

Tour Report

Brazil's Big Five Photo Safari

8 - 21 September 2023

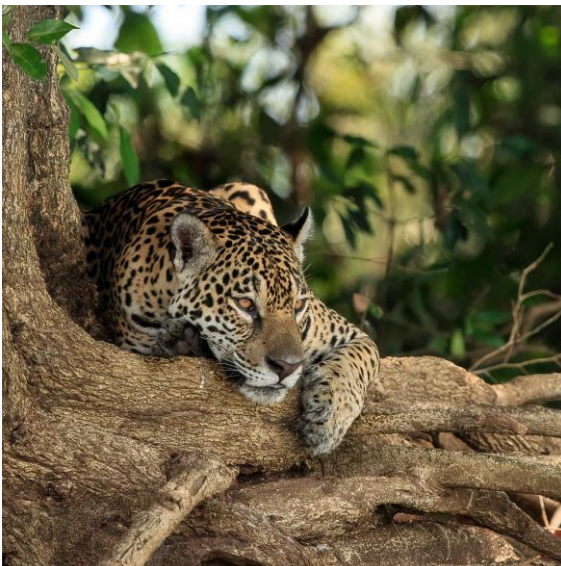
Giant river otter



Ocelot



Jaguar



Giant anteater



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to São Paolo**Friday 8 September 2023**

The group had a late, overnight flight from London Heathrow to São Paolo in Brazil. As we were flying in from several different locations, we weren't all able to meet before we boarded. However, despite a slight delay in boarding, we were soon in the air and on our way to Brazil.

Day 2: São Paolo to Cuiabá and on to SouthWild Lodge**Saturday 9 September 2023**

We arrived in São Paolo early in the morning and gathered at baggage reclaim. It had taken a while to pass through immigration, so we quickly made our way to catch the airport shuttle to the domestic terminal. It took us around five minutes on the bus and soon we were checking in for our onward flight to Cuiabá.

Almost as soon as we had all cleared security, we boarded the flight and were on our way. With another smooth flight behind us, we arrived in Cuiabá and collected our bags. It wasn't long before we were greeted at Arrivals by our local guide, Tom. It was now late morning and with all of our luggage on the minibus, we made our way to a nearby Brazilian BBQ house, where the group enjoyed an excellent first meal in the country.

After lunch, it was time to head out of Cuiabá and make our way to the town of Poconé – often referred to as the gateway to the northern Pantanal. We stopped briefly, before continuing south on the world-famous Transpantaneira Highway. This iconic road is famed for its numerous wooden bridges and the huge diversity of wildlife that can be seen along the way.

We were able to enjoy some great sightings as we slowly made our way along the road in an open-sided safari vehicle. The rich birdlife was immediately apparent. Within the first hour, as we worked our way



along the unsurfaced road, we enjoyed views of greater rhea, toco toucans, jabiru storks and too many savannah hawks to count. Then there were the wading birds – feathered species galore – such as roseate spoonbill, snowy egret, great egret, crowned heron, plumbeous ibis and so many more. The highlight though

was a tapir, which was wallowing in a pool by the roadside – although photography was tricky, it was great to see one so close to the road.

After approximately four hours on the road, we finally made it to our first lodge. SouthWild is nestled on the banks of the Pixaim River and as we arrived, a group of Gauchos were riding along the track in front of us, while a couple of capybaras greeted us as we climbed down off the safari truck. A refreshing juice was served, but we didn't have long to gather our camera gear before setting off on a short walk to the nearby ocelot hide. With heavy eyes after a long day of travel, we sat and waited for the ocelot to appear. Unfortunately, on this occasion, we were not rewarded as the ocelot decided to keep itself hidden away and out of sight.

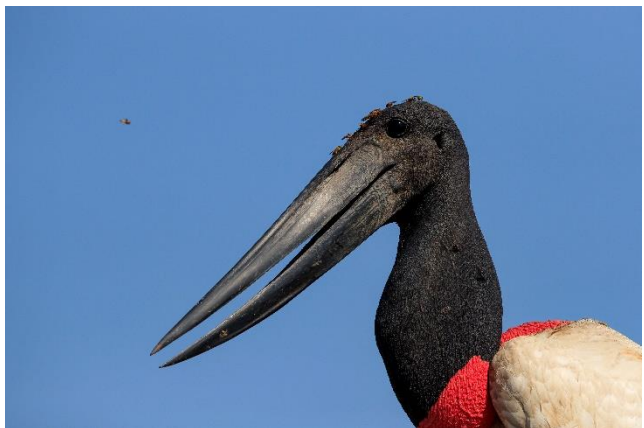
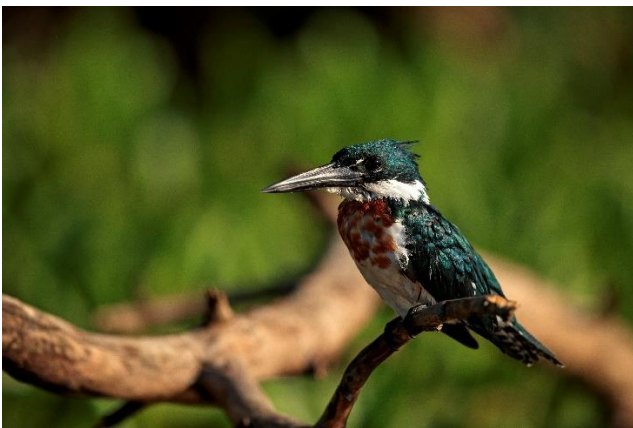
And so, it was time to return to the lodge for our first dinner together. The food was excellent, but it wasn't too long before we said goodnight and retreated to our rooms for a very well-earned rest.

Day 3: SouthWild Lodge

Sunday 10 September 2023

This morning we woke early and headed out on a walk into the nearby forest at dawn. It started off rather quiet, but as the sun continued to rise we could hear a group of howler monkeys – their call booming across the vast landscapes of the Pantanal. We made our way towards the calls and enjoyed watching the family as they moved through the trees. With the sun getting ever higher in the sky, it wasn't long before we started to make our way back to the lodge.

Upon our return, we enjoyed a delicious breakfast in the dining area before gathering our things for our morning boat trip. The boat excursions are perfect for photography. With the group split across two different boats, we were soon on the water. Almost immediately, we were enjoying some excellent photographic opportunities with both ringed and Amazon kingfishers, as well as black-collared hawks and southern crested caracaras.



