Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars and so much more Tour Report 2024

27 December 2024

by Virginia Wilde

For anyone with a beating heart for wildlife, here is my prediction: the Pantanal will truly make it thump and race.

Such is the smorgasbord of animal and birdlife, it's almost impossible *not* to fall in love with this watery world of badass Jaguars, playful Giant River Otters and beguiling birds. Set, as they are, upon a sprawling wetland stage of winding rivers, pea-green rainforest flora and bat-filled sunset skies.

That the Patanal is, indeed, very special, was the resounding – and unanimous – conclusion of this year's Wild Images Brazil group. An apt response to a tour that, quite frankly, knocked it out of the ballpark when it came to the kind of powerful wildlife moments that take your breath away.

Yes, our tally of individual Jaguar sightings was pleasingly high (24). But, of far more importance were those encounters that transcended even the most ambitious photographic aims to become something more resonant and affecting.

And it was the sheer number of these sightings – the ones to write home about and carry with us – that made the Pantanal my favourite tour of the year.

Foremost among them was our encounter with Jaguar huntress 'Jeni', who (over the course of 20 long minutes) grappled with a Yacare Caiman almost twice her body length. All before finally headlocking – and then hauling – her kill 10ft up a vertical riverbank into the trees. And in light so warm, dark and golden, it was practically sepia.

And then there was Pantanal matriarch 'Patricia', who called out five times to her adorable four-week old cub to quit messing around – playing with sticks – and return to the den. Before giving in and rounding him up, sheepdog style, until he reluctantly agreed to go to bed.

And for a showcase of Jaguar swimming expertise, females 'Apeiara' and 'Marcela' were our champions. Our boat driver, Alex, masterfully followed each cat for up to three hours as they paddled miles downriver – sometimes diving, sometimes locking eyes with potential prey – in the hope of a successful kill.

But for sheer charisma, it's hard to beat any sighting of the bruiser of a cat that is 'Ousado' (aka 'Bold'). This dominant male became the world's most famous Jaguar after he suffered debilitating burns to his paws in the region's devastating 2020 fires.

Helicoptered out for skin grafts, and dropped back in a month later, it was heartening to see Ousado – the Pantanal's symbol of survival – swimming and hunting with such vigour.

Other highlights included witnessing the almost reckless courageousness of a pair of Giant River Otter parents heckling a resting female Jaguar. Indefatigable in their efforts to intimidate her into staying away from their nearby cubs, they grunted, whooped and snarled at this apex predator from the water, while maintaining enough distance to avoid her claws.

Then there were the charming encounters with swimming Tapirs, Howler Monkeys, Ocelots, Giant Anteaters, cute Coati and Crab-eating Foxes.

And a dizzying number of bird sightings, from the statuesque-but-strange Jabiru, to the iconic Toco Toucan and Hyacinth Macaw, to my personal favourite – the gorgeous rust and green coloured Rufous-tailed Jacamar that flitted in bushes beside the famous Transpantaneira highway.

The Wild Images Pantanal tour has long been a favourite among clients, and for good reason: here in this biodiversity stronghold is wildlife at its most gifted.

You want the world's largest jaguars, anteaters, otters, parrots and rodents? Well, here they are. And in densities that make wildlife watching an utter joy.

The Pantanal itself is a commanding main character. Once an ancient inland sea, it's the world's largest tropical wetlands (covering an area larger than England) – ten times bigger than the Florida Everglades and 15 times the size of Botswana's Okavango Delta.

Renowned as one of the most biologically rich environments on the planet, the Pantanal shines even in a country (Brazil) that is already home to one-tenth of the world's species and boasts the title of most biodiverse nation.

Dubbed 'Terra de Ninguem' ('No Man's Land') by the Brazilians, the Pantanal spills into neighbouring Bolivia and Paraguay, and is actually a vast alluvial plane.

Life in this delta follows the ebb and flow of a watery ecosystem that pulses with the seasons, slowly rising by up to 4 metres in some areas and shifting often enough that its waters remain fresh and never stagnant.

Unlike the thick jungle of the Amazon, the Pantanal is also a very open environment; fantastic for photographers who can view its animal and bird stars as they take centre stage.

