

Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars! and More...

Oct. 7-17, 2024 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



Guides: Demis Bucci, Bianca, and Dave Mehlman, with participants: Doug, Ed, Jennie, Julia, Ken, Richard, Susan, and Teri

“Wait, that’s not rain!”



Thurs., Oct. 3

Arrivals in São Paulo | Parque Estadual Cantareira

Everyone in our group gradually trickled in over time the prior day and this morning, so we all met in the dining room of the São Paulo Airport Marriot for lunch to kick-off the tour. Earlier arrivals spent some time around the hotel grounds finding some great species to start off with, such as Swallow-tailed Hummingbird, Rufous Hornero (who’s nests were on seemingly every telephone pole), Sayaca Tanager, and Chalk-browed Mockingbird. After lunch, we grabbed our field gear and met our excellent bus driver Luciano at the hotel for our first outing to the Parque Estadual Cantareira about 30 minutes away in São Paulo State. The afternoon proved quite productive and an excellent introduction to both our travel mates for the next 2 weeks and many of the local bird species. We observed Demis’ great bird finding ability right away, as he picked out numerous goodies on our short walk. Highlights of the afternoon included great views of a Crescent-chested Puffbird (the only one of the tour), Green-headed Tanager, Buff-fronted Foliage-Gleaner, Green Ibis, Purple-throated Euphonia, and Pallid Spinetail. We also saw our first Capybara of the tour to get our mammal list off to a great start.



As the day ended, we negotiated São Paulo’s busy traffic and returned to the Marriot for a short break and then met in the lobby bar for a welcome drink, introductions, and an overview of the tour, along with a discussion of plans for the following day. After this, we headed to the restaurant for the first of many sumptuous buffet dinners, followed by returning to our rooms for the first night and final organizing for the next day.

Fri., Oct. 4 Itatiaia National Park—Atlantic Forest

Some were up a bit early this morning for some final birding around the Marriott and then we were first in line to open the breakfast buffet at 0600. After breakfast, we brought all our gear down to the lobby, loaded up in the bus, and then began about a 4-hour drive north to our destination for the next few days: the legendary Itatiaia National Park in Rio de Janeiro State. Naturally, a drive of this length was broken up by a few stops for birding and other essential needs! Demis picked out a Yellow-rumped Marshbird along the highway which provided a “road lifer” for most on the tour and a stop for bathrooms at a Frango Assado at a highway plaza yielded Toco Toucan, Campo Flicker, Sick’s Swift, and Guira Cuckoo. A second stop at a Graal store near Alemão provided both bathrooms and views over the nearby Rio Paraiba do Sul. Not surprisingly, the location had some great birds, too, including our first Black Jacobin; Burnished-buff, Hooded, and Orange-headed Tanager; Rufous-browed Peppershrike; and Chopi and Chestnut-capped Blackbird, the latter wandering around in the parking lot (and the only one of the tour!).

We arrived at our lodging for the next several days, the lovely Hotel do Ypê, at about 1:00pm and immediately were distracted by the great feeder traffic! In quick succession, we spotted Brazilian Ruby, Violet-capped Woodnymph, Black Jacobin, White-throated Hummingbird, and Versicolored Emerald at the feeders, while numerous Dusky-legged Guans wandered about the grounds—we were clearly going to enjoy ourselves here. Breaking away from the feeders, we enjoyed a great buffet lunch in the dining room and then got settled into our rooms.

After lunch and a brief rest, we met for an afternoon walk around the grounds and entrance road of the Hotel. We quickly started becoming familiar with the local species, some of which we would see numerous times, that anoint this landscape in the Atlantic Forest. We found Red-breasted Toucan, Velvety Black-Tyrant, Green-barred Woodpecker, Long-tailed Tyrant, Red-rumped Cacique, Gray-headed Tody-Flycatcher, and Rufous-headed Tanager. Some additional time studying feeder birds turned up Frilled Coquette, waiting its turn amid the bigger hummingbirds, along with Golden-chevroned and Green-headed Tanager and some Blue Dacnis. At the end of the walk, we enjoyed a bit of free time before convening for our daily checklists and dinner. A few lucky people



got views of a pair of Tawny-browed Owls near the parking lot, courtesy of another birding group that was also staying at the hotel, before dinner.

Sat., Oct. 5 Itatiaia National Park

We began the day with a buffet breakfast, with a few early risers noting some Olive-green Tanagers feeding at the fruit feeders outside the dining room window. After breakfast, we met in the parking lot for our morning bird walk on the entrance road to the hotel, during which we were followed by our van. After reaching the bottom of the entrance road, we continued on the park road all morning, alternately walking/birding and driving, all the way to the Complexo Maromba. At that point, effectively the end of the road, we used the facilities, rested a bit, then turned around and headed back to the Ypê. In short, this was an incredible morning of birding with bird species, many of them both new for the tour and lifers for most, coming fast and furious almost the entire time! Way too many to specifically call out, some of the best sightings of the morning included Chestnut-crowned Becard, White-barred Piculet, Green-winged Saltator, Rufous-crowned Greenlet, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Yellow-legged Thrush, Swallow-tailed Manakin, Saffron Toucanet, Brassy-breasted and Black-goggled Tanager, Plain and Spot-breasted Antwren, and Star-throated Antwren. The latter species posed for us incredibly well at Maromba, providing about the best possible antwren viewing a birder could possibly expect to have! Returning to the hotel, we had a brief break and then an enjoyable lunch. After lunch we took a brief siesta to rest and review the amazing morning.

