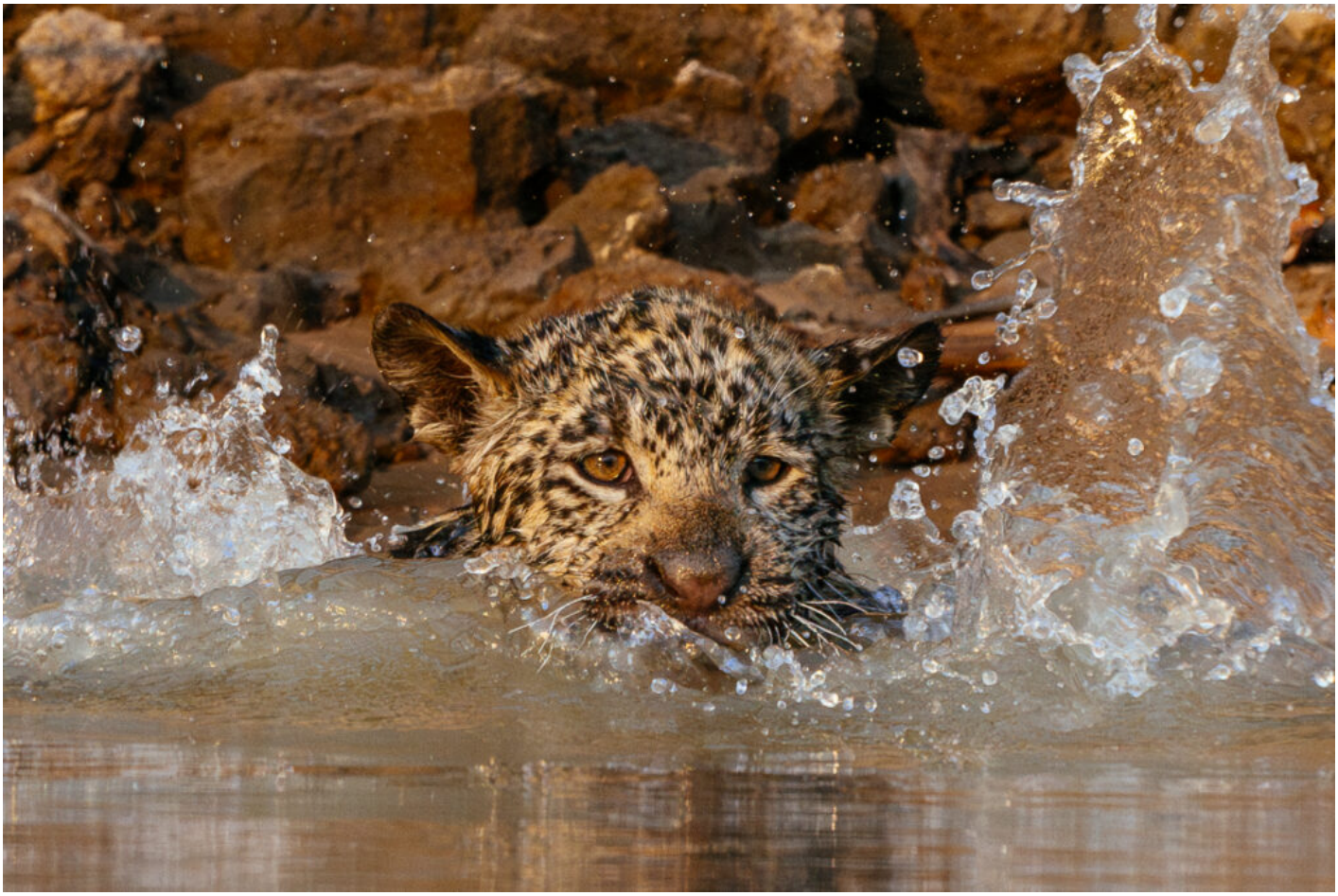


Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars and so much more Tour Report 2024

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.



Our wonderful group of guests next to a beautiful flowering Ipe Tree in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



Black Vultures peck at a pained Capybara, drawing blood while removing and eating ticks from the resting rodent's fur (image by Gin Wilde)



Portrait of a Ringed Kingfisher - the largest kingfisher in the Americas - displaying its daggerlike bill, on the Rio Pixaim (image by Gin Wilde)



How many Neotropic Cormorants can rest on an old tree in the Pantanal? Well in this tree there were 40, and then one flew away... (image by Gin Wilde)



What's that emerging from that nearby bush? Oh, it's a yawning Jaguar. And what big teeth you have! (image by Gin Wilde)



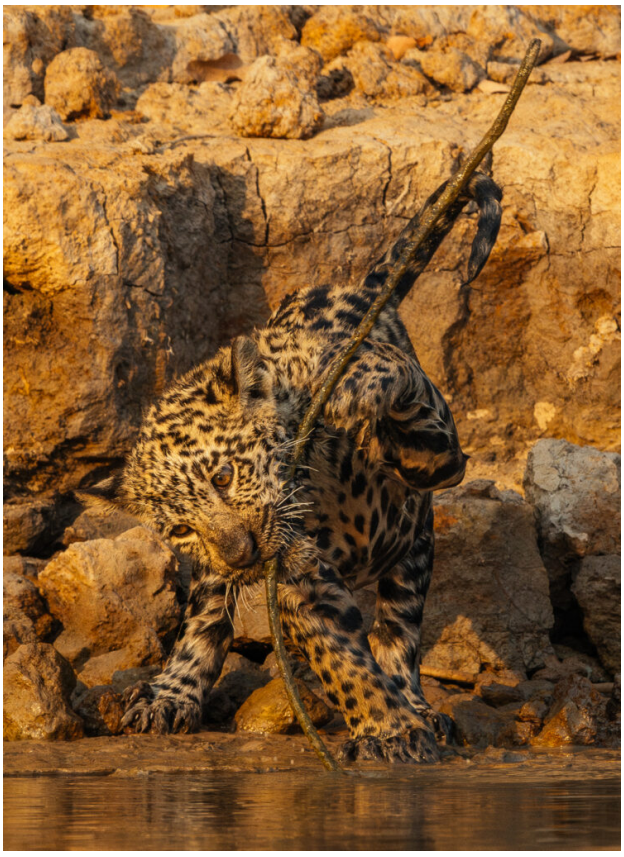
One of the most impressive Jaguar feats is their swimming ability. So adapted are they to wet environments that they can dive and swim miles down river while hunting, like female Jaguar here 'Ti' (image by Gin Wilde)