Up to 4,000 Jaguar are thought to live in the Pantanal, together with almost 160 mammal species, 700 bird, almost 100 reptile and more than 3,500 different plants; collectively representing the highest concentration of wildlife in South America.

The Tour Begins: Cuiaba to Pouso Alegre in search of Anteater, Tapir and Potoo

We started our tour, as always, in Cuiaba, the capital of the state of Mato Grosso in southwestern Brazil. Renowned as one of Brazil's most sweltering cities – and home to a particularly fiery football team – we left as swiftly as we arrived, after meeting up with our knowledgeable and entertaining co-guide Marlon, and jumping into our spacious Mercedes Hi-line Sprinter van.

Heading southwest out of the city, the urban sprawl morphed into open farmland, before gradually shifting into the dry savannah that dominates the Northern Pantanal.

Dispiritingly, we could see the smoke from distant wildfires that decimated parts of the Pantanal, Brazilian Amazon and Bolivia this year. More than 1.3 million hectares of the wetlands burned in just a few months (an area eight times the size of London.) Later on in the tour, we spotted firefighters tackling a blaze, as we headed away from the Cuiabà River.

While wildfires are part of the natural Pantanal ecosystem, the recurrence of extreme fire seasons (like the one this year) – particularly when heaped on top of the region's worst drought for 70 years – foreshadows some increasingly difficult years ahead.

After passing by the small town of Pocone, we turned onto the iconic Transpantaneira Highway; essentially a raised 91-mile-long dirt road made famous by being the only road to cut through the Northern Pantanal.

Built by the military government in the 1970s, the highway was initially planned to link Cuiaba with the city of Corumba, in the southern Pantanal (and very close to the Bolivian border). But a rupture in government led to the collapse in such lofty plans.

Yet experts believe this failure saved the eco-tourism potential of the Pantanal: the Transpantaneira avoided becoming a drug-trafficking highway and Jaguar-watching remains a low-risk activity.

Today the Transpantaneira is a wildlife-watching destination in its own right. More than a hundred bridges lift up the road which – despite being particularly dry this year – passes through marshes, gallery woodland, scrub and pastures, with the few ponds replete with waterbirds.

Here we spotted our first Jabiru, Roseate Spoonbills, Plumbeous and Buff-necked Ibis, and Capped and Cocoi heron – together with Red-legged Seriema and a variety of egrets.

We stopped to photograph a family of Capybara (at a distance) and piled out of the van again at one bridge where more than 40 black vultures were feasting on the carcass of a cow. Further avian sightings included three hawk species: Black-collared, Great-Black and the

prosaically named Roadside Hawk.

As wild as the Pantanal may be, huge swathes of it are privately owned by small scale farmers and cattle ranchers. Thankfully, 14 of these farms have been converted to eco-lodges; one of the best undoubtedly being the 27,000 acre Pouso Alegre ranch.

Situated on the fringes of the Pantanal, the drier conditions here play host to some wonderful species. And the Pouso Alegre lodge – a former cattle ranch or 'fazenda' – is home to a series of small lakes, or watering holes, that remain into the dry season and serve as mini epicentres of wildlife activity.

This lodge, set around a cerrado landscape with patches of gallery forest, was to be our base for the next two days, and provided some wonderful encounters.

Plus the first introduction, for some of us, of Brazil's iconic Caipirinha cocktails, a treat when winding down at dinner. (Note to future self: Marlon becomes uncontrollably giggly after just one drink.)

Arriving at the Hacienda-style lodge for lunch, we were immediately struck by a cacophony of life around the bird feeders. It was also hard to ignore the guilty-looking South American Coati that congregated outside my lodge room door – as if he'd been hoping to check-in himself.

Also charming were the cheeky Azaras Capuchins , chasing each other from tree to tree.

In terms of bird life, we soon spotted the first of the many Toco Toucans (that forever draw your eye with their outrageously large banana-shaped bills).

These competed with the equally charismatic Chestnut-eared Acarais and, in the mornings, sightings of the stunning Hyacinth Macaw: the world's biggest parrot, as our avian stars.

Not to mention the flocks of Yellow-billed Cardinals, Greyish Baywings, Chopi Blackbirds, Silver-beaked Tanagers and Saffron Finch flitting around the bird feeders and the lodge dining room.