Meeting up again in mid-afternoon, we enjoyed a bit of productive birding right around the hotel, finding both the red-bellied and yellow-bellied forms of Surucua Trogon and a Variable Antshrike to round out our bird list. We then climbed aboard our van and traveled to the abandoned Hotel Simon, apparently one of the fanciest in the area in its heyday. Though late in the day and becoming very cloudy, this proved to be a productive spot (despite our fears of ghostly objects springing from the hotel walls!) and we found Spix's Spinetail, a pair of White-shouldered Fire-eyes, Pin-tailed Manakin, and the "stunning" Planalto Tyrannulet (!). We then returned to the lodge for our checklist and dinner. After dark, we spent some time looking for nightbirds and saw some Short-tailed Nighthawks flying around over the hotel near the pool and were able to re-find the pair of Tawny-browed Owls for the entire group to see.

Sun., Oct. 6 Itatiaia National Park

We were up early for breakfast today in anticipation of a great trip to the higher elevations of Itatiaia. Unfortunately, this part of the park was only accessible by driving down from our hotel, out of the park, and



then back up into the park on a different road, but we were up for anything! After a quick rest stop at the Bar do Miguelzinho, by which time we were above the cloud layer that had dominated most of our stay in Itatiaia, we emerged into a bright sunny landscape, and we promptly started birding. At this higher elevation, we encountered a mix of familiar and new species; some of the new ones included Buff-throated Warbling-Finch, Serra do Mar Bristle-Tyrant, Brassy-breasted Tanager (a bird with a personality to match!), Diademed Tanager, White-browed Warbler, and brief glimpses of Green-crowned Plovercrest. We continued higher and higher up into the mountains, alternately driving and walking, finding all sorts of interesting species. Highlights included Blue-billed Black-Tyrant, Streaked Xenops, a fly-over Swallow-tailed Kite, Itatiaia Spinetail (how could we come here and NOT see that one?), and, in a stunning and rapid highlight sequence, a beautiful Black-and-gold Cotinga followed by an amazing Swallow-tailed Cotinga! Personally, I have to say that was one of the most incredible one-two sequences of outstanding lifer birds I have ever had.

Continuing on higher, we stopped on the road at a large stand of Araucaria trees (a type of gymnosperm now restricted to the Southern Hemisphere, see [Araucaria - Wikipedia](#)) to specifically look for the Araucaria Tit-Spinetail, only found in this habitat. After a bit of work by Demis with playback, we were able to get on several of them in the canopy of some nearby trees, and even had a few scope views of a particularly cooperative bird. After this “tick stop” we pushed a bit higher and arrived at the picnic area at the top of the mountain, or at least as high as the road went. Going to the picnic tables, we devoured our tasty picnic lunch, of course monitoring the nearby trees and shrubs for birds. Avian distractions abounded (and I’m not talking about the ubiquitous Rufous-collared Sparrows!) with a Bran-colored Flycatcher, White-rumped Monjita, and Hooded Siskin around and, high above, some White-tailed Hawks and a seemingly way out of elevational range Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. At the very end of lunch, some of us noticed a bird perched in a tree that, with the aid of the scope, was clearly a pipit. After much consultation, including between Demis and another birding guide with a different group, we realized it was a Hellmayr’s Pipit! While not completely unexpected here, it was a nice surprise (and a checklist write-in!) and a great addition to the bird list. An after-lunch walk on the roads near the picnic area resulted in some pipit stalking and better views of this cryptic species, along with Velvety Black-Tyrant, Great Pampa Finch, and Stripe-tailed Yellow-Finch.

It was then time to start our return trip, one of the downsides of having a long drive to get to and from the birding site. A few stops were made as we descended from the heights, mostly finding things we had seen before (but were more than happy to see again!); the one major exception was a very good view, though brief, of a Mouse-colored Tapaculo which was lured into a relatively open spot with some playback. After descending



all the way down the mountain, we detoured off on a rural side road to visit a birding spot which Demis had heard about. Though late in the day, this area turned out to be a very productive birding area, proving to be a mix of cattle pasture with shrubs and a few wetland meadows. While here, we dug up Wing-banded Hornero, Swallow-tailed Hummingbird, some Firewood-Gatherers and their nest, a group of raucous Streamer-tailed Tyrants, Brazilian Tanager, and a visible Pantanal Snipe hanging out in the wetland. As dusk descended, a Great Snipe called from the wetland but could not be lured out for views.

At this point, dusk had pretty much descended on us so we climbed in the van and drove all the way back to the Hotel do Ypê. After the late arrival, we quickly went over the bird list for the day and then ate another satisfying buffet dinner and turned in after a long, but highly rewarding, day.

Mon., Oct. 7 Itatiaia National Park | Return to São Paulo

We began our day at the delightful Hotel do Ypê with a breakfast buffet and then, after getting our gear together, started a full morning walk and drive around the area of the hotel, the entrance road, and the main park road. The area right around the hotel continued to be quite productive for our group, today turning up previously undetected species such as Black Capuchin, a pair of Black-tailed Tityra, Purple-throated Euphonia, Swallow Tanager, Blue-winged Macaw, a calling Barred Forest-Falcon, and the mind-blowing sighting of a Black-billed Scythebill. The entrance road to the hotel yielded even more, including Brown Tanager (voted as, by far, the most useless English common name of any bird seen on the tour!), Robust Woodpecker, Buff-browed Foliage-Gleaner, and Sepia-capped and Swainson's Flycatcher.

