Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars and So Much More Photography Tour Report 2018

5 September 2018

by Mike Watson

I keep writing that if we had to compile a list of top wildlife photography destinations in the world, in terms of number of subjects and ease of shooting them, then Brazil's Pantanal would at least be in the top five. Not only did the third Wild Images visit to this amazing region again live up to this bold statement but it was also our best visit so far in terms of photographic subjects. Most importantly Jaguar encounters over our six days on the Rio Cuiabá were off the scale with a massive 33 sightings, almost three times more than our previous best total and not a single blank on any of our boat trips. As always, some of these events were not ideally photogenic, being either partly obscured by vegetation or in poor light but some of them were very nice indeed. No caiman kill this year although with these numbers we were still well satisfied. Most were lounging around on the riverbank but there were a few more interesting encounters. Tourist numbers were more or less back to normal on the river now that everyone has forgotten about the Zika virus scare and the Olympics were not taking place this time! That meant most of the Jaguar 'shows' were curtailed by the sheer number of boats arriving. We did manage to find two Jaguars ourselves and were second or third on the scene numerous times, which meant that we only missed out on a couple of animals this year. Behaviour we were able to photograph this time included resting, sleeping and yawning portraits, walking, hunting, stalking and jumping and all at various ranges from very close to distant against the riverbank landscape. It was difficult to imagine that something could trump the headline attraction of the tour but this year we were privileged to visit the SouthWild Ocelot hide (well open air theatre more like) where the after dark wild Ocelot performance was simply jaw dropping and very photogenic too.

Whilst en route to Porto Jofre or scouring the riverbanks from there we again enjoyed a profusion of other fabulous creatures. Close behind Jaguar and Ocelot in popularity was the habituated Giant Anteater at the lovely Pouso Alegre Lodge, which we saw at point blank range by day and night this year. Other highlights included the numerous encounters with family parties of Giant Otters, a Brazilian Tapir, which swam right past our boat, the 'beauty of the shadows' Agami Heron (our best unobscured views of this one!) and the outrageous outsized parrot Hyacinth Macaw as well as the close views of some other crazy-looking birds like Boat-billed Herons, Toco Toucans and Chestnut-eared Araçaris. The Pantanal was again simply fantastic!

We were able to photograph a wide variety of birds including: Chestnut-bellied Guan; Blue-throated Piping Guan, Bare-faced Curassow, the mighty Jabiru, Maguari Stork, Cocoi, Capped, Little Blue and Striated Herons, Rufescent Tiger Herons, King, Black and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, Great Black, Black-collared, Savannah and Crane Hawks, Sungrebe, Black Skimmer, Large-billed and Yellow-billed Terns, Great Horned and Ferruginous Pygmy Owls, Great and Common Potoos, Band-tailed Nighthawk, at least one million kingfishers including American Pygmy, Green, Green, Amazon and Ringed; Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Black-fronted Nunbird, Chestnut-eared Araçari, Campo Flicker, Nanday Parakeet, Golden-collared Macaw, Peach-fronted Parakeet, Scaly-headed Parrot, Great Rufous and Narrow-billed Woodcreepers, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Mato Grosso Antbird, Great Antshrike, Black-backed and White-headed Water Tyrants, Purplish Jay, White-winged Swallow, White-banded Mockingbird, Black-capped Donacobious, Orange-backed Troupial, Scarlet-headed Blackbird and Silver-beaked Tanager to name just a few.

Reptiles were also very impressive, including: Yacare Caiman (hundreds!), Black-and-white Tegu and Green Iguana of note (only one brief Paraguay Caiman Lizard, this time though). At this time of year the landscape of the Pantanal turns yellow with the candle-like flowers of Cambará trees adding colour to backgrounds. In addition, the old wooden bridges, watery margins and tree-lined riverbanks made great subjects. Ecotourism has not been established in this region of Brazil for anything like as long as it has in the Amazon but services have developed quickly and the lodges, mostly diversified cattle ranches or 'fazendas', are very comfortable and made our stay a real pleasure. However, unfortunately the best thing about the 120km of the dusty Transpantaneira highway, or rather dirt track, is that its rickety

