

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

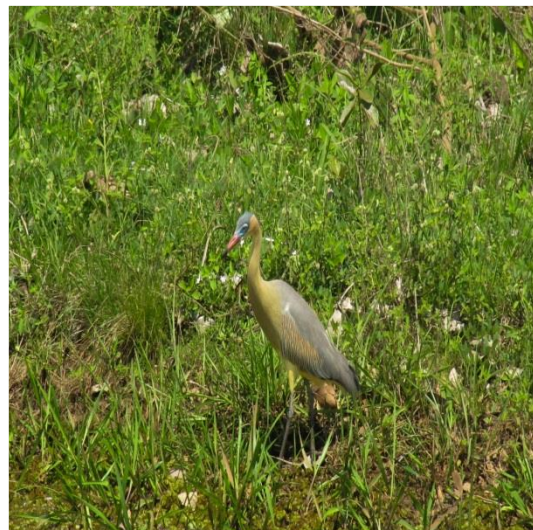
Brazil – Wildlife of the North & South Pantanal

(5 - 15 October 2018)

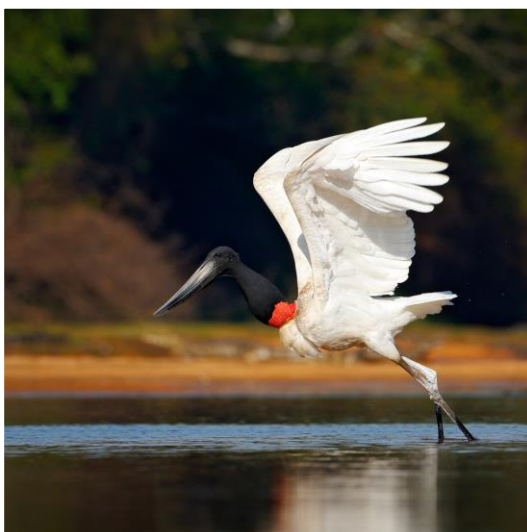
Jaguar



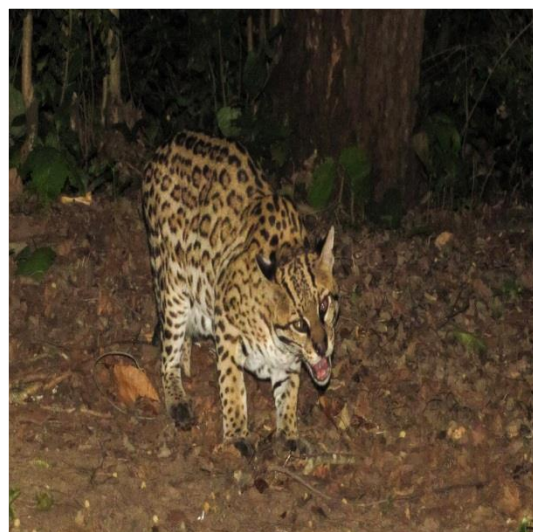
Whistling heron



Jabiru



Ocelot



Compiled by: Lucas Marti

Day 1: Arrival at Campo Grande

Friday 5 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

We started our trip at Campo Grande Airport in the capital city of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. As soon as we arrived we got into a van that was waiting for us and started to drive west. After about an hour's drive, we stopped at a local restaurant to enjoy some local food plus some really nice ice cream and juice. In the parking lot a few birds, including black vulture and sayaca tanager, were spotted. After enjoying our delicious meal we kept driving before taking a detour and going down a dusty road. The first birds to be spotted were a pair of huge macaws sitting on a palm tree: hyacinth macaws... what a great start! As we moved on, more animals started to show up – a nice giant anteater looking for food in the grasses was really rewarding. We left the vehicle to take some pictures and to get some really good, close views of this weird-looking animal. There, we also had the chance to enjoy the colorful faces of three whistling herons and a lonely buff-necked ibis. After a few minutes of driving we saw something flying low among the trees without knowing very well what it was. We got out of the van again to find out what it was. After a few seconds of searching, we found it and took some pictures of a very helpful laughing falcon sitting in a cecropia tree. We then moved to our next stop – another giant anteater, but this time even closer! A few other stops gave us chances to see greater rheas, red-legged seriema, a brown-crested flycatcher delivering food to its young, a narrow-billed woodcreeper nesting on a fence post, plus jabirus, black vultures and plumbeous kites taking advantage of the thermals and swirling above our heads. We got to our lodge around 4pm, but all of us were keen to keep looking for wildlife. So, after a 45-minute rest, we jumped into our safari truck (but not before taking some pictures of around ten hyacinth macaws that were eye-level and just a few meters away from us!). We left the lodge and stopped for tropical kingbird, cattle tyrant, a pair of burrowing owls, a lineated woodpecker and two plush-crested jays drinking from a pond. At a nearby camping spot were blazed-winged parakeet, green-barred woodpecker and a pair of very confident and pretty bare-faced curassows literally walking in front of us. As we were enjoying all the birds, our local guide called us with excitement – it was a pair of spectacled owls. Picture after picture, click after click we really took advantage of the fading light as much as we could. What a great ending! But the day wasn't over. While we were having dinner a curious yellow armadillo was strolling in the garden and among the tables, looking for something to eat. Back in our rooms some of us spotted a crab-eating fox sitting just next to our bedrooms. What a great start to our tour!

