



**WILDWINGS**

**WILDWINGS BRAZIL JAGUARS  
19<sup>th</sup> July – 4<sup>th</sup> August 2008 – TRIP  
REPORT**

[www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)

Mark Andrews & Regina Ribeiro - Leaders.

**20<sup>th</sup> July 2008**

Not a good start as we had left two of our party in London due to their late arrival at check in because BA had cancelled their flight from Manchester and they had been forced to come down by coach. After a long overnight flight with minor delays, three of us arrived in Sao Paulo at around 6.30am. After a rather rushed immigration and formalities, our baggage into domestic handling, we boarded our internal flight to Belo Horizonte arriving relatively on time this year to be met by a smiling Regina Ribeiro and the five participants already in Brazil. We boarded our bus and set off for our long drive to Sao Roque de Minas on the foothills of Serra de Canastra National Park. Stopping for lunch at a roadside Churruscaria introduced many people to their first taste of Brazilian cuisine, a splendid buffet offering salads, vegetables and for the non-vegetarians, a range of their finest cooked meats all washed down with a variety of soft drinks. The improvement to the roads close to Sao Roque meant that this was a trouble free journey and we arrived at our Chapado with plenty of daylight remaining. Unbelievably, our arrival coincided with a visit to the garden by the resident riverside Black-tufted Marmosets who were soon tempted down from the trees with an abundance of that old favourite, the banana! We were very soon enjoying a wonderful encounter with these tiny primates as they jostled for prime feeding positions until the bananas ran out and it was time for them to return to their tree cavity and bed. With everybody pretty tired, we checked into our rooms, hot showers and the first of many excellent evening meals on this trip.

**21<sup>st</sup> July**

The insomniacs among the group were up at first light and enjoying a pre-breakfast birding session in the grounds of the Chapado. Our first hummingbird, a White-vented Violetear, was literally a quick flyby. A noisy pair of White-eyed Parakeets hotly pursued by a number of other species quickly whetted our appetites for the forthcoming day. After some brief birding around the front of the Chapado, we boarded the bus and headed off, up a rather testing road to the park entrance high above us. Today we had three main targets, Giant Anteater, Pampas Deer and Maned Wolf. Anteaters are funny creatures, rather like us, they don't like cold starts and often will not move and are therefore not visible until the sun is relatively high, today was pretty warm, surely a good sign. The usual brief stop at the source of the Rio Sao Francisco to scan for wolves amongst the nearby rocky outcrops produced no wolves but astonishingly the rare and generally elusive Brasilia Tapaculo padding around along the stream edge. Also present, the seemingly resident White-vented Violetear doing it's rather

familiar 'chiffchaff' song. We headed off to an area known as the 'coral'. Scanning from the dry stone-walls of this abandoned building works where we found few birds but did include the rather excellently named Firewood Gatherer and a plethora of rather drably marked seed-eaters. In the far distance a potential dark speck was initially dismissed as a Giant Anteater, until it vanished, reappearing higher up on the hillside, way to far to think about walking to but just identifiable for everyone to grab a quick scope view and get 'their eye in'. Further scanning produced a couple of distant Greater Rheas, again feeding on a way distant hillside and maybe another anteater, which also disappeared as quickly as it had been sighted! It was time to move although we certainly hadn't gone far when a shout from the rear drew our attention to a rather lovely Yellow Armadillo walking along the edge of the track. Despite running off into the rather dry scrub, it was soon relocated giving everybody fabulous views of this rather endearing little beast as it searched and dug for termites.