nature and one million dilapidated bridges (well just over 120 actually) keeps speed and therefore the amount of traffic using it, down… although tourist numbers using it are steadily increasing and there is now a programme to replace the wooden bridges with steel bridges on concrete piers, which has already reached as far as Pixaim (although not yet beyond there in the last two years) so we think a visit sooner rather than later is a good idea. The mega concentration of water birds in the borrow pits and marshes along its length seems to be a thing of the past but the throng of herons, egrets, storks and ibises was still pretty impressive nevertheless, especially for Pantanal first-timers. Even the roadside vegetation, which had grown up somewhat over the last couple of decades is being thinned out a bit, although this is probably more about interference with electricity wires than conservation. The Jaguars alone make the long journey to this quiet backwater of South America worthwhile but all this extra interest is a fabulous bonus for the photographer and we are very much looking forward to returning for many years to come!

Our photo journey started at Cuiabá airport, where we boarded our very comfortable minibus and headed for lunch at a typically Brazilian grill/restaurant or 'Churrascaria' before we set off southwest bound for the Pantanal. Again, we passed the half-finished tramway intended for the 2014 soccer World Cup as we left Cuiabá's twin-city of Varzea Grande and then made our way through the seemingly endless dry cerrado countryside towards the gateway to the Pantanal, Poconé. Unfortunately there are now numerous gold mines in this area, their spoil heaps dotted here and there and they must represent a significant threat to the water quality in the Pantanal? Formerly a centre for the trade of caiman and Jaguar skins, Poconé is now bedecked in murals of the Pantanal's spectacular animals as its ecotourism economy grows. Where the hills give way to flat lands marks the start of the Pantanal proper, the tarmac ends and the Transpantaneira and its dilapidated bridges begins.

Pouso Alegre

This year we stayed at the delightful Pouso Alegre again, set in 30,000 hectares of savannah grassland and marshes, interspersed with patches of woodland. It is a real haven for wildlife and, unlike many other lodges, it is possible to see plenty of wildlife on foot here and particularly around the lodge buildings thus making it is a pleasant alternative to endless boat and truck rides. Pouso Alegre is another attractive fazenda or cattle ranch, turned mini-ecotourism resort with a distinct rustic charm. We spent the evening around the lodge grounds with some Black-and-white Tegu lizards in perfect evening sunlight. A walk along the entrance track almost to the Transpantaneira produced a few photogenic birds like Plumbeous Ibis. On our way back we spotted some White-lipped Peccaries, Red Brocket Deer and a Brazilian Tapir, although dusty conditions were not conducive to photos. At our evening meal dessert was interrupted by news of a 'Tamandua Bandeira' i.e. a Giant Anteater (!) nearby. We all rushed out and enjoyed a show-stopping night-time encounter with this amazing creature, which usually rests up during the day and goes foraging for termites at night. This particular individual is a regular visitor to the lodge grounds and has been fed (eggs among other things) by lodge staff here for some time. It is therefore very tame and relaxed around people. Nevertheless it was worth reminding ourselves that these ostensibly peaceful animals have been known to kill humans with their incredibly powerful bear-like claws so we were sure to leave it some space where possible! Giant Anteaters have very poor eyesight and encounters can sometimes be very close indeed, as this one was. Some of the horses in the same paddock as the anteater bolted past in the dark, the anteater was unfazed and continued on its way. We returned to the dining room to pick up where we left off and I talked about (amongst other things) photographing Giant Anteaters. Gate, horse and bolted sprang to mind again. Getting late and time for bed, the anteater sauntered past as we headed to our rooms.

Before breakfast we tried to photograph a sunrise, with limited success. Unfortunately there was a deep dust layer, which meant that the sun did not light up the cloud base quite as well as it might have done as it rose above the horizon but with a little creative processing something could still be done with it. After the first of many tasty buffet breakfasts we spent the rest of the early morning around the bird feeders at the lodge. The feeders at Pouso Alegre attract a good variety of birds, some of which are tricky elsewhere, notably Toco Toucan, Chestnut-eared Araçari, Crested Oropendola, Purplish Jay and Bare-faced Currasow. We could fuss over backgrounds here with lots of chances during their visits and try for fruit between the mandibles shots of the toucans as they threw their heads back. Other species at the feeders here included Yellow-billed Cardinal, Greater Kiskadee and Narrow-billed Woodcreeper.