Day 2: Pousada Aguapé

Saturday 6 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

We started the morning with a gentle walk around the lodge gardens where we saw nine parrot-like species in an hour: hyacinth, red-shouldered, and blue-and-yellow macaws; scaly-headed and yellow-faced parrot; monk, yellow-chevroned, nanday and peach-fronted parakeets, and turquoise-fronted amazon. Besides that, we got really good views of a chestnut-eared aracari trying to break in into a monk parakeet nest, some really nice views of a bunch of guira cuckoos having a sun bath, and many more birds! Everything seemed to be in the lodge gardens. Wow! And we'd only been in the southern Pantanal for one hour!

Breakfast gave us the energy to go for a safari ride in our truck. We spotted two campo flickers chasing great-rufous woodcreeper around a tree and, after that, we got a nice view of giant anteater and a red-legged seriema quite close to each other. We tried for the band-tailed manakin with no success, but on the way we got ferruginous pygmy-owl, short crested flycatcher, gilded hummingbird, greenish and forest elaeinas, yellow-olive flycatcher and golden-green woodpecker. Then we got back into our truck again to finally reach a campsite where three golden-collared macaws were sitting in the open. Birds were all over the place and notable species included white-fronted woodpecker, red-billed scythebill, Amazonian motmot, and rufous-tailed jacamar in a nearby tree where some local were drinking maté. We also saw blaze-winged parakeet in the light, plus a bunch of black-crowned and black-tailed tityras chasing each

other on top of the trees. After a few seconds of playback we all got to see blue-crowned trogon perching still, very close to us.

In the afternoon we went for a safari, heading west to the ranch's open fields. As we drove we encountered a few new species including migratory fork-tailed flycatcher, two pretty chotoy spinetails (showing all their features very well), some really close views of jabirus plus a curious giant antshrike male and little woodpecker. One of the moments of the afternoon was a pair of aplomado falcons having a dust bath in the middle of the road. We also had our first close encounters with yacare caimans – as soon as we stopped our vehicles, they walked towards us! The end of the day was spent having a short walk to find some noisy yellow-chinned spinetails and the beautiful rusty-collared seedeater. Going back in the dark we were lucky to find a nacunda nighthawk flying around us, which finally landed on the road; as we stooped to open a gate, we heard a common potoo that was just sitting on a fence post.

After dinner we were ready to go through our bird list, but a sudden call from the nearby camp site made us leave it for later, and the excuse was good: an ocelot was visiting campsite. So we quickly jumped into the open truck and drove to take a look. When we arrived there was a large female feeding on some fish just 5 metres away from us. We took lots of photos, enjoying superb views of this little spotted cat.