We continued our search for the 'Canastra three' seeing another distant anteater but no sign of wolves or deer. There were plenty of birds though and despite this being a non birding group, some families quickly became honorary mammals. We spent some time photographing Southern Crested Caracara atop the rather fascinating termite mounds as well as enjoying views of the rather charismatic and endemic Cock-tailed Tyrant amongst other Cerrado specialities. Across the park, toward the top of Casca D'anta we diligently scanned for areas of new grass for the desired Pampas Deer and the ridges for a late hunting wolf and a hoped for close anteater. Despite covering a rather large area, this was going to continue as a theme for the rest of the day. Lunch, a picnic, was consumed in the splendid surroundings of the river as it disappears over the edge, falling hundreds of feet into the valley below. This area has in the past produced the extremely rare Brazilian Merganser, but today although still relatively quiet in terms of visitors was just too noisy to be considered a possibility. There were some good birds of course, the group's first Crested Black Tyrants, a trio of bathing Sharp-tailed Tyrant, a vivid Blue Dacnis, Cinnamon Tanager and several hummingbirds entertained those who wished to 'eat on the hoof'. The afternoon was spent in similar fashion, driving, stopping, scanning but to no avail in terms of wolf and deer. We were however successful at finding Giant Anteaters though none sadly close enough for a true appreciation of this magnificent creature. We did find one close enough to approach but it was under rather special circumstance that we took extra care. After looking very carefully through the scope to judge the situation, we discovered that she was carrying a very small, very young animal around her neck, we enjoyed the views but kept our distance. We found another, this time a bit distant but again approachable as the wind was with us and there was a stream in between though once again, as we approached it ran off...such is life! We lingered in an area known to be good for wolves but again drew a blank. This year the area was incredibly dry and with a lack of signs of small mammals you wonder how this larger mammal survives. We made it back to the Chapado after dark, but with time to shower before another excellent evening meal prepared by the resident chef and the discovery that our missing members had finally made it! A brief evening spotlight failed to produce anything at all.

## **22<sup>nd</sup> July**

With Dave and Linda now onboard and rested following their rather testing experience, we again returned to the park, once again hoping for close views of the Anteater and success with Maned Wolf and Pampas Deer. A change of vehicle overnight to a bigger more comfortable version meant that the journey to the top took a little longer. At the entrance gate, a brief stop produced a number of good birds with pride of place perhaps going to a juvenile King Vulture catching the early morning thermals. We again stopped at the 'source'

but although we could hear it, the Tapaculo showed itself only briefly this time. A French birder we'd met the day before alerted us to the presence of 'deer' on the opposite hillside and after a quick search, a young Pampas Deer Stag was observed, neck upwards, hiding in the rather long vegetation. Although a rather distant view, good to get as this species has declined alarmingly in the area and is now classed as endangered. We followed a similar routine to the previous day, once again visiting the coral, searching the hillsides and valleys for our targets, and once again struggling in the unseasonably hot dry weather. With only a distant Anteater or two, generally wandering away in the wrong direction we continued on to our regular lunch stop beside the river at the top of the falls. Once again, beautiful surroundings, great packed lunch and the odd good bird, the best perhaps a cruising adult King Vulture, low over the ridge in front of us.

Still desperate for a closer, 'full appreciation of the size' kind of encounter with a Giant Anteater, we decided to check the area we last saw them before lunch. Still visible and with the wind in the right direction, we set off on a yomp though not before another albeit briefer encounter with another Yellow Armadillo by the bus. A yomp it certainly was as the ground here can be incredibly deceptive and much deeper than it first appears and true to form, it was a tough walk. We had to cross a stream and work our way slowly up the hillside to where we thought the animal was now feeding. Surprisingly, we were closer than we thought, at one stage maybe only about ten metres as this individual bumbled along in classic anteater fashion. Unfortunately, once again something disturbed it whilst we were trying to get to a better photographic position and it hot-footed it's way into the nearest cover. Whilst we were deciding what to do, another bigger animal was spotted and once again we set off in pursuit, once again getting close before the animal disappeared, like they seem to do!

Our ever alert driver had been following our progress and repositioned the bus every time we made a detour due to the terrain to get back to the main road, a feat greatly appreciated by all us sweating souls. Happy now, we spent the rest of the afternoon searching for Maned Wolf which we unfortunately just missed but found a closer more obliging Pampas Deer on the way. Once again we stopped at the 'source' on the way out seeing a number of good birds including, once again the near impossible Brasilia Tapaculo and also, perhaps surprisingly, a couple of Brazilian Guinea Pig feeding by the water's edge.