A walk along the entrance track produced a variety of bird photos including a pair of Ferruginous Pygmy Owls, Green Ibis, Amazon Kingfisher, Snail Kite and Jabirus at their nest as well as at least one million Yacare Caimans in the pools by the track and under the rickety wooden bridge. After lunch clouds had started to gather so we brought forward our hike into the surrounding forest with local guide Fabio. We passed by more caimans at a secluded pool, flushing a couple of Sunbitterns in the process until we came to a spot not far from where we visited two years ago. There was still a Great Potoo here, again hiding in plain sight, mimicking a cut-off tree branch

and in a slightly better situation than on our last visit. This huge nightjar relative has an incredibly cryptic plumage and it took a while for some of our folks to spot it. Fabio's next trick was a nesting pair of Great Horned Owls, one of which was watched in the open devouring what looked like a baby Wattled Jacana allowing some decent photographic opportunities, although the light was fading fast in an overcast sky.

We returned to the lodge and paused to photograph a Jabiru feeding on small crabs in a roadside pool when the anteater was spotted again, this time in broad daylight, wandering towards the lodge grounds. We were able to catch up with it easily, they never seem to go anywhere in a hurry and enjoyed some more point blank views. Nevertheless we were able to photograph it against a variety of backgrounds, including plenty of non-manmade ones before it made its way back into the forest. Maybe the overcast sky had done us a favour after all as they usually rest in the shade on sunny days. Another night drive resulted in a couple of Crab-eating Foxes, Brown Brocket Deer and Collared Peccary but none of them worthwhile photo opps. Crab-eating Foxes can be seen in the lodge grounds at night so no need to make a special effort for them. Interestingly we did not see a single Crab-eating Raccoon for the second tour in a row, I wonder what has happened to them?

Ewww! What's this? Rain!!! I didn't see rain before in the Pantanal in what is supposed to be the dry season but sure enough next morning it was raining, just light drizzle but enough to render our attempts at photography this morning futile. We did manage a few shots of capuchin monkeys around the lodge but at high ISO levels there were not many keepers among the record shots.

Transpantaneira

After breakfast we continued on our journey on the Transpantaneira towards Porto Jofre. The rain was holding off now and we managed to photograph some good birds like King Vulture (a pair hanging around something dead in a ditch with all three other vulture species for company, it's not often you can see the king let alone perched and with all of its subjects), Scarlet-headed Blackbird (a couple of males) and a large (116!) flock of Maguari Storks albeit all under leaden skies. It was good to see that beyond the Pixaim none of the wooden bridges have been replaced so it is still slow progress and small coaches only on this stretch. Capped Herons shone in the many channels under the bridges among a throng of other waterbirds, millions of kingfishers and caimans. Unfortunately there wasn't much time to stop on this journey on our way to Porto Jofre if we were to arrive in time for lunch and our first boat ride on the river.

Jaguars

At the end of the Transpantaneira the Hotel Pantanal Norte is the traditional base camp for Jaguar searchers. Although the various flotels moored upstream save around two hours cruising on the river each day we like the idea of the flexibility of staying on dry land, a little way from the insect life and a chance to stretch our legs in bird filled gardens if anyone feels like a break from the Jaguar boat rides. From a photographer's point of view the boat ride to and from the main Jaguar zone is usually done in less than ideal photographic light anyway, at dawn, the middle of the day and in the evening twilight. We were welcomed at the hotel's gates by our capable host Venisio and piled into the restaurant for the first of many great buffet meals there.

