

Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars and so much more Photography Tour Report 2019

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by Luke Massey

September is one of the prime times for Jaguars in the Pantanal so we headed into the world's largest tropical wetland for 12 days in search of one of the most spectacular cats and hopefully, a host of other creatures that call the Pantanal home. Starting off at the Southwild Pantanal Santa Teresa Lodge (SWP) meant a drive along the Transpantaneira (or TP) road and its 122 rickety wooden bridges. The TP offers a great array of wildlife and almost as soon as we crossed under the entrance sign, a male rhea and his 18 chicks crossed the road in front of us. Unlike many birds, only male rheas incubate and raise the chicks, whilst the females go about their normal day to day business not having to worry about a brood of adventurous little fluff balls! A couple of Roseate Spoonbills stood out amongst the flocks of Snowy and Great Egrets, whilst the birding cast was supported by a few mammals, a Nine-banded Armadillo scuttled across the road ahead of us whilst a troop of coatis foraged alongside the TP. We got to SWP in time for sunset so a quick look around at the resident Orange-backed Troupials, Black-and-white Tegus and the giant Jabirus that nest at the lodge. The main attraction for us at SWP was the jaguar's tiny cousin, the ocelot. We meandered our way down the path to take our seat in the ocelot arena and sat and waited... After an hour's tense (and a little itchy thanks to the local mosquitoes) wait, out of the undergrowth emerged the stunning dainty cat. We were treated to a 40 minutes view of the little feline as she fed on chicken scraps left out for her.

At dawn we decided to take a pre-breakfast stroll around the grounds, where we had fleeting glimpses of Crab-eating Foxes moving back to their hideouts after a night of foraging as well as our first close views of Toco Toucans. Some of the group headed up the spiral staircase to get eye level with the Jabiru pair and offspring in their giant nest, a true avian high rise, as sparrows & monk parakeets

nested in the lower storeys of the construction. A quick breakfast followed and we jumped in a boat and headed out on to the river to see what we could find. We saw all five species of kingfishers; American Pygmy, Ringed, Amazon, Green and Green and Rufous. In the tangle of roots, we had fantastic views of perhaps the world's sexiest heron, Agami, as it chased away a Grey-necked Woodrail. But our viewing was over when an overzealous Yacare Caiman emerged from the river and sent our Agami skulking back into the shadows. It wasn't just the Agami that was deciding to be showy, we also had great views of the normally shy Sungrebe. Returning to SWP we had just got off the boat when the local Capybaras, the world's largest rodent, started barking. A sure sign of a Jaguar in the area and one local guide got a very brief view of a jaguar passing through the undergrowth on the riverbank opposite.

From SWP it was back up the TP to Rio Claro. The resident Nanday parakeets screeched and squawked around the lodge grounds, before we got on a boat to check out the Rio Claro itself. A romp of shy Giant otters was fishing in the tangle of roots but as they weren't the most cooperative photo models we left them to it. A Great Black Hawk did a nice fly by around the boat allowing for some nice photo opportunities. The next morning, we were up early again and had more fleeting glimpses of local Crab-eating Foxes, who were chasing and calling to each other. A pair of noisy Hyacinth Macaws flew through the grounds just before we got on the boat for our morning ride. An Osprey perched nicely for us alongside the river before we got up close with a great array of riverside birds. Cocoi Herons stood tall in the riverside vegetation, whilst habituated Black-collared Hawk, Great Black Hawk and Roadside Hawk all obliged by swooping in for fish thrown by the boatman. A noisy colony of Yellow-rumped Caciques bickered over their pendulous nests as repairs were made to their homes in time for the looming rainy season. Back at RC we took a short walk around the grounds before the midday heat got too much and there we had our first close sighting of a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars, fly-catching right in front of us. Once the heat began to subside we headed back out on the river again for one last outing at RC. Agoutis foraged under a Mango Tree, whilst normally tricky to see Yellow-collared Macaws fed in a tree above us. Our first Sunbittern showed briefly as did our only encounter with a Blue-crowned Motmot just before sunset.