While Great-rufous and Narrow-billed Wood Creepers, Peach-fronted Parakeets and Green-barred Woodpeckers also drew our eyes, hopping around in the nearby trees.

After lunch, we jumped into the safari-style open farming truck that was to become our wildlife viewing vehicle for the next few days – and off we went for our first of our five drives.

Despite extensive searching, we were ultimately unlucky here in our search for the Giant Anteater (although we made up for this later on in the tour). Particularly as we missed one by minutes after accidentally flushing it towards the lodge, to be photographed by other guests, as we found and photographed a troop of Black Howler Monkeys.

But exploring around the watering holes – and on the day drives, sometimes all the way to the southern cow pastures – we had good sightings of Azalea Agouti, Peccaries, Black Marmoset, Capybara, Red-footed tortoise and both Red and Brown Brockets.

For birds, we notched up sightings of huge Bare-faced Curassows, Chaco Chachalaca, White and Red-throated Piping Guans, and Undulated Tinamous – not to mention an increasing list of impressive raptors, such as the handsome russet-coloured Savanna Hawk.

On several occasions, we caught sight of a Tayra; a strangely captivating mammal similar to a marten, but with the far chunkier build of a wolverine.

At night, as we zipped along the farm trails, with Marlon and I holding up powerful flashlights, we notched up five good Brazilian Tapir sightings – including a mother and juvenile nuzzling each other in a small watering hole.

On the second night, we waited at a larger almond-shaped lake until the sun went down, walking its banks for portraits of some of the estimated 10 million Yacare Caiman believed to live in the Pantanal.

Client Jen and I had the very odd experience of being growled at by a particularly grumpy caiman that locked eyes with us from further up the bank. On the journey home, we caught a glimpse of a nightjar and a much younger Tapir infant; its coat still displaying the spots and stripes that help camouflage them against predators.

On our night drives, hunting Crab-eating Foxes also put in an appearance, together with a feral pig. Driving back towards the lodge in pitch black, a wave of a torch towards one watering channel revealed hundreds of pairs of eyes, lighting up the dark like a strip in Las Vegas .

One morning, we embarked on a beautiful 1km pre-dawn walk to the lodge's canopy tower, climbing the 132 steps to watch the sunrise over trees filled with Wood Storks. Before returning through trees with Fork-tailed and Vermilion Flycatchers and Turquoise-fronted Parrot.

A later stroll – along the Rio Bento Gomes Channel forest trail – had the highlight of the wonderfully weird Great Potoo; an otherworldly bird that almost looks like a prehistoric owl.

Finally we said goodbye to Pouse Alegre after breakfast – and after some sightings of a large Tegu lizard – headed south to our next lodge, in search of Ocelot.

SouthWild (Santa Tereza) for Ocelot and the Art of Capturing Diving Kingfishers

The beautiful SouthWild Lodge, located just 2km off the Transpantaneira Road, sits on the forested banks of the wildlife-rich Pixaim River and is the best place in the world to see wild Ocelot.

On arrival, two things were immediately apparent: one, you could not ignore the impressive Stork Tower, giving bird-lovers and photographers an eye-level view into a giant Jabiru nest, with three (already sizeable and chunky) Jabiru chicks sat awaiting their parents' return.

And two, the water-level in the Rio Pixaim was so unseasonably low that we were not going to be able to launch a boat from here. Thankfully, Marlon came up with an alternative – enabling us to embark at a spot further down the river, a 20 minute drive away.

The SouthWild Lodge was once called Fazenda Santa Tereza, a traditional cattle ranch, but is now renowned for its eco lodge credentials and noted for its impressive and particularly delicious buffet-style meals.

Our two and a half days here unfolded in the following ways: early-morning and afternoon boat trips down the beautiful Pixaim River, our aim being action shots of diving kingfishers and raptors. And evenings at a purpose-built staging hide, where several wild Ocelot have learned to swing by at dusk for a chance of some chicken meat.

Within 30 minutes of arrival at the lodge, client David had captured a shot of the gorgeous Sunbittern with its wings open – while the rest of us chugged down some coffee or visited the Stork Tower. To be able to peer straight into a Jabiru at nest at eye-level – and observe and photograph all the comings and goings of these strapping birds – while not disturbing them at all, is a wonderful experience.