Once again we arrived back after dark seeing relatively little on the road and once again were treated to an excellent dinner at the Chapado. After dinner we again ventured out into the garden to search for the now elusive White-eared Opossum failing once again. This was perhaps not surprising considering the circumstances as Nick first picked up some eyeshine close to the water's edge. Searching further and piecing together bits of sightings we realised that we were actually in the company of a rather elusive Ocelot, a first for us at Canastra. Despite further searching and a brief view, for me anyway along the riverbank, the animal disappeared in the direction of private land. Further searching then produced what can only have been an Otter moving along the bank before entering the water and disturbing a large shoal of fish. We sadly didn't get any views at all and it was time for bed.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> July**

Today was going to be another travel day, and we needed to cover quite a distance as we wanted to arrive at our next destination, the monastery at Caraca, in plenty of time to check in and relax before the anticipated 'evening show'. After a rather leisurely breakfast and a quick pack, we were ready for the day ahead. However not before another encounter with the habituated Black-tufted Marmosets, which once again came across the river and out of the

trees tempted by some nice fresh Banana. A good catch-up for those that had missed the earlier encounter. We made a short stop at a small lake observing another group of Black-tufted Marmoset and a nice variety of waterbirds as well as the odd opportunistic stop for photographs, one roadside Ferruginous Pygmy Owl probably the best of the lot. Lunch was taken at a Churruscaria close to Belo Horizonte. The remainder of the afternoon drive down to the monastery was largely uneventful with only a few birds of prey identifiable from our moving vehicle. I say moving as there were periods behind heavy traffic we may as well not have been, today wasn't a good day on the roads! We eventually arrived at Santuario do Caraca after nearly eight hours on the road and sadly arriving after dark, initially missed the view of the Monastery from the mountainside. After dinner at the monastery everyone made their way to the terrace to wait for the Maned Wolves to appear. An appearance soon after by a huge female put big smiles on everyone's faces though tested their resilience amongst the rather noisy locals. Repeat visits later on, perhaps more infrequent than usual by her and another perhaps somewhat nervous male (always looking down the terrace as if making sure the female was not coming), left everyone with fabulous memories and this was just our first night.

### **24<sup>th</sup> July**

The pre-breakfast session around the monastery proved productive with Brazilian Rabbit (Tapiti) still present from the night before, Brazilian Cavie and Guianan Squirrel being noted alongside a variety of birds present in the grounds. Breakfast, which is a kind of self serve, self-cook affair provided its usual entertainment and bewildered looks. A morning walk along the Tanque Grande trail to look for Masked Titi Monkey and Black-tufted Marmoset produced both species with relative ease, unlike recent years. We hadn't even got to the beginning of the trail before the first of many excellent birds however as a pair of gorgeous Swallow-tailed Cotingas were observed taking lichen, presumably for nest building from roadside trees. This is an unusual sight at this time of year and another indicator of an advanced season. Other good birds in the area also backed up this unusual sighting with Blue-naped Chlorophonia amongst others in the same set of trees. The views of the Titi Monkeys were very good indeed as a group slowly moved across the trail in front of us and settled down to feed in the trees beside the main trail. The walk up to the reservoir provided a number of excellent birds to add to the Pin-tailed and Swallow-tailed Manakins plus Surucua Trogon we had already seen, though none were easy in the forest. Returning for lunch we found a feeding flock of birds by the main bridge but once again, nothing showed itself very well. After lunch back at the monastery there was ample time for everyone to catch up with covies and squirrels before we took a walk out along the trail leading to the falls. We saw another group of Masked Titi Monkey but the walk to the falls was rather uneventful. On the return a number of good birds were seen on the first part of the trail including Grey-backed Tatchuri and Serra Antwren and for some a very brief, flyby Hyacinth Visorbearer, the vicinitie's endemic hummer. After another excellent dinner, the group, now officially the paparazzi returned for another evening on the terrace and more close encounters with Maned Wolf often feeding only a few feet away, in the gothic surroundings of Caraca. A unique experience leaving wonderful memories.