Wanting to make the most of another trip along the TP we left RC at dawn. Scaly-headed Parrots fed on foliage along the road, and a troop of Grey-tailed Marmosets bounced their way through the roadside tree cover. A hunting Crane Hawk brought us to a stop. As the group waited for another fly by, I decided to see what the other side of the road held. Suddenly a Giant Anteater ambled out from the scrub in front of me. Alerting the group quickly and quietly proved tricky, and Giant Anteaters are notoriously skittish, but everyone did manage a brief view as it headed into a copse never to be seen again.

After our wait for the anteater to reappear failed it was time to head to our next stop, Pouso Alegre. A walk along their entrance track yielded us some tapir tracks but not the owner of them…yet. We added sightings of Whistling Heron, Yellow-billed Tern, Limpkin, Rhea and Buff-necked, Plumbeous and Green Ibises. A Chalk-browed Mockingbird saw us in, as Black-and-white Tegus strolled around the lodge grounds and more Toco Toucans fed in the surrounding Chicha trees. After lunch we drove up to 'The Wait' – a makeshift lean-to beside a waterhole. With temperatures high this acts as an oasis for wildlife. Within minutes, an inquisitive Tayra turned up and this was just the start of a stream of visitors. Coaties, Red Brocket Deer and capuchins came to drink. A slow-paced visitor in the form of a Red-footed Tortoise ambled down for a drink, whilst avian guests included Cream-coloured Woodpecker, Sunbittern, Great Antshrike and once darkness fell, a couple of feeding Great Potoos. On our route back to the lodge, just before the gate an accommodating Brazilian Tapir posed for us before heading into the shadows. Finally, at 11pm the local resident giant anteater passed through the lodge grounds but only one lucky guest could be roused from their bed to get a close view of this unusual looking beast. A tiring day!

A pre-breakfast drive found us another Crab-eating Fox, this time having a little scuffle with a slightly sickly-looking coati and then a pair of Crab-eating Racoons munching in the swamp. Within the grounds we found capuchins and Toco Toucans taking turns to feast on the Chicha seeds, and a pair of campo flickers posed beautifully for us. After a morning at PA it was time to leave the outer Pantanal and its inhabitants behind, and head toward the Rio Cuiaba in search of jaguars! Along the TP we had a brief sighting of a Yellow Anaconda, but with temperatures hitting 40 degrees Celsius, most sensible wildlife was hiding in the shade. Arriving at our hotel in Porto Jofre we got closer views of Hyacinth Macaws and a pair of Southern Screamers accompanied by their little pom-pom like chicks. Out on the lake a Striated Heron perched on the giant lily pads, as Wattled Jacanas strutted along the lakeshore. We all headed to bed after dinner, excited for what the next morning out on the river held for us…

What a start! Within 20 minutes of heading out on the river we had our first Jaguar. A big male swimming along the Rio Cuiaba in search of caiman. Once he headed away from the river we moved on to meet another Jaguar, this time a female. She had a full belly and had stashed a recent kill not far away, but gave us a few nice yawns before heading off to no doubt feed on her kill. But it wasn't all about the

big cats, we had great views of feeding Giant Otters and the birds didn't disappoint either. Little Cuckoo & a Rufous-browed Peppershrike were two of the highlights. Our afternoon boat ride proved it isn't always easy to find Jaguars in the Pantanal, we paid the morning's female a visit and had her drinking before she slunk away but we did get views of howler monkeys, a Common Potoo and juvenile Yellow Anaconda on the river bank. On hearing of the presence of a pair of three years old male jaguars, the two brothers, we headed straight up to the Rio Cuiaba and had great views of them trying their best to hunt. It was fascinating to see two mature males being best of friends, time will tell how long that lasts… In the afternoon we had a young female Jaguar on the bank but she was more interested in sleeping so we left her behind and found a fascinating scene on one of the smaller tributaries, a battle to the death between a Rufescent Tiger Heron and a water snake. Eventually after some tangles, head shakes, chokes and regurgitations the heron finally beat the snake into submission and swallowed it!