The first of four boat trips on the Rio Pixaim, that afternoon, was almost a shock to our photographic systems; so fast were the kingfishers and such a challenge for many of our camera's autofocus systems, given the verdant – but often cluttered – foliage backdrops before the birds hit the water.

Thankfully, we all improved quickly, with – I think – all of us achieving a sharp shot of a kingfisher leaving the water, droplets spraying all around.

Our boatman – Robson – was incredibly skilled at navigating the Water Hyacinth choked river, sometimes motoring along this peaceful waterway; sometimes punting, Venetian gondolier style.

A continual succession of impressive birds were tempted down by the small piranha thrown from the boat: Green, Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers, together with the occasional Savanna Hawk.

We cruised past some more beautiful raptors and waterbirds: Crane, White-tailed and Harris Hawk, together with a host of herons: Rufescent Tiger, Boat-billed, Large-billed, Cocoi, Little-blue and Night. Although our much hoped for Agami Heron (aka the 'world's most beautiful heron') didn't materialise, there was so much wildlife to see.

The behavioural highlights over our two days included dozens of Capybara bobbing in the Water Hyacinths, all with yellow Cattle Tyrants – with whom they have a symbiotic relationship – sat on their backs, hoping for ticks to eat.

Later on, we spotted much-larger Black Vultures pecking at one clearly pained Capybara, drawing blood in the process.

And then there were the large Green Iguanas, high up in the trees; the Black Howler Monkeys in the trees and the one particular Great Egret that followed us for our entire boat trip. On two occasions, kingfishers stole fish from right under the bills of the stately Jabirus in the shallows.

Back at the SouthWild lodge, we geared up for our first Ocelot session, gathering in a small tiered -seat hide in a wooded glade near the ranch. For more than an hour we sat waiting in silence, as the light faded to dark.

Just as I was wondering if this (normally) elusive species of cat would remain elusive, a female Ocelot, believed to be five years old, appeared out of the shadows, silent and solitary. We were able to watch and photograph this beautiful feline, lit by a makeshift lighting system, for 45 minutes, as she chewed scraps of meat and padded along the branches of a fallen tree.

A couple of the clients had particularly dreamed of seeing an Ocelot, so this was a magical experience for them. And we were buzzing when we returned to the restaurant for dinner.

On our second morning's dawn boat ride, we arrived at the launch-spot – adjacent to a field of horses – to a noticeably charged atmosphere. We quickly learned that a Jaguar had attacked two of the farm's horses the night before; the equines now huddled together as if haunted.

Later, as we drove away, claw marks were clearly visible on two of the horses' flanks, where the cat had tried to take hold. Such interactions demonstrate the ever present tension between apex predators and cattle farmers, who traditionally have killed jaguars on sight.

In fact, the ecotourism potential of the Pantanal serves as an important bulwark against Jaguar hunting; giving rise to the oft-quoted statistic that it is the only place in the world where a jaguar is worth more alive than dead.

Back at the SouthWild lodge, we gathered for our second Ocelot session, with the knowledge that – despite some degree of habituation – these notoriously shy felines are wild animals, and there is no guarantee of seeing them at all.

Ocelots are about twice the size of house cats, and the second largest spotted cat in South America, after Jaguars. Their name comes from the Aztec word 'Tlalocelot' which means 'field tiger'.

But sat in the staged hide, on that second night, we wondered if we could possibly improve on the night before. And, lo and behold, we did! This time, not only were we able to photograph the same female, but – just before we left – a larger male melted in from the darkness and padded along the tree in front of us.

We considered ourselves very privileged to be able to enjoy two different Ocelot encounters!

To Porto Jofre and the Heart of Jaguar Land: Giant Otters and the World's Most Powerful Cats

After our final dawn boat trip, we returned to the lodge for a mouth-watering breakfast just as a Crab-eating Fox made a particularly spirited appearance outside the dining room, posing beautifully for portraits before being chased away by the ranch dog.

This particular morning was decidedly cool and grey, necessitating fleece jackets to keep warm. We jumped back in the Sprinter to head south, back onto the Transpantaneira highway to Porto Jofre.

After a short stop at the Hotel Pantanal Mato Grosso to photograph some Hyacinth Macaws and parakeets, we lunched in a wooded alcove, and spotted the most beautiful Rufous-tailed Jacamar flitting in the scrubland bushes.

