

WETLAND OF PLENTY

The Pantanal has rightly earned a reputation as one of the best places on earth to see a jaguar, not to mention a raft of other wildlife. **Nick Garbutt** reports on a memorable adventure into the heart of Brazil's vast wetlands

As soon as we entered the lagoon, the boatman cut the engine and the agitated burbling of water against the bow gradually softened to a whispering ripple. Momentum carried us into the edge of a dense mat of water hyacinth until we stopped. An unmistakable tension filled the air; a sixth-sense making the hairs on the back of my neck bristle. A lone capybara didn't share my intuition and stood in the shallows, nonchalantly munching a leaf. I searched the shadows beneath the bushes along the riverbank but nothing moved. We sat and waited.

Then, peering into the dark recesses where dense tangles of branches blended with leaves, I made out a vague shadowy shape. It was well hidden but the sinuous spinal curve was unmistakably feline. Movement followed and the shape became increasingly distinct. Emerging gradually from the gloom and slinking low and slow through the foliage was a magnificent male jaguar. Pausing on the edge of cover, it sank lower into the vegetation, ears flattened, its intense gaze focused on the capybara not more than 15 metres away.

NARROW ESCAPE

It was impossible to tell which moved first, but in an instant the jaguar bounded forward and the capybara barked in alarm and leapt into the water. There was a riotous splash as the cat followed and both animals disappeared beneath the blanket of water hyacinth. I held my breath.

Many moments passed before the jaguar's head bobbed back into view, with the capybara nowhere to be seen. Even for apex predators like jaguars, there are more hunting failures than successes (most big cats are successful once in every 15-20 attempts). This jaguar swam off towards the riverbank and worked its way through the floating leaves, where it re-emerged, dripping wet and glistening like a honed and polished piece of wood.

That first sighting of a wild jaguar is etched into →

Here: male adult jaguar on the banks of the Piquiri river in the northern Pantanal

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my mind: the perfect muscular form of an adult male – a rottweiler in cat’s clothing – illuminated by glorious, golden, late afternoon light. Such encounters are now common in certain areas of the Pantanal, Brazil’s giant wetland, yet it is only in recent years that the region has cemented its reputation as one of the world’s finest wildlife locations.

Jaguars undoubtedly top the wish-list for most visitors. There was a time, less than 20 years ago, when the chances of an encounter were exceedingly small. They were regarded as a ghost-like presence, revealing themselves extremely rarely. This remains the case in most other parts of their range, like the Amazon, but the opposite is certainly true in the vicinity of Porto Jofre along the Cuiabá and Piquiri rivers. Put simply, there is no finer place to see South America’s top predator.

ABUNDANT WILDLIFE

During my first visit, I quickly became aware of how much other wildlife there was to see. The main rivers and their tributaries are home to giant otters, many of which are now tolerant (unlike in some other parts). I spent time watching two family groups as they hunted and played along the margins. When seeing them play endearingly (like only otters can) it is too easy to forget there are few more voracious and efficient predators.

The forests and mosaics of grasslands adjacent to the rivers also support an abundance of other wildlife: there is a good chance of finding shy Brazilian tapirs



Clockwise from here: group of capybaras, the world’s largest rodents; iconic hyacinth macaw; yacare caiman gaping to regulate its body temperature; female harpy eagle returning to its nest; rufescent tiger heron

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emerging from the forest and perhaps crossing a river, while in the trees along the banks spotting brown capuchin or black howler monkeys is also likely. Birdwatching is excellent with regular sightings of colourful toucans and aracarís, noisy chakalacas and piping guans, vibrant kingfishers and statuesque jabiru storks. Numerous species of raptors patrol the margins, especially great black hawks and black-collared hawks.

Porto Jofre lies at the end of the Transpantaneira Highway, a ramshackle dirt road that begins at Pocone at the Pantanal’s northern boundary and continues south for 150km to the banks of the Cuiabá River, crossing more than 120 rickety wooden bridges en-route. The area the road bisects is the most accessible and visited part of the Pantanal. There are numerous small and medium-sized lodges along its length that offer a window into the rich variety of wildlife that the region supports. Even next to the road in the dry season there are receding pools thronged with birds, mammals and reptiles.