Our next morning brought us a hungry looking female Jaguar perched atop a log, looking longingly into the water, wishing for a caiman to present itself but to no avail. Just around the corner from this hungry female we had another female, this time a big girl who was clearly nursing cubs but they were hidden deep in the scrub and she was on the hunt. In the afternoon we headed back to the hungry girl and had a great time following her along the bank hunting, posing, drinking and working her way through the scrub and root tangles, allowing for some great photo opportunities. Once she headed off away from the river and our lenses we decided to move away from the 'main' Jaguar areas and checked out the Rio Piquiri, what a decision. Our punt was rewarded with great views of a tapir wading along the water's edge. After the previous evening's tapir success we decided to head up the Piquiri again not finding a tapir this time, but a Jaguar instead! A young female who we later found out was an un-recorded female in the area so allowed the group to name her as part of the Pantanal Jaguar ID project. It was fantastic to anchor up beside her, with no other boats around we were able to have a jaguar encounter accompanied by bird calls and the chatterings from the forest beyond.

We popped into Pousada Piquiri and had good views of the punk-like Guira Cuckoos, Bare-faced Currasows, guans and Buff-necked Ibis. On our way back, we had more time with our earlier jaguar, and watched as she prowled along the bank before leaving her to continue her hunt into the forest. Our route back found us another Jaguar, this time a very shy female, who was certainly not used to boats, so probably another new jaguar for the area. As we approached she slowly turned and moved off into the forest. After the morning's excitement we only found one female asleep in a Giant Otter's holt and an anaconda in the afternoon. Time was running out but at the last gasp, I spotted a Jaguar swimming in the river. We were able to catch up with him just as he got out onto a grassy bank and stared across at some distant capybara, before deciding to go for a vegetarian meal and munch on some grass!

With the weather cooling down we were quite unlucky with Jaguars on our penultimate day, not a single one spotted! But the wildlife on the Piquiri allowed us to watch Sunbitterns catching moths and black skimmers doing what they do best, skimming across the surface of the river. On our final full day, we came up trumps with the most jaguars in one day of the whole trip, an astonishing six different individuals! Our morning started with a sleeping Jaguar who we left to snooze before going and joining up with the two brothers again as they tried to hunt. Their hunting gave us a little avian treat too, a Least Bittern was flushed from the reeds by them. In the afternoon we decided to slowly work our way back to the brothers and bumped into a Jaguar sat in the water, feet from a pair of very shocked looking Capybaras. Shocked but relieved for once in the water they were safe from the jaguar. After this close call we continued up river and found the morning's sleeping Jaguar still snoozing. We left her to it and were then reunited with the two brothers who were also snoozing, clearly a sleepy afternoon for Jaguars!

Our final morning was spent in the grounds of our hotel in Porto Joffre. The hyacinth macaws put on a good show and a Crimson-crested Woodpecker nest was a nice final bonus with a showy chick on the verge of fledging. Our outward drive up the TP en route to Cuiaba sadly didn't provide much for us but we did have a nice little group of White-lipped Peccaries feeding just a few hundred metres before the end of the TP. No doubt next year will bring us an equally amazing amount of wildlife in the Brazilian Pantanal. See you then?



To see one jaguar is fantastic, but to see two hunting together, that really is being spoilt! (Image by Luke Massey)



Emerging from the roots and along a backwater channel, this female allowed us to follow her for over an hour as she stalked the water's edge (Image by Luke Massey)



Taking a break in the shade of the canopy (Image by Luke Massey)



Fallen trees provide the perfect perching point for jaguars to sneak along and ambush unsuspecting prey below (Image by Luke Massey)



The brothers wade through water hyacinths in search of prey (Image by Luke Massey)



A smart white headed water tyrant stands proud on the bank side (Image by Luke Massey)



