Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars and so much more Photography Tour Report 2025

16 September 2025

by Oliver Krüger

2025 marked the eighth Wild Images trip to the Pantanal, the largest wetland on the planet. As a tour leader, I have to confess that I was a bit nervous, as I had not been to the Pantanal since 2013 and the tour reports of 2024 and 2023 by Virginia Wild and Mike Watson were so amazing that I feared that 2025 might not match previous years.

While comparisons are impossible, I believe we continued the run of highly successful tours to this first and foremost wildlife photography destination in South America. We had 25 Jaguar encounters, including a full sequence of a successful Caiman hunt, several unsuccessful attempts, Jaguars in the water, in the trees, even in the air as we witnessed three jumps. Some of our Jaguar encounters lasted over two hours and this does not mean that the Jaguar was sleeping. In fact, hardly any of the Jaguars we encountered was sleeping. This resulted in a rather diversified portfolio of Jaguar pictures. In addition, we photographed over 110 bird species during this trip, and due to our wonderful guide Marlon, saw quite a few other species, too. Add to this a stunning daylight encounter with a Tapir, three Giant Anteaters, a relaxed Yellow Anaconda, Giant Otters playing and catching fish and I hope everyone can understand why many of us were rather low on memory card or disk space by the end of the tour.

It all started, as in previous years, close to Cuiaba airport, more precisely at the Amazon Airport Hotel, where most of us had stayed the previous night(s). Everyone was ready to go and so we took off at a smouldering heat of 37°C, but our air-conditioned van provided a welcome cocoon. Soon, Cuiaba was behind us and the landscape became more wild. After driving for 90 minutes, the first Capybaras, Caimans and Jabirus came into view and we left the Transpantaneira Highway and arrived at our first destination, Pousada Piuval. We were expected and welcomed and the re-modelled former cattle ranch was our base camp for the following two days.

Piuval

We enjoyed our first lunch at Piuval which was delicious, but soon after a loud noise made us curious and as we stepped out of our rooms, Red-legged Seriemas landed in the middle of the lodge grounds, providing us with a rare opportunity to get closeups of these normally rather shy birds. Their taxonomic position is still disputed, but they might be closely-related to the now extinct terror birds. They “terrorised” us with their loud calls, but we were more than happy to spend our first lunch break in their company. The afternoon drive started soon thereafter around 3 pm and we found a Spectacled (or Jacare) Caiman with part of a Tegu lizard in its mouth. Both Hooded Capuchin and Black-tailed Marmosets were seen and photographed and time went quickly. Just as the sunset was closing in, we came across a Giant Anteater and we predicted correctly that it wanted to move towards the main road, hence we positioned ourselves accordingly. With a little bit of luck provided by another vehicle, it changed course slightly and moved directly towards us and only after it came within 25 metres did it change course again to cross the main road. What a start to our tour and on the ensuing night drive, we were able to capture a nightjar species (Common Pauraque) resting next to the track.

The next morning saw us leave the lodge at dawn. We found another Giant Anteater, this individual was a bit shy but nevertheless also crossed in front of our vehicle and at a reasonable photographic distance. After returning for breakfast, we set out to another part of the ranch and were treated to a group of seven Coatis, which surprised us by moving in ever more closely before they had a drink, thereby minimising their individual zone of danger. After encounters with a Snail Kite and a Sunbittern, we found a troop of Tamarins and Black Howler Monkeys, both of which were difficult to photograph but we eventually managed. Further highlights were a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl and a Giant Potoo, a strictly nocturnal bird that mimics a dead branch so well, it is almost impossible to see without the trained eye of a guide. We finished highly satisfied at around 10 am with a nice sighting of a Great Rhea and over the hottest time of the day, we relaxed or photographed birds around the lodge. The afternoon drive brought us close to an Amazon Kingfisher, Buff-necked Ibis and Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. For the last light, we went to an observation tower and watched the sun go down. While it did so, we photographed Monk Parakeets and Little Woodpeckers. The tranquillity of the last minutes of light was only broken by the evening

chorus of Chachalacas.