Later avian finds included the striking Scarlet-headed Blackbird, Helmeted Manakin, Snail Kites and Southern Screamer, together with a host of water birds such as the White-backed Stilt and Southern Lapwing.

Arriving at Porto Jofre and our waterfront hotel Pantanal Norte, we were immediately struck by the sheer abundance of wildlife in the hotel's grounds.

Large family groups of Capybara wandered the lawns, while the trees heaved with Toco Toucans and pair-bonded Hyacinth Macaws, with one couple indulging in what, in the human world, would constitute a lover's tiff.

Behind the hotel's boathouse was an attractive lily-padded lake with a boardwalk – albeit it resembles much more of a dry muddy watering hole than normal, due to the area's long-running drought.

Near the dining room, 19 Guira Cuckoos roosted communally under some vines; squashed together with barely a feather's breadth between them. Comedically, they squabbled and jostled over positions.

We relaxed before dinner and rested up, conscious that, early the next morning, we would embark on our first of eleven boat trips along the Rio Cuiabà and its tributaries – spending almost 60 hours on the water over the following six days.

Our Jaguar days followed the same basic routine. A speedy 5.30am breakfast and then onto the river before sunrise, in our own speedy motorised skiff, captained by driver Alex – undoubtedly one of the finest boatmen on the Pantanal.

After up to six hours on their water (stopping at select places for loo breaks if needed) we would return for a buffet lunch and break from the heat, before a shorter 2-3 hour boat trip in the afternoon, just as the sun was setting and bats skimmed the surface of the water. A buffet dinner and wine – or Brazilian favourite cocktail, the caipirhinia – ended our days.

The Rio Cuiabà flows through the Pantanal Matogrossense National Park and is itself a tributary of the great Paraguay River. It flows by itself for 300-miles-long – before joining the Rio São Lourenço upstream of Porto Jofte, where lots of jaguar sightings occur.

The Rio Cuiabà flows through extensive areas of the Pantanal's most wildlife-rich wetlands – with tributaries such as the Black Channel of the Très Irmaos ('Three Brothers') being particular fruitful for this year's most impressive Jaguar sightings.

The Jaguars themselves are nothing short of awe-inspiring. Pound-for-pound, the most powerful cats in the world, here they are diving, swimming, leaping and hunting – oh, and knocking out caiman and yellow anaconda for breakfast.

They also have the strongest bite force of all big cats -their large muscular jaws used to crush the heads of their prey.

Recent taxonomic research has rejected former descriptions of a number of Jaguar subspecies. Yet experts recognise that Jaguars in the Pantanal grow consistently – and considerably – larger than anywhere else in the world, attributed mostly to the abundance of prey

Boatmen on the Pantanal work together to share Jaguar sighting information over their radios, although there is an etiquette that favours the boat that made the original sighting, and over decisions of when to retreat back along the river to allow a hunting Jaguar space to cross the river, or room to make its kill.

Although we often joined other boats attending reports of good Jaguar sightings – we also found several Jaguars by ourselves. Indeed, some of our most intimate and favourite encounters were these ones – where it was just us, or one other boat, sharing some incredible moments.

Individual jaguars are recognised by the unique pattern of whirls and spots on their faces and coats.

Over the past few years, the Jaguar Identification Project – a citizen science conservation NGO – has done a phenomenal job in compiling Jaguar sightings and data, so it was possible to identify most of the cats we saw down to named individuals.

In total, we saw 23 individual jaguars during our six days on the Rio Cuiabà (and one later on at Pousado Piuval). But some jaguars we spotted more than once.

So rich was our list of sightings that we had opportunities for close portraits in vegetation and trees and both eye-level hunting action shots and images featuring swimming and diving

The cute factor was provided by the gorgeous mother and cub interactions, together with three successful hunts – one truly memorable, and the others more fleeting; sightings of one jaguar capturing an iguana, and another, a smaller caiman.

Additionally, some of us fell in love with the lighting conditions in the Pantanal. For photographers who are a fan of Baroque-style light (of contrast and shadow) there's so much to enjoy here. I loved it when a jaguar moved away from the shadows on the bank – so that just its head was bathed in shafts of morning light. Sometimes the tones here seemed almost sepia.