However, this region constitutes but a



fraction of the Pantanal as a whole. Most of the remaining areas in the south and west are more inaccessible and difficult to reach – characteristics that only make them more intriguing. Rumours about one such area – Taiama Ecological Reserve, on the western fringes of the Pantanal along the Paraguay river – painted an alluring picture: not only was the wildlife extremely rich, but jaguar populations were very good, with sightings of the cats on the increase. In short, I had to go. →



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PARROT FASHION

Nest boxes have made the stunning hyacinth macaw a Pantanal conservation success

The hyacinth macaw is undoubtedly one of the Pantanal’s most iconic species – a must-see bird for all visitors. It is the world’s largest flying parrot (only New Zealand’s flightless kakapo is heavier) and reaches up to 100cm in length. Its vivid, cobalt-blue plumage, contrasting vividly with bright lemon-yellow eye-rings and facial skin, makes it a visual feast. Today, seeing them is easy as most lodges have breeding pairs within their immediate vicinity, but this was certainly not the case 20 or 30 years ago and the species’ recovery is one of the Pantanal’s conservation success stories.

The macaws have specific habitat requirements, preferring palm-savannahs and similar environments, where the nuts of a few regionally endemic palms, such as Acuri and Bocaiuva palms dominate their diet. The Acuri nut is so hard that the parrots cannot feed on it until it has passed through the digestive system of cattle. These days, the macaws are naturally restricted to three main populations: the Brazilian Pantanal and adjacent areas in eastern Bolivia and north eastern Paraguay; the Cerrado region of the eastern interior of Brazil; and the relatively open areas associated with the Tocantins, Xingu and Tapajós rivers in the eastern Amazon Basin.

Huge tracts of habitat have been lost in many of these areas, which led to the species’ initial decline before a catastrophic plummet began in the 1980s with the expansion of the cage bird and pet trade. It is thought at least 10,000 adult birds were taken from the wild



during that decade and numbers in the Pantanal dropped below 1,500. Now the illegal trade is much reduced but unfortunately trafficking does still occur and birds change hands for several thousand dollars.

In the Pantanal, 80 per cent of wild nests are constructed in manduvi trees, but hollows of sufficient size are only found in trees of at least 60 years of age and, as these are in short supply, competition is fierce and this limits breeding.

The Hyacinth Macaw Project (*Projecto Arara Azul*) began in the 1990s with a programme of providing nest boxes and protecting and monitoring chicks. Many lodges have been encouraged to place nest boxes in appropriate large trees and this has been a spectacularly successful initiative, resulting in a significant, three-fold population recovery. Today there are perhaps more than 5,000 birds of which 80 per cent occur in the Pantanal.

The journey there was long: five hours by road from the city of Cuiabá, the last two on dirt roads through ranchland and forest patches until we reached the banks of the Paraguay river, where the houseboat that would be home for the next four nights was anchored.

The following morning I set off in a small boat with my boatman-guide to explore the reserve. Along the main Paraguay river there are numerous side channels and lagoons that harbour concentrations of wildlife, while some 20km further downstream Taiama Reserve begins. This is actually a huge island 30km long (over 11,200 hectares) in the Paraguay river and the reserve's level of protection forbids anyone landing on it. This is not a problem for seeing wildlife, however, as the best way is by boat, slowly exploring the many channels, lagoons and backwaters.

The sheer abundance of birdlife was immediately apparent, with great flocks of ducks, herons, egrets and other water birds omnipresent; the margins peppered with yacare caiman and capybara that together comprise the staple diet of Pantanal jaguars.

I was instantly struck by the feeling of being in the heart of an untamed wilderness, partly because of its remoteness and seclusion (there was no one else for miles), but also because the impression of immense scale was so much greater than in other parts of the Pantanal. In one area of interwoven waterways and marshes, where there were no trees as far as the eye could see, my guide explained it would take well over 24 hours to cross by boat and there was a very real danger of getting lost.