A Striated Tiger Heron scores a meal of water snake in the Pantanal (Image by Luke Massey)



An unlucky water snake put up a great fight but the Striated tiger heron eventually subdued and swallowed it (Image by Luke Massey)



The tangled roots that line the bank can make photos tricky at times, but when the jaguar emerges from them, it is worth the wait (Image by Luke Massey)



The elusive tapir, South America's largest land mammal, and one we were lucky enough to encounter on the Rio Piquiri (Image by Luke Massey)



Chicha seeds are irresistible to a wide range of creatures, including the Toco toucan who plays an important role in the seed dispersal of this tree (Image by Luke Massey)



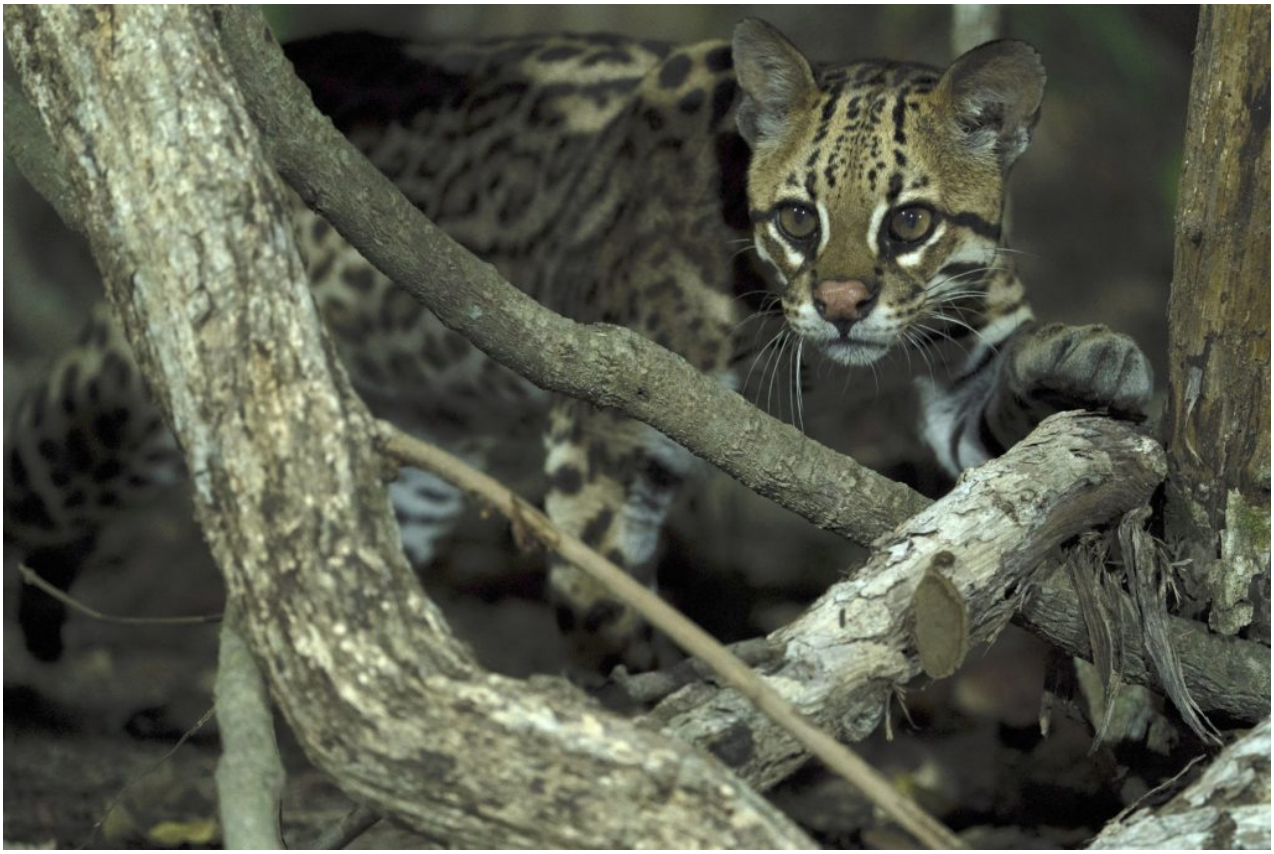
Guinness may be hard to come by in the Pantanal, but the bird that was made famous by that tipple, the Toco toucan is quite abundant (Image by Luke Massey)