Matriarch of the Pantanal 'Patricia' nuzzles her four-week old cub 'Makala' - bringing the cute factor to the banks of the Rio Cuiaba (image by Gin Wilde)



Female Jaguar 'Apeirara' shakes the water from her fur after swimming for more than an hour, while hunting in the Rio Tres Irmaos in Brazil's Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



In the great 2024 fight between Jaguar cub and stick, the stick won. Mostly because cub 'Malaka's' mum 'Patricia' called him back to the den. Just like human mothers and sons (image by Gin Wilde)



A female Jabiru waits patiently on the nest with her rapidly growing chicks. Not only are Jabiru one of the largest birds in the New World, but they are also the tallest flying bird in South America, standing five tall and with wings of up to 8ft long (image by Gin Wilde)



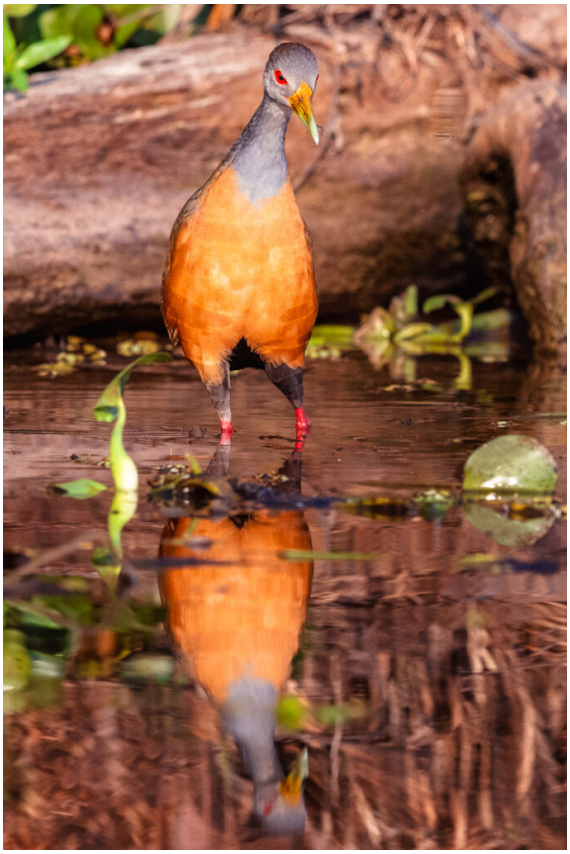
Female Jaguar 'Apeiara' was indefatigable in her three hour hunting trip, pausing only momentarily, in the shallows of the Rio Tres Irmaos, in a patch of dappled sunlight (image by Gin Wilde)



Giant Otters are prodigious hunters, but decades of poaching and habitat destruction have led to them being one of the most endangered mammal species in the Neotropics - with fewer than 5,000 individuals left in the wild (image by Gin Wilde)



Hunting down a Yacare Caiman that was almost 10ft long was a tall order for female Jaguar 'Jeni'. But her skills as a huntress should never be underestimated (image by Gin Wilde)



'Mirror, mirror, on the river 'wall', Who's the fairest Gray-cowled Wood Rail of them all?' Why, me, of course! (image by Gin Wilde)



Bare-faced Currasows are handsome-looking birds. This female strode across a branch in front of us at Pouso Alegre, Brazil, with her black-and-white crest on display (image by Gin Wilde)



Hunting down a Yacare Caiman that was almost 10ft long was a tall order for female Jaguar 'Jeni'. But her skills as a huntress should never be underestimated (image by Gin Wilde)



A Giant Anteater wanders through a pasture in Pousado Puival, with pink Ipe trees starting to bloom in the background. Habitat destruction is a major threat to these magnificent mammals - having already gone extinct in large areas of Central America (image by Gin Wilde)



A Great Egret swoops down in an effort to land a fish, its huge white wings held aloft behind. On the Rio Pixaim (image by Gin Wilde)



Four-week-old Jaguar cub 'Malaka' looks sheepish, after mum 'Patricia' twice headed back down to the water's edge- after calling for her youngster to return to the protected den hidden in the foliage (image by Gin Wilde)



I loved the contrast of light and shadow in the Pantanal, that provides so much scope for Baroque-style wildlife photography - but also shows how camouflaged a hunting Jaguar can be (image by Gin Wilde)



'Power in the Pantanal: Life, death and everything in between'. Huntress 'Jeni' hid in the shadows of a jutting rock, before pouncing on her Caiman prey (image by Gin Wilde)



Shadow to light, and back to shadow. The conditions in the Pantanal are a treat for those wildlife photographers who favour Baroque contrasting light (image by Gin Wilde)



If a Jaguar could grin, it would look like this! Female Jaguar 'Apeiara' shows some charisma as she checks out the riverside for prey (image by Gin Wilde)



The stockiness of Jaguars, relative to some other big cats, can be seen here in female 'Apeiara'. Powerful paws, and chest - and an almost bulldog-shaped head. Topped off by those incredibly strong jaws, with a bite force unmatched in other felines, and double that of a Tiger (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguars are renowned for their leaping ability - and can easily jump up to 10ft vertically and 20ft horizontally. In fact, the word 'Jaguar', comes from the indigenous word 'Yaguar' which means "he who kills with one leap." (image by Gin Wilde)