Getting in the van, we drove down the main park road and turned off on a small side road to the Hotel Donatti. As we drove, our ever-alert group spotted a woodpecker at a nest cavity, so the van came to a stop and we popped out to bird that area. Although the woodpecker (a Robust Woodpecker) never came back, that roadside stop turned up all sorts of interesting birds including Uniform Finch, Rufous-capped Spinetail, Ferruginous Antbird, Fork-tailed Pygmy-Tyrant, a couple of Temminck's Seedeaters, and a Large-headed Flatbill. Motto of the day: always stop for woodpeckers at roadside holes!

We then continued to the elegant and spacious grounds of the Hotel Donatti which provided yet more great birding. A few hours spent wandering around the grounds here turned up Orange-eyed Thornbird, Blacksmith Thrush, White-collared Foliage-Gleaner (at last, a foliage-gleaner species that was pretty easy to identify!!), Gray-hooded Attila, Gilt-edged Tanager, an elusive and poorly seen Slaty Bristlefront, and a Slaty-breasted Wood-Rail



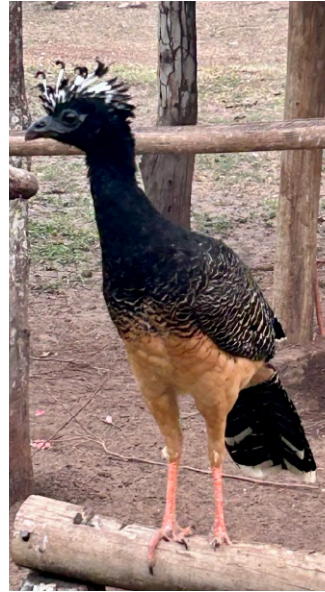
near a small wetland. Far up in the sky we also detected a young King Vulture soaring with other vultures to round out this excellent morning. Everyone in a great mood after this outing, we returned to the Ypê in the van, enjoyed our last lunch, then got all our gear together in the van and started the trip back to São Paulo, pretty much retracing our path down the mountain and on the highway. Before leaving Itatiaia for good, we stopped on the way down at the Visitor's Center, which unfortunately was closed Mondays. However, birds were to be seen around it including some Streak-capped Antwrens flitting about the tree canopy, Burnished-buff Tanager, Buffy-fronted Seedeater, and White-throated Woodcreeper.

We stopped again at a lovely viewpoint up into the mountains which came with its own Argentine Black-and-white Tegu running around. Our final stop in Itatiaia was at the entrance gate, where we spent a bit of time birding (and used the facilities). Demis was able to dig up an immature male White-bearded Manakin to add to our list and both Dusky-throated and Scale-throated Hermits made appearances at some of the flowers. With those last birds, we got in the van and trusted Luciano to guide us back to the Marriott São Paulo Airport, making a rest stop along the way at the trusty Frango Assado. Although it was a bit late when we arrived, we took a moment to put our gear in our rooms, then met again in the dining area for a quick buffet dinner and the day's checklist. Then, off to our rooms to get ready for the start of our Pantanal adventure.

Tues., Oct. 8 Flight to Campo Grande | Pousada Aguapé

As our flight was not until mid-morning, we were up in time for the elegant breakfast buffet, after which we did our final packing and brought all our gear down to the lobby, checked out of the hotel, and then Luciano made his last run with us, dropping us off at the bus drop-off area at Guarulhos Airport. We then checked in with our airline, LATAM, and then enjoyed an easy, 2-hour flight to Campo Grande, where we had, in fact, gained an hour by flying west. Upon arrival and obtaining our bags, we met our driver at the airport and then headed on the trip to Pousada Aguapé, our lodging for the next several days in Mato Grosso do Sul State. While driving on the highway, the shout quickly went up: "rheas on the right!" and we came to a halt to admire a couple of Greater Rheas foraging away in cattle pasture, our first for the tour. Continuing, we stopped at the Rancho do Pescador restaurant outside Aquidauana for lunch to satisfy our emerging hunger.

After a short distance more driving on the paved highway, we turned off on the long entrance road to Pousada Aguapé and then commenced birding in earnest, alternating driving and getting out. Though it was quite hot and a bit hazy, we found many great species, mostly new for the tour, in our first exploration of the Pantanal. Notable highlights included Jabiru, Brazilian Teal, and Whistling Heron near some of the few wetlands and Peach-fronted Parakeet, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, White Woodpecker, Purplish Jay, and Pale-legged Hornero out in

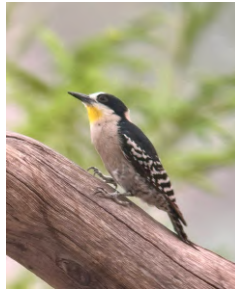


the roadside scrub and fields. A memorable stop at a cattle tank was a real highlight, with Red-legged Seriema, 2 Hyacinth Macaws, Nanday Parakeets, and a Burrowing Owl all stopping by for a visit along with many other birds. Arriving at the Pousada in late afternoon, we were greeted by a great display of Hyacinth and Blue-and-yellow Macaws at the feeders and a welcoming committee of Chaco Chachalacas as we checked in. While walking to our rooms, we were amused by the numerous Six-banded Armadillos scampering about, apparently unfazed by the humans (and sheep!) walking by. What a wildlife paradise we had entered! After a brief break to unpack and get settled, we met on the dining porch for our daily checklist followed by a tasty buffet dinner.