We saw so much, but the following encounters were our undisputed highlights:

‘Battle of the Predators‘: Huntress ‘Jeni’ takes down a Yacare Caiman almost. twice her size.

On this particular morning – our second full day on the Cuiabà River – we had already enjoyed two jaguar sightings: female Pollyanna in morning light leaping in a thwarted hunting attempt, and Ti further along the bank, in the undergrowth.

We motored for a fair distance down the Black Channel, away from other boats, and were enjoying the birdlife on the Rio Tres Irmaos, when we rounded a corner to see female Jaguar ‘Jeni’, mere moments after she’d pounced on a disproportionately large Yacare Caiman. As we pulled in, her front limbs were choked around its neck, while her teeth delivered death blows to its skull.

For the next 20 minutes we sat, barely breathing, just a few metres from the bank as Jeni grappled with this vast reptile, herself struggling from the exertion of hauling it out of the river and along a section of the bank carved out like a low-hanging cave.

With the caiman still just about breathing, Jeni first dragged her prey along with her jaws, then wrapped her front limbs around its neck, as if in a headlock.

Standing tall on her hind legs, ‘Jeni’ manhandled the body up a 10ft tall vertical bank – pushing furiously with her hind legs like a 4WD vehicle trying to gain traction.

When she was finally up on the bank, her kill finally hidden in deep foliage, the clients on the only other boat present burst into cheers; such was the respect for a powerful huntress at the height of her skill and potency.

By the end of this particular day, as well as witnessing such a sizeable kill, we had notched up nine sightings of individual jaguars.

The Matriarch and her Cub: ‘Patricia’ gives a Masterclass in Jaguar Mothering

Some of the Pantanal Jaguars have received near-legendary status – usually for their hunting prowess, good looks or charisma. One of these is undoubtedly Patricia – a goddess among jaguars for her badass hunting skills and position as mother to so many of the wetlands’ younger cats.

In fact, her face is the main image on the Wild Images website, dating back to our 2015 tour. And our own encounters with her provided some of the most adorable images on the trip.

We spent two beautiful early evenings watching Patricia, just one month into mothering her latest cub – the four-week-old male dubbed ‘Makala’ – emerge from a riverbank den with her youngster in tow.

Some of the interaction between mother and son was so moving that it brought clients to tears.

Makala was the star of the show here, playfully fighting with sticks, before nestling up to his mum or trying to keep up with her by scampering along the bank as she swam past.

Eventually, Makala tried out the water himself, with comedic results. He splashed about in the water like a toddler child, before thinking better of it, and hauling himself back onto the bank.

Patricia herself behaved in ways that every human parent would recognise. One evening, after repeated attempts to call young Makala back to the den, she grew frustrated and climbed back down the sandy bank herself to physically separate him from the stick he was playing with, and demand he follow her to bed.

‘The Swimmers’: ‘Apeiara’ and ‘Marcela’ show how impressive jaguars are in the water

Although every wildlife lover knows that jaguars – unusually among felines – are adept swimmers, it’s not until you see one paddling and diving for up to three hours that you really appreciate their abilities.

‘Apeiara’ was the first jaguar that we spent a sizeable amount of time with, as she swam for more than an hour and more than a mile, downriver, hoping to catch a caiman unawares.

For most of this time, we were alone with her, with driver Alex giving a masterclass in how to follow a jaguar silently in a boat.

Ever so often, Apeiara would take a break and haul herself up onto the bank to shake herself dry, droplets flying in the air around her.

Similarly, 'Marcela' wowed us on the final morning of our jaguar days, swimming for three hours, while hunting alongside the Rio Cuiabà.

Known for being a particularly beautiful jaguar, Marcela put in a spirited hunting show – sometimes swimming right across the river, and – on one occasion – leaping high in the air to pounce on a caiman (that, sadly for her, got away).

Undeterred, she finally found a tiny fish in the shallows that she picked up and carried for ages, like a house cat gently holding a soft toy.

'The Survivor': Male Ousado still ruling the Pantanal

If ever a Jaguar lived up to his name, it would be dominant male 'Ousado' (aka 'Bold' in Portuguese).