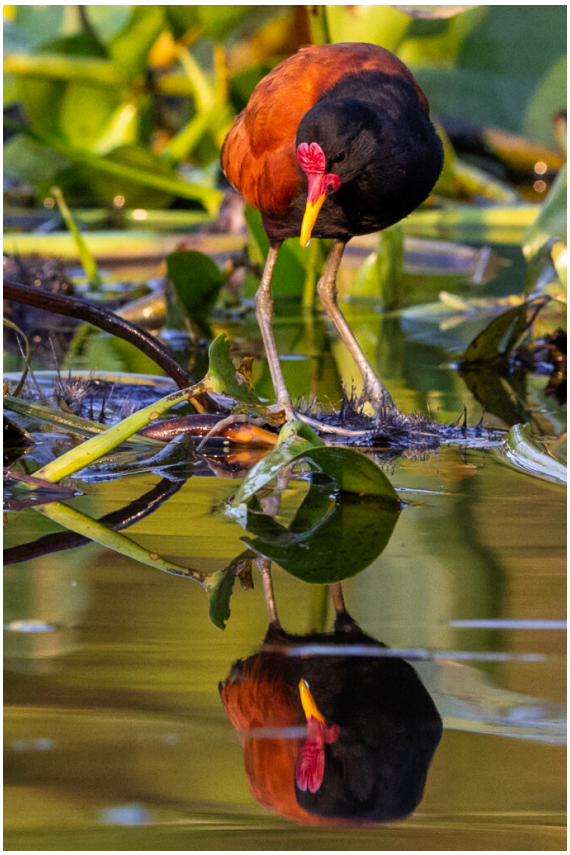
A dainty female Ocelot - shy and nocturnal - pads along a branch in Santa Teresa (image by Gin Wilde)



Close-up portrait of a Rufous-tailed Jacamar: one of the prettiest small birds we have ever seen. Its feathers were as dazzling as a jewel, as it flitted around the bushes beside the Transpantaneira Road (image by Gin Wilde)



We watched female Jaguar 'Apeirara' swim for more than a mile, letting the current of the Rio Tres Irmaos help her to scour huge swathes of Water Hyacinth for unsuspecting Caiman. Here, she emerges, dripping, from the water (image by Gin Wilde)



Wattled Jacanas are amazing lily and Water Hyacinth trotters; their super-long toes spreading their weight over a large area, enabling them to walk across floating vegetation (image by Gin Wilde)



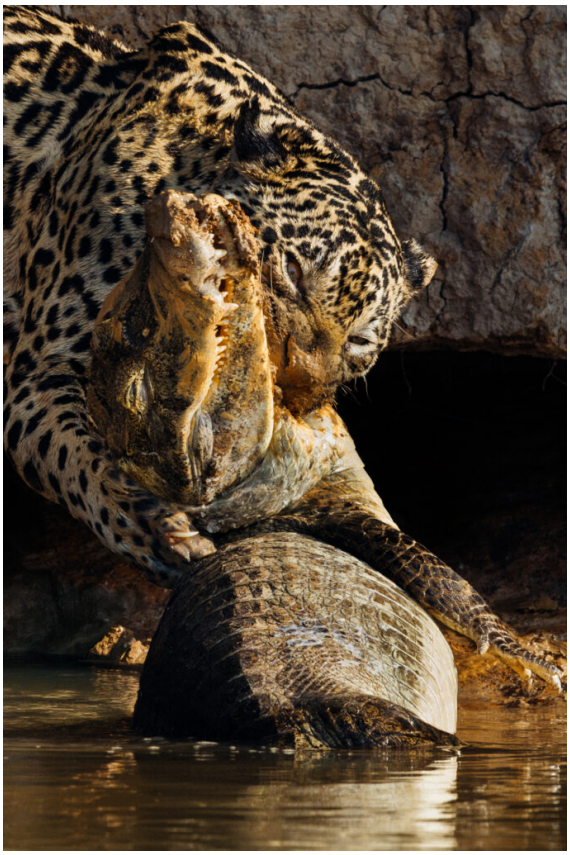
How stunning is a Jaguar's coat, when seen from the side?! Jaguar spots consist of rosettes with inner spots. In contrast to leopards, who have similar rosette patterns but with no inner spots (image by Gin Wilde)



This pretty Ocelot had only just become active - with twilight and night its hunting hours. Worshipped by ancient Peruvians, ocelots are unique among many wild cat species by being able to turn their ankle joints around to climb down trees (image by Gin Wilde)



Lesser Kiskadees can be feisty birds! This pair duke it out in the grounds of Pouso Alegre (image by Gin Wilde)



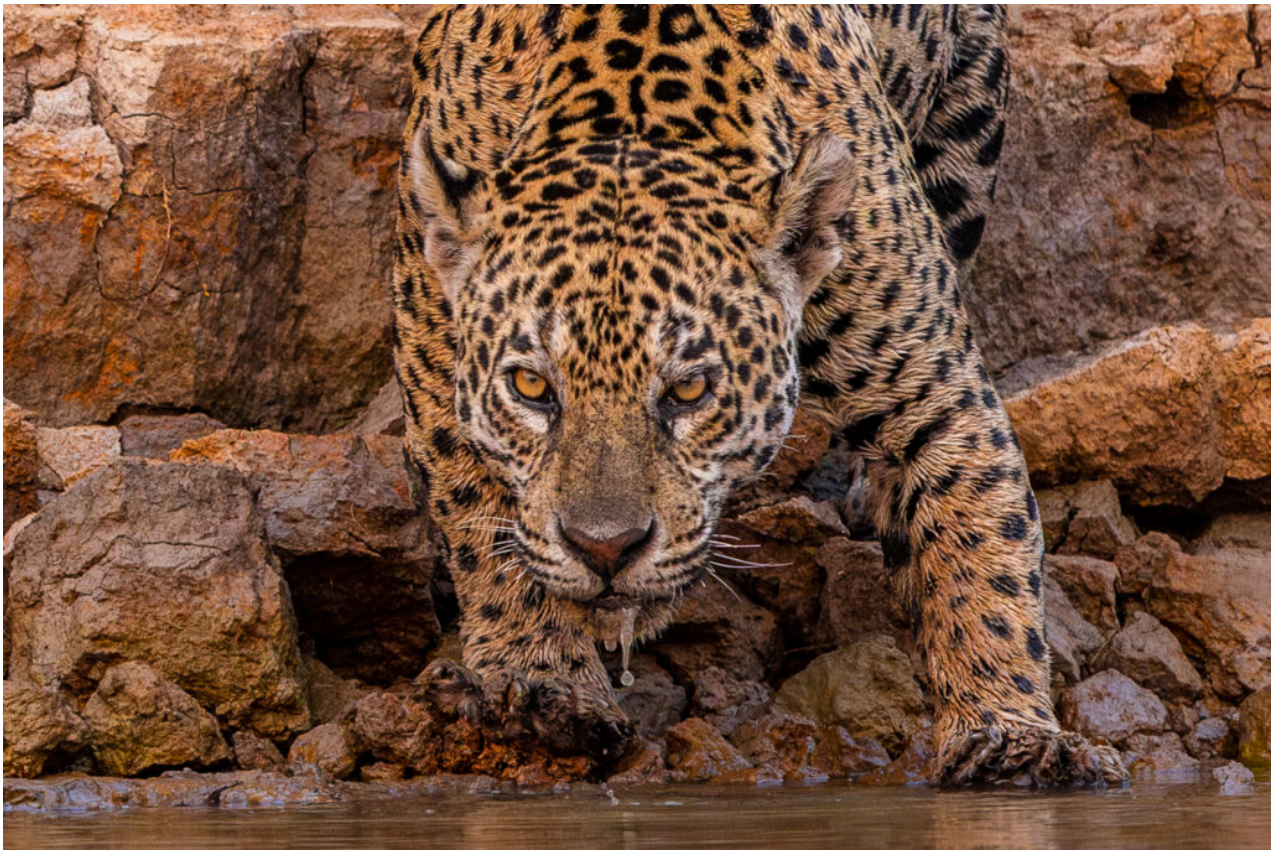
Life and Death in the Pantanal. Jaguars have a bite force of 1,500 pounds per square inch (PSI) - the strongest bite of any big cat, relative to size. And double the bite force of a tiger (image by Gin Wilde)