A little further along the river, we also enjoyed views of a large cocoi heron and a pair of jabirus, which allowed us particularly close views and enabled some excellent photography. With so many birds around, it was great to capture a mix of striking portraits, alongside some birds in flight/action imagery.

After a great session photographing the birds, we moored the boats up by one of the canopy towers and some of the group went up to see the view. It was starting to heat up as we walked back through the riverine forest to the lodge. The walk was a little quiet, probably due to the heat, except for a couple of bare-faced curassows, which flew off as we walked down the track. Making our way through the forest, we soon arrived back at the lodge and had a little downtime before reconvening for lunch.

After lunch, having spoken with the group and with Tom, we decided we would head out on the water once again and see what we could find. It wasn't long before we had a view of a small, green kingfisher and yet another ringed kingfisher. The highlights to start with were definitely a black-collared hawk, which swooped

down to pluck a fish from the surface, as well as a perched great black hawk. The great black hawk was a fantastic poser and an absolutely magnificent bird.



We continued further along the river, passed the bridge over which the Transpantaneira Highway crosses the river, and made our way through large patches of water hyacinth. It was here we found the first giant river otter of the trip. In fact, it was a magnificent encounter, with incredibly close approaches.



It must be said, that the reason we were rewarded with such fantastic photography opportunities was because the otter has been habituated and fed with fish from the river. It really was a wonderful session. The group were all rewarded with some stunning images of this giant member of the otter family.

With the light beginning to fade, and a date with a certain spotted cat (an ocelot) approaching, it was time to head back along the river to lodge. We moved at speed and therefore didn't see an awful lot on our way back. We had a little time to put things back in the rooms before grabbing what we needed and heading out to the ocelot hide once again. This time though, we were in luck.



Within only a few minutes of everyone settling into their seats, and while there was still enough light to see without any artificial lighting, there was some movement. An ocelot was slowly, but purposefully, making its way through the trees towards where we were sitting. Then it climbed up the dead tree, where some food had been placed for it. By now the lights were on to enable us to photograph the ocelot. The cat came to feed multiple times (as the meaty morsels were replaced) and then hid away in the shadows before reappearing once more. The whole group were overjoyed with this amazing encounter and the photography opportunities (despite the low light levels) were excellent. Eventually, our spotted star decided it had had enough and as quickly as it appeared, it melted away into the dark forest once more. After such a wonderful day and evening, it was time to head back to the lodge, where we enjoyed a fabulous dinner talking about the day's delights.

However, the day wasn't done just yet. There was one more adventure to be had as we headed out for a night drive in the area around the lodge. To start with, things were a little on the quiet side until Tom spotted some movement in the thick vegetation just off the road. We will never know what it was, but Tom was convinced it was a large predator, maybe even a maned wolf. We continued onwards towards the Transpantaneira, where there were several boat-billed herons feeding along the drying pools by the side of the road. As we neared the point where we planned to turn around, we spotted a large tapir. We had good views, but the conditions weren't suitable for photography. It was a fantastic sight though. As we neared the lodge, we came across a couple of crab-eating foxes. Amazingly, as we tried to see where they went, one grabbed a Brazilian cottontail (rabbit) and then quickly disappeared into the scrub. It all happened very quickly, but another amazing encounter nonetheless. Upon our return, we all said goodnight and headed straight for bed as tomorrow we would have another day's journey.

Day 4: SouthWild Lodge to Capybara Lodge

Monday 11 September 2023

This morning we woke and had our bags ready to be packed onto the truck for our drive down the Transpantaneira to Porto Joffre. We enjoyed breakfast at the lodge, before climbing aboard the safari truck for our drive down to the end of the highway.

Leaving the lodge, we noticed some other people looking up at a tree around 50 yards away from the track. A great horned owl was perched on a high branch. As we were not able to photograph it, we started our journey south after a brief pause. As we reached the main road, countless black vultures were feasting on the carcass of a cow. We weren't sure of the reason for the cow's death, but with ground to cover we kept on moving. Along the road we saw a plethora of water-loving bird species, such as wood stork and roseate spoonbill. Briefly, we stopped at a jabiru nest, where we could see an adult with three chicks. Other birds included wattled jacana, yellow-headed vulture, both ringed and Amazon kingfisher and some Guira cuckoos. We also had a very brief view of a coati as it crossed the road and darted into cover. The highlight was undoubtedly an anaconda, which was swallowing a small bird – possibly an egret. We watched it as it made its way, with a noticeable lump, towards a nearby pool and accompanying vegetation.



With the burning hot sun beaming down, we didn't try to follow the snake. Instead, we climbed aboard the vehicle and continued our journey to Porto Joffre. The bags were loaded onto one boat, while the rest of us climbed on the other. We roared up the Cuiaba River, keeping our eyes peeled for the various species that call these waterways home. Our home for the next few nights is the remote Capybara Lodge, far away from the flotels and busy waterways closer to Porto Joffre. We hoped to spend the next few days enjoying exclusive sightings. After around an hour on the water, we rounded a bend and found a couple of stationary boats, their passengers watching a jaguar in an exposed tree on the bank. It was a beautiful female with a cub. As we worked our way in towards the bank, the female moved and came out on another exposed log, posing perfectly for a little while before disappearing back into the trees. It seemed like we had lost her until we realised that she had in fact crossed the river further downstream and worked her way along the bank.

Our plan was to head to Capybara Lodge for lunch, and so, with no more photo opportunities, we continued upriver. It wasn't long though before we found a big male jaguar resting in the shade of a tree (right on the riverbank). We still had about half an hour to go and, with that in mind, we decided to head onwards for lunch before coming back again later in the afternoon. We arrived at Capybara Lodge and ensured everyone

was shown to their rooms before reconvening in the dining area for lunch. The lodge is situated in a remote area of the Pantanal and is the perfect base to explore the quieter waterways away from the Cuiaba River.

After lunch, it was time to head out on the boats (we had two for the group) and see if we could find the large male jaguar back where we had left him earlier in the day. Walking down to the jetty, a beautiful rufescent tiger heron was seen, right by the boats, then out on the water we had good views of capybara, several caiman, and white-headed marsh tyrant, alongside ringed and green kingfishers. We worked our way slowly down the narrow channel from Capybara Lodge down to the Three Brothers River, hoping that something might show itself. It wasn't until we were in the main channel that we came across a couple of other boats and learned that a jaguar which caught and killed an iguana nearby. We assumed it was likely to be the large male we had seen in the same area earlier on. To our amazement, the jaguar started to come down the bank and entered the water right in front of where we were sitting.