Despite being the only cat we saw to be wearing a collar, this leather neckpiece did nothing to detract from this particular feline's star power.

Helicoptered out of the Pantanal for skin grafts after suffering terrible burns to his paws in the region's horrific 2020 wildfires, his coat still has the appearance of singe and burn-marks.

We spent some time watching Ousado at the end of our second Jaguar day, as he duck-dived for caiman and hunted like the pro he is. A bruiser of a large cat – with a face like a seasoned boxer – it feels like a privilege just to see this cat in action.

The Reckless Courage of Giant River Otters: The Art of Jaguar Heckling

As well as our repeated Jaguar sightings, some of our best wildlife moments were watching playful family groups of Giant River Otters.

Yet, sadly for these large mammals, one of their most immediately impressive qualities is also their downfall – and that is their utter fearlessness.

We watched a pair of adult otters continually heckle and scream at a resting jaguar – the female 'Ague' – in a completely reckless display of courageousness. For more than 20 minutes they circled close to the bank where she lay, looking annoyed and sleepy, as they barked and hollered at her to stay away from their nearby den and cubs.

As a display of animal behaviour, it was fascinating. Giant Otters are a prized prey species for jaguars.

But their renowned fearlessness, and tendency to approach humans, has made them extremely easy to hunt.

Combined with major habitat destruction, late sexual maturity and a complex social life, Giant Otters have seen their numbers decimated.

Currently, they are listed as endangered and now fewer than 5,000 individuals are believed to live in the wild in Brazil.

The Pantanal's Other Stars: Vibing Caimans, Anaconda and Avian Delights

It is easy to think of the days at Porto Jofre to be one big jaguar-fest. But, in between these sightings, we had many moments of wonder with the other wildlife that inhabits these wetlands.

Among them, our morning watching Black Skimmers skirt along the river, beaks touching the water, was lovely. And we had several attempts to photograph Yellow Anacondas – twice under the jetty near our boat mooring, and once as one swam in the river nearby.

Among our other bird encounters, I loved seeing the single trees groaning with up to 30 Neotropic Cormorants. And the Osprey and Hawks flying by, sometimes snakes in their talons.

Several South American Tapir made river crossings in front of us – these strange-looking mammals resembling a mini hippo with a nose like a snorkel. Additionally, we saw Black Howler Monkeys coming down to the water to drink, and a Tayra jumping high up in the trees.

For me, the sight of almost three-metre-long Yacare Caiman vibing together – heads and tails held aloft, and grunting, like some flashmob communal singing session, but with the caiman equivalent of jazz-hands – was a memorable highlight.

Pousado Piuval: The Giant Anteater maks an Appearance amid the Pink Ipe Trees

On our last night at Porto Jofre, several of us fell asleep to the sound of jaguars roaring at night. And after our final morning, it was time for us to make our way back north, along the Transpantaneira, to the lovely Pousado Piuval ranch.

As we drove down the dusty farm track to this – our last eco-lodge- the pink Ipe trees were flowering, striking and pretty, against the dark-blue sky. We hopped into a converted farm-truck that served as a wildlife viewing vehicle, for an evening and night drive that initially seemed highly unproductive.

This dearth of any wildlife vanished with the sighting of a raccoon dog, darting across the road. Then… what's that sitting low in the trees? None other than another jaguar, just a few hundred metres from the lodge restaurant!

That night we celebrated a successful tour, drinking cocktails under the stars as a Great Horned Owl perched in the trees by the lodge swimming pool.

The following morning – our last of the trip – we headed out for a ranch drive. And – bingo – Giant Anteaters! Both individuals that we saw were timid, but we managed to get good shots as one crossed the road in front of us.

It was fantastic to see another anteater wandering in front of the Ipe trees. Other wildlife highlights here were the troop of Black Howler Monkeys above us in the trees, parakeets and a number of Greater Rheas that passed in front of us.

Finally it was time to leave, and – after a lavish lunch at a buzzy restaurant with a local band and fresh seafood – we headed back to Cuiabà Airport, for our goodbyes.

There are few tours that stir so many emotions and hit so many wildlife highlights as the Pantanal. I, for one, love every second of this hypnotic place. It is, unquestionably, an absolute powerhouse of a wilderness destination and every wildlife lover should visit here at least once, if they can.