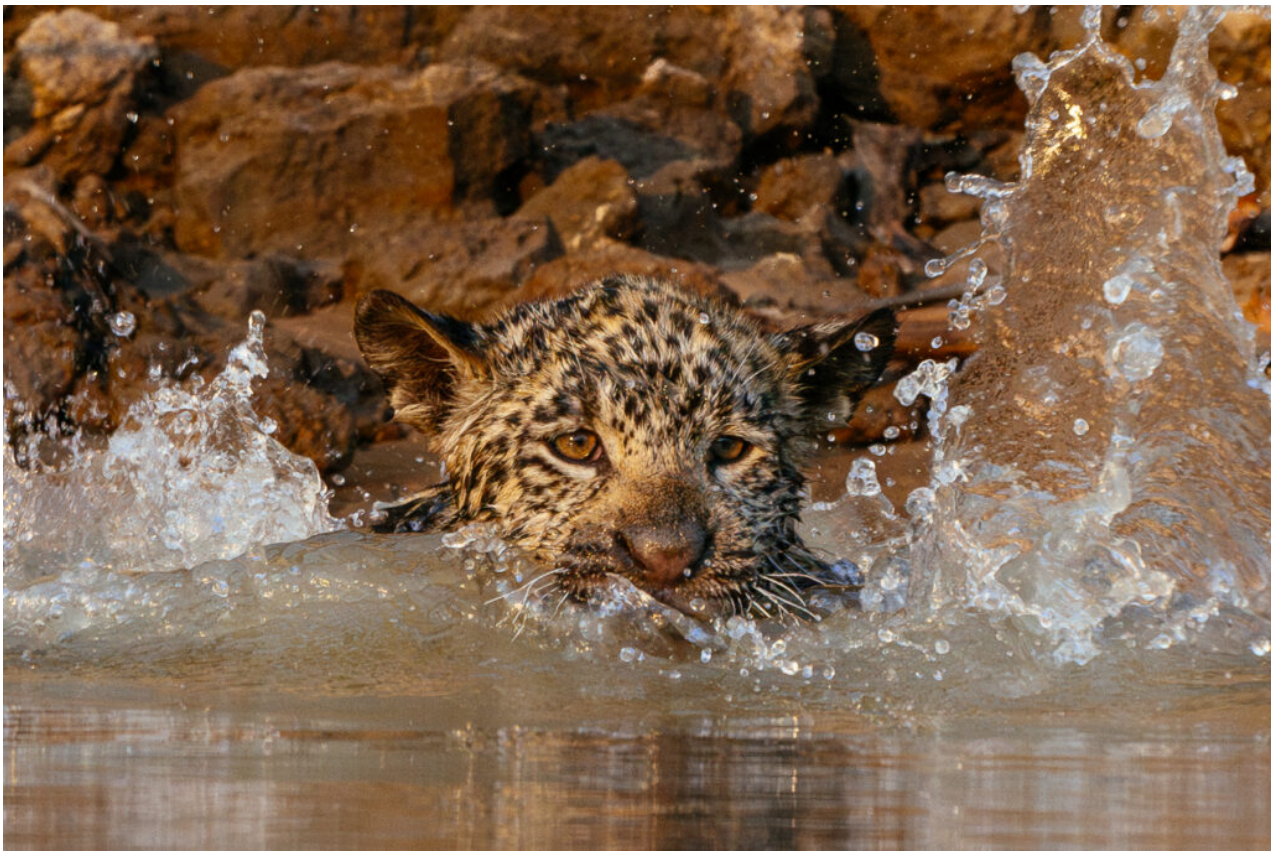
Female Jaguar Apeiara - one of the most beautiful Jaguars in the Pantanal - pads through pockets of shade along the Rio Cuiabà (image by Gin Wilde)



Female Jaguar' Pixana' amid the lush vegetation on the banks beside the Rio Cuiaba (image by Gin Wilde)



Water from the Rio Cuiabà drips from huntress Patricia's jaws, as she cools down in the 42 degree C afternoon heat (image by Gin Wilde)



'Makala' the 4-week-old cub of Pantanal matriach Patricia, holds his nerve as he attempts a dip in the waters of the Rio Cuiaba (image by Gin Wilde)