The Rio Cuiabá is an 800km long, broad, slow-flowing and silt-laden river that eventually drains southwards into the River Plate and into the Atlantic between Uruguay and Argentina. It passes through the Pantanal region where the smaller Rio São Lourenço joins it. Around and upstream of this confluence is where that the majority of Jaguar sightings occur. This area is particularly rich in wildlife and the favourite prey of Jaguars – Capybaras, caimans and anacondas, which can be hunted from the riverbanks. The water margin also provides an easy way for the Jaguars to move around as well as sunlit windows to the gallery forest where they like to sit in the early morning. They are curious and, like many big cats, they simply like to sit and watch the world go by. Our first boat ride was successful and we managed to see a Jaguar at the first attempt, a very special moment for all, in fact all of our 10 boat rides were successful in at least seeing Jaguar, again with not a single blank trip. This was thanks to our very smart boatman, Alan but also owing to the fact that there were even more boats on the river this year so the Jaguar radio was constantly buzzing with news. There also appeared to be plenty of Jaguars in the area this year and we saw a minimum of 11 different animals, including some old aquaintances from 2015 and 2016. I do not usually detail every sighting but this will hopefully give an idea of how things happened. Not every sighting is photogenic hence our five full days trying for Jaguar photos worthy of hanging on our wall.

Our first sighting was of an old male Jaguar (no. #1), with a distinctive scar on his nose and a pattern like the face of a monkey on his forehead (if you imagine really hard!). We would see him several times during the course of our stay on the riverbank, more of him later. He was slumbering on a sandbank by the confluence of the rivers, the 'four-ways', where a confusing flow has developed as the Rio Cuiabá has cut through a meander and is in the process of creating a cut-off channel. Unfortunately more and more boats arrived and he wandered off, only to reappear on the bank quite close by where we could rattle off a good number of portrait photos. Again he was besieged by an armada of motorized skiffs and eventually walked off stage and back into the riverbank forest. The overcast weather continued with intermittent drizzle so we had to resort to some high ISO values this afternoon but at least it was great to get off the mark so quickly and of course the first sight of a Jaguar is always a special one and we had four folks in that very happy category today. Not much else was happening so we cruised along slowly until we got news of another sighting, back on the Rio Piquiri, another tributary of the Cuiabá further downstream, which we had passed earlier.

There was a Jaguar laying down on the other side of a sandbank, barely visible unless we stood up tall in our boat...and then when I checked my photos there were actually two faces tight together looking back at me! (Jaguar nos. #2 & #3.) These were twin male cubs, which had presumably just left their mother and again we would see these two again several times during our stay. They did not do much in the cold weather, except huddle together and with the light fading further on a very dull afternoon and ISO sky high we called it a day and headed back to the hotel. Not a bad start though.

Our first full day kicked off with my biggest ever Jaguar sightings tally from one boat trip, seven. At the end of the day it was difficult to remember the circumstances of all of them but they went something like this. We started quite early, before the four-ways, with a Jaguar on the west bank (no. #4), sitting on a small sandbank by the water's edge. We were second on the scene for this one but as other boats appeared, it walked back up the bank, the followed the river upstream passing a few openings in the vegetation but quickly veered off into the hinterland and away. Cruising upstream we were again second on the scene of a Jaguar (no. #5), which was resting on the top of the riverbank, although mostly obscured before it got up and walked along it for some way upstream. Where more open grassland began it too veered off and out of sight. At the time I did not realise that this was actually the lovely mating female I had photographed less than 2km from this spot in 2015, she's looking older now but great to know that she is still around! We weren't anywhere near second on the scene for this one, a Jaguar (no. #6) was hunting in the floating hyacinth beds of the 'Rio Negro', actually a cut-off channel of the São Lourenço before it flows into the Cuiabá, where we have spent so much time on previous visits. We got a few head on shots in vegetation and swimming with head out-stretched but some daft behavior by other boatmen curtailed his attempts to hunt here and she wandered off. Shame, this could have been a good sighting. We saw her again at almost the same spot – more of this later.