Wed., Oct. 9 Pousada Aguapé

We started this first day in our new location by birding from the lodge area and on a short walk around the grounds—wow! In addition to the species previously mentioned, we found Rufous Cachalote (a very spiffy bird, truth be told), Turquoise-fronted Parrot, Thrush-like Wren, Red-shouldered Macaw, and Narrow-billed Woodcreeper. Meanwhile, a Crab-eating Fox warily scouted out the offerings at the fruit feeders while the armadillos continued wandering about hoovering up bird seed. Somewhat reluctantly, we turned away from this visual feast for our actual breakfast feast on the patio dining room. After breakfast, we grabbed our gear and set out for a morning safari across the grounds of the Pousada and its adjacent fazendas, driven in the safari vehicle by Rosalino. The drive was great, with sightings of numerous birds and other wildlife from the truck interspersed with periodic stops for more intensive birding. A few of the new species encountered included Pampas Deer, Yellow-faced Parrot, Crowned Slaty Flycatcher, Grassland Sparrow, Black-throated Saltator, Long-tailed Ground-Dove, White-wedged Piculet, Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch, Masked Gnatcatcher, Red-crested Finch, and a Great Potoo, spotted by Rosalino, to cap off the morning. After that safari feast, we returned to the lodge for lunch and a break during the hottest part of the day.

After the break, we reconvened for a late afternoon safari, again in the truck, to explore more of the area surrounding the Pousada. In addition to many birds, we enjoyed spotting numerous Capybara, more Feral Pigs than we would have liked to have seen, South American Coati, and a few Collared Peccaries. Avian highlights, accentuated by the fact that we took a swing over to the nearby Aquidauana River, included Blaze-winged Parakeet, Pale-legged Hornero, White-fronted Woodpecker, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, Mato Grosso Antbird, and a handsome pair of Great Antshrikes. As dusk fell on our return drive back to the lodge, we heard and flushed up several Little Nightjars and Common Pauragues to round out our list. Arriving back at the lodge, we had time to freshen up, then met again for our daily checklist and buffet dinner to conclude our first full day in the Pantanal.



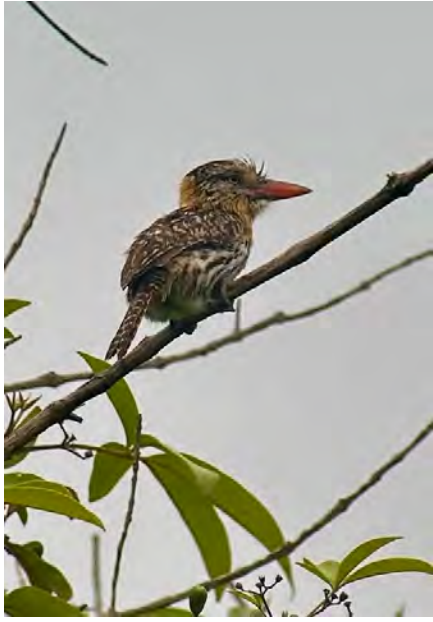
Thurs., Oct. 10 **Birding from Aguapé to Campo Grande**

This, regretfully, was our last morning at Aguapé, and we had one big miss on our species list so far: Giant Anteater. Since this was at the top of most of our “want lists” for this tour, we made the decision to begin today with an early morning driving safari to try to find this magnificent animal. Therefore, we were up early in the pre-dawn twilight, grabbed a cup of coffee or two, and then loaded into the safari truck. It had rained the night before, so it was a remarkably cool and damp morning that awaited us. Sure enough, after a bit of searching on the part of Rosalino and Demis, we found 3 different Giant Anteaters! In fact, we were able to get close by and down-wind enough of one to get great views and photos on foot of this remarkable animal—it was possible to see how it walked on the knuckles of its massive forearms as it foraged (for ants?) across the grasslands. After this successful outing, we returned to the Lodge for a well-deserved breakfast.

After breakfast, we climbed aboard the truck for a final driving safari at Aguapé, mostly in search of anything we might have missed on our previous outings. While we mostly found by now familiar friends, we also encountered a mixed flock of seedeaters with Yellow-bellied and Tawny-bellied Seedeaters in it accompanied by a few Blue-black Grassquits, a pair of lovely Spot-backed Puffbirds (here, of the subspecies known as the Chaco Puffbird), Mouse-colored Tyrannulet, Variable Oriole, Crane Hawk, and the always amazing Red-billed Scythebill. As we returned to the Lodge at the end of the tour, some White Woodpeckers showed up in the trees near the feeders, apparently to wish us a final farewell. We then enjoyed our final buffet lunch at Aguapé, settled our bills, and said our good-byes as we started the trip back to Campo Grande. Of course, birding was the order of the day on the way out and a stop on the entrance road, under somewhat cloudy skies, yielded the unique Pale-crested Woodpecker as well as calling Undulated Tinamou and Blue-crowned Trogon. After arriving back on the paved highway, we made a quick rest stop at Rancho do Pescador amid a rain shower and then continued on, arriving at the Hotel Mohave in Campo Grande late in the afternoon. Since we had a very early flight the next day, we had an early dinner, quickly did our daily checklist, and then turned in to try to get some rest for the next leg of our tour.

Fri., Oct. 11 Flight to Cuiabá | Northern Transpantaneira

To take advantage of the only non-stop flight from Campo Grande to Cuiabá, we were up extremely early today, so as to arrive at the airport in time to check in for our 0500 flight. The flight was on time and we arrived



without incident in Cuiabá, where our friendly bus driver picked us up and took us to the nearby Amazon Hotel Aeroporto for breakfast. Even on this short ride, it was apparent that the bus was too small for our group, so while everyone ate breakfast, our helpful colleagues at Neblina Forest quickly arranged a vehicle swap and the driver returned with a larger, very comfortable bus for us. Everything is possible in Brazil!