A striated heron uses giant lily pads to its advantage, a floating fishing perch (Image by Luke Massey)



A trio of black skimmers coming into land in their nesting colony on a sandbar (Image by Luke Massey)



Santa Teresa's Ocelot hide gives unrivalled access and views to this incredibly elusive, stunning little cat (Image by Luke Massey)



Up to 4 ocelots can visit the hide if you're lucky. Emerging out of the shadows, tempted by a few pieces of well placed meat... (Image by Luke Massey)



An unlucky cichlid is prepared for dinner by a Large-billed tern (Image by Luke Massey)



A Large-billed tern rests on a sand bar (Image by Luke Massey)



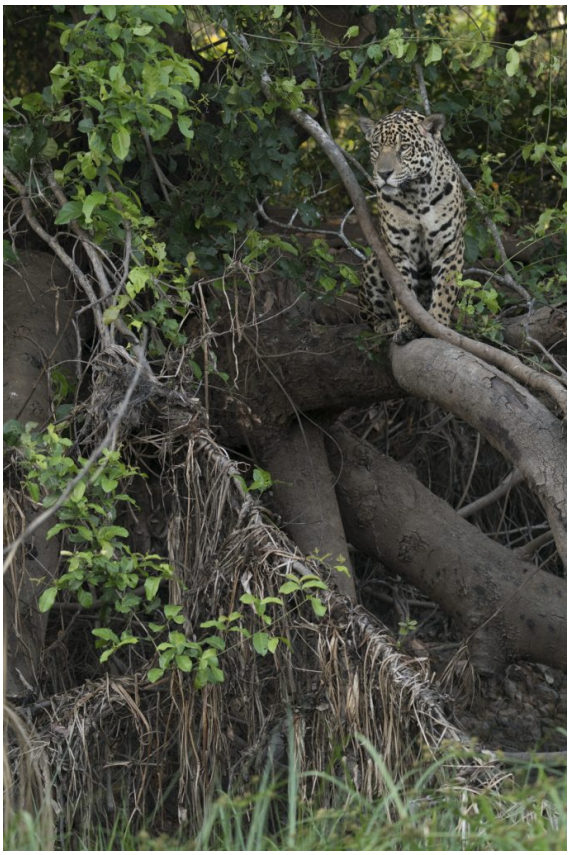
Despite their size if you're not paying attention you could miss the submerged jaguar as they work their way along the waterways (Image by Luke Massey)



Unlike the other big cats, jaguars love the water! It is common to find them swimming along the rivers and tributaries to get from A to B, to hunt or just to cool off (Image by Luke Massey)



