



## **BRAZIL: PANTANAL PHOTO TOUR**

**26 July – 4 August 2023**



**Trip report and photos by Alyson Melo**  
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## Itinerary:

**26 July** – Arrivals in Campo Grande. Transfer to Pousada Aguapé in the Southern Pantanal.

*Night at Pousada Aguapé*

**27 July** – Pousada Aguapé all day.

*Night at Pousada Aguapé*

**28 July** – Pousada Aguapé and transfer to Bonito.

*Night at Pousada Olho d'Água, Bonito.*

**29 July** – Morning at Buraco das Araras sinkhole for macaw photography. Return to Campo Grande in the afternoon.

*Night at Hotel Mohave, Campo Grande.*

**30 July** – Early flight Campo Grande – Cuiabá. Travel along the Transpantaneira road to SouthWild Pantanal (Fazenda Santa Tereza) in the Northern Pantanal.

*Night at SouthWild Pantanal Lodge.*

**31 July** – Morning at SouthWild on the Pixaim river. Afternoon travel to Porto Jofre.

*Night at Santa Rosa Pantanal Hotel, Porto Jofre.*

**1 August** – Full day in the Encontro das Aguas State Park for jaguars and much more.

*Night at Santa Rosa Pantanal Hotel, Porto Jofre.*

**2 August** – Full day in the Encontro das Aguas State Park for jaguars and much more.

*Night at Santa Rosa Pantanal Hotel, Porto Jofre.*

**3 August** – Full day in the Encontro das Aguas State Park for jaguars and much more.

*Night at Santa Rosa Pantanal Hotel, Porto Jofre.*

**4 August** – A final morning in Jaguarland. Afternoon return to Cuiabá.

*Night at Amazon Aeroporto Hotel, Cuiabá.*

## Diary:

Day 1 – We started our journey at Campo Grande, the capital of Mato Grosso do Sul, heading to the Southern Pantanal and our first destination, **Pousada Aguapé**. Before we reached the Serra do Maracaju, the east border of the Southern Pantanal, we crossed 130 kilometres of Cerrado biome, a South American savannah environment. In the Cerrado we saw a few cerrado birds through the window of the bus, such as: **Greater Rhea, Buff-necked Ibis, Blue-and-yellow Macaws, Red-legged Seriema** and more. Just after we crossed the sandy stone rock formations of the Maracaju mountain range we stopped for lunch in the small town Aquidauana and around the restaurant we could see our first **Toco Toucan, Chalk-browed Mockingbird, Picui Ground Doves, Ruddy Ground-Doves** and also heard White Woodpecker. After lunch we turned off onto the 50 kilometres of dirt road that links the nearest town with Pousada Aguapé. Along this road our eyes were ON for the amazing Giant Anteater one of our targets.





Along the road we saw Greater Rhea and Red-legged Seriema, two iconic birds typical of the Cerrado

Just a few kilometres along the dirt road we sighted the first **Giant Anteater**, but it was against the light, and we only enjoyed the animal moving along the open field going to the forest. Two more were seen in a far distance before we spotted one near the road in an open area, in great light providing our first good shots of this emblematic mammal. While we enjoyed the Anteater, four **Hyacinth Macaws** came out flying in the background. After that we kept moving along the road, in every single marsh area and forest edge we could see stunning birds such as: **Snail Kites**, **Black bellied Whistling Ducks**, **Vermilion Flycatcher**, **Plumbeous Ibis**, **Buff-necked Ibis**, **Savannah Hawks**, **Nanday Parakeets**, **Toco Toucan**, and so on.



**Giant Anteater**





**Our first Hyacinth Macaws of the trip showed en route to Aguapé**

To our surprise we had yet another outstanding **Giant Anteater** sighting; we were returning to the van after getting some great images when we sighted a **Lesser Anteater (Tamandua)** that sent us back to the field to photograph one of the most difficult mammals to see during day time and on the ground no less, as they are mainly arboreal.



**A nice surprise during our way to the first lodge in Southern Pantanal, Tamandua (Lesser Anteater) day time!**

Even before we reached the lodge, we had more **Giant Anteater** sightings including a female carrying the baby on her back, but the light was not favorable for photography.

Day 2 – The Southern Pantanal is rightly famous for its parrots, and Pousada Aguapé is truly a special place for them. Right around the lodge we see **Hyacinth Macaw**, **Turquoise-fronted Parrots**, **Red-shouldered Macaw**, **Blue-and-yellow Macaw**, **Monk Parakeet** and **Nanday Parakeet**. During breakfast we had great opportunities to photograph all those species flying around the lodge and at the lodge feeders. The feeder is also special for **Toco Toucan**, **Purplish Jay**, **Plush-crested Jay**, **Red-crested Cardinal**, **Yellow-billed Cardinal**, **Chaco Chachalaca**, **Bare-faced Curassow**, **Shiny Cowbird**, **Screaming Cowbird**, **Giant Cowbird** and **Crested Oropendola**.