We were absolutely delighted as we spent the next 10 minutes quietly cruising alongside the large jaguar. He seemed to be searching for another meal in the water – possibly a caiman – but unfortunately to no avail. Eventually, he came to a sudden stop, turned back on himself and crossed the river. Within only a few seconds he was up the bank on the opposite side to where we found and him, and he was then gone. What a fabulous first day in 'jaguar country'. With countless photos and some very happy photographers, we started to make our way back for dinner. On the way, we saw boat-billed and capped herons, turquoise-fronted Amazon and ringed kingfishers. As the sun was dropping down over the horizon, it was the perfect time to open the cool boxes and enjoy a sundowner.

Arriving back at the lodge, we had enough time to freshen up before we met up for dinner in the dining room. We all hoped that the following days would offer up some equally rewarding encounters.

Day 5: Capybara Lodge & the Pantanal

Tuesday 12 September 2023

Today was our first day with both the morning and the afternoon available to explore the waterways for jaguars. Of course, there is so much more on offer in the Pantanal. It isn't all about jaguars. As the group sat

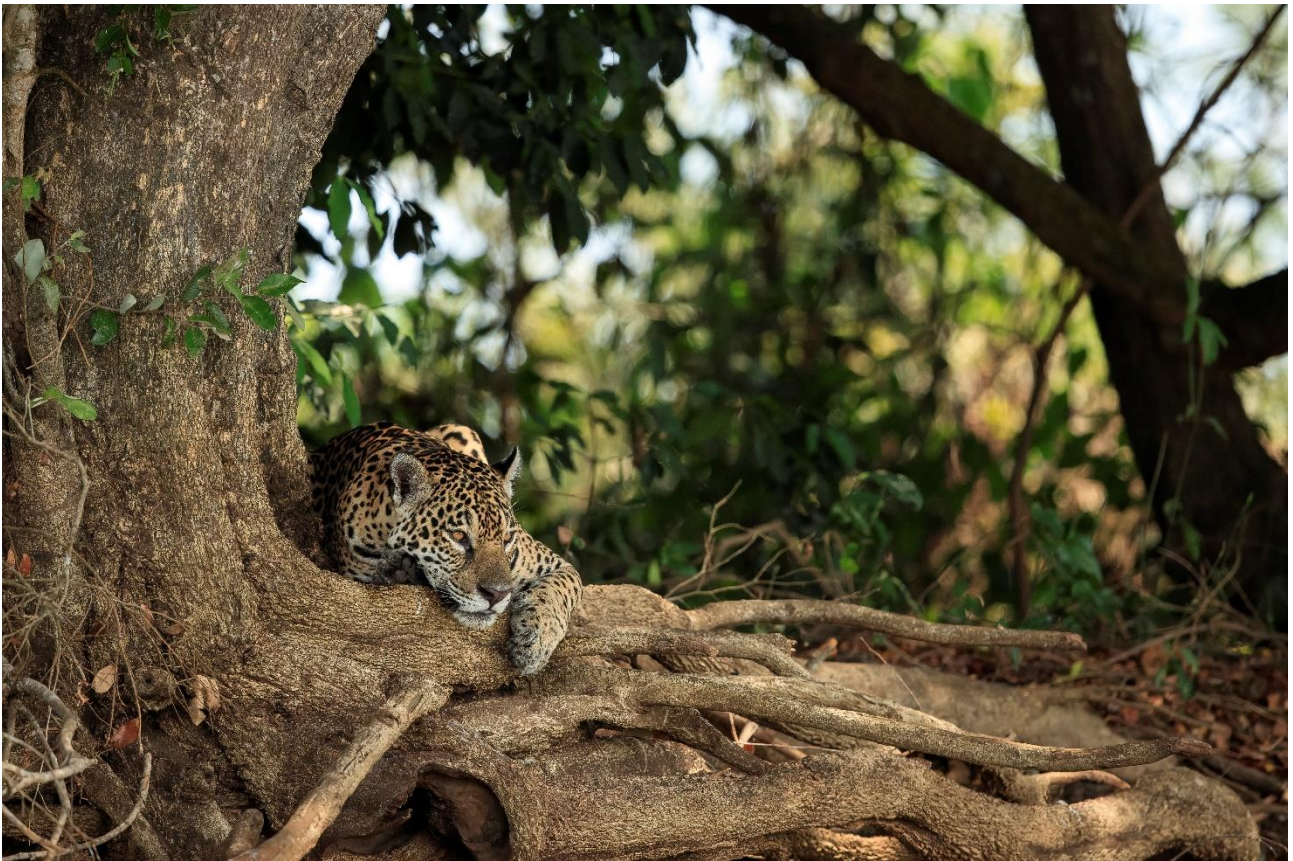
enjoying breakfast, we enjoyed the movements of agouti and bare-faced curassow outside, walking to and fro. After breakfast, we gathered our things and headed out on the water once more. Cruising slowly down the narrow channels, we enjoyed views of many caiman and crested caracaras, as well as some very relaxed capybaras. They were enjoying the warmth of the morning sun as they stretched out on a beach, posing perfectly for some photos. There was also a juvenile great black hawk posing perfectly on a tree stump by the side of the river with backlighting providing a different photographic challenge for the group.



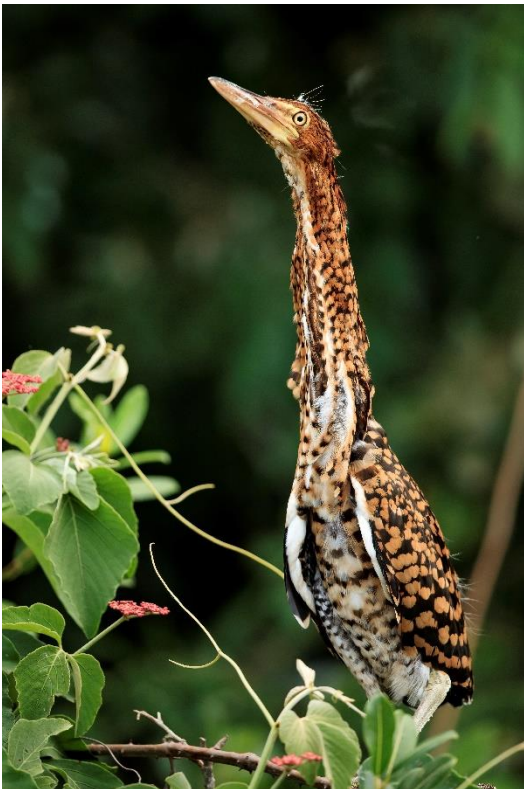
We ventured further down the main waterway of the Three Brothers River, hoping to find a jaguar resting on the bank, or if we were particularly lucky, an individual hunting. As we gently motored along, we found a pair of rufous-tailed jacamar and a posing anhinga, while further downstream a pair of giant river otters were busy grooming themselves in the hanging roots and branches of the bank's vegetation. By now the light was getting harsh and it was particularly challenging to capture any images of the otters in their branch-heavy surroundings.

