at 09:00 can feel as strong as it does at midday!

After an hour or so at the farm, we made our way back to the boat, stopping for a couple of minutes to photograph the butterflies on the beach by the water. Then we made our way to the Flotel to check in and have lunch.



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After eating, we decided to leave a little earlier than planned, since it was our last afternoon boat trip in jaguar land. We stopped about five minutes from the Flotel to photograph a group of three immature jabiru storks. We then continued to the black channel as a jaguar was spotted swimming in the hyacinth, but it quickly vanished out of sight. Our choices were to wait and see if it would come back, or follow a lead that two jaguars were sleeping in the shade further up the Three Brothers River – what a decision!

We decided to go in search of the two cats, and found them, as reported, resting under a tree. Mum was keeping watch as her juvenile son slept. We spent a while photographing the jaguars in the shade, but hoped that they would move into better light. Gradually they started to stir (as did the many boats watching!) and after a couple of false starts, they moved along the beach one after the other – it was exactly what we had been waiting for!



We spent over an hour with them, and were treated to some beautiful bonding behaviour, including nuzzling and playtime.

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What a way to end this part of the trip! Once the jaguars disappeared into the undergrowth, we decided to make our way back towards the Flotel, just in case we could see anything else on the way in the lovely light. A black collared hawk posed for us in the beautiful last warm rays of sun, so we returned to the Flotel very happy customers.

Day 9: Jaguar Land to Corumba

Thursday 27 October 2022

We were ready for an early start as this was always going to be a long travel day. Leaving the Flotel at 06:00 in two passenger boats, with the food and luggage split between us, we made our way south to Corumba with a lot of land to cover. We passed lots of caiman and birds along the way and made steady progress, slowing slightly for beaches full of cormorants and yellow-billed terns, striated herons flying along the shore, anhingas sunning themselves, and spoonbills flying overhead near the Amolar Mountains. Approaching and passing the Amolar Mountains offers a lovely variation in the landscape and some beautiful scenery.



After travelling 240 miles, we arrived in Corumba and said our goodbyes to Manoel and other boat driver. Our new driver, Marcio, then took us to the hotel in a minibus.

We had a couple of hours to relax, shower and stretch our legs, before leaving for dinner, so some of the group had a rest, while others chose to explore the town. Dinner was at Miguei's - a lovely local restaurant offering a varied menu including local dishes. Most of the group enjoyed trying the local delicacies, including the steak and fish, as well as some caipirinhas of course.

Day 10: Corumba to Bonito

Friday 28 October 2022

We left at around 06:30 to drive to our next stop in Bonito. Driving along a main road with beautiful scenery on either side, we passed jabiru storks, limpkins, and some capybaras in the grasses that were making the most of the water and other areas to hide. The journey took around four hours, but we stopped en route for lunch at Estancia Mimosa. Mimosa was an oasis, with a lovely forest walk where butterflies, insects, birds, red and green and blue and yellow macaws could be seen. There was also a lake, which had a number of young caiman basking on the edge. A couple of tegu also briefly ventured out of the bushes to pose for photos. As we left, we spotted our first brocket deer by the road.

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We arrived at the lodge, checked in, and then had a quick turnaround to leave again at 14:30 to start our search for anteaters. We went to the fields, which had been successful last time, but we couldn't see any in there, so we drove back out the other side of town. Andre spotted a mother anteater with a baby on her back, so we stopped and entered the field. We managed to avoid her smelling us and get on the right side of her to take some lovely images of her and the baby (who somehow also had a stick in its arms!) before she retreated into the trees.



We continued on, spotting more anteaters, but as they didn't come closer we spent some time watching them from afar. We had dinner at the hotel, then some of us explored the lodge grounds with our macro lenses, discovering cicadas emerging, then weevils, moths, mantis and many more exciting species.

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Day 11: Bonito

Saturday 29 October 2022

The hotel kindly agreed to serve breakfast for the group at 05:40 and we left at 06:00. We collected Andre en route and headed off to the Buraco D'Araras. It was a slow start as it was very windy – but there were a few buff-necked ibises flying around to help everyone practice their camera settings. Gradually, the macaws began to fly around, and a blue and yellow macaw landed among the red and green ones in a tree, causing a stir.



A few of the group enjoyed some macro photography on the trails while waiting for the macaws to become more active, and after we had had our fill of birds in flight, the group went back to reception, where a woodcreeper was posing nicely for us.

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We left the Buraco to sounds of thunder approaching and, as we began to drive, the rain started to fall and a big storm hit. We were only going around 15 minutes away, to the Rio do Prata for lunch, so we got out of the minibus and found a big table to sit at for lunch, hoping the rain would ease. The lunch was a delicious buffet made from locally grown and sourced meat and vegetables. Once we had finished, and some members of the group had taken a quick walk to photograph some slightly soggy turquoise fronted parrots, we decided to make our way back to the lodge.

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Driving past huge forks of lightning, we approached Bonito. Ahead was sun and blue sky. We left again at 15:30 and headed back out to the fields.

We saw a giant anteater in a field quite far away - she had a baby on her back, so we decided to move towards her, but she disappeared into the forest. Passing another couple of fields with some rhea and red-legged seriema, we spotted a burrowing owl, on a pile of stone, so we stopped for a few photos. When we stopped, we noticed another one on a post much closer. As a couple of us walked back to the pile of stone, a third one flew in and landed on the grass, by a gate, so we edged closer. It was very obliging, letting us get some lovely images.

Carrying on with our search for anteaters, we went to some more fields and spotted one coming in our direction - moving into the wind and the golden light. We stayed on the road initially, then a few of us went through the fence as it was coming towards us. The light and wind direction stayed in our favour, and we had the most incredible experience as the anteater came within about 2 metres of us and gave everyone fantastic views. An unforgettable experience.



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In the evening, we ate at a local restaurant, recommended by Andre, called Juanitas. Their signature dish was a huge pacu fish that was split between three people (but was probably a large enough portion for 4-5 people!) After a delicious dinner we said goodbye to Andre, as we were leaving the next morning.

Day 12: Bonito/Campo Grande

Sunday 30 October 2022

We enjoyed a relaxing start to the day. Some of us were up early to make the best of the morning light and were treated to a wonderful display by some black capuchin monkeys eating fruit off the trees in the lodge gardens.



As well as these cheeky monkeys, there were the agutis, toco toucans, parakeets and more to keep us entertained.



We had some more macro opportunities with cicadas, weevils, mantids, spiders, caterpillars and finally a beautiful common potoo, which was spotted just outside the lodge grounds. The whole group had time to walk out and get some lovely shots of it resting on a branch by the road.

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We started our journey towards Campo Grande, stopping for lunch en route at a brasserie is Sindrolandia.

As we came into Campo Grande, the clouds started to look quite menacing, so we decided to try and see the wildlife before checking into the hotel. The first place we looked for coatis was unsuccessful, as it was still quite hot, so changed our plans. We drove to the hotel, checked in, and then went to the Avenue do Macaws, to wait for them to return near sunset. They started arriving as the sun was going down. We managed to photograph some red-bellied, blue and yellow macaws, as well as a hummingbird that kept us entertained while we waited.



We then returned to the hotel, packed our camera equipment away, and went down to the restaurant in the hotel for our last dinner, before heading off to our rooms to pack ahead of our flights in the morning.

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Day 13: Fly home**Monday 31 October 2022**

It was time to say goodbye to Brazil. After a quick breakfast and coffee, we caught an early flight to Sao Paulo to connect with our onwards flight home, arriving the following day.

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