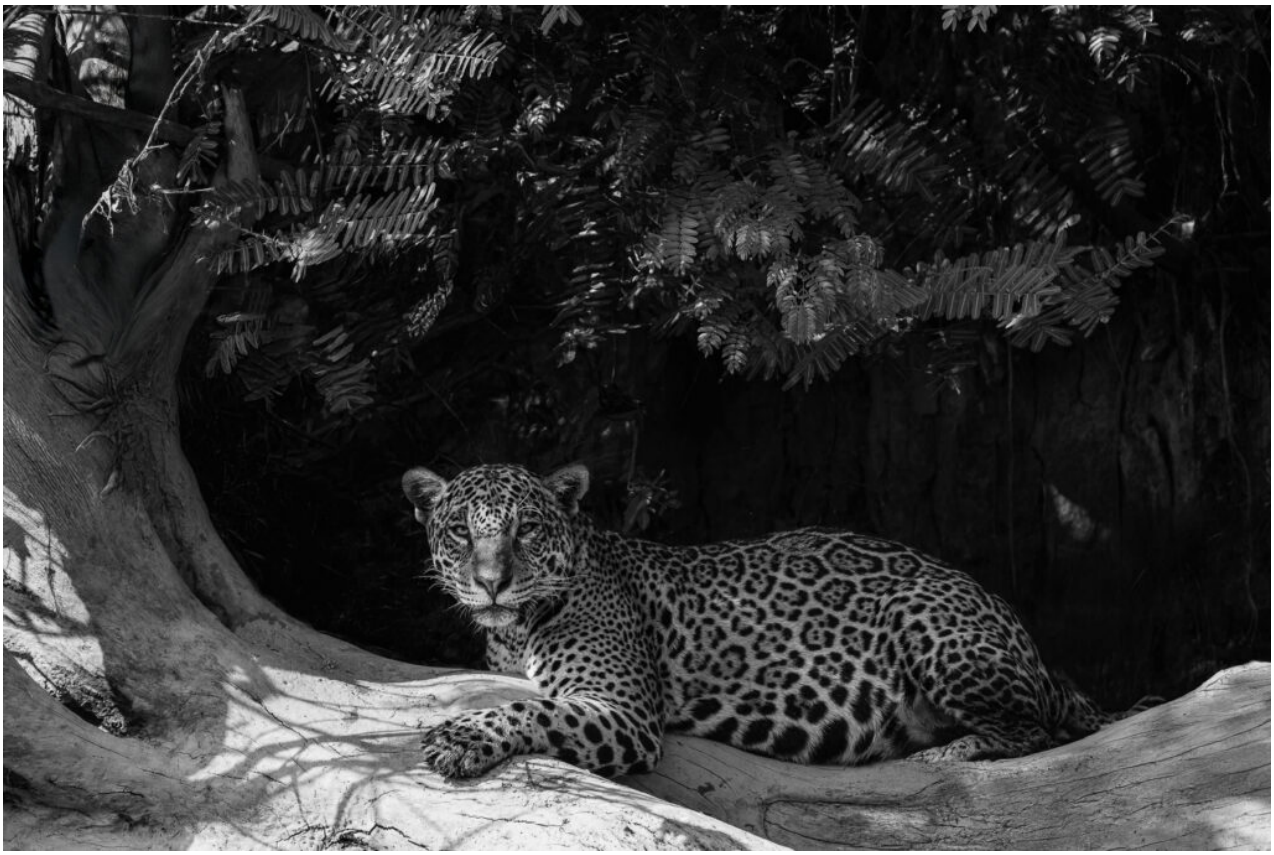
The sheer power of a Jaguar is apparent here - as female 'Jeni' drags a large Yacare Caiman out of the water, after the thrashing reptile loses its battle against her jaws (image by Gin Wilde)



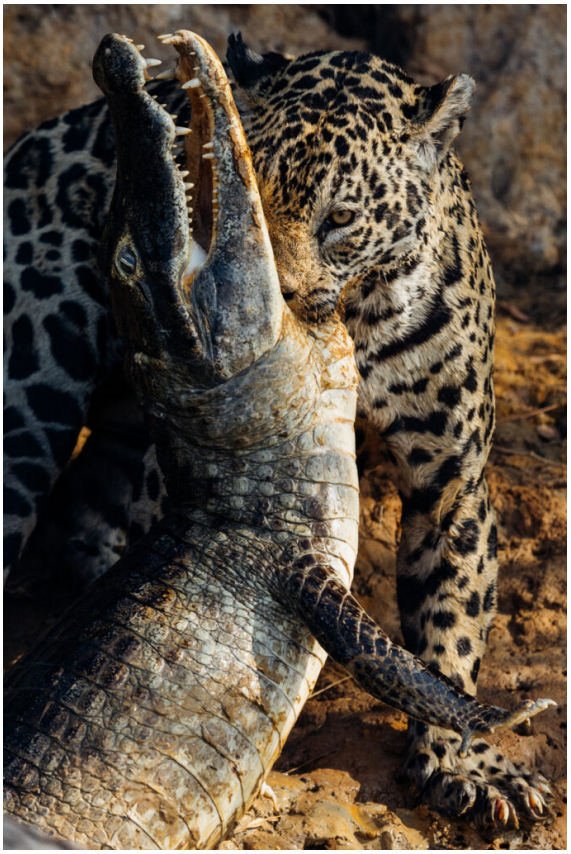
As the largest of the four anteater species, the Giant Anteater is a prize to see in the Pantanal. They protect their sharp front claws by tucking them into their palms and walking on their front knuckles (image by Gin Wilde)



Snoozing in a tree at Posou Alegre, a nocturnal Great Potoo. Known to many as 'The Ghost Bird', Potoos are known for their haunting calls and large, expressive eyes (image by Gin Wilde)



'Serenity in the Pantanal.' A female Jaguar rests under the shade of a tree just after sunrise (image by Gin Wilde)



This Yacare Caiman was still breathing when Jaguar huntress 'Jeni' started hauling it from the shallows of the Rio Tres Irmaos, and up the bank (image by Gin Wilde)



'Just a black and white snap of a handsome snapper.' This Yacare Caiman looks straight at me - one of ten million thought to live in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



Close-up portrait of a Rufous-tailed Jacamar: one of the prettiest small birds I have ever seen. Its feathers were as dazzling as a jewel, as it flitted around the bushes beside the Transpantaneira Road (image by Gin Wilde)



A pair of attentive Giant Otter parents shepherd their pups out of the water, up a sandbank and into the safety of their riverside den - offering protection from any Jaguar predators that may come their way (image by Gin Wilde)



A Greater Ani, in bushes beside the Rio Cuiabà, in the Pantanal. The largest of the Ani's, these glossy blue-black birds are members of the cuckoo family, sometimes referred to as the 'Black Cuckoo.' (image by Gin Wilde)



Aww! 'Here's looking at you, Kid!' Four-week-old Jaguar cub 'Makala' stares out in curiosity at everything going on around him in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