Day 3: Pousada Aguapé & to Campo Grande Airport

Sunday 7 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

We began with a short early morning walk, and enjoyed the birdfeeder next to our breakfast table – both made for a great start to the day. The nanday parakeets were having a feast and it was nice to hear the cracking noise of their bill crushing the corn. Another safari drive found us on the road again with another close sighting of a giant anteater. Then we drove to a small pond where the tiny common tody flycatcher, a solitary cacique on its hanging nest and three orange-backed troupials on top of a tree were the highlights of the place ... not to forget a colourful purple gallinule and noisy donacobius that came really close to us. After that, we continued to a trail in search of other species – sightings of hooded tanager, large elaenia, white-lined tanager and a male rusty-back antwren made the last part of our morning. On the way to the lodge we had the opportunity to photograph one of the world's most amazing herons: the whistling heron.

After lunch we hung around the feeders, taking our last images of the lodge's wildlife before leaving for Campo Grande Airport to catch our plane to Cuiabá. En route, we stopped to watch a group of more than 15 greater rheas by the side of the road. But the highlight was a group of seven yellow armadillos chasing a female all over the place. It was a highly entertaining sight. We had dinner at the airport then flew to Cuiab, finally reaching our hotel at last.

Day 4: Cuiabá; Currupira das Araras

Monday 8 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot in the morning; raining in the afternoon

This morning everybody was able to sleep in a bit as we didn't have to be meet until 8am in the hotel lounge. We started out on our 120-kilometre journey to the Serra das Araras, a low hill chain with some of the remnants of the Amazonian forest. After a stop to buy some nibbles, we hit the road. We arrived at our lodge surprisingly quickly. A spot of birding before lunch produced some noisy white-eyed parakeets, and a group of red-shouldered macaws was taking advantage of the shade provided by the mango trees in front of our rooms. Then we made a short walk to a patch of forest where we admired some of the trees and watched butterflies. On the way there we encountered a swallow perching on a post as well as a bunch of black-fronted nunbirds 'swinging' from branch to branch. Some of the other attractions were a pair of buff-throated woodcreepers that responded very well to the playback and the tasting of a jatoba fruit which, according to our local guide Agnaldo, is good for sore throats. Back at the main house we were distracted by some red-and green macaws.

After a break, we departed by vehicle to another spot but it started to rain heavily and we had to abandon our excursion. Before that we enjoyed a pair of least grebes diving in a little pond, a well camouflaged sunbittern and some huge cicadas that were sitting really low in a nearby tree. A wasp nest (genus *Synoeca*) locally known as maribondo tatu also deserves a mention. The architecture of the nest is full of precision, symmetry and delicacy... it was mind-blowing!

Day 5: Currupira das Araras

Tuesday 9 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot in the morning; raining in the afternoon

We enjoyed some early morning birdwatching on a nearby pond and marveled at the ease of birding in open areas. During our birding session we also enjoyed our local guide's knowledge about native plants. He told us about how important biodiesel is in Brazil and how they used the mamona seeds, which were growing naturally by the side of the road, to produce it. Some of the bird highlights of the trip were Brazilian teals, an ash-throated crane that responded very well to our playback, coming into the open, and also a distant chestnut-bellied seed-finch. We were surprised by a pair of giant antshrikes, both male and female, which gave us the chance to make a comparison between the two. The black and white colour of the male, compared to the brown and white of the female, made some of us think they were a different species. We ended the morning with a pair of distant, but pretty, capped herons. Breakfast was waiting for us on our return.

Before lunch we decided that it would be nice to try to get two species that are intimately associated with mauritia palms (*Mauritia flexuosa*): the red-bellied macaw and the point-tailed palmcreeper. We succeeded with the first species – a bunch of them were hiding on top of the palms; however, we only got a glimpse of the palmcreeper. On our way back to the lodge we were privileged to spot a common tegu lizard standing still by the side of the road and an Azara's agouti running away.