**Blue-and-yellow Macaws and Hyacinth Macaws just around the lodge at Pousada Aguapé**



**Red-crested Cardinal and other birds also visit quite often the bird feeder in front of the breakfast area**

We always spend a few hours around the lodge photographing the birds at the feeder setups before we board our private safari vehicle to explore the lodge property. The property has about 4 thousand hectares and during the safari search for our targets to photograph. In the morning we got our first photos of the largest stork in



the world, the imposing **Jabiru**. We saw many pairs of these impressive birds stalking the ponds in search of fish, while others were flying around and collecting nesting material. Besides, we had **Pantanal Caimans**, **Whistling Herons**, **Striated Heron**, **Wattled Jacanas**, **Yellow-collared Macaws**, **Roadside Hawk**, **Pampas Deer** and **Seven-banded Armadillo**. Because 3 of the guests had missed their inbound flight and only reached the lodge late the previous night, we needed to find a good Giant Anteater, and after some searching we got it. The whole group hopped out of the truck and we worked with the accommodating anteater, shooting it in different terrain and backgrounds as it foraged, oblivious to our presence.



Another great **Giant Anteater** sighting! This time with the whole group together.

In the afternoon we had another safari drive and incredibly, more **Giant Anteaters** and couple of new birds such as **Blaze winged Parakeet** (photo below), **Chestnut-eared Aracari**, **Guira Cuckoo**, **Campo Flicker**, and so on. This afternoon we got great **Savannah Hawk** and **Red-legged Seriema** shots.



One of the jewels of this tour, a super restricted distribution species, in Brazil found only in Mato Grosso do Sul



Day 3 – In the morning after enjoying another couple of hours shooting around the lodge, we had our last safari truck drive to search for more Giant Anteaters, as the group was hoping to find a mother with baby in its back since we had already photographed the anteater in almost every other possible setting. We had some more great sightings of **Giant Anteaters**, but to our surprise, no babies. But we had more birds and mammals, such as **Pampas Deer**, **Capybaras**, **Jabiru Stork**, and so on.



**Capybara and Caimans seen during our last safari drive at Pousada Aguapé**

After lunch we rode several hours in our van to the small tourist village of Bonito, where we would stay the night before visiting the Buraco das Araras (Macaws Sinkhole) the following morning. Along the ride we found even more **Giant Anteaters** to everyone's amazement, but tried not to stop too often as we wanted to reach our next lodge before day's end. However, we were already back to the paved road crossing ranchland in the Serra de Bodoquena hills when we finally spotted a mother **Giant Anteater** with a newborn baby on her back, and we simply had to stop. The baby was so small that its fur was still whitish rather than gray.



**In our last minute we finally got to spot a Giant Anteater female and her baby.**



They clients jumped out of the van and we had time to shoot in a nice light while the female anteater searched patiently for ants or termites in the short grass pasture. What a great moment to say goodbye to the spectacular Southern Pantanal!

Day 4 – Early in the morning, we checked out our hotel and we headed to the famous Red and Green Macaw's Sinkhole, known locally as the ***Buraco das Araras***. The sinkhole was formed millions of years ago when the soil, which is a combination of limestone and sandstones, collapsed, forming the deep sinkhole. About 40 years ago Red-and-green Macaw began to use the area as a roosting site. Nowadays there are at least 50 pairs of macaws living in the sinkhole, according to local researchers who monitor the birds as part of the on-site ecotourism project.



Buraco das Araras presents a unique opportunity to shoot macaws in flight in three different levels: from above, from below, and at eye level. It can be a challenge, but the photographic rewards are well worth the visit. We spent the whole morning enjoying the show and photographing the macaws, and besides the **Red-and-green Macaws**, we also saw and photographed **Curl-crested Jays**, **White-banded Mockingbird**, **Buff-necked Ibis**, **Laughing Falcon**, **Blue-and-yellow Macaw**, and more. After a delicious lunch at a nearby restaurant, we headed to Campo Grande to overnight at a comfortable hotel in the city prior to our early flight to Cuiaba, the capital of Mato Grosso, for our section in the Northern Pantanal.



**Laughing Falcon in flight at Buraco das Araras**



Day 5 – Our flight was uneventful and we arrived safely in Cuiabá, the busy capital of Mato Grosso state, Brazil's agricultural giant. We started things off here with lunch in a traditional Brazilian steakhouse known as a *churrascaria*. After lunch we drove 1.5 hours to the beginning of the Transpantaneira road, the most famous road in the entire Pantanal. The dirt road is lined with wildlife along its length, offering amazing photo opportunities all the way down. However, we had a mission to reach our lodge with enough time to visit a place to photograph the elusive Ocelot, so we couldn't linger as long as we might have wanted on the way. Along the Transpantaneira we saw a great variety of waterbirds: **Green Ibis, Limpkin, Jabiru Stork, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Muscovy Ducks, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, White-faced Whistling Duck, Rufescent Tiger Heron, Cocoi Heron, Striated Heron**. Beyond that, there were a few raptors along the road, such as: **Black-collared Hawk, Crested Caracara, Savannah Hawk and Great Black Hawk**.