After a good night sleep, we set out at sunrise again and just as the light allowed photography, we found our third Giant Anteater which again came quite close but the light was still limiting. Afterwards, we found a photogenic Roadside Hawk right next to the track and just when we were trying our luck with a piping guan high in the tree, we received a tip via radio that a Lowland Tapir had been spotted in bright morning sunshine. We arrive barely ten minutes later and it was still there and allowed us over 30 minutes of quality Tapir photography. Easily the most photogenic Tapir sighting of my life, everyone thoroughly enjoyed it. We arrived late for breakfast but thought we had a jolly good excuse. Afterwards, we quickly packed up and soon we were on our way towards the second destination, Santa Tereza.

Santa Tereza

As distances are not that great, we arrived at the lodge in the late morning. The lodge was smaller and more cozy than Piuval and we used the time on either side of lunch to photograph birds at the various feeders around the lodge. From Saffron Finches to Yellow-chevroned Parakeets, at this time of the year, water dripping from a pipe was almost as attractive as the feeders.

Our first boat trip started mid-afternoon and the speciality at Santa Tereza is action photography. With a little help from some small fish brought along by our boat driver, several bird species are attracted and well accustomed to collect the fish from the water surface. Our guide Marlon announced our presence with a whistle and within a minute, a Black-collared Hawk was nicely perched in anticipation. It came down to the water quickly and grabbed the fish and most of us were rather surprised and I certainly missed this first opportunity in terms of photography. Luckily, several more were to come, including a Southern Caracara where we could nicely witness the difference between a hawk and a new world falcon. Whereas the hawk was able to simply grab the fish with its talons, the caracara had to dive into the water head first to take the fish into its mouth, thereby giving us that crucial extra time to get decent shots. Finally a Ringed Kingfisher arrived and its speed was a different challenge altogether. In addition, it tended to fly away from us after the dive, providing all of us with plenty of opportunities to photograph the back of it and quickly deleting it afterwards. However, by the end of the session, all of us had first decent shots of all three species. The remainder of the boat drive yielded a nicely perched Rufous-tailed Jacamar, but soon it was late afternoon and hence we were back at the lodge to quickly refresh, followed by a short walk to an Ocelot hide. SouthWild Santa Tereza lodge is famous for attracting this beautiful cat to a feeder after dawn and we tried our luck. However, after waiting until 7:15 pm, our guide from the lodge gave up hope and so did we. After this wonderful day, dinner was delicious and everyone was rather tired. Nevertheless, some of us went for an extra night drive offered by Marlon which enabled us to see a Giant Potoo at night and marvel at its huge eyes.

The next day started a bit later compared with Piuval and by 6:30 am, we were on the boat and cruising the Pixaim river. Once again, Black-collared Hawk, Southern Caracara and Ringed Kingfisher were attracted to the boat and we continued to improve our diving portfolio. As we were cruising along the river, all of a sudden a head popped out of the water and for a second everyone thought it was another Capybara, but it turned out to be our first sighting of a Giant Otter. It swam within three metres of the boat and we got a first glimpse of the agility of the largest species of otter. Afterwards, we arrived back at the lodge and made use of an observation tower in front of a Jabiru nest. As there was a bit of cloud cover, the light was nice and soft which is important in Jabiru photography as the adults are mostly white with a beautiful black and red bare head. Initially, an adult shielded the four chicks from the sun but soon the chicks became active and begged for food. The parent left the nest and returned with food a few minutes later and we were able to witness the scrambling competition that ensued between the chicks as the adult regurgitated big chunks of fish.

The afternoon boat drive provided additional opportunities for action photography and once again we finished at in the late afternoon to make our way to the Ocelot hide. Sadly, no Ocelot showed up and this really disappointed us as we all had dreamed of seeing and photographing this highly elusive little cat. It seemed certain that we would miss out on this species during this tour. With our spirits slightly dampened, we enjoyed dinner and went to bed early.

Another morning, another boat drive. Our action photography skills further improved and as we were doing rather well, we had our attention on other photographic targets. Marlon heard the very high-pitched call of a Pygmy Kingfisher and we were finally able to see it and come within range to photograph it. What a beautiful little gem of a bird it is! As we happily drove around another bend of the river, we scanned the river bank and indeed there was a large male Jaguar in the most glorious morning sunshine. As we later learned from the guides in the lodge, this was the first Jaguar seen this entire season and probably the reason why the Ocelot did not come to the feeder yesterday and the day before, and actually the last seven days as we were finally told by the lodge manager. We enjoyed the Jaguar