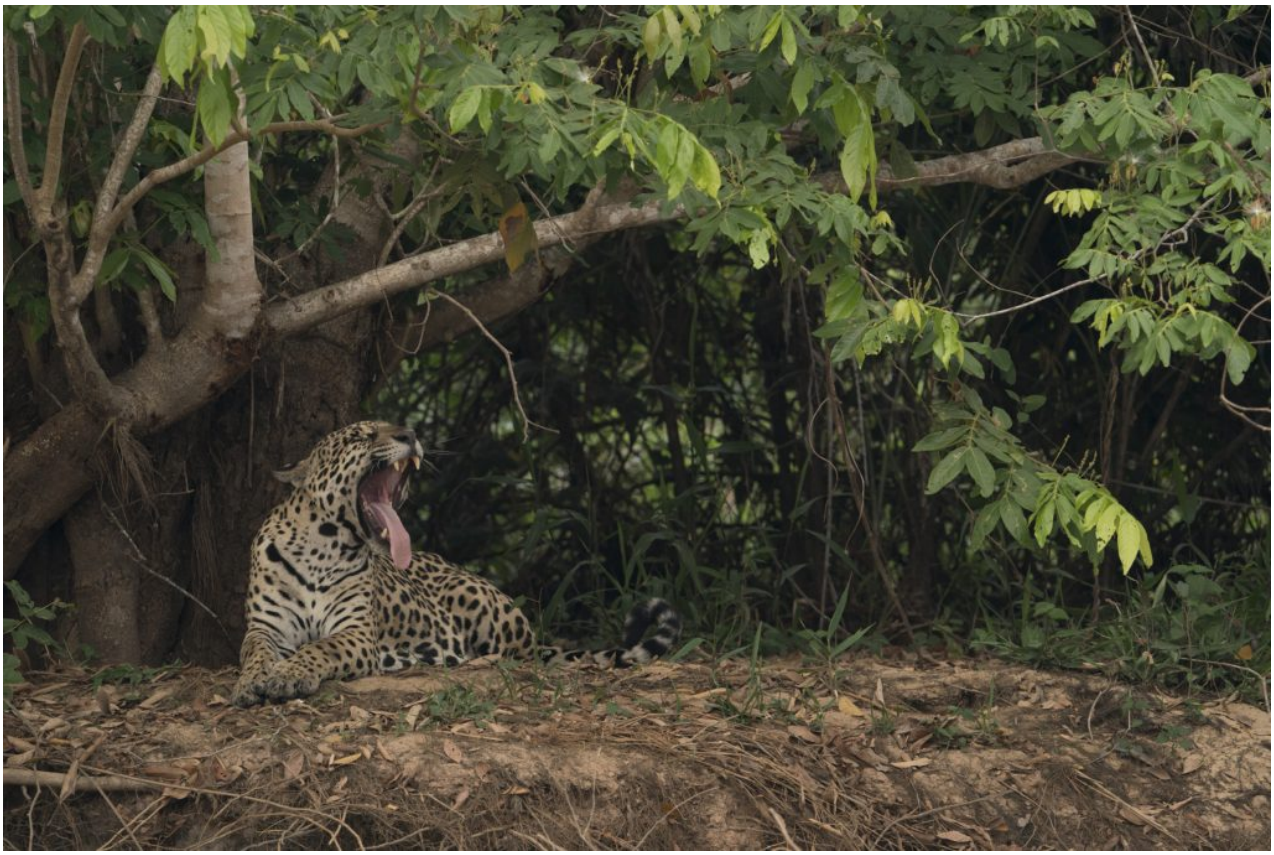
When sat up on the bank sides, the jags are often on the lookout for prey, be it a grazing capybara or a passing heron (Image by Luke Massey)



The perfect vantage point. Up high in a fallen tree, with views of the river (Image by Luke Massey)



The brothers wade through water hyacinths in search of prey (Image by Luke Massey)



Jaguars, like all cats, love to sleep. Their almighty yawns give a good opportunity to capture their mighty jaws on display (Image by Luke Massey)