### **25<sup>th</sup> July**

After breakfast and some photography and general catching up, a quick turnaround at the monastery, drinks bills settled and were off again, departing for another day largely spent on the road travelling towards Caratinga in eastern Minas Gerais, the base for our visit to the

Muriqui Reserve. We made a brief stop to visit the area above the 'piscina' to try again for the stunning Hyacinth Visorbearer, an endemic gem of a hummingbird. Unfortunately, although a bird came in the bigger more aggressive resident 'emerald' chased it off and there was no star performance despite the fantastic backdrop. We made a few stops but the only noteworthy observations were quick 'flybys' of occasional birds. This is a mammal tour however, and after another great lunch stop we made our way late afternoon to Sitio Graciema. This privately owned finca just to the west of Manhuaca provides the joy of having close encounters with a habituated group of Geoffroy's Marmosets. We were not disappointed. On arrival, the edge of forest bordering the house suddenly burst into action as marmoset after marmoset appeared in anticipation of a free meal. Possibly as many as twelve of these wonderful little creatures were present, some of the adult animals gratefully accepting pieces of fresh banana from members of the group. By early evening we had arrived in Caratinga, where we all relished our first power showers and unlimited hot water for a week, before eating a delicious meal in the restaurant downstairs.

## **26<sup>th</sup> July**

After an early breakfast we departed for a day in Reserve Biologica de Caratinga in search of the most threatened of primates possible on this tour, the Muriqui and Buffy-headed Marmoset as well as two more common primates, Brown Howler and Black Capuchin (formerly a subspecies of the Brown Capuchin).

For this trip we stopped at the gated track opposite the river on the edge of the reserve. This has been very productive in recent year's to observe the Buffy-headed Marmoset and once again it wasn't long before their familiar calls could be heard. I walked up the main track whilst Regina walked the roadside with the group. Unfortunately the marmosets were already on the move across the main track and although close, I didn't have time to get people up before they disappeared. Although not habituated as such, this relatively large group appears to be very tolerant and providing your both quiet and careful, allow close approach. Not this year! They were extremely difficult and the views were hampered by the lush roadside vegetation but everyone did eventually get a sight of this very different looking primate. There were Brown Howlers in the area, but once again they were on the move and awkward to see though whilst searching we did find a nice group of Black-necked Aracari and a Paraque by the riverside. A little further along the road and we were enjoying great views of a large group of Black Capuchins, again right by the road though we did have to back off when a large male started to perform a very visual threat followed by a rather menacing attempt at lobbing a large branch down at us! Onward to the reserve proper, and our base at the headquarters. We have friends involved in the research here and its generally not to long before the radios crackle and we have an idea where the Muriqui maybe. That said, if the group are feeding in the forest interior, it can be a long wait before they'll move out towards the open. It is once again very much down to luck. Today was just a waiting game as a large group of Muriqui were actually resting in the forest opposite the headquarters although out of view. We did glimpse the odd movement and occasional swing through but today was going to be a waiting game. We amused ourselves with more close encounters with the Capuchins, ventured down the road to look at a group of Brown Howler that were calling from the tops of adjacent trees. Calling that became rather pronounced, alarm like and on investigation proved to be a Tayra which I glimpsed as it moved through but sadly did not reappear for the rest of the group. Luck was with us however, for after our picnic lunch the Muriqui did move the right way and eventually came out just beside the road. A large group of predominantly