A couple of cool herons seen along the Transpantaneira road, Rufescent Tiger Heron and Whistling Heron

We managed to keep our stops to a relative minimum, arriving to our lodge, the ***SouthWild Pantanal Lodge*** at Fazenda Santa Tereza in time to go to the Ocelot “arena” in the nearby gallery forest. Usually we share the opportunity to see and photograph the Ocelots with the lodge's other guests, but tonight we were very fortunate in that we were the only ones in the place. After couple of anxious minutes waiting for it, a handsome **Ocelot** came out and provide for us one incredible show for everybody. What a spectacular cat!



Two shots of one of the most elusive felines in the Neotropics, the Ocelot.

Day 6 – We woke up listening to the loud growling voice of the **Black-and-Gold Howler Monkeys** mixed with the raucous calls of dozens of **Turquoise-fronted** and **Orange-winged Parrots** that had been roosting in the trees along the Pixaim river. First thing in the morning we had time to climb up a tower to photograph a **Jabiru** nest at eye level, though some of the guests decided to shoot from the ground.





A Jabiru on its nest at daybreak

After breakfast we took our first boat ride of the trip. The mission of this ride was to find and photograph some of the raptors in flight, and also giving us our first great chance to shoot all 5 species of Kingfishers that occur in South America: **Ringed Kingfisher, Amazon Kingfisher, Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, Green Kingfisher** and the **American Pygmy Kingfisher**. After an accomplished mission, in the way back we had great time with a **Jabiru** that approached the boat up close and really put on a show. We then had lunch at the lodge, and drove the rest of the way south down the Transpantaneira, heading for the Porto Jofre area in anticipation of our visit to “Jaguarland”



Jabiru and Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, two emblematic species seen on the Pixaim river



**Black-collared Hawk in action, heading to catch a fish!**



**Rufous-tailed Jacamar**

In this afternoon we had returned to the Transpantaneira road, heading for its endpoint and stopping for wildlife as we went. In the way we many birds and mammals we had already seen, along with new ones like the rarest stork in the Pantanal, the **Maguari Stork**, **Scarlet-headed Blackbird**, **Black-capped Donacobius**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**, in addition to so many **Pantanal Caimans**, herds of **Capybaras**, several **Marsh Deer**, and many other things. We arrived in our lodge, the ***Santa Rosa Pantanal Hotel***, by the end of the day. Santa Rosa is located along the Cuiaba River, in a region known as “Jofre”, which according to the jaguar researchers harbours one of the highest densities of Jaguar in the Earth.





**Marsh Deer, the largest deer in South America, seen quite often along the Tranpantaneira road.**

Day 7 to Day 10 – In the following days, our main mission was to search for Jaguars. Nevertheless, the region, particularly the Encontro das Aguas State Park, exceeded our expectations on a daily basis. We had new bird species like **Sunbittern**, **Pied Plover**, **Black Skimmer**, **Large-billed Tern** and **Yellow-billed Tern** all along the river edges. The terns, skimmers and plovers were all actively nesting on the beaches and sandbars of the Cuiabá River. Slow cruises into narrower creeks and oxbow lakes found us more raptors, kingfishers and waders for our binoculars and camera lenses. Some great additions were **Boat-billed Heron**, **Southern Screamer** and **Snail Kite**. A wonderful element of our boat rides were multiple sightings of the impressive **Giant Otters** that entertained us for long periods as we watched their behaviour: swimming, hunting, grooming one another, and feeding on fish.



**Sunbittern in the Piquiri river; Giant Otter eating a fish**



However, the star attraction during our days on the rivers was the king of the Pantanal, the Jaguar and we had great sightings during every single boat trip we made. There is simply nowhere in the world better to observe and photograph these powerful apex predators than in the Encontro das Aguas State Park upstream from Porto Jofre. The name “Jaguarland” is well-earned! Our sightings were varied: we saw mothers and cubs moving along the shore, adults stalking the riverbanks looking for prey, cats chasing down caimans, and of course, jaguars laying down on the riverbank for a snooze, reminding us that cats are cats, no matter how big they get. Those days were really fantastic and memorable, and our three full days on in Jaguarland just flew by. Before we knew it, we were finishing up our final morning’s boat ride before packing up and returning to Cuiabá, where we spent the night in a comfortable hotel near the airport and enjoyed a farewell dinner at a nearby *churrascaria*. Most of the group would continue to São Paulo the following morning to spend three days in the Atlantic Forest photographing the many colourful endemic birds in the montane forests of São Paulo state.



A big thank you to the whole group for a memorable trip to this fascinating region of Brazil!





Another cat, this time it was resting on the log when it stalked a Caiman.