We cruised upstream where we thought no. #6 might reappear but Jaguar radio crackled into life and saw us blasting up the São Lourenço where a large male Jaguar (no. #7) was sitting in the open on the riverbank. This was easily the best so far, in morning sunshine and unobscured so we could drop the ISO below 800, stop down aperture to f/7.1 or lower and capture hundreds of frame-filling portraits, including yawning and then follow its progress for ages across some very nice backgrounds at the water's edge. Fab-u-lous! He had a distinctive mark on its right lower eyelid and we never saw him again. Even further upstream we visited a Jaguar (no. #8) sat deep in shade, obviously with a kill nearby, which had already attracted a number of Black Vultures. Sadly it had already attracted some other boats as well and we saw little of it before we decided to head back downstream now that the sun had come out again and the light was getting quite severe. Back downstream we had a female Jaguar (no. #9) on the riverbank, although quite briefly. Not much to say about this one. On our way back we saw the seventh Jaguar (no. #10) of the morning, again briefly on the riverbank by the confluence of the Piquiri and Cuiabá but it was also disinterested in us and retreated back into the forest.

What a morning! Maybe never to be repeated? Even our boatman was stunned by so many sightings. Even though we spent most of the morning looking at Jaguars there was still a little time for other things during our six hours on the river. Our views of a Great Potoo were interrupted by Jaguar no. #4 and a family party of five Giant Otters was fishing in the 'Rio Negro' channel. It is a good day when Giant Otter is in the 'also' category! One of them caught a fish while we watched it but did not share it with his kin. We also had a decent look at a Crane Hawk, which posed for photos, had our first good view of Rufescent Tiger Heron and had record shot views of smart White-browed Blackbirds and a White-bellied Seedeater. A cold morning with a little drizzle had cleared to a lovely sunny day, quite typical Pantanal weather for this time of year and the transition was perfect for photography with lovely sunlight diffused by cloud cover.

The afternoon boat ride was quite uneventful in comparison that is if you can call a sighting of the twins uneventful, (nos. #11 & #12). One of them climbed down the riverbank onto a dead tree and posed nicely for a while. However, it was still hot and not time to wake up

yet so it soon returned to slumber with its brother up in the shade on the riverbank. We also had an amusing encounter with the Giant Otter family in the 'Rio Negro' channel, watching them visiting a latrine, a couple of the youngsters obviously very excited when checking out a pile of poo and diving back into the water. It wasn't easy to get much photographically from this view though. We tried the Piquiri on the return ride seeing a Capped Heron of note.

Our second full day on the river started with a layer of mist over the water. Cruising upstream, the call of 'Anta' was for a Brazilian Tapir swimming across the river. Luckily it struggled to find a way up the bank when it got to the other side so we got a longer view than usual before it exploded out of the water and away. It even dived a couple of times! What a strange creature this is, with a face like something out of Star Wars. Interesting to think that a three-toed ungulate it is. We managed some photos, albeit at high ISO values in the early morning shadows. Jaguar no. #13 was one of our best photographic encounters, a female on a large sandbank up the São Lourenço, at the entrance to the hidden lagoon. We could even shoot it stalking a Jabiru, which wisely made a sharp exit. Not everyone in the boat was able to line up this shot up though. It walked along the bank for a while but it too made off when more boats and their noisy occupants arrived. We saw the twins again (nos. #14 & #15), back near the Piquiri confluence but again not doing anything except slumbering on the riverbank. Other photographic highlights this morning included the Giant Otter family out of the water on a stranded tree stump. They never stay still even when they are resting it seems. They were forever squirming around and grooming each other. A roosting group of Proboscis Bats was in the groove of an overhanging tree up a side channel but sadly there was not much light to do anything with them. Best of the rest was the family of Boat-billed Herons up the same side channel of the São Lourenço, some of which allowed very nice partly obscured portrait photos through gaps in the canopy of their roost tree. We also saw Crane Hawk again as well as Sungrebe (albeit in poor light), Black-fronted Nunbird and (at last) some very showy Rufous-tailed Jacamars that afforded some great photo opps against a tree root background on the riverbank.