males then performed incredibly well, hanging like a big bunch of grapes whilst they surveyed an out of reach palm tree loaded with nuts, so near so far. The weight of these large primates was just too much to bridge the gap and we could almost see the frustration on their faces. We stayed with this group for a long time, soaking up the views and with cameras clicking. We spotted a female amongst them with a few days old youngster, trying desperately to sex it for the researchers but to no avail, the important bits were too well hidden. The Capuchins in the vicinity certainly showed the Muriqui how to bridge the gap between the forest and the fruiting palm, managing it kamikaze style with ease and once again provided a wonderful photographic opportunity. The Brown Howlers were also on the move in the same area though sadly rather less photogenic. After soaking all this up we decided that thanks to a kind offer to drive us there from Antonio, we would visit the canopy tower to chance our luck with the possibility of discovering a Sloth in the many Cecropia trees visible. Sadly this was not to be despite some pretty thorough checking. We decided having had a successful day, pretty much within a hundred metres or so of the reserve headquarters that we would have another go for the Buffy-headed Marmoset in the area alongside the river. Unfortunately it appeared that they had already retired to bed though a group of reasonably close Howler Monkeys, some with young compensated slightly and gave the photographers a chance to get some shots. Back at the hotel via a slightly different route, we enjoyed dinner before retiring to bed happy after another successful day.

### **27<sup>th</sup> July**

Another travel day but a rather leisurely start and late breakfast in Caratinga before departing on the long journey back to Belo Horizonte. Stopping en route for a late lunch at a favoured stop, we made it in good time to catch our flight to Cuiaba via the rather quirkily designed Brasilia, capital of this vast country. Despite our previous experiences of the potential cold in the Pantanal at this time of year, we arrived in Cuiaba late evening to discover they were experiencing a mini heat wave, with day time temperatures peaking at 41C - so much for the cold weather gear! A short trip from the airport and we were all relaxing or sleeping in the rather luxuriant surroundings of the Amazon Plaza Hotel.

### **28<sup>th</sup> July**

Despite our long travel day yesterday, we still managed to be on the road not long after breakfast albeit a slightly later one. With hot temperatures predicted the air-conditioning system on our comfortable coach for this initial run to the Transpantaneira was more than welcome and after picking up a variety of fluids at a supermarket in Pocone we were soon heading south on the gravel and sand of the Transpantaneira reaching the entrance to the Pantanal in good time. From here on the richness of this huge ecosystem was clear for all to see. Further stops were made to view and photograph the wealth of water birds and birds of prey found alongside the road here especially as it appeared much drier than in recent years. Species seen included Jabiru, Maguari and Wood Storks, Great and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Heron, Rufescent Tiger Heron, Snail Kite, Black-collared and Savannah Hawks. Continuing south it was clear that there was a lot less water around than usual this year and because of this, there was a greater species concentration. A little further and a brief stop at Araras Ecolodge's Bar Araras for a quick refreshment fix before continuing our way onto Pixaim. After encounters with our first Capybara, the world's largest rodent, we arrived at the Beira Rio just in time for a splendid buffet lunch. After lunch while some took the opportunity to rest, others chose to spend time watching and photographing the colourful

array of birds and reptiles around the hotel itself. These included Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers, Yellow-billed Cardinal, Bay-winged, Shiny and Giant Cowbirds, Purplish Jay, the now numerous Pantanal Caiman and Tegu Lizard.

At around four we boarded our boat for the trip east along the adjacent Rio Pixaim. We were not to be disappointed. As we headed away from our hotel, a wealth of water birds alongside several Bare-faced Curassow and numerous Chaco Chacalaca's vied for attention. Rounding a bend, the main reason for our trip suddenly appeared or rather the boats watching them did. A couple of habituated Giant Otter that has been using these stretches of river for a number of years were playing hide and seek in the riverside vegetation. Initially they came to investigate the boat and participants, sometimes too close to photograph but certainly not far enough away to disguise their very fishy breath! After thirty minutes of close encounters we returned back along the river in time to see the emergence of the nightwatch, initially Band-tailed Nighthawks followed by the Fishing Bats. Whilst we were waiting for dinner a Crab-eating Fox visited the bar area giving everybody wonderful views at almost touching distance before idling off into the night. Post dinner and we were off again, this time on our newly-gained open back safari-style truck for a spotlighting session on the Transpantaneira north of Pixaim. Initially difficult it soon turned into one of those classic nights with Crab-eating Fox and Raccoon, Brazilian Tapir and Southern Tamandua all being seen well in addition to an elusive Giant Anteater and both Common and Greater Potoo's.