nevertheless and on the way back, a beautiful Green Ibis in bright sunlight was a nice bonus and so was a Capybara with a Tropical Kingbird on its head. Back at the lodge, we packed our stuff and as we were ready to leave, a Fork-tailed Flycatcher, a migrant species from the north, appeared and were able to marvel and photograph the male's massively elongated tail feather, and the rest of the body, of course. We left late in the morning and after a couple of hours of driving, we felt the need for a toilet stop at a little lodge. This proved to be a wonderful decision by Marlon, as there were two Hyacinth Macaws feeding on palm fruits and they were oblivious to us and allowed us to take head portraits of these beautiful birds. A bit further along the Transpantaneira, we arrived at our lunch spot and while we enjoyed the packed lunch provided by Santa Tereza, we found a Great Horned Owl and chicks in the tree, as well as a Common Tody Flycatcher pair busy finishing its nest. At a mere 9 cm in length, it is one of the smallest bird species of the Pantanal and we were thrilled to see it and get within 5 metres to photograph it. We finally arrived at the Hotel in Porto Joffre later that day. Porto Joffre used to be the centre of exploitation of the Pantanal, with thousands of Caiman and Jaguar skins exported from it every year. With ecotourism becoming the more profitable (and more legal) business activity, this changed the livelihood of people, the whole ecosystem and, as we were to find out over the next six days, the behaviour of the Jaguars.

Porto Joffre

After a restless night due to all the anticipation, breakfast started in the pre-dawn darkness and with the first light, we were cruising the mighty Cuiaba river with our boat driver Alan. Driving at full speed, Alan got us to prime habitat within 30 minutes and a Cocoi Heron with fish was the first photographic opportunity of the day. Soon afterwards, we received a tip via radio and we saw the first Jaguar, a beautiful female by the name of Medrosa. We stayed with her for over an hour and she made two hunting attempts on Caiman, both of which were unsuccessful. We were mesmerised how habituated this Jaguar female was. She was sitting right in front of us, but not only right in front of us, but there were 15 other boats as well and she could not care less. Afterwards, we found a male Jaguar in the water and stayed with him patrolling the river bank for another hour. After the third encounter with another male Jaguar, we returned to the hotel later that morning, thrilled and exhausted. Most of us used the lunch break to download images and load batteries, as the morning had been so intense, photographically speaking. The afternoon boat ride produced another two Jaguar sightings, which were not as beautiful and long as the ones in the morning. This does not mean we were bored on the boat, far from it. We photographed Capybara at the water edge, Proboscis Bats resting on a tree and the warm evening light made the Amazon Kingfisher, Rufescent Tiger Heron and Silver-beaked Tanager glow. What a first day it had been and everyone felt a little overwhelmed at dinner.

The next morning saw us driving the Cuiaba river further upstream and once again, we found a beautiful male Jaguar in no time. He had a little injury to its face and was salivating intensely, but this soon ceased and we engaged in Jaguar portrait photography. A bit further along the river, we came across a large sand bank and it was occupied by Black Skimmers and terns. As we observed them, a Giant Otter appeared with a large fish and he ate it noisily and with quite a bit of splash right next to us. Opposite of the sand bank, another boat stopped and for a good reason, as a female Jaguar appeared. Named Luna, she is 11 years old and she was resting and checking the river bank for prey. As she stood up, with the lush green vegetation and some flowers surrounding her, it was perfect light and a perfect setting, so once again our memory cards were heating up. On the way back we found more Giant Otters and another Jaguar, so it was spectacular in every sense. Back at the hotel, many of us went to the bird feeders after lunch and for very good reasons. From Chestnut-eared Aracaris to Toco Toucans and Crested Oropendolas and Hyacinth Macaws, there was a plethora of birds to photograph. Hence, the afternoon boat ride started without much of a break at all. After two brief encounters with Jaguars, we concentrated on a Pied Lapwing and Capybara. After a tip from another boat, we sped up a smaller tributary of the Cuiaba river and managed to find the described spot, where a Yellow Anaconda rested in a small tree. After another boat had left, we could photograph the roughly two-metre-long snake. Anacondas have greatly exaggerated lengths, for Yellow Anaconda, the maximum length reliably measured is around four metres. Regardless of length, it was a beautiful sighting and we once again returned to the hotel full of memories and full of memory cards.