The afternoon ride kicked off with the twins again. (nos. #16 & #17). Resting more or less where we had left them this morning and again not doing anything worthy of raising the lens for now we had a good selection of Jaguar images. Next up was our first self-found Jaguar (no. #18), resting in one of their favourite spots on the São Lourenço, exactly where I took my favourite portraits in 2015. It was the monkey-faced male again and after a while he got up and wandered back into the forest and out of sight. Later in the afternoon we caught up with him again, after he had crossed the São Lourenço and was hunting in the Boat-billed Heron's cut-off channel (no. #19). He was far too close this time and I found myself with a lens too long. I think the ideal all round lens of this tour is probably a 200-400 f/4, as you often need to shoot in low light situations. The 500 f/4 I used for most shots is great for medium range encounters and most other wildlife but at anything less than 20m range the Jaguars are bursting out of the frame. Note to self, I really ought to have tried a motion blur for this one. By now there were far too many boats in the channel and the behavior of one of the drivers was really stupid, willing to wreck the encounter for everyone (his boat included) by blasting past the Jaguar at less than 5m range in the tight channel just as it had spotted a catchable caiman. We all looked on in disappointment (I just reread my notes and they are much less polite). No doubt the Jaguar was also disappointed and headed off beyond the end of the channel and away. After this debacle, the only one of our time on the river fortunately, we enjoyed a stunning sunset, which lit up a young Rufescent Tiger Heron by the boat. On the return journey to the hotel the sky was on fire and after dark a spectacular display of forked lightning lit up the sky to the southeast of Porto Jofre.

Our third full day on the river began with the monkey-faced male again (no. #20). This time he was stalking the banks of the 'Rio Negro' cut-off channel, bellowing every so often, a stomach-churning growl during which his whole body strained. Not a great photo opp but a superb experience nevertheless. He was obviously on the trail of a mate, more of this later. He headed off away from the channel and out of sight into the gallery forest to the southeast. We went to the 'portrait corner' where animals seen in the 'Rio Negro' often end up but there was no sign of him so we continued upstream, where the offending boat driver from the previous day partly made amends by finding a nice female Jaguar (no. #21), on the same sandbank as the Jabiru hunter the previous day, we could shoot it walking along the riverbank for a while before again the number of boats built up and it moved away out of sight. On our return downstream the 'monkey-faced' male, (no. #22), was seen again, this time sleeping in the 'Rio Negro' cut-off channel but he didn't show signs of doing anything, except look up occasionally and time was now ticking away so we moved on. Further downstream (no. #23) was hiding in some riverbank bushes above a long-dead caiman by the first bend upstream of the Piquiri confluence. This animal was obviously still eating the caiman, which was starting to stink and had been dead for some time, although it had clearly been killed by a Jaguar, maybe this one, with its throat bitten. Again in harsh light and with lunch approaching we headed back to port. We explored quite far upstream on the São Lourenço today, including another cut-off channel, which produced a couple of Limpkins (they are uncommon on the river), Little and Squirrel Cuckoos, lots of Black-backed Water Tyrants and a group of three Giant Otters, obviously a family we had not met before. They

managed to catch a few fish and posed for photos.

With so many Jaguar shots now I decided to concentrate on 'Jaguar in the landscape' on our afternoon boat ride. It was quite dull now, with clouds building towards dusk so ideal conditions to do so without the usual glare from the super reflective riverbank vegetation. We had a pretty good opportunity right away with a cat, (no. #24), hunting in the hyacinth beds of the silted former course of the Cuiabá of the 'four ways'. It wasn't on show much here though, until it reached the bank upstream of the confluence and then proceeded to stalk for about half an hour during which time we could take some quite nice landscape shots of it. The rest of the rather dull afternoon was quite uneventful, although we did see the twins again, (nos. #25 & #26), along the riverbank on the Piquiri. However, everyone else was already here by the time we got there, a total of 20 boats! It was now late afternoon, the sun was falling out of the sky as the light faded so we headed back. A Western Osprey was new on the river today, the only one of the trip and we also caught up with a small family group of Black-and-gold Howler Monkeys, including one large male along the São Lourenço but the light was not great for photos against a grey sky.