## **29<sup>th</sup> July**

An early pre-breakfast boat trip heading west from the hotel was pretty atmospheric and although produced no new mammals another sighting of at least two Giant Otters, different individuals to yesterday was very welcome. They were obviously on the hunt but delayed their progress to give us all good views, approaching the boat several times before continuing upstream. A small group of Black and Gold Howler Monkeys were calling but elusive in the high canopy. We returned to our hotel, our breakfast ready including copious amounts of strong Brazilian coffee for those that needed it. After breakfast we loaded up the luggage van and climbed aboard our 'open' truck for a long drive down to Porto Jofre. We stopped at various points but most target species remained elusive. The 'Pantanal' Marmoset was neither heard nor seen on the trip down to Jaguar Ec lodge, quite unusual compared to recent years. The traditional 'bat bridge' with a colony of Long-nosed Bats had been repaired and freshly creosoted and unsurprisingly all the usual inhabitants had left. In fact of the 128 wooden bridges that allow transfer between Pocone and Porto Jofre, only one looked like it really needed immediate work! Numerous encounters with small groups of the rather endearing Capybara, always set amongst the now ridiculously common Pantanal Caiman further indicated the rapidly drying waters in this part of the Pantanal. We stopped for lunch at the Jaguar Ecological Reserve's Pousada Jaguar and enjoyed a splendid buffet with at least two Hyacinth Macaws noisily flying about.

Early afternoon and the slow drive south to Porto Jofre was more about enjoying the wilderness than targeting anything particular. We did have two individual sightings of what can only have been Neotropical Otters dashing across the Transpantaneira, but the sightings were just that, unfortunately brief. In Campo Jofre we stopped to enjoy the numerous family parties of Capybara though surely there's only so many images you can take despite the fact they are rather endearing? A good aggregation of Nacunda Nighthawk, the largest and most spectacular of its family were well appreciated, especially the close flyby's.

We arrived at Porto Jofre with enough time to briefly explore the grounds on foot to which most people did independently whilst Regina and I organised the following days logistics. After a splendid buffet dinner at the restaurant we returned to the truck for an evening's spotlighting session. Driving back north along the Transpantaneira but despite many encounters with nightjars, particularly Scissor-tailed, and the odd distant Marsh Deer and a couple of Red Brocket it generally felt quiet and we decided to turnaround and head for bed.

### **30<sup>th</sup> July**

An early breakfast and a day spent exploring the river system from Porto Jofre. The advantage of using a single-engined speedboat to explore the area soon became apparent as we hurtled up the main river from Porto Jofre. We located a Giant Otter rather quickly but on this river the animals are much shyer than at Pixaim, and it soon disappeared. Checking every sandbank we passed revealed the rather worrying fact that the river was still relatively high and there were no obvious signs that the big cats were moving around. An impressive group of Black Skimmers together with some synchronised skimming drew our attention for a while, as did the rather gorgeous Pied Lapwings usually present on the sandbanks. Onward and more checking of the river's edge revealed no sign of Jaguars but we were still pretty relaxed. A high group of rather elusive Capuchin attracted us for a short while but again they were difficult. A toilet stop was rather fortuitous as a pair of oblivious Giant Otter came cruising down the river approaching quite quickly. Once they'd spotted us, they raised themselves right out of the water showing the quite remarkable marbling before uttering alarm calls and returning back the way they had come. Around eleven o'clock, whilst cruising slowly up one of the backwaters we struck gold, well to be precise a trio of golds. Initially well spotted by Dave, one Jaguar quickly became two, a youngish looking pair resting in the 'elephant' grass. They quickly disappeared, initially disturbed but as we backed off and waited on the opposite bank, the male reappeared, checked us out through the long grass and turned, appearing to walk along the riverbank. Giving it a few minutes before slowly idling along we found them both and then immediately a third, much larger male at the water's edge. He was obviously aware of the pair and fairly quickly disappeared