The next morning saw a profound change in weather, it was cloudy, a bit windy and rather cold. Everyone was happy to wear the life vest this morning. After some radio communication, we found a female Jaguar by the name of Patricia. We stayed with her for the next two hours, she checked various spots and eventually jumped from the river bank into the water to grab a full-sized Caiman. We were just 15 metres away and none of us will forget the sound of the canine teeth piercing the Caiman skull, the aptly named death-bite. She dragged the Caiman out of the water and eventually out of sight to feed on it and we could hardly believe what we just saw and photographed. The ornithological highlights of this morning boat drive included Blue-crowned Trogon and Southern Screamer. We all were rather cold after the rush home and instead of turning on the air condition, many of us used the extra blankets in the room to warm up. The bird feeders were again visited by Toucans and Oropendolas and just before returning to my room, I came across a sizeable Tiger Rat Snake, a

non-poisonous common snake of the Pantanal. The afternoon boat ride saw us going downstream the Cuiaba river towards a large sand bank with a nesting colony of Black Skimmers and Yellow-billed Terns. After seeing a male Jaguar for around 10 seconds, we were eager to photograph the Skimmers skimming, a highly specialised foraging strategy where the lower mandible enters the water to scoop up fish or crustaceans. Some skimmers finally obliged and we got decent skimming shots. Afterwards, we entered a little stream with lush riverine vegetation. We had a rare and prolonged encounter with a Crane Hawk checking out cavities for food. With a small head and very long tarsi, the Crane Hawk is a very odd-looking raptor but in decent afternoon sunshine, it was a pleasure observing it. Finally, we were tipped off to a tree and indeed the most sought-after kingfisher species was in view, the Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher. While it was rather dark, we came within 10 metres and with significant overexposure, it worked out reasonably well and we had by now photographed all five kingfisher species of Brazil! An Agouti was the mammalian highlight of the afternoon and once again, everyone returned to Porto Joffre tired but happy.

Our fourth day at Porto Joffre saw the temperature rise a bit, which we all welcomed, but it still felt rather cold as we sped along the Cuiaba river in the morning. We briefly saw a tapir at first light but it disappeared from the river within seconds. We once again had three Jaguar sightings but they were not of the very high quality we had witnessed on previous mornings. Instead, we found a group of Giant Otters and we spend half an hour observing how they marked their territory with repeated scratching and scent-marking at a particular part of the river bank. This allowed us to see them fully out of the water and made us appreciate their enormous size, up to 2.5 metres from nose to tail. With a body weight of up to 35 kg, they weigh us much as female Giant Anteaters which we remembered looking much larger from our time at Piuval. In addition, we saw a group of Howler Monkeys, Nunbirds and the tiny (9 cm) but beautiful White-wedged Piculet. All this bird photography meant we arrived at the hotel at noon and went straight to lunch. Many of us photographed at the feeders and just as were to embark on the afternoon boat trip, Marlon came to me with an idea. He had talked to other guides and mentioned that we did not have luck with an Ocelot at SouthWild Santa Tereza. Apparently, the SouthWild Lodge at Porto Joffre had started feeding Ocelots this year and we were invited by the lodge to try our luck this evening. Of course we wanted and hence our afternoon boat trip lasted for an hour only as we did a bit of Skimmer and Tern photography. This was actually the only boat ride from Porto Joffre where we did not see a Jaguar. We arrived at the SouthWild Lodge around 5 pm and soon thereafter, a guide brought us to the hide. We knew the procedure of complete silence well by now (in contrast to some wildlife photographers from India) and waited patiently. At 6:15 pm, an Ocelot appeared out of nowhere and we were so delighted that we were able to photograph it as it went along the branches, collecting the small pieces of chicken provided. Our iso ratings were rather high, between 3200 and 25600, but noise can be dealt with rather well these days in post-processing. The Ocelot came a second time and hence everyone in our group was delighted to add an Ocelot to our photographic portfolio. The icing on the cake was a Barn Owl that was perched nicely around the lodge as we went back to our car.