With lush vegetation and its mind-boggling number of species - this is the Pantanal at its most verdant. Jaguar 'Marcela' surveys this - her wetland and rainforest realm (image by Gin Wilde)



'Hunter vs Hunter'. In the battle of the swampland predators, the Jaguar wins. Jaguars are specifically adapter to hunt neotropical reptiles, capable of killing alligators up to 4 metres in length (image by Gin Wilde)



'That's one way of making a splash!' Jaguars are excellent swimmers and have adapted perfectly to living in the watery wetlands of the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



Weaving through the leaves and peering through, who would suspect that a Jaguar was nearby? Mastering the art of stealth and stalking is a must if you are to be successful as a Jaguar in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



The waters in the Pantanal can rise by up to 4 metres, depending on the season. This ever-changing aquatic environment means the waters are never stagnant - and so are richly supportive of life. Meaning lots of prey for Jaguars! (image by Gin Wilde)



Could there be a happier looking bird than this kingfisher! A male Amazon Kingfisher opens his bill wide, looking like he has heard the best joke in town (image by Gin Wilde)



Pair-bonded Hyacinth Macaws - the world's biggest parrots - 'gossip' in a tree at Porto Jofre, in the Northern Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



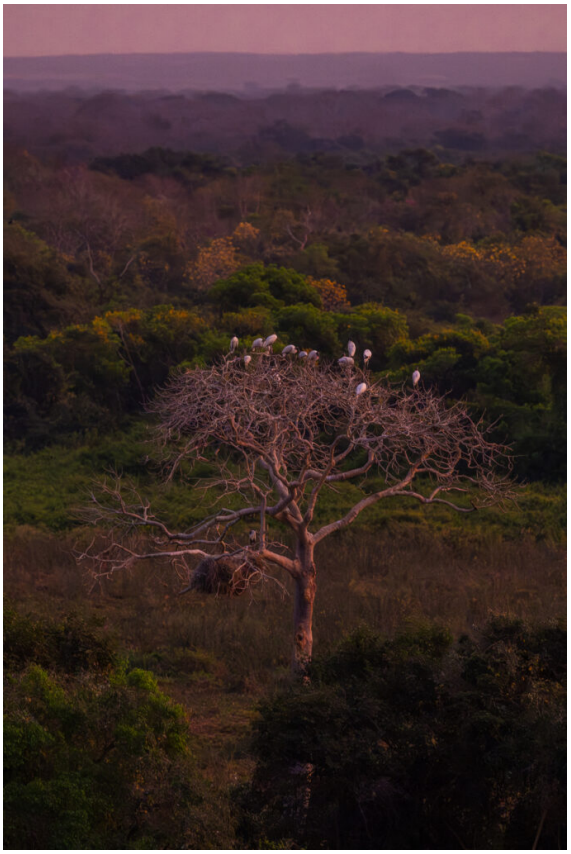
A South American Coati scampers through the leaves in Posou Alegre, Brazil. Coatis are part of the racoon family and communicate through soft whining sounds and alarm calls, as well as loud woofs and clicks (image by Gin Wilde)



All eyes on this Yacare Caiman as it glides silently through the water. There are estimated to be ten million Yacare Caiman in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



A Jaguar laps at the waters of the Rio Cuiaba. Jaguars are identified by their facial and body markings - the unique mosaic of whirls and rosettes on their coats. But these patterns can (I think) look striking in black and white images too (image by Gin Wilde)



Wood Storks gather in a tree at dawn, in a scene taken from a telegraph tower in Posou Alegre, Brazil (image by Gin Wilde)



Posing handsomely in the grounds of Santa Teresa, Brazil, a wild Crab-eating Fox allows his portrait to be taken, before scampering away (image by Gin Wilde)



Stalking through the undergrowth, the sheer size of this Jaguar's muscular jaw is on show - giving it the power needed to break the skull of a caiman (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguar 'Marcela' pounces on a prospective Caiman meal, leaping high above the Water Hyacinth, before crashing down into the water...as her quarry dives out of sight and away (image by Gin Wilde)



'Marcela' - renowned as one of the prettiest Jaguars in the Pantanal - tackles a dastardly rogue stick, as she plays in the shallows of the Northern Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



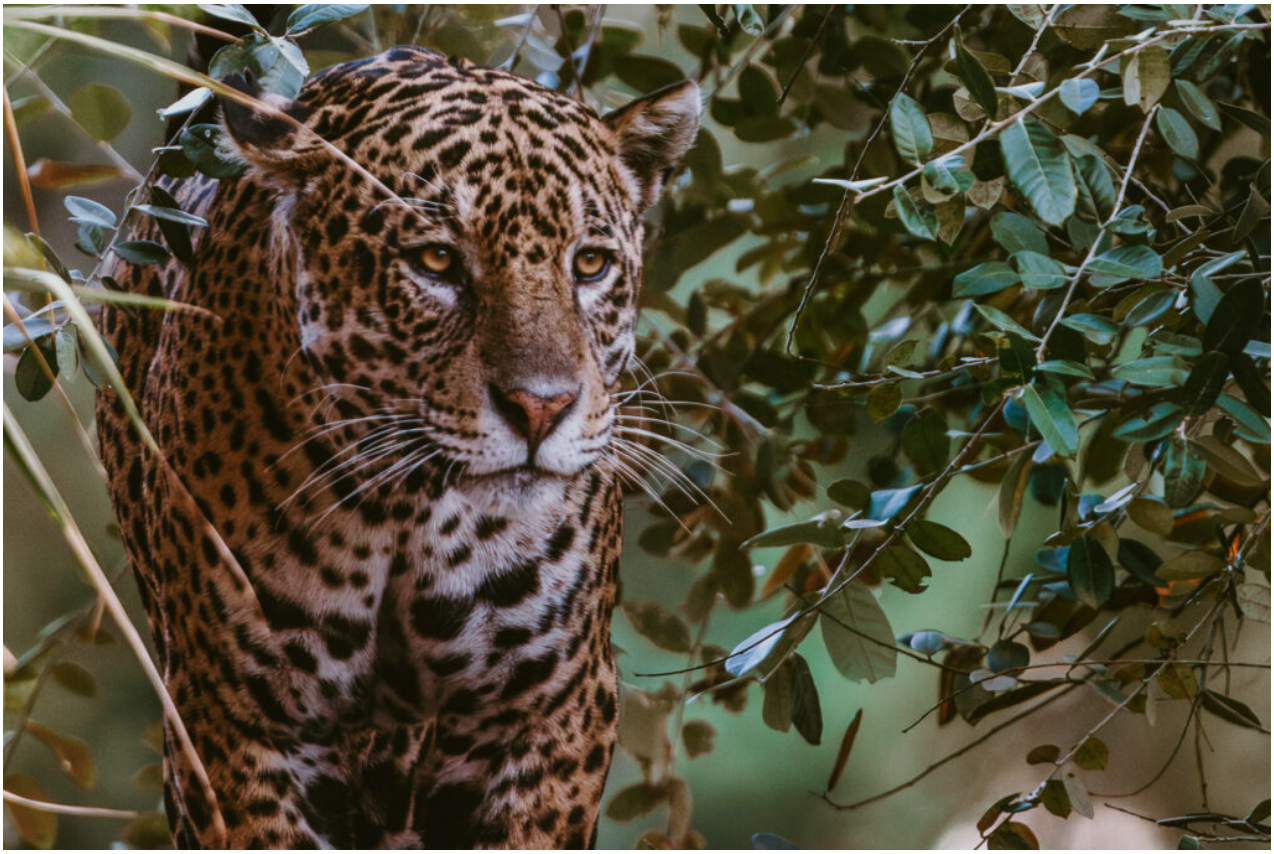
'Realm of the Jaguar'. The female Jaguar 'Apeirara' pads in and out of the shadows - as at home in the dense rainforest trees as she is in the swamplands (image by Gin Wilde)