While finding birds and other wildlife was

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raised sandbars and islands of higher ground where magnificent pink-blooming piuva trees flourished. Basking on the sandbars were large numbers of caiman, while numerous capybara grazed the vegetation. Surely there had to be a jaguar somewhere?

FOOTPRINT TRAIL

It was late afternoon when we left the main channel and turned into a particularly large lagoon. I was initially drawn to a distant sandbank by a pair of southern screamers – huge, turkey-sized birds that, as the name suggests, can be extremely vocal. Normally shy, they are generally difficult birds to approach, but this pair proved surprisingly confiding and allowed us to drift close by, only beginning to walk away once we were within 20m. At such proximity I could also make out many tracks and prints along the beach. The footprints of the screamers were large and obvious, while those of smaller wading and water birds were less distinct. There was also a line of very large, purposeful tracks that looked suspiciously feline, each print chiseled and distinct in the wet sand, indicating their freshness. We drifted down the edge of the sandbar to the corner.

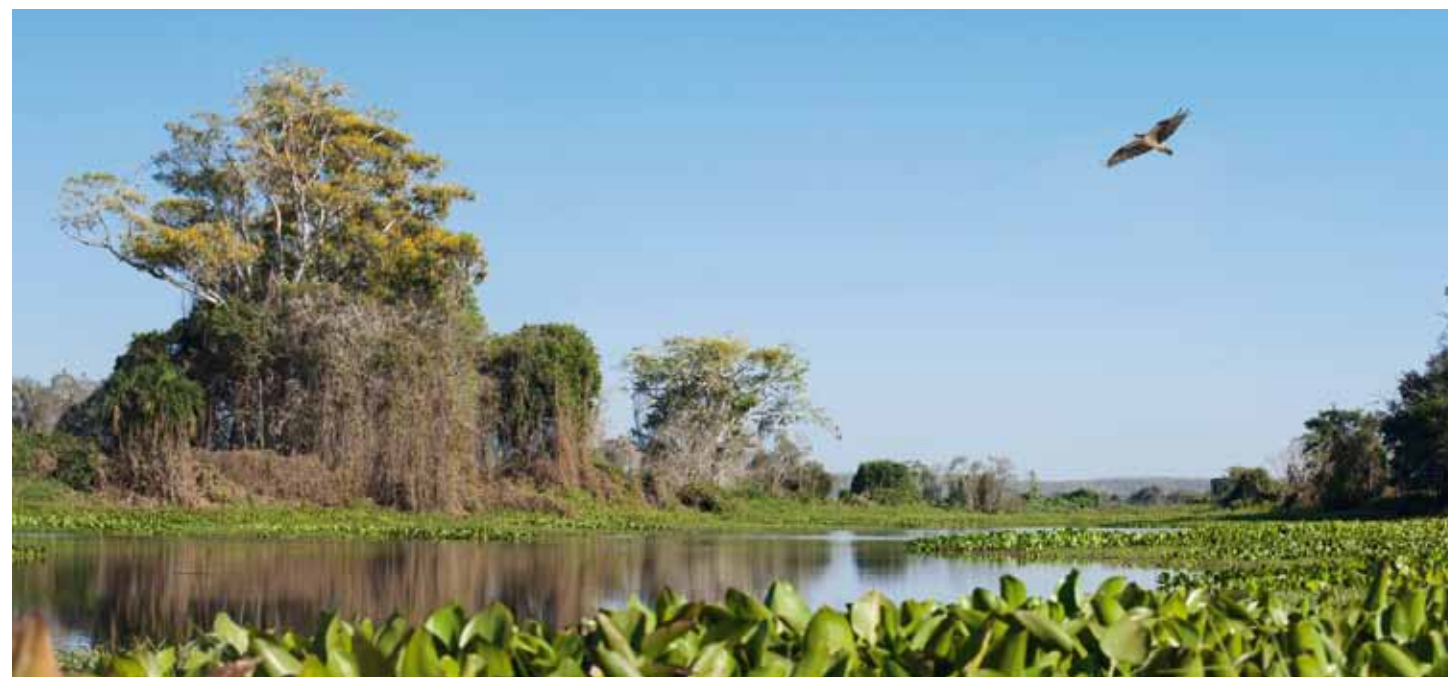
The jaguar was standing at the water's edge 50m away. It appeared to have just