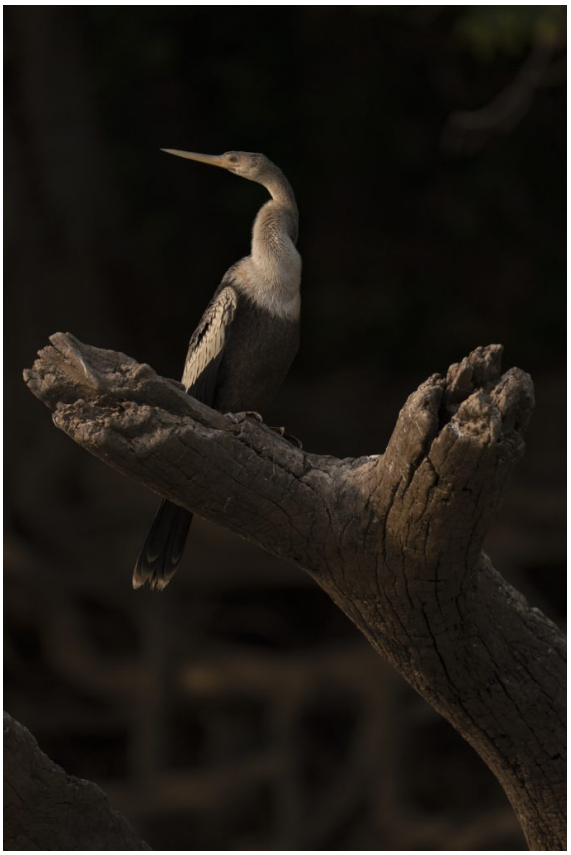
A longing stare, out across the river to a pair of distant capybaras (Image by Luke Massey)



Jaguar resting on a Pantanal riverbank (Image by Luke Massey)



It's not all stalking and swimming though. Jaguars need to rest too (Image by Luke Massey)



Portrait of an Anhinga (Image by Luke Massey)



The death stare, the look of concentration, the focus (Image by Luke Massey)



A sleepy jaguar, awakes from her slumber to look out on us below her (Image by Luke Massey)



Coming around a river bend and spotting a jaguar is a fantastic feeling (Image by Luke Massey)



The emerald grasses really help a jaguar to hunt and they also help a photographer to make the cat pop out (Image by Luke Massey)



Prowling through the riverside vegetation hoping to flush a hidden caiman (Image by Luke Massey)



The many kilometres of bank side we are able to access, means we can have countless different opportunities with jaguars below, above and eye level with us (Image by Luke Massey)



A new jaguar for the Pantanal, a young female rests on the banks of the Piquiri (Image by Luke Massey)



The sheer size and power of the jaguar is clear to see. And with our tour we were able to have multiple encounters with this king of the jungle (Image by Luke Massey)



The brothers could be trekked down far up the Rio Cuiaba hunting the banks, or resting in the shade (Image by Luke Massey)



The heat of the Pantanal works up a thirst, for humans and cats! (Image by Luke Massey)



A special sight for our 2019 tour, two male jaguars together! These brothers are over 3 years old, so it is rare to see to males almost in their prime hanging out together! (Image by Luke Massey)



A juvenila wattled jacana struts along the lake shore at sunset (Image by Luke Massey)



The brothers wade through water hyacinths in search of prey (Image by Luke Massey)



Anaconda! A yellow anaconda chills out in the water. These mighty serpents call the Pantanal home and if you're lucky (or unlucky for some) you may grab an encounter (Image by Luke Massey)



Black and White tegus roam around the grounds of both Santa Teresa and Pousa Alegre. Although they look mean and dangerous, these slow moving lizards are harmless to humans and pose nicely for photos! (Image by Luke Massey)



Black collared hawks can be spotted almost everywhere, perched up looking for an opportunity to steal a meal (Image by Luke Massey)



A black collared hawk admires the rising sun (Image by Luke Massey)



A black collared hawk feasts on a scavenged plecostomus catfish (Image by Luke Massey)



Giant otters devour a couple of unlucky plecostomus' (Image by Luke Massey)



Portrait of a Giant Otter (Image by Luke Massey)



A crimson crested woodpecker feeds its chick within the grounds of Porto Joffre Hotel (Image by Luke Massey)



The world's largest rodent and the reason for so many jaguars. Capybara make up a large part of the jaguar's prey base (Image by Luke Massey)



A young capuchin reaches into a chicha seed pod. The monkeys crush the seeds as they feed so aren't as beneficial to the tree in terms of seed dispersal (Image by Luke Massey)



A wide range of flickers and woodpeckers can be spotted in the Pantanal, one of which being the Campo Flicker (Image by Luke Massey)



The punk-like Guira cuckoo, gregarious and common in the Pantanal (Image by Luke Massey)