Female Jaguar 'Apeiara' powers her way up the bankside in the Northern Pantanal, after spending three hours hunting and swimming - sadly in vain - in the Rio Tres Irmaos (image by Gin Wilde)



Watching this four-week-old cub 'Makala' take his first tentative steps towards the water was the epitome of adorable - and one of the highlights of our tour (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguars can move like ghosts through the lush vegetation alongside the Rio Cuiaba, in between scouring the banks and foliage for prey (image by Gin Wilde)



A handsome Cocoi Heron - the largest of the South American heron species - is reflected in the waters of Brazil's Rio Pixai (image by Gin Wilde)



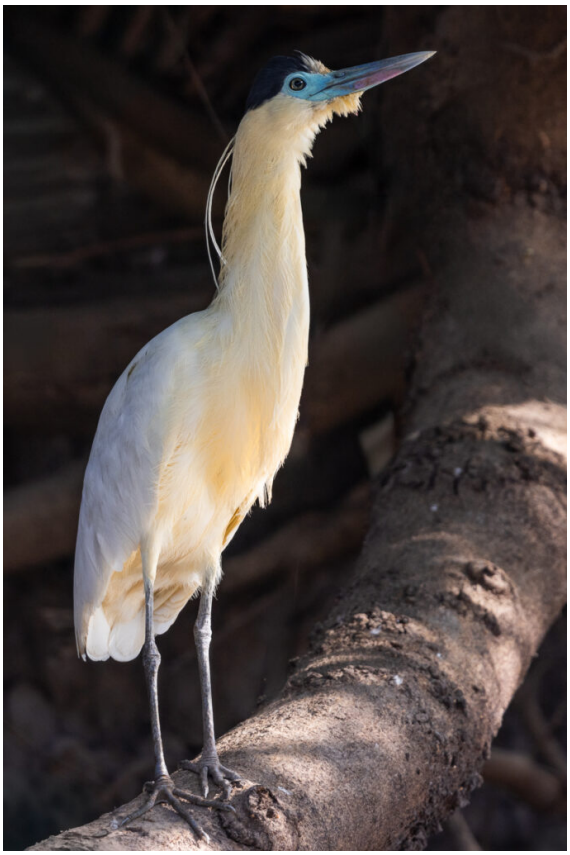
Giant Otters grow up to 1.8 metres long, with sizeable bodies and tails, as this individual shows (image by Gin Wilde)



What this image doesn't show was quite how high this Green Iguana had climbed up a tree, overlooking the Rio Pixaim. We estimated maybe as much as 80-90ft off the ground! But this tree was clearly his happy place, as he was still resting up here the next day (image by Gin Wilde)



A Black-collared Hawk zeroes in on a fish below in the Rio Pixaim; its impressive talons on show (image by Gin Wilde)



A Capped Heron sits on a branch in the Pantanal. These gorgeous waterbirds are distinct from other herons - being the only one with a blue beak and face, and a black crown (image by Gin Wilde)



Sunset turns the sky different shades of pink, purple, orange and yellow in the fields around the ranch of Posou Alegre (image by Gin Wilde)



A pair of Giant Otter pups haul themselves out of the waters of the Rio Cuiabà, flanked by their watchful mum (image by Gin Wilde)



'Oy, budge over!' Guira Cuckoos roost in groups of up to 20, meaning compromises must be reached in the communal nest! They are social birds that huddle together to keep warm, and even sunbathe together in the early morning or after it rains (image by Gin Wilde)



This little Yacare Caiman didn't stand a chance against the might of a Pantanal Jaguar (image by Gin Wilde)



That's one way to make a splash. Four-week-old Jaguar cub 'Makala' starts his swimming lessons, in the waters of the Northern Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



Hauling her Caiman prey up a steep bank was no small feat for huntress Jaguar 'Jeni'. But here she is, at the top - with her Caiman prey showing the sizeable tail almost as thick as Jeni's own body (image by Gin Wilde)



A balletic leap from female Jaguar 'Pollyana' as she traverses the lush vegetative trails of the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



'Portrait of a Jaguar'. Studio-style portrait of the gorgeous Apeiara, 'Princess of the Rio Tres Irmaos' (one of the tributaries in the Pantanal.) (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguar 'Pollyanna' prowls in and out of the shadows and shallows - showing that stealthiness and camouflage are prime hunting tactics in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



Slow-shutter speed creative shot of Monk Parakeets, as they flew along the banks of the Rio Pixaim (image by Gin Wilde)



Alert and eyes skyward, Jaguars are such opportunistic hunters that they will prey upon almost anything...including birds and monkeys in the trees above (image by Gin Wilde)



A Strong-billed Woodcreeper tosses leaves about as it probes foliage and leaf litter in search of an arthropod meal (image by Gin Wilde)