Our fourth morning boat ride started off with an extensive search up the Cuiabá for a change but although it looked very nice with plenty of great waterside vegetation we couldn't find a Jaguar there. A trio of very approachable (for a change!) Capped Herons made the effort worthwhile though. As we turned around Jaguar radio crackled into life and we were soon zooming back to see the twins for the sixth time, (nos. #27 & #28). We followed them along the Piquiri, swimming but mostly walking along the sandy shore in some lovely diffused sunlight. They veered away from the riverbank to pass a couple of hotel boats but reappeared near the old campsite by the confluence with the Cuiabá, where they took an interest in an old drinks cabinet as well as some picturesque logs on the shore. This was certainly one of our top five Jaguar encounters. The Cuiabá above the 'four-ways' was not at all productive this year, a contrast to our visit two years when our best action was on this stretch was by far the best area for Jaguars.

The highlight of the last afternoon on the river was a mating pair of Jaguars (nos. #29 & #30). It was 'monkey face' (our sixth sighting of him) and the female with the 'W' on her forehead that we had seen hunting in the hyacinth bed in the 'Rio Negro' cut-off channel two days earlier (no. #6). So this was why he had been growling the previous morning, he had obviously picked up her scent and was looking for her. The mating was mostly taking place out of sight, obscured by some foliage and against some harsh sunlight so it was not much of a photographic spectacle thankfully, although their sex show had attracted quite an audience of boats. Jaguars spend several days together and mate hundreds of times, every few minutes in fact. An unbelievable feat of endurance. They had also attracted an audience of disapproving birds, which included squeaking Chestnut-eared Araçari, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Orange-backed Troupial, Little Cuckoo, Black-capped Donacobious, Greyish Saltator, Red-billed Scythebill, Vermillion Flycatcher and Silver-beaked Tanager as well as the local pair of Great Black Hawks. Their youngster was screaming from nearby trees and allowed some decent flight shots while we waited for the Jaguars to show. As the sun dipped we cruised off for a while to try some birds in the last golden rays of light. A Rufescent Tiger Heron posed nicely against some dark shadows, as did Amazon Kingfisher and some caiman. A Cattle Egret stood on the back of a water buffalo. Asian Water Buffalo is probably the most dangerous animal in the Pantanal and some of the bulls were quite aggressive towards our boat, even though we were safely out of their reach in the channel. A Wattled Jacana looked great reflected in the water of the channel and a White-headed Water Tyrant showed nicely. As we passed the spot where the mating Jaguars had been hanging out they were both in view at last with no other boats around although we did need to pump up the ISO a bit, drop the shutter speed and increase the white balance to recover some colour. As you can see the result was not too bad considering the twilight conditions.

All good things come to an end but after 30 sightings we were well satisfied with our time on the river. Our final morning boat ride added another three, which included some new individuals. First of all we headed back to the 'Rio Negro' cut-off channel, where instead of the expected mating pair we saw a battered old male resting on the bank (no. #31). He had hardly any whiskers left, a scarred face and a broken nose. He had enough of the gathered boats after a while and wandered off into the forest. We saw him again shortly afterwards on the 'portrait corner' of the São Lourenço but I'm not counting this as a separate sighting. Again he didn't stay in view for long here either before he took a few steps back and laid down out of view. He occupied us for some time until the sun was quite high in the sky and with hardly a cloud in sight it was time to call it a day. I thought he looked familiar and on checking I see he is the same male with a broken septum that we saw and photographed swimming in 2016. This was a very nice surprise as he looked on his last legs two years ago!

We still had time for another two encounters on the way back downstream though. The first of these, (no. #32), was our worst sighting, almost completely obscured and walking on the bank downstream from the Piquiri confluence but the next was one of the best, albeit in

horrible harsh sunlight. Jaguar no. #33 was another new animal, this time found by our boatman Alan, only our second self-found. It was a new female hunting the bank way downstream from the Piquiri. We stuck with it for ages in the hope it would find something in the water hyacinth and were a little late for lunch as a result. No luck though but it was interesting to watch and a nice way to end our best visit to this amazing Jaguar hotspot so far. Birds today had included a good Pied Lapwing encounter.