While we were with the otters, we heard about a jaguar that had been seen resting in the branches of a tree. Tom warned us that there would probably be other boats about, but it might be our only chance to see a jaguar in a tree. And so we decided to leave the otters in peace and try our luck with the jaguar. We picked up some speed and went straight to the spot where she had been seen. Sure enough, there were the boats and the jaguar, the latter resting under the shade of a large tree.

Although the boats were not to our liking, members of the group were able to capture some beautiful imagery of the jaguar sitting in what looked like a particularly idyllic setting through the lens. We didn't want to stay with the other boats for long, and after taking the opportunity to capture some striking imagery, we decided to call it a morning and make our way back to the lodge. Heading back upstream, we came across a caiman which had just caught a fish. Despite our best efforts to manoeuvre the boat, the caiman wasn't overly cooperative and so we moved on, allowing it to enjoy its meal in peace. By late morning, the sun was very warm and it was the perfect time to get back to the lodge, where we could relax until our afternoon boat safari.



After lunch, we reconvened down by the boats and were soon out exploring the channels of the Pantanal once again. It was on the narrow channel heading down to the Three Brothers River that we came across a juvenile rufescent tiger heron. Arguably the fledged youngsters are more attractive than their parents, and it is the juveniles' appearance for which the species is named. In the main channel, we found a number of iguanas sitting nicely on a downed tree.



We found our first howler monkeys in this area of the Pantanal, but unfortunately, they were high up in a tree and we were unable to capture any great images. We continued on and found another group of howlers, once again high up in the trees. While we watched the primates, a crane hawk appeared underneath and started to search the cracks and holes in dead trees along the river bank. It was an absolutely beautiful bird and a delight to watch as it went about its business trying to find a meal.

We bumped into our first 'feral' water buffalos, which were drinking down at the river (this species was introduced by farmers to the area, but they are now living wild). As we approached, they soon disappeared. With the light starting to fade and time running out, we found the same giant river otters from this morning. However, it was challenging to capture images of them due to the dark roots and branches overhanging the water. And so, after another action-packed day, we had to make our way back up the river to the lodge.

The group reconvened in the dining room before heading out on a relaxed night walk around the grounds of the lodge. There were a number of large toads on the floor, while a tiny water snake was searching for a meal. Other cold-blooded species included a number of different tree frogs, including the waxy monkey tree frog. We spent some time watching this beautiful green frog as it watched a cricket – hoping for it to come close enough for an easy meal. Our guide, Tom, then heard the calls of a ferruginous pygmy owl nearby and he called back to it with a whistle. Sure enough, we were then joined by one of the birds high in a mango tree.

We'd had another action-packed day, with some great photography highlights, but it was time to retreat to our rooms and catch up on some sleep before another day exploring the Pantanal's wild delights.

Day 6: Capybara Lodge & the Pantanal

Wednesday 13 September 2023

We awoke early once more and ate our breakfast with the curassows, once again, which were wandering back and forth outside the dining room doors. It wasn't long before we were down at the jetty, where a rufescent tiger heron was using one of the boats as a perch. A few hundred yards down the channel, a pair of jabiru storks were attending their nest, while southern screamers were perched atop a tree. We enjoyed good views of a beautiful vermilion flycatcher as it perched on a branch protruding up above the water's surface. We tried to get closer for some images, but we never really got close enough to do this beautiful bird justice.



Our plan this morning was to head to the Cuiaba River and a colony of black skimmers which nest on one of the river's islands. On the way, on the Three Brothers River, we came across a number of iguanas. Although they were out enjoying the morning sun, it was tricky to get a shot of them without the branches and leaves obscuring them, but our perseverance paid off in the end as one individual decided to pose perfectly. We also saw a, usually elusive, grey-necked wood rail, which sat on an open branch for a short while and allowed us to photograph it.

We continued until we arrived at the Cuiaba River, from where we started to head north towards the colony of skimmers. As we approached the southern tip of the large island, we spotted a pair of giant river otters. They were both perched high up on a bank and would have made for a perfect subject. Unfortunately, as these otters were not used to boats, they quickly retreated out of sight, presumably into their holt.

We tried to sit and wait, but with no sign of them reappearing, it was soon time to move on. So we continued upriver until we finally reached the colony of large-billed terns and the magnificent black skimmers. While we sat at the colony, the

weather took a turn for the worse and all around us storm clouds started to build. You could feel the temperature dropping, but we focused on the birds until everyone was content. The wind was gusting now and we started to head back to the lodge, but as we left the colony we noticed more skimmers on a wind and

sand-blown bank. It provided some fantastic photography opportunities as the birds battled against the wind and it was something different from what we had already photographed.



With plenty of images banked, and the weather continuing to deteriorate, we started to make our way back to the lodge. It looked like we were going to miss the rain, but it became apparent that our journey along the narrow waterways back to the lodge was going to get a little wet. It started to rain, and then it poured. We battled to get back to the lodge as quickly as possible, trying our utmost to keep the cameras dry. We arrived back at the lodge and had a chance to dry ourselves off as well as our gear.

Unfortunately, it continued to rain well into the afternoon and despite our best efforts to head out on the boats again in the afternoon, it was very quiet. Much like us, it seemed the wildlife wanted to try and keep out of the much cooler, wetter weather. We saw several different bird species, and some howler monkeys (again high in a tree), but photographic opportunities were few and far between. We were not defeated, but we did make our way back to the lodge for dinner and an early night, looking forward to another day out exploring.

Day 7: Capybara Lodge & the Pantanal

Thursday 14 September 2023

We awoke to a cool morning with a lot of moisture in the air, but we hoped that this morning we would find a jaguar enjoying the drier river. We moved slowly along the narrow channel close to the lodge and one of the boats found a group of guira cuckoos huddled up on a branch above the river. The birds looked as though they had been thoroughly drenched, and they were obviously huddled up to keep warm in this much cooler weather. The sighting provided us with some wonderful photography opportunities – they really were charming subjects and it was a lovely way to start the day.



Working our way onwards, moving with the water's fast current, we came across a black vulture feeding on an old jaguar kill – the remnants of a caiman. There were also plenty of capybaras along the banks of the river, but otherwise, everything seemed pretty still and quiet. There seemed to be some sort of hangover from the heavy rain. Perhaps it was the cooler weather and the wildlife was just trying to warm up.



Then suddenly, upon entering a new channel which we hadn't yet explored, we came across a black-collared hawk with a fish in its vice-like grip. We were able to capture some stunning images as the bird devoured the fish at incredibly close quarters. It was amazing to see the hawk feeding and the excellent photographic opportunities were, as always, a massive bonus. When everybody had had their fill of taking pictures of the hawk, we continued along the narrow channel still hoping we might find something else.

It wasn't long before we turned a corner and noticed a couple of boats parked up along a bank with cameras raised. Sure enough, as we continued around the bend in the river, there was a jaguar resting on the bank. Surrounded by thick, vivid green vegetation, the beautiful cat was resting her eyes intermittently, and in between, she was watching the water intently, hoping that a caiman would come close enough for her to catch. Unfortunately for us, she decided to stay put. However, this meant we could spend our time photographing her. After an elongated period, she

started to yawn, a tell-tale sign that she was going to get up. The group photographed her yawning before she disappeared away from the bank and into the surrounding vegetation. We decided to stay put, just in case she reappeared. In the end, with the sun starting to burn through the clouds and the temperature starting to build, we decided to return to the lodge for our lunch and our midday break.



This afternoon, knowing the jaguar was likely to be looking for food, we decided to make our way back to the same spot and see what may happen. We made sure that we kept on the move, trying to cover ground quickly so that we would be in the right spot at the right time. It wasn't long before we were on the wider waters of the Three Brothers River and picking up speed. Tom and I were hoping that we might find another jaguar on our way to the spot where we had seen the beautiful female earlier on.

It must have been written in the stars. As we passed through a section of river with particularly high, and steep banks, there, looking over the edge was another beautiful jaguar. What was better, we had it all to ourselves. It was just our two boats with not a soul nearby. Perfect.

And so, we spent the next couple of hours, watching, photographing and enjoying the peace and solitude. Seeing a big cat in the wild is always special, but seeing a jaguar in its element, completely unfazed, is all the better. The group was treated to some wonderful portrait photography moments as the cat watched for potential prey, dozed in the warm afternoon sun, and then started to yawn. Maybe she would get up, just as the other jaguar had done earlier on. Another boat appeared, luckily with only a couple of very quiet and respectful photographers, but with their arrival, the cat decided to move into a patch with better cover. It was likely a coincidence, and it only provided us with different photographic opportunities. What a wonderful way to spend the afternoon. It isn't very often that you can spend such a prolonged period with a predator. Nor capture such a stunning collection of imagery. With such success, we called it a day and made our way back to the lodge, delighted with a wonderful day's photography.



Day 8: The Pantanal to Cuiaba, flight to Campo Grande

Friday 15 September 2023

Today was going to be another long day, as we were leaving the north of the Pantanal to head south. First, though, we had to get back to Cuiaba before our flight to Campo Grande. After breakfast, we boarded the boats from Capybara Lodge for the last time and started to head south back towards Porto Joffre. The journey started with a number of beautiful capybara along the river.



It doesn't matter how many times you see the world's largest member of the rodent family, you still can't quite get over the sight. They are charismatic and great subjects, particularly in the right light. As we had a long journey ahead of us, we weren't planning on hanging around unless we had a particularly special encounter.

We carried on south, making our way at a decent pace down the Three Brothers River. We turned off down a smaller channel as we hoped to avoid bumping into any other boats, and were almost immediately greeted by an extremely noisy family of giant river otters. We were treated to quite a show, and a choral performance, as they went up and down the channel calling loudly and catching several fish. It was then that we heard about a jaguar sitting on a dead tree on the Cuiaba River. Time was getting away from us, but we decided it was worth going to have a look. Upon our arrival, there were already a lot of boats there, but our drivers managed to get our boats into a great position to photograph the cat.



The light was already getting pretty harsh, but we managed to capture some lovely images as the jaguar rested in the branches overhanging the shallow water of the river's edge. After quite some time, she grew restless and stood up. It seemed as if she wasn't quite sure what she wanted to do. She sat down again, and we thought that might be that, but suddenly, she got up again and headed towards the bank.

Moving along the river bank, she disappeared into the undergrowth for a short while before making a picture-perfect appearance on the bank. The jaguar decided to pause in a little opening, and our boats were in the perfect position for the group to capture more striking big cat imagery. What a way to end our time in the waterways of the northern Pantanal. After another very productive morning, we really did have to pick up speed and head on to Porto Joffre where a minibus was waiting for our arrival. With a quick pit stop, our luggage was loaded and then it was time for us to board the bus and make our way back up the Transpantaneira Highway and on to Cuiaba.



We had a smooth journey north, and we made it in time for our lunch stop at SouthWild Lodge. We were treated to another excellent meal and had some time to relax, enjoying the birdlife coming to the feeders and a couple of caiman lizards wandering past. We still had a few hours to go before we would reach Cuiaba and it was a welcome relief when we arrived safe and sound at the restaurant by the airport. We enjoyed another excellent meal, before hopping across to the airport terminal, checking in for our flight and saying goodbye to our excellent guide Tom.

From Cuiaba, we caught a flight south to the city of Campo Grande in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Upon our arrival in Campo Grande, we were met by our next guide Andre, and soon aboard the bus to the comfortable hotel in the city.

Day 9: Campo Grande to Bonito

Saturday 16 September 2023

Having woken up in a new city, we met for breakfast in the hotel restaurant and were soon aboard the comfortable minibus for our drive to Bonito. After leaving the hotel, we paid a quick visit to a nearby avenue where a number of blue and yellow macaws were nesting in the planted palm trees.

We had a few hours journey across the vast open farmland of this part of Brazil before we would eventually end up in the southern reaches of the Pantanal. As neared the eco-tourism hub of Bonito, our driver spotted a giant anteater in a field by the road. What luck! This was our primary reason for visiting the area and on the transfer we were treated to our first chance to photograph this bizarre, but captivating mammal.

Our driver pulled over and the group were quickly on the other side of the wire fence. With permission from the area's landowners, this was somewhere we were able to make an approach and try our best to get up close and photograph the anteater. This was our fourth species of Brazil's 'big five' and we were delighted to be able to make an incredibly close approach. Despite the time of day and unfavourable light conditions, we were rewarded with some excellent imagery.



The anteater ended up coming so close (as we had the wind in our favour) that it ended up almost walking into the group before retreating back over a slight rise. We decided to leave it at that and head on to Bonito for lunch. On the outskirts of town we saw another anteater, but this time it wasn't possible to make an approach. After a brief pause, we drove the short distance to the restaurant in town and enjoyed another excellent lunch.

Our hotel for the next few nights was on the edge of Bonito, only a five-minute drive from the restaurant. Soon we were all able to drop our things off in our rooms. We agreed to reconvene at 4pm so that we could head out for a dedicated attempt at finding another giant anteater to photograph. It wasn't long before we found another anteater, but this individual didn't want any company and, despite our best efforts, we were unable to get into a good position to photograph it. A toco toucan had flown over and was perched atop a tree on a hilltop in the distance, but we wanted to try and find another anteater.

It was in the next valley that we spotted an anteater in a field of cattle. The group was soon walking across the fields, trying hard to keep downwind, and approaching the animal. We spent around an hour trying to get close and constantly repositioning ourselves in order to get the very best photographic angles. There was a herd of cows in the field, but after initially coming to check us out, they soon moved away. But then the anteater started to approach us. In fact, despite the light fading, the group was blown away by how close it came. It would have been impossible to expect more from one of Latin America's most remarkable mammals.

At the same time, a burrowing owl provided another subject to photograph, but it was challenging to get as close as we perhaps would have liked. With the light all but gone, it was time to head back to the hotel where we sat down together for a very well-earned meal.



Day 10: Bonito

Sunday 17 September 2023

We awoke early, meeting just as the sun was rising, and headed back to the fields where we had spent the evening before. Our first sighting was a number of three white-lipped peccaries, running across the fields and into the cover of the forested hills. The anteaters seemed to be eluding us this morning, but we found the most wonderful subjects – a pair of burrowing owls. We spent a prolonged period in the most magical light as the birds flew from mound to tree and back again.



As we made our back to the hotel for breakfast, we came across a huge flock of cattle egrets in one of the farmer's fields. Upon our arrival at the hotel, a red and green macaw was feeding on a tree stump within the hotel grounds – the warm morning light made for some excellent photography.



We enjoyed a fantastic breakfast in the hotel and then had some free time before meeting up at reception to commence a busy day. We headed to a farm outside of Bonito, where we would spend the middle of the day. Upon our arrival at the pousada, we were immediately treated to wonderful views of lined woodpeckers as they excavated a nesting hole in a tree. They were obviously used to people and not at all bothered by our presence.

Just before midday, lunch was served. The group enjoyed a fabulous lunch on the property's veranda, with plenty of birdlife all around. There was even a caiman resting on the shore of the lake, though admittedly on the other side of a fence.

When everyone had their fill, there was an opportunity to walk around the grounds and photograph the wild delights that were all around us. Glittering emerald hummingbirds visited the garden's flowers, while a pair of hyacinth macaws kept coming to and fro. Several members of the group spent another period of time photographing the woodpeckers, before the hyacinth macaws put on a particularly good show, posing perfectly for photography. It was lovely to watch the two birds come together and show their obvious affection for one another. As we tried to photograph the two macaws, a couple of red-legged seriemas were in the midst of a skirmish, seemingly over their overlapping territories. And so we had yet another subject to focus on. These bizarre birds have remarkably long legs and a very unusual crest at the front of their heads, sticking up above their beaks. When the birds weren't busy squabbling, several members of the group were able to capture some stunning images as they posed and looked on inquisitively.



We left the property behind, as we had another busy afternoon ahead of us looking for giant anteaters. While we were exploring areas that we had not yet covered, an armadillo ran across the road in front of us, but before we could even stop, it had disappeared.

Once we were in prime anteater habitat, mainly large areas used for grazing cattle, we intensified our search. Andre and the driver, Jesus, spotted an anteater in the distance. Unfortunately, by the time we reached the area, it had disappeared into the forested hills. It looked as though we might not be lucky in this area, so we started to head back the way we had come. Then an anteater was spotted a couple of fields away from the road, so we disembarked to see if we could make an approach and get some photographs of it. We followed the field margin, trying our best not to alert the anteater to our presence, and as we got closer, we moved around to ensure the wind was in our favour. We were able to get surprisingly close, but the anteater went to ground in a thicket and we thought once again we might be unlucky if it decided to go to sleep.

After only five minutes or so, we were delighted that the anteater was back on the move, had emerged from the thicket, and was working its way along a grassy knoll. It meandered along before turning back and disappearing into the thicket once again. It wasn't too long though before it reappeared once more, and we were able to get the group ahead of it. The light was perfect and the anteater put on quite a show, it walked right up to the group on numerous occasions before we were able to reposition ourselves again. The anteater started to make its way towards some more woodland on a low hill and, as it neared, we decided to leave it in peace. The group had been rewarded with some excellent images and with smiles all around, we headed back to the minibus and started to make our way back to Bonito.



This was not to be our last giant anteater encounter of the evening. On the drive back to Bonito, there was a wonderful surprise as a mother was spotted with a youngster on her back. It was too good an opportunity to miss, so we pulled over and headed into the field. For a tricky but rewarding session. What a great day we had been treated to.



We never got the 'perfect' angle with fences around, but nonetheless, it was a wonderful sighting in some magical light. As the sun dropped down behind the horizon, we climbed aboard the minibus and made our way back to Bonito.

Tonight we had planned to head out to a very popular local restaurant. It was very busy and we had to wait a while before sitting down, so we went for a walk around the town centre before enjoying our meal. With another long day ahead of us tomorrow, we returned to the hotel and headed straight to bed.

Day 11: Bonito & Buraco Araras Sinkhole

Monday 18 September 2023

Having been particularly lucky with our anteater encounters, and the respective photography opportunities, today we headed out of Bonito to the spectacular Buraco Araras Sinkhole. This remarkable natural feature formed when a limestone cave weakened the layer of sandstone above. When it collapsed down, it formed a spectacular crater. The sinkhole bottom is home to a unique micro-ecosystem with trees and plants as well as its own large pond. It promised to be a great day.

Meeting up in the hotel's reception area, we were delighted when a pair of toco toucans landed in the palm tree above the minibus. It would have been rude not to photograph them. One of the birds was feeding on the small fruits produced by the palm and we were able to capture the process of it plucking and then swallowing the fruits.



With time flying by, we had to get going and start the journey to the sinkhole. It wasn't long before we were underway and heading south out of Bonito, passing through vast swathes of farmland. We arrived at the Buraco Araras Sinkhole and walked to the viewing platform for a morning photographing the resident red and green macaws.

The birds fly backwards and forwards from nesting sites to areas where they excavate the sandstone, likely trying to find minerals in the rock. With the sun coming up over the trees behind us, there were multiple opportunities to try different types of photography and be creative with slower shutter speeds and utilise the varied backdrops.



We were also surprised to see a blue and yellow macaw with a red and green macaw. Apparently, they have formed a bond and are now a pair, it was wonderful to see. Other birdlife in the area included buff-necked ibis, black vultures, and a spectacled owl on a nest. After a wonderful morning of photography in this incredible place, and with the macaw activity dwindling, we decided to head to a nearby pousada for another excellent lunch.

While we enjoyed the excellent food and the surrounding gardens, we were treated to close views of our first purplish jay, an incredibly tame turquoise-fronted Amazon species, which was feeding on a bunch of bananas hanging from a tree. We also saw more red and green macaws. A storm was brewing in the distance, but only some strong gusts and a spattering of rain reached us. As the storm seemingly blew itself out, it was time to head back to the sinkhole for another afternoon of photographing the magnificent macaws.



On the short journey, smooth-billed anis and toco toucans were flying along the roadside. Upon our arrival at the sinkhole, we headed to the other end where the sun would be setting behind us. Once again, we spent

our time at the sinkhole trying different techniques. At this end of the sinkhole, the birds often flew right at us and we were blessed with multiple fly-bys, as numerous birds came incredibly close. We also saw the yellow and blue macaw as it flew directly overhead with its partner. Furthermore, although it wasn't great for photography, it was wonderful to see a bat falcon nesting on one of the many ledges.



Blue and yellow macaw with partner by tour participant Robin S

Over a couple of hours, the group were able to capture an incredible array of bird imagery. With the sun dropping ever lower in the sky, it was time to head back to the minibus and drive the 45 minutes or so back to Bonito. There was still enough time to have a shower back at our rooms, before heading out for dinner in a Lebanese restaurant. It was an excellent meal and a lovely evening was had by all.

Day 12: Bonito to Campo Grande

Tuesday 19 September 2023

We had one last drive through the fields surrounding Bonito early this morning, but unfortunately, it was pretty quiet. We saw a roadside hawk, a rather uncooperative burrowing owl and a couple of white-lipped peccaries. There weren't really any photography opportunities this morning, but it was lovely to explore the area one last time before having to leave. We returned to the hotel for breakfast and to grab our bags, before setting out on the road once more, heading back to Campo Grande.

However, after we finished breakfast, we were greeted back to our rooms by a large troupe of capuchins. They were busy playing, squabbling and feeding on a large fruit on the ground, providing us with some great photographic opportunities. This was the first chance on the trip where our efforts had been rewarded with some close encounters with the region's most charismatic primates.



After this unexpected, bonus encounter, it was time to set off for Campo Grande. Except for briefly pausing to see a male rhea with a huge number of chicks, we didn't stop until we reached a typical Brazilian roadside restaurant for lunch. As per usual, there was plenty of food and once everybody had their fill. We then headed back out on the road for the final leg to Campo Grande. Upon our arrival in the city, we explored around the large park in the minibus, attempting to find coatis. These charming mammals had so far, not provided us with any photography opportunities, but despite our best efforts, we went to the hotel empty-handed.

With another long day of travel behind us, there was a chance to relax in the hotel before enjoying dinner in the restaurant. We had our final dinner together as a group, reminiscing about the experiences over the past ten days. The whole group had been able to enjoy some magical sightings and we had been able to see and photograph all of our target species.

Day 13: Campo Grande to Sao Paolo; on to the UK

Wednesday 20 September 2023

This morning we awoke early, with bags packed, as we had one last chance to try and find the elusive coatis. Andre knew of a spot near the airport where coatis are often seen by the roadside, and where a coffee seller's customers film and photograph them. Upon our arrival, to our frustration, the coffee seller wasn't there, but there was one lone, curious coati, which came for a closer look. There weren't really any great photographic opportunities, but it was an amazing close encounter. We waited to see whether any others might show, before realising that we needed to head to the airport. As we unloaded our bags and went to check in, we said our goodbyes to Jesus and Andre.

Check-in was smooth and we were soon through security and waiting in the departure lounge. The flight took off on time and landed in Sao Paolo safe and sound. As we were changing airlines, we needed to pick up our bags before walking across to Terminal 3 and checking for our flight back to the UK. We enjoyed a smooth flight back to London.

Day 14: Arrive UK

Thursday 21 September 2023

We landed earlier than expected, but unfortunately, our landing gate was blocked by a plane that was suffering technical difficulties, so we had to wait for a prolonged period until we were assigned a place to park away from the terminal. We were finally picked up by buses and driven to the terminal where unfortunately the group were split up and we were unable to say goodbye properly.

However, it was a fantastic group and we had all been privileged to witness some absolutely remarkable wildlife sightings. Those sightings, in turn, provided us with countless photography opportunities which were very much appreciated by the entire group.



Checklist for Brazil's Big Five Photo Safari



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13
	BIRDS													
1	Greater rhea	<i>Rhea americana</i>	✓						✓	✓	✓		✓	
2	Southern screamer	<i>Chauna torquata</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓					
3	Red-legged seriema	<i>Cariama cristata</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Bare-faced curassow	<i>Crax fasciolata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
5	Red-throated piping guan	<i>Pipile cujubi</i>					✓		✓					
6	Chaco chachalaca	<i>Ortalis canicollis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		
7	Neotropic cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓					
8	Anhinga	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>				✓	✓	✓						
9	Muscovy duck	<i>Cairina moschata</i>	✓		✓				✓					
10	White-faced whistling duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>							✓					
11	Buff-necked ibis	<i>Theristicus caudatus</i>	✓		✓					✓		✓	✓	
12	Plumbeous ibis	<i>Theristicus caerulescens</i>	✓				✓		✓					
13	Green ibis	<i>Mesembrinibis cayennensis</i>	✓											
14	Roseate spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>	✓		✓				✓					



15	Striated heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓					
16	Boat-billed heron	<i>Cochlearius cochlearius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓					
17	Rufescent tiger heron	<i>Tigrisoma lineatum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
18	Capped heron	<i>Pilherodius pileatus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓					
19	Cocoi heron	<i>Ardea cocoi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
20	Black-crowned night heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓					
21	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Snowy egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓					
23	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓		✓				✓					
24	Jabiru stork	<i>Jabiru mycteria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓					
25	Wood stork	<i>Mycteria americana</i>	✓		✓				✓					
26	Maguari stork	<i>Ciconia maguari</i>			✓				✓					
27	Black vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
28	Lesser yellow-headed vulture	<i>Cathartes burrovianus</i>		✓	✓				✓					
29	Turkey vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>				✓		✓		✓	✓			
30	Crane hawk	<i>Geranospiza caerulescens</i>							✓	✓				
31	Roadside hawk	<i>Rupornis magnirostris</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Savannah hawk	<i>Buteogallus meridionalis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓					
33	Great black hawk	<i>Buteogallus urubitinga</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					



34	Black-collared hawk	<i>Busarellus nigricollis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓					
35	Southern crested caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
36	Bat falcon	<i>Falco rufigularis</i>										✓		
37	Great horned owl	<i>Bubo virgininus</i>			✓									
38	Burrowing owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Feruginous pygmy owl	<i>Glaucidium brasilianum</i>				✓								
40	Common potoo	<i>Nyctibus griseus</i>	✓											
41	Banded-tailed nighthawk	<i>Nyctiprogne leucopyga</i>					✓	✓						
42	Grey-necked wood rail	<i>Aramides cajaneus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
43	Purple gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinicus</i>			✓				✓					
44	Wattled jacana	<i>Jacana jacana</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					
45	Southern lapwing	<i>Vanellus chilensis</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	
46	Black skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>					✓							
47	Large-billed tern	<i>Phaetusa simplex</i>					✓		✓					
48	Yellow-billed tern	<i>Sternula superciliaris</i>					✓							
49	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
50	Guira cuckoo	<i>Guira guira</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓					
51	Striped cuckoo	<i>Tapera naevia</i>												
52	Hyacinth macaw	<i>Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus</i>			✓				✓		✓			



53	Red-and-green macaw	<i>Ara chloropterus</i>									✓	✓		
54	Blue-and-yellow macaw	<i>Ara ararauna</i>								✓		✓		
55	Monk parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		
56	Orange-winged parrot	<i>Amazona amazonica</i>					✓							
57	Turquoise-fronted parrot	<i>Amazona aestiva</i>				✓							✓	
58	Ruddy ground dove	<i>Columbina talpacoti</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓				✓	
59	Scaled dove	<i>Columbina squammata</i>		✓					✓					
60	Glittering-bellied emerald	<i>Chlorostilbon lucidus</i>									✓	✓		
61	Rufous-tailed jacamar	<i>Galbula ruficauda</i>				✓	✓							
62	Toco toucan	<i>Ramphastos toco</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
63	Ringed kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle torquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
64	Amazon kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle amazona</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
65	Green kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle americana</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					
66	Lineated woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus lineatus</i>									✓	✓		
67	Vermilion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus rubinus</i>				✓	✓	✓						
68	White-rumped monjita	<i>Xolmis veltus</i>												
69	White-headed marsh-tyrant	<i>Arundinicola leucocephala</i>			✓				✓					
70	Cattle tyrant	<i>Machetornis rixosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
71	Great kiskadee	<i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓					



72	Lesser kiskadee	<i>Philohydor lictor</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓					
73	Fork-tailed flycatcher	<i>Tyrannus savana</i>		✓					✓				✓	
74	Rufous-bellied thrush	<i>Turdus rufiventris</i>									✓			
75	Black-capped donacobious	<i>Donacobius atricpilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
76	Purplish jay	<i>Cyanocorax cyanomelas</i>									✓	✓		
77	Plush-crested jay	<i>Cyanocorax chrysops</i>										✓		
78	White-winged swallow	<i>Tachycineta albiventer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
79	Palm tanager	<i>Thraupis palmrum</i>		✓	✓						✓	✓		
80	Silver-beaked tanager	<i>Ramphocelus carbo</i>				✓	✓					✓		
81	Yellow-billed cardinal	<i>Paroaria capitata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
82	Saffron finch	<i>Sicalis flaveola</i>		✓	✓									
83	Yellow-rumped cacique	<i>Cacicus dela</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓						
	REPTILES													
1	Rococo toad	<i>Rhinella schneideri</i>				✓	✓	✓						
2	Chaco tree frog	<i>Boana raniceps</i>				✓								
3	Waxy monkey tree frog	<i>Phyllomedusa sauvagii</i>				✓								
4	Yacare caiman	<i>Caiman yacare</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			
5	Green iguana	<i>Iguana iguana</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
6	Caiman lizard	<i>Dracaena paraguayensis</i>			✓	✓			✓					

7	Yellow anaconda	<i>Eunectes notaeus</i>			✓									
	MAMMALS													
1	Six-banded armadillo	<i>Euphractus sexcinctus</i>									✓			
2	Giant anteater	<i>Myrmecophaga tridactyla</i>								✓	✓			
3	Hooded capuchin	<i>Sapajus cay</i>			✓			✓	✓				✓	
4	Black-and-gold howler monkey	<i>Alouatta caraya</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓						
5	Jaguar	<i>Panthera onca</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓					
6	Ocelot	<i>Leopardus pardalis</i>		✓										
7	Crab-eating fox	<i>Cerdocyon thous</i>		✓										
8	Giant river otter	<i>Pteronura brasiliensis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					
9	South American coati	<i>Nasua nasua</i>			✓									✓
10	Capybara	<i>Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
11	Brazilian rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus brasiliensis</i>		✓										
12	Azara's agouti	<i>Dasyprocta azarae</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓					
13	Brazilian tapir	<i>Tapirus terrestris</i>	✓	✓										
14	White-lipped peccary	<i>Tayassu pecari</i>									✓		✓	
15	Red brocket deer	<i>Mazama americana</i>							✓					
16	Marsh deer	<i>Blastocerus dichotomus</i>	✓		✓				✓					