Everything arranged and everyone fed, we then started our long journey out of town and down the famed Transpantaneira highway to our destination for the next few days: Aymara Lodge. We made a quick rest stop on the paved road and, after about 2 hours driving, hit the dirt of the Transpantaneira. About mid-morning, we arrived at the “official” start of the highway, only to find that the famous entrance sign was not up! Apparently, a truck had hit one of the supports a few weeks earlier and knocked it down. Nevertheless, the entrance station had a bird feeder set up and we watched the action for a while, noting the hordes of Grayish Baywings; Shiny, Screaming, and Giant Cowbirds; and Yellow-billed Cardinals, accompanied by a few Scaled Doves. In the shrubs nearby, we found Squirrel Cuckoo, Greater Thornbird, and Fork-tailed Flycatchers while a few Plumbeous Kites soared overhead.

We continued our drive south on the Transpantaneira, stopping at a few roadside wetlands along the way, which were basically the only water for miles around. This limited water, along with the continuing dry season, led to a great concentration of birds around these water holes, so species came fast and furious! Herons were in great evidence: Little Blue, Cooi, Rufescent Tiger, Capped, and Striated were all present, as were Plumbeous, Green, and Buff-necked Ibis, Lesser Yellowlegs, Southern Lapwing, Sunbittern, and a Pantanal Snipe. The water-loving landbirds made a great show, too, and we spotted Black-collared Hawk, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Black-backed Water-Tyrant, Yellowish Pipit, Unicolored Blackbird, and White-headed Marsh-Tyrant, and a Large-billed Tern made a brief fly-over appearance. This truly was birding at its best and most inspiring! Finally, after this great show, we arrived at Aymara Lodge just before mid-day, got our room assignments, and then enjoyed our first lunch in their screened dining porch. This was followed by break time in the heat of the day to recover from our trip and organize our gear for the next few days.

Meeting up in mid-afternoon, we spent the rest of the day birding the grounds of the lodge and on some nearby roads and trails. Perhaps most impressive was the assortment of birds just wandering around outside the lodge dining room: Bare-faced Curassows, Red- and White-throated Piping-Guans, Gray-cowled Wood-Rails, White-tipped Doves, and an amazing number of tame Sunbitterns! These were complemented by Azara’s Agoutis



trying to grab some of the bird seed. Some in the group also spotted Lesser Kiskadee along the nearby creek, which was almost out of water. Our walk around the grounds and trails was very productive, turning up Great Rufous Woodcreeper, Black-fronted Nunbird, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant, Rusty-fronted Tody-Flycatcher, Fuscous Flycatcher, White-lored Spinetail, Red-crested Finch, and, in an amazing feat of playback use, an Undulated Tinamou! This great birding walk concluded a long, but very enjoyable day, and provided a great introduction to what awaited us in the days ahead in the northern Pantanal. After a short break, we met again for our daily checklist and then another excellent buffet dinner, before enjoying our first night at Aymara Lodge.

Sat., Oct. 12 Aymara Lodge

We started the day with a pre-breakfast walk around the lodge area, fortified by coffee which was fortunately available before we started! Another great morning of birding for us without having to walk too far at all! In addition to the “normal” things (e.g., Sunbitterns!), we spotted Buff-throated Woodcreeper (here of the Lafresnaye’s subspecies), Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Glittering-throated Emerald, Greenish Elaenia, Yellow-olive Flatbill, Flavescent Warbler, Mato Grosso Antbird, White-winged Becard, and a Rufous Casiornis apparently feeding young in a nest cavity. This walk whetted our appetites so upon return we chowed down at the breakfast buffet. We then got our gear together for a more extended walk on one of the local trails, this one along the creek, to try to find more goodies for our ever-expanding bird list.

This walk, too, resulted in a large bird and wildlife list with a mix of “old” and “new” species. Coatis and agoutis wandered about as we continued to marvel in such attractive species as Red-crested Finch (well-named!), Little Woodpecker, Gray-headed Tanager, Great Antshrike, and Chestnut-vented Conebill. Of particular interest this morning was at least two Pheasant Cuckoos which were first detected by their call. With Demis’ remarkable work with playback, everyone in the group was able to get at least a glimpse of these birds as they flew back and forth in front of us, but never quite seemed inclined to put on a full view. We also found a female Helmeted Manakin, Ashy-headed Greenlet, and a pair of Band-tailed Antbirds right at the creek’s edge. A few in the group also spotted a very cool snake, identified as a *Chironius laurenti* (though it has no official English name, we called it Laurent’s Sipo) by the resident guide at Aymara upon our return. We finished this truly excellent morning in the Pantanal with lunch and a short rest.

Meeting up in mid-afternoon, fully rested, we did a little birding around the lodge to chase a couple of Chestnut-eared Aracaris which had come to feed on the trees around the buildings. After getting great views of this elegant species, we climbed aboard Aymara’s safari truck and went out on the road and in some of the nearby

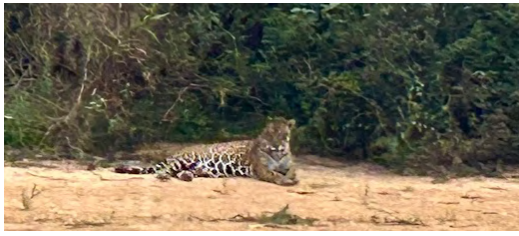


ranch area for an extended afternoon/early evening safari. Highlights of the afternoon part of the safari included some Yellow-collared Macaws, several Small-billed Tinamous lured out to the edge of the road with tape playback, Solitary Black Cacique, Rusty-collared Seedeater, Vermilion Flycatcher, Rufous and Pale-legged Hornero, and Crested Oropendola. As dusk fell and we started to head back to the lodge, the night birds took over and we had one of the most excellent night bird drives any of us could remember, highlighted by a Striped Owl perched in a shrub, a bunch of Common Potoos (some even with their eyes open, which is a crazy sight!), and calling and flying Rufous and Little Nightjars and Common Pauraques. Returning well after dark, we were all very happy to have experienced this unique Pantanal excursion. Upon return, we did our daily checklist, had our last dinner at Aymara, then went to our rooms for a great night's sleep.