Our final full day in Porto Joffre saw the temperature increase a bit further and it was hence comfortable again on the morning boat rush to prime Jaguar spots. One of these was indeed successful and the beautiful female Marcela treated us to a plethora of postures including stretching and yawning and we spend a full two hours in her company. Two further prolonged Jaguar sightings meant that from 7 to 11 am this morning, we had just spend almost four entire hours continuously in the company of non-sleeping Jaguars. Lunchtime saw us spending some more time around the bird feeders, before our final afternoon boat ride commenced. After seeing Marcela again, we were told that the collared male Jaguar by the name of Ousado had caught a Caiman and was feeding on it in relatively good sight. We quickly went there and indeed Ousado was not only still there and feeding, we realised that the Caiman was still alive. This was most likely due to the fact that the canines of Ousado are mostly broken off and hence he cannot deliver the death-bite as other Jaguars can. While slightly grim, it provided us with ample opportunity to enlarge our Jaguar portfolio with feeding shots. To celebrate the occasion of what were truly memorable five days, we watched the sunset with a glass of champagne in our hands.

The last morning at Porto Joffre and our last boat ride. We quickly found Patricia in a tree and because she disappeared after 10 minutes, we drove on and found one of the really strong males, Bororo. He was out and around looking for prey and we stayed with him for an hour. Afterwards, we engaged in bird photography as Red-billed Scythebill, Vermillion Flycatcher and Short-crested Flycatcher were perched nicely. As we were about to go back, Patricia appeared again and this time she was accompanied by her full-grown cub Makala. They drank together and it was a fitting finish to our boat rides. After eleven boat trips and 50 hours spend on the various waterways, we had collected 24 Jaguar sightings, bringing the total with the one at Santa Tereza to 25. But it was not only the sheer number of sightings, it was the quality and duration of these sightings that ensured that everyone in the group managed to obtain a rather diversified Jaguar portfolio. Due to all the time on moving boats, I was actually compensating with my sense of balance. back on land. Back at the hotel, we packed our gear, had lunch and by 1 pm, we were on the Transpantaneira again, but this time heading north again to our final

destination, Pousada Alegre.

Alegre

We arrived at the rustic, but cozy lodge at 3 pm and one hour later, we explored some of the 7000 hectares of the ranch by truck. We made our way to a waterhole and waited for animals to come for a drink in the late afternoon. And some did. We were excited to see Tinamous coming for a drink and then a Tayra appeared, a big member of the weasel family and rarely seen. This male Tayra though thought otherwise and gave us 10 minutes of his time to photograph it rather well. As the last rays of sunshine hit the trees, two Toco Toucans took turns to tease each other and as light was fading indeed, a Crab-eating Fox appeared. Although rather common in the Pantanal, this was our first opportunity to take pictures of it and while it feeds mostly on crustaceans in the wet season, its diet is much more variable in the dry season and it was a nice photographic finish to the day, as the following night drive did not yield anything.

The last morning on the tour started with an early morning drive during darkness, but in line with our previous night drives, it was not particularly successful. We got out of the truck and walked the remaining last 2 km back to the lodge, birding on the way. This produced nice sightings of an Orange-backed Troupial, a Black-and-White Water Tyrant, Chachalacas and Long-tailed Ground Dove. After breakfast, we sat around the feeder and had a nice sighting of a group of Coatis, Crested Oropendolas, Giant and Shiny Cowbirds as well as lots of Yellow-billed Cardinals. Eventually, it was time to go and we hit the road back to Cuiaba after 9 am. The two-and-a-half hour drive passed quickly and for lunch, we were invited to the Mirante das Aguas, a nice fish restaurant overlooking the Cuiaba river. As we enjoyed the buffet with fish from all over Brazil, Marlon pointed out that this is potentially good place to see the Blue-crowned Motmot. So once more, we got the cameras out and with a little help from a playback call, a pair of Motmots came into sight. Although the midday light was far from ideal, we tried and succeeded eventually and to a certain point. A nice bonus was a Squirrel Cuckoo that we initially thought was another Motmot. After lunch, it was time to say goodbye as some of us were flying out in the evening. What an intense twelve days, and they passed in a heartbeat.

What an extraordinary journey through the greatest wetland on earth! I think we all ended up shooting more pictures than we ever expected to do due to the extreme variety and outstanding sightings, but what more can a guide ask for? Of course, not everything worked out as I had hoped, but you always need a (photographic) reason to come back.

My final thank you goes to our wonderful guide Marlon who got us through everything and who enriched our tour immensely. I would like to offer a big thank you to my fellow photographers as well. It was a real pleasure travelling with you and I believe we were a real team and learned a great deal from each other.

Our next tour to the Pantanal will be in August 2026 and I cannot wait to go back!