Rio Claro

Driving back north in the afternoon over the Transpantaneira's rickety wooden bridges we passed the Maguari Storks, a few Capped Herons and Crane Hawks but best of all a White-banded Mockingbird, a southern species, which just sneaks into Brazil's southern Pantanal. Pousada Rio Claro has a nice atmosphere with a large communal dining hall and fruit-laden trees surrounding the lodge buildings. We enjoyed some nice views of birds on their feeders and in the surrounding trees like Nanday Parakeet – a Rio Claro speciality, Scaly-headed Parrot, Thrush-like Wren, Giant and Shiny Cowbirds, Greyish Baywing, Saffron Finch and Campo Flicker. However, the most obvious attraction here is Chestnut-bellied Guan, which continues to do very well here. The guans were everywhere around the lodge grounds and very noisy. Almost as noisy as the 'Metallica bird', Chaco Chachalaca, which regularly started up at 4am outside my room with a deafening early morning chorus of heavy metal guitar riffs. The ideal focal length here was around 400-500mm, as many of the birds are very close. The pastures and woodland around the lodge grounds was also quite productive and during our stay we could photograph Whistling Heron, Southern Lapwing, a Common Potoo at its roost, as well as Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Great Antshrike, Mato Grosso Antbird, Great Rufous Woodcreeper, Red-crested Finch and a few mammals too like Black-tufted Brown Capuchin, South American Coati, Azara's Agouti and Crab-eating Fox. The river cruises themselves were as fabulous as always. With only miniscule traffic, the much narrower Rio Claro is a haven for wildlife. During the course of four boat rides we had a couple of good encounters with the 'beauty of the shadows', the gorgeous Agami Heron! Known as something like 'Hummingbird Waterbird' (the literal translation is actually 'Punch Flower-kisser') in Portuguese it is beautifully ornate but rarely strays from the shade of overhanging riverside vegetation, moving incredibly slowly and occasionally stabbing at tiny fish in the shallows with its extra long bill. Our last sighting was our best so far here, with a bird right off the bow of our skiff completely in the open, reflection and all! Wow! Rio Claro is also known for Golden-collared Macaw and they obliged on several occasions on the river but you had to be set and ready for a flight shot to catch them as we motored along. We were also treated to some nice views of now familiar species such as Snail Kite, Great Black Hawk as well as numerous herons, kingfishers and other waterbirds.

At the last minute we were able to add a sparkling new attraction to this tour and a very nice surprise bonus for everyone that turned out to be the tour highlight for most, an Ocelot at the Southwild Santa Teresa hide or rather open air theatre. We gathered after dark sitting on the small bandstand opposite a tangle of vines baited with piranha steaks and it did not take too long for the hoped for cat to appear, creeping in furtively from the forest to our right. It took some time to pluck up courage to make its way to the food but when it did our local guide turned on the other two of the three floodlights lighting up the 'stage'. This is certainly the most sophisticated set up of its kind I've seen so far and most folks were able to get reasonable high ISO photos at slow shutter speeds. I opted instead for flash synced at 1/250th second, ISO 1000 and an aperture of f/8, which captured a couple of nice eye-level portraits when the Ocelot stood in a position up on the vines that I was happy with. Interesting that my effective focal length was 280mm too. Generally 400mm is recommended but if you want some background at all then this is too long for me. The shorter and faster lens also aids shooting in the low light of the floodlight if you don't want to use flash and burn out the cat's eyes. Not all of the set up is photogenic so it is important to figure out where you want to shoot it, position yourself for that angle and hope that the Ocelot obliges, which lucky for me it did. The Ocelot show was so efficient that we were even back at Rio Claro for evening meal. We are very grateful to Southwild for their kind hospitality and we will be making Santa Teresa a feature of this tour in future. What a way to end a very enjoyable tour!

Eventually it was time to leave the Pantanal and make our way back to the hustle and bustle of Varzea Grande. If there is an easier and more pleasant way to photograph wildlife than cruising on the quiet waterways of the Pantanal I haven't found it yet. Thanks to our excellent group whose good humour made the tour such a lot of fun. Our table was also the noisiest, which is a good sign that things are going well. Thanks also to our local guides, without whose help we would not have seen nearly as much wildlife! We will be back on the riverbank again soon!