Shake, shake all that water off! A Jaguar sends water droplets flying after a dip in the Rio Cuiaba (image by Gin Wilde)



A South American Tapir emerges from the waters of the Rio Cuiaba, its skin showing several fighting scars. Due to their large size, slow rate of reproduction, and sensitivity to habitat destruction, tapirs are endangered - often one of the first species to decline when humans disturb an ecosystem (image by Gin Wilde)



Hey Toco Toucan, you really are an otherworldly looking bird, with that colourful bill four times the size of your head (image by Gin Wilde)



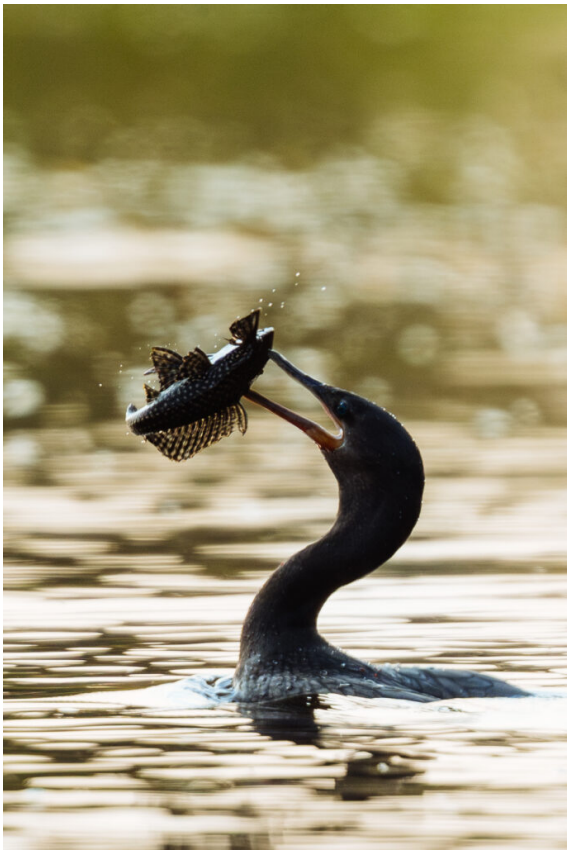
Huntress 'Jeni' uses her giant paws to begin to haul her Caiman prey from the water, before manoeuvring her quarry up towards the upper riverbank (image by Gin Wilde)



'That's breakfast sorted!' A Ringed Kingfisher rises amid a splatter of droplets, fish in mouth, in Brazil's Rio Pixaim (image by Gin Wilde)



A South American Tapir and her juvenile calf, believed to be around eight months old, enjoy a late night dip in a watering hole, in Pouso Alegre (image by Gin Wilde)



Almost silhouetted in the morning light, a Neotropic Cormorant holds its sizeable fish breakfast aloft, before taking three goes to swallow it (image by Gin Wilde)



The intense eyes of powerful huntress 'Jeni' as she hauls her Yacare Caiman prey along by its neck in the Pantanal, after delivering the fatal bite (image by Gin Wilde)



Whatever's caught this Jaguar's focus better get out of here pronto... Jaguars are opportunistic hunters - and very skilled ones at that (image by Gin Wilde)



'Marcela' - one of the most charismatic Jaguars in the Pantanal, scouts out the water and banks for prey (image by Gin Wilde)



'What's that scent? I nose it's something!' While there is no precise measurement for how far a jaguar can smell, it is known that they can detect scents that are several miles away, especially if they are strong or pungent (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguars are opportunistic hunters, with more than 85 different species of prey, including birds, mammals, fish and reptiles. This Jaguar looks skyward, in the hope of a meal (image by Gin Wilde)



'Jaguar Contemplation Time'. Female Jaguar 'Apeirara' rests in the shadowland banks of Rio Cuiaba; time out from hunting (image by Gin Wilde)



Female Jaguar 'Patricia' has her attention caught by a noise on the far bank of the Rio Tres Irmaos, in Brazil's Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



There's no doubt about it: Jaguars are badass. Pound for pound, the world's most powerful felines, as 'Jeni' shows here by hauling a Caiman longer than her up a steep bank (image by Gin Wilde)



Four-week old Jaguar cub 'Makala' watches, entranced, as his mum, 'Patricia' cools off in the waters of the Rio Cuiaba, temporarily escaping the 42 degree C heat (image by Gin Wilde)



'I'm here with you, mum!' Four-week-old Jaguar cub 'Makala' keeps up with his swimming mother 'Patricia' (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguars are known to regularly eat more than 85 species of prey. Including little fish. Although, compared to the big caiman we saw these cats wrestle, this little tiddler seems a little tame (image by Gin Wilde)



Jaguar 'Apeirara' takes a pause from hunting atop a fallen branch - and surveys the banks along the Rio Tres Irmaos in the Northern Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



A female Howler Monkey, with her infant, staring down from the trees near Poconè. Confusingly, female Black Howler Monkeys are brown, leaving the namesake colour to the males (image by Gin Wilde)



It's getting 'otter and 'otter out here- so all we can do to escape the heat is rest on this tree. Giant Otters laze on a fallen tree in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



Black Howler Monkeys are among the Pantanal's noisiest inhabitants. Around sunrise they begin their roaring howl, which has to be heard to be believed (image by Gin Wilde)



'First on the tree gets to flipper-slap the rest!' Giant Otters play amid the fallen trees and driftwood on banksides in the Pantanal (image by Gin Wilde)



How often do you see a rodent with a bird on its back?! Capybara have symbiotic relationships with Cattle Tyrants: the birds get a tick meal, the Capybara gets rid of the blood-suckers (image by Gin Wilde)



A female Anhinga dries its wings on the banks of the Rio Tres Irmaos. These (mostly) fish eaters are unfairly known as "Devil Bird' or 'Snake Bird' in the Brazilian Tupi language - due to their habit of only keeping a part of their neck above water while swimming, thus resembling a serpent (image by Gin Wilde)



Portrait of a Crab-eating Fox. These widespread canids get their name from the crabs they prey on during the wet season - scouring for the crustaceans on muddy floodplains (image by Gin Wilde)



The Pantanal is home to more than 600 bird species, with the Chestnut-eared Aracari just one of the colourful birding stars that relish life in this region (image by Gin Wilde)