Sun., Oct. 13 Transpantaneira to Porto Jofre | Jaguar Boat Excursion

The group did some early birding around the lodge grounds, admiring for a last time in this location more Chestnut-eared Aracaris, a nesting pair of Hyacinth Macaws, and the crowd of curassows, doves, and wood-rails at the feeders. Then, we had our last buffet breakfast at Aymara, settled our bills, loaded our gear into the van, and off we went to head further down the Transpantaneira. As we drove south down the bumpy road, we spotted our first Marsh Deer in a roadside wetland, along with more Greater Rheas. A quick stop at the Hotel Mato Grosso, where we were due to spend the last 2 days of the tour, whetted our appetite for coming back by seeing the large crowd of cardinals, Saffron Finches, baywings, and cowbirds at the feeders. Continuing our way south, we began to see a bit more water near the road as we got closer to the river and added the fascinating Southern Screamer to our list, along with Jabiru, Wood Stork, Limpkin, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and Roseate Spoonbill. At last, at about noon, we arrived at Porto Jofre, the literal end of the road and right on the bank of the Cuiabá River. We found the appropriate boat landing spot (aka a beach!), transferred all our gear to a smaller boat, and then all climbed aboard another passenger boat. After donning our life jackets, we zipped off on the river for about half an hour until we arrived at the Panoramico, our floating hotel houseboat and home for the next 2 nights. Welcomed aboard by the crew, we first had lunch in the second-floor dining room, then all found our rooms and got settled in.

After a brief break, we assembled on the lower deck and boarded the small boat for our first boat outing on the Rio São Lourenço. After all our time and effort to finally get here, we were ready to go! It turned out to be a delightful afternoon on the river, as we traveled to various parts constantly looking for birds and wildlife. To cut to the chase, we came across an aggregation of other boats near shore with every passenger clearly looking at something. So, we carefully nudged ourselves between the other boats and there it was: our first Jaguar! In fact, an adult Jaguar with a slightly smaller one next to it, most likely a female with her cub!! We drank the



scene in, though the Jaguars themselves did not seem to be too impressed! What amazing luck to have had a jaguar on our very first outing from the boat—I think our guides were quite relieved. In addition to this most-wanted mammal, we also found some Giant River Otters on this outing, to add another of “South America’s Big Five” to our list. And, yes, birds abounded on this outing, including Osprey, Yellow-billed and Large-billed Tern, Black-capped Donacobius, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Epaulet Oriole (the only one of the tour), and a Great Potoo, pointed out by the boat captain. As dusk fell, hordes of Band-tailed Nighthawks came out, foraging over the river and we heard Common Pauraques calling from the shores. At the end of this magical afternoon, we came back to the boat, refreshed a bit, and then met in the dining room for our checklist and buffet dinner.

Mon., Oct. 14 Jaguar Boat Excursion

We started today with an early-ish breakfast to allow us to be out on the water while temperatures were still on the cool side. After breakfast, we gathered our gear for the morning and took our seats in the “jaguar boat” and headed out for a full morning on the rivers of the Pantanal. And what a morning it was! By the time we returned to the Panoramico, we had seen 5 different jaguars at various places along the rivers, including an incredibly memorable sighting where a large adult Jaguar was being harassed by 2 Giant River Otters apparently protecting their kit! After this, almost everything else was not quite that fascinating, but we had a fabulous time spotting the birds, too, including several Pied Plovers on the sandbars, Black-collared and Great Black Hawks seemingly every several kilometers, Golden-green Woodpecker, Ringed and Green Kingfisher, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, a pair of Helmeted Manakins, and another Great Potoo. Another fascinating mammal sighted, the only time on the tour, was a small group of Black-and-gold Howler Monkeys.

We returned to the Panoramico in time for a buffet lunch, then took a short break to let the heat of the day subside. Meeting up in the late afternoon, we climbed aboard the jaguar boat again for a final afternoon/sunset boat trip on the Pantanal rivers. This was another super boat trip, with perhaps the most amazing sighting being a South American Tapir we spotted as it was on the river bank. Promptly coming closer, we watched and waited as it first retreated into the forest, then came back out to get a drink from the river, providing excellent views, especially of its flexible proboscis. We also had the extraordinary luck of finding another Jaguar, this one languishing comfortably on the river bank (and, thankfully, without a herd of tour boats around!) to provide our sixth different Jaguar of the day—incredible! The birds did not disappoint either, and we saw Snail Kite, Yellow-rumped Cacique, White-tailed and Bicolored Hawk (the latter an amazingly good sighting of a bird on a sandbar, unusual for a species that is not often seen well), Amazon Kingfisher, and Buff-breasted Wren. As the sunset and dusk fell, we reluctantly began our trip back to the Panoramico as the Band-tailed Nighthawks came out again,

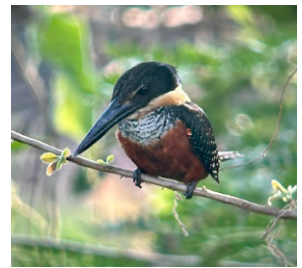


and we were reminded that though our time in this great place was short, the birds and ecosystems continued to follow their normal daily rhythms unaffected by our presence. Upon our return to the boat, we compiled our daily species list and then enjoyed our final buffet dinner on the boat.