Clockwise from left: an osprey flies over Taiama Ecological Reserve; black-striped tufted capuchin monkey; a common (or green) iguana basks in the afternoon sun; giant otters can reach up to 1.7m in length; toco toucan in forest canopy

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straightforward and there was always something to see, finding jaguars proved more difficult. This was hardly surprising as the populations in Taiama are nothing like as habituated as their counterparts close to Porto Jofre. On the first day we drew a blank, seeing only some pug marks on an exposed sandbank – probably from a female.

On the second day we headed downstream and began to explore some of the many beautiful lagoons that border the main channel of the Paraguay river. Each seemed to be its own isolated microcosm and expression of the region's biodiversity. Calm, glassy waters were surrounded by margins and fringes of reeds, occasionally broken by



From here down: a jaguar emerges from the blanket of water hyacinth; a boat trip affords the best views



finished drinking as drops of water dripped from its chin and whiskers. Turning slowly, it looked towards me with apparent disdain, then swung away and walked effortlessly from the water's edge before melting away into the cover of vegetation.

We paddled slowly along the shore hoping to catch another glimpse, but all I saw was the slight movement of vegetation as the cat moved deeper into the undergrowth. It didn't reappear, but, if anything, the brevity of the encounter enhanced the feeling of achievement and intense excitement. It is a feeling that only comes when searching for elusive big cats and, as intoxicating and addictive as any drug, it inevitably leaves you wanting more. **WT**



TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★★★★

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Wildlife Worldwide offers an 17-day wildlife and photography tour in August or September 2014 and 2015, which includes extended stays at both Porto Jofre and Taiama looking for jaguars, giant otters and other wildlife, as well as time at a renowned lodge along the Transpantaneira and lodges to the north of the Pantanal in Chapada. Including international and domestic flights, prices are around £7,425 per person, based on two sharing (www.wildlifeworldwide.com).

GETTING THERE: The northern and western Pantanal are accessed via Cuiaba, while the southern Pantanal is reached via Campo Grande. There are flights from the UK to Sao Paulo, with onward local connections to both of these. International and domestic flight packages to Cuiaba in Mato Grosso with British Airways and TAM cost from £1,250. Once in Cuiaba, package tours travel overland by small coach. Independent travel is more difficult and vehicle hire is necessary. Boats for jaguar watching at Porto Jofre are expensive and get booked up well in

advance; hence package tours offer the best option. It's only possible to visit Taiama Reserve through an organised package.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: UK citizens do not require a visa to visit Brazil.

TIPS & WARNINGS: Malaria is not an issue in the Pantanal, but nonetheless mosquitoes and other biting insects are a nuisance, especially around dusk on the rivers. While daytime temperatures are often in the high 30s and even above 40°C, early mornings and late evenings on the rivers can be very cool and it is necessary to wrap up warm.

WHEN TO GO: The best time to see jaguars is during the drier season from mid-July until mid-October, when the waters have receded and the cats spend longer periods hunting along the banks of the larger rivers and their tributaries. This is also the best time to see larger concentrations of birds and other species. In the wet season (November to April) the Pantanal experience is very different. High waters mean the environment is very green, with most of the wildlife concentrated around the permanent areas of dry land where forest flourishes.

TOUR OPERATORS:

- WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE, Tel: 0845 130 6982; www.wildlifeworldwide.com
- PAPYRUS TOURS, Tel: 01405 785 232; www.papyrustours.co.uk
- JOURNEY LATIN AMERICA, Tel: 0208 622 8376; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk
- HEATHERLEA, Tel: 01479 821 248; www.heatherlea.co.uk