In the afternoon, and after a short break, we were again delayed by rain. On this occasion it was just for an hour so. After a heavy downpour, we went back out into the field with great expectations. Among the most important birds to mention were the lettered aracari and a gray-lined hawk that was seen briefly, but called back by playback, returning to its perch high in the open. We were enjoying a nice stroll along a road surrounded by a green forest, and some botanical notes made by our local guide, when we heard the call of a pavonine cuckoo. This forest 'ghost' can sometimes be very hard to get. After working really hard we were rewarded with a good eye-level view. The night was coming, as the cicadas and bugs were calling all over the place, and the millipedes were crossing the road to who knows where. The perfect ending to a lovely day.

Day 6: Currupira das Araras; on to the Pantanal

Wednesday 10 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

We started the morning with a plan to explore a forest trail. We got into our van, drove for a few minutes and started to walk very early in the morning. It was a really quiet morning but we still enjoyed the walk. Malaquite butterflies, grasshoppers, caterpillars plus a black-tailed trogon, a crab-eating racoon and some capuchin monkeys on their way across the trail made or first part of the morning.

After a nice breakfast we hit the road on our way to the Pantanal. As we were leaving the hotel grounds some of us saw a tayra running into the forest. Lucky them! Although common in some other parts of South America this carnivore has proved to be difficult to spot in this area of Brazil. As we didn't have a good look at the point-tailed palmcreeper on the previous day we decided to give it another try. As we were arriving at the right spot, some king vultures were soaring above our heads, and we had a good chance to appreciate this majestic bird. We started our search for the palmcreeper and this time persistence paid off, as we saw a pair of them in the open and clinging from the palm fronds. We continued on our way to the Pantanal but there was a big traffic jam on the road. It seems that there was a part of the road being paved.

It took us an hour and a half to finally get off that road but, thanks to our driver's expertise, we were all happy and safe.

After lunch by the roadside we started to move again. We crossed Poconé, the city known as the gate to the northern Pantanal, to join the Transpantaneira road. Green ibis, ringed and amazon kingfishers, yellow-billed cardinals, savannah hawks and many more species welcomed us. The sun was going down, birds were flying over our heads, searching for a place to roost and some large-billed terns and black skimmers were having a last meal.

Day 7: The Pantanal

Thursday 11 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

Our first morning in the Pantanal started with a walk in the hotel grounds. Highlights included endemic chestnut-bellied guans coming to join the other birds at the feeders; yellow-billed cardinal, saffron finch, shiny cowbird, purplish jay and giant cowbird were among the most common attendants. After a tasty breakfast we got into our van and drove through an inner road on the way out of the lodge grounds. Ruddy and picui ground doves, chestnut-eared aracari and toco toucan, crimson-crested woodpecker, white-lored spinetail and great rufous woodcreeper were among some of the species we found.

After a nice lunch and siesta break we got ready for our first boat ride of the tour. As soon as we arrived there we were navigating and enjoying all the wildlife around us. Flying Neotropic cormorants, noisy rusty-backed spinetails hiding in the vines, piratic flycatchers, savannah and black-collared hawks, and great black hawk were some of the interesting birds seen. We also took note of the fresh water sponges attached to the tree roots coming out of the banks. But the highlights of the trip were the five species of kingfishers (American pygmy, green, green-and-rufous, amazon and ringed) in just one boat trip... superb! Not to mention the beautiful sightings of giant otters going in and out of their dens. The Pantanal and all its diversity was right there on show.

Day 8: The Pantanal

Friday 12 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

Today our target was clear. After spending an afternoon in the river with good photographic opportunities, and having seen all five kingfisher species, we decided to go try for the amazing agami heron. En route there was the usual wonderful diversity of fauna and flora that the Pantanal is famous for: herons, egrets, kingfishers, cormorants and much more were everywhere, making our quick ride very enjoyable.

As we were approaching the right sort of spot for agami heron, the tension in the group grew. The boatman slowed the engine ... and our patience was rewarded. There it was! The first individual, skulking in the shadows under tangled vines. We took photo after photo – and really made our cameras work, as well as our eyes, as we marvelled at, arguably, the most beautiful heron in the world. But that wasn't it! After a few minutes, another individual show up to give us a real treat.

Back at the lodge we were feeling very grateful to have accomplished our mission, and rewarded ourselves with a delicious breakfast!

The rest of the morning was spent in a nearby forest just behind our lodge, with birds such as mato grosso antwren, moustached wren, stripe-necked tody-tyrant and many more, as well as bugs and butterflies of all different kinds including an amazing leaf caterpillar and mammals such as tiny black-tailed marmoset.

After such successful morning we decided to have a break before lunch.

This afternoon we were supposed to leave the lodge then head deeper into the Pantanal. En route, we received information that a bridge was broken with no chance to be fixed on this particular day. We managed as well as we could and arranged for a couple of vans to be waiting on the other side of the bridge to take us to our final destination: Port Jofre. It's worth mentioning that while we were waiting for the vans to pick us up we got a really good view of one of the region's iconic birds: the helmeted manakin!

Day 9: The Pantanal

Saturday 13 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

After an early breakfast we were ready to head to the river. Today was one of the most eagerly anticipated days of the trip. We were departing the pier at the Cuiabá River in search of South America's biggest cat: the jaguar.

It was great to be on the river again, with the breeze on our faces and the sun still quite low. Within the first few hours we got to see two young male jaguars (brothers) on a sand bank, a female sleeping, another one under a tree ... so many views and performing so many different behaviours that it was hard to believe our luck. In the afternoon we watched the female climb a tall tree and then lie down on it, as well as another one just 50 metres away from it, lying on a dead log hanging from the edge of the river bank. Her legs were hanging to the side, giving the impression of a really lazy cat! By the end of the day, six individuals had been spotted, and we'd had some really good opportunities to take pictures and just watch these extraordinary big cats in their natural habitat. We also saw the two females having a brief encounter – coming face to face, growling and baring their teeth to one other. It was a perfect day! As we were returning to the lodge, the band-tailed hawks plus lesser and greater bulldog (fishing) bats were flying over the river. But that wasn't all as we spotted the two jaguar brothers again ... this time in better light and coming down to the river to drink and swim. Magic!

Day 10: The Pantanal

Saturday 14 October 2018

Weather: sunny & hot

Today we had an easy and relaxed day at the river. We started during the first light of the day, taking pictures of the different birds in the sandbanks until we got a call saying there was a big male jaguar lying on a nearby sand bank ('Lion on the beach', you could say!). There he was. This huge male with a torn lip was resting and cooling down without noticing us at all. After a few minutes he got up and decided that that was it and walked into the grasses. Some of the other interesting sightings of the morning included giant otters having a healthy breakfast of catfish. We were able to appreciate their human-like hands and also how sharp their teeth were. In the morning we were also lucky enough to find a group of black howler monkeys with mothers carrying babies.

In the afternoon we decided to spend some time birding along more narrow streams. We tried hard with a helmeted manakin that flew by but never showed very well, but we were lucky with some other birds like greater ani, rufous-tailed jacamar, pale-legged hornero, greater thornbird and grey-crested cacholote to mention a few of the whole array of birds we saw.

Day 11: The Pantanal to Cuiabá

Sunday 15 October 2018

We left the lodge in the morning to drive all the way along the Transpantaneira road stopping en route. Some of the new birds for the trip were fuscous flycatcher, the handsome barred antshrike, a great horned owl and some really good views of a pair of bat falcons.

We stopped at Pixaim River for lunch and kept on driving to Cuiabá. But destiny was working in our favour, to make this day another great one. The first thing to mention was the five streamer-tailed tyrants responding to our playback and getting really close to us, posing for photos. We got into our van and

thought that that was it... but no. A mammal crossed ahead of us in the distance. What it was? Nobody knew. It was quick and distant. As we were approaching the area where we saw it, we stopped and there it was: a Pantanal cat! This little cat, which can be confused with a domestic one, was sitting in the grasses looking at us. What a great pleasure to finish our trip with this rarity!

We got to the airport with happy faces. What a great trip!