Tues., Oct. 15 Lower Transpantaneira to Hotel Mato Grosso

We began the day with a very early breakfast, since we had a lot of boat and road travel to reach our next destination and we definitely planned to stop for birds and wildlife along the way. After breakfast, we got all our personal gear together and the boat crew loaded our large bags into the luggage boat. After that, we climbed into the jaguar boat for one last ride and headed back to Porto Jofre. We made one stop on the way back as many of us had expressed an interest in buying a copy of the “Jaguar Field Guide, 2024 edition” which we had seen on the Panoramico. After asking around, Demis determined that he could get copies for us from at the Jaguar Project’s field camp, so we stopped there. While Demis went to the station to get the books, the rest of us enjoyed an unexpectedly lovely morning of birding right on the riverbank. Upon landing, a *Nacunda Nighthawk* flew off, providing an unexpected and very welcome addition to the bird list. A pair of *Roseate Spoonbills* flying by added a bit of pizzazz to the landscape and diligent work with the bins and scope yielded another *Pantanal Snipe*, *Solitary Sandpiper*, and our only *White-rumped Sandpiper* of the tour.

We then arrived at the Porto Jofre riverbank, disembarked, and loaded all our bags into our bus, which had been parked there the entire time. While waiting for all this to happen, many in the group noted a *Large Elaenia* in the nearby trees. After all the loading was finished, we climbed aboard, took our seats, and then set off on our trip north along the Transpantaneira. Thanks to our early start, we had plenty of time and we made numerous stops along the road, primarily at places where there was water to attract birds and other wildlife. Indeed, pretty much every such stop was teeming with life, the profound drought having concentrated the water in very few places. Every water hole was seemingly packed with caimans and the full complement of wading birds, from *Jabiru* to *Limpkin* to the ever present *Rufescent Tiger-Herons*. A few *Marsh Deer* also dotted the roadside as we drove by and we found some new species such as *Cinereous-breasted Spinetail*, *Lesser Yellowlegs*, *Collared Plover*, *Chotoy Spinetail*, and, to our great delight, a flock of *Scarlet-headed Blackbirds*. We made one final stop before reaching our destination at an abandoned homestead at Demis’ suggestion. A *Common Pauraque* was roosting next to the buildings, allowing close scope views until it flushed. After carefully wandering the grounds and peering into the trees, we detected a roosting *Great Horned Owl*, which Demis had hoped we would find, adding another owl species to our list. At the end of this great morning, we returned to the Hotel Mato Grosso (where we had stopped for a break on the trip south), checked into our rooms, and then enjoyed a buffet lunch.

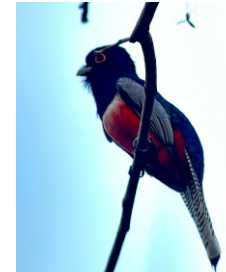


After a rest break to escape the heat, we took a short boat trip on the Rio Pixaim, immediately next to the hotel. In this case, we had to use 2 small boats to fit our group, and we proceeded in both directions from the hotel, though, due to low water, we could not go far in either direction before the water hyacinths completely choked the channel. Though the low water was not ideal for wildlife watching (except for the very numerous caimans!), we had the great luck of seeing another two tapirs, great views of Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfisher, Pale-legged Hornero, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Orange-backed Troupial, and Rusty-backed Spinetail. After the trip, we returned to the hotel for a break, during which some partook of the delightful swimming pool. We met again for our daily checklist in the dining room, followed by a satisfying buffet dinner.

Wed., Oct. 16 Pixaim River Area Wildlife & Birding

Many in the group were up before breakfast to enjoy the bird show on the hotel grounds. The hotel's feeders attracted hordes of Yellow-billed Cardinals, Saffron Finches, and Grayish Baywings, along with the occasional Orange-backed Troupial and Rufous Cachalote. On the grounds, Rufous Horneros wandered around, sometimes singing their heads off, while Thrush-like Wrens foraged ceaselessly through the branches. After this warm up, we had a buffet breakfast in the dining room and then all met up for a morning walk on the savannas near the hotel. This was a very interesting walk, though at this point we had seen so many bird species it was getting harder and harder to find new ones! One very nice new species we turned up was a White-tailed Goldenthrout, which everyone got to see pretty well after a bit of time. In addition to this, we had great views of Greater and Rufous-fronted Thornbird, the seemingly everywhere Pearly-vented Pygmy-Tyrant, Large Elaenia, Long-tailed Ground-Dove, a pair of Rusty-backed Antwrens, Barred Antshrike, and Chestnut-vented Conebill. Two Brazilian Teal in a small pond rounded out our morning list. Returning from the walk, we had lunch then took an afternoon break.

After break, we got into the small boats again for another quick trip on the Rio Pixaim. While heading out, we thanked the two hard-working guys who had been digging out the channel for us and other guests. The trip, though quite pleasant, did not yield much in the way of new species except for a Forest Elaenia. Given these results and the low water, we returned to the hotel and boarded our van for a final late afternoon/dusk outing on the Pantanal. Driving out on the Transpantaneira, we turned into a neighboring Fazenda and walked a short distance as the sun set. As luck would have it, we had incredible views of another South American Tapir, our fourth of the tour, as it browsed alongside the ranch road. The lovely afternoon light yielded a perched Savanna Hawk, hordes of Turquoise-browed Parrots flying to their night roost, Plumbeous Ibis, a Greater Rhea, and at



least 2 more Nacunda Nighthawks flying around foraging. A fabulous finish to our final full day in the Pantanal! We then returned to the hotel, did our checklist, and had our final buffet dinner at the Mato Grosso.

Thurs., Oct. 17 Return to Cuiabá | Parque Mãe Bonifácia | Departures

Early this morning, much to our regret, Demis headed back to Cuiabá due to some prior family obligations and our guide Bianca came out to work with us for the last day of the tour. Many in the group did some informal birding on the grounds of the hotel before breakfast and we all met for our final meal in the dining room. After breakfast, Bianca led us on a final walk on one of the trails near the hotel, this time walking through some of the brush near the Rio Pixaim. Bianca was able to find a new species for us, a Pale-bellied Tyrant-Manakin, which everyone got onto after a bit of work. Other great birds this morning were a very cooperative Rufous-tailed Jacamar, another male Helmeted Manakin, White-lored Spinetail, Mato Grosso Antbird, and Bluish-gray Saltator. Returning to the hotel, we got all our bags out, settled our bills and checked out, then loaded up in the van to start the return to Cuiabá.

We drove up the Transpantaneira, retracing our steps this time with experienced eyes and always on the lookout for birding opportunities. We stopped at one of the roadside water holes that we had visited earlier since there were obviously a lot of birds (and caimans!) present. The waterbird display was impressive, with numerous Capped Herons, Snowy and Great Egret, Little Blue and Striated Heron, Green, Plumbeous, and Buff-necked Ibis, and the usual complement of jacanas and wood-rails. Probably the best find at this spot was a very visible Striped Cuckoo, which Bianca was able to lure in after hearing it singing repeatedly. All the while, Gray-breasted and Brown-chested Martins dipped and dived over the water, feeding furiously. We continued on and stopped again at the Transpantaneira entrance sign, which, miracle of miracles, had been repaired! So, we pulled over and got out so that the obligatory group photo at the sign could be taken—our tour was now complete! Continuing, we finally emerged onto pavement, a welcome relief after so much time on the bumpy, dusty Transpantaneira.

As we neared Cuiabá, we made one final birding stop at a large lake right next to the highway since Bianca thought there might be some interesting birds there. Sure enough, as we scanned carefully with our bins and the scope, we saw a very large flock of whistling-ducks. Though by far the majority of them were Black-bellied, we picked out a few White-faced among them to add another duck to our list. Additional scanning yielded several Black-necked Stilts wading among the jacanas and capybaras along the shoreline, so we could add this shorebird (which we had inexplicably not seen earlier) to our list. We eventually arrived in Cuiabá and headed to

the Churrascaria near the airport for a classic Brazilian lunch: a huge buffet with apparently endless quantities of meat brought right to you! Finishing lunch, we drove to the Hotel Amazon Aeroporto, dropped the four who were spending an extra night off, and then to the airport to drop the four off who were leaving that afternoon. Alas, time to start saying our good-byes, but the good memories lingered.

After the airport drop-offs, Bianca and Dave returned to the Amazon, retrieved the four staying on, and then we went on a last afternoon field trip to the Parque Mãe Bonifácia, a Cuiabá city park that contains some remnant cerrado vegetation. This was a lovely park that, though surrounded by busy streets, provided a literal green island in the middle of the urban forest. Despite the late hour, heat, and dryness, we had a lovely outing, finding a new mammal species (a group of Black-tailed Marmosets at a fruit feeder) and some great birds, including several Blue-crowned Trogons (a species which was heard-only up to this point), Planalto Slaty-Antshrike, Chivi Vireo, Red-crested Finch, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and the best imaginable looks at a pair of Russet-crowned Crakes which came to investigate playback of their call. As it became darker, we headed to our van for one final time, then out into city traffic to wind things up. That put a wrap on this incredible tour of Brazil, full of birds and wildlife to be remembered and treasured for years to come.

Photos: Group (Dave Mehlman - DM), Red-breasted Toucan (DM), Green-headed Tanager (DM), Jaguar (Teri Martine - TM), Black Jacobin (DM), White-eyed Parakeet (DM), Green-barred Woodpecker (DM), Brazilian Ruby (DM), Frilled Coquette (DM), Hotel do Ypê (DM), Buffy-fronted Seedeater (DM), Swallow Tanager (DM), Group Birding in Itatiaia (DM), Itatiaia National Park (DM), Rufous Hornero (DM), Streamer-tailed Tyrant (DM), Pantanal Snipe (DM), Common Morpho (DM), Donatti birding (DM), Blue-and-yellow Macaws (DM), Bare-faced Curassow (DM), Nanday Parakeet (DM), Red-shouldered Macaw (DM), Southern Pantanal (DM), Buff-necked Ibis (DM), White-fronted Woodpecker (DM), Capybara Crossing Sign (TM), Spot-backed Puffbird (DM), Hyacinth Macaw (DM), Sunbittern (DM), Chaco Spiny Lizard (DM), Black-fronted Nunbird (DM), Chestnut-eared Aracari (DM), Yellow-collared Macaw (DM), Chestnut-bellied Guan (DM), Jaguar (DM), Azara's Capuchin (DM), Jaguar viewing (DM), Houseboat (DM), Giant Anteater (TM), South American Tapir (DM), group (TM), Pantanal at Dawn (DM), group (TM), group (TM), group (TM), Green-and-rufous Kingfisher (DM), Birding the Pixaim River (DM), Black-tailed Marmoset (DM), Pantanal Lifeguard (DM), Blue-crowned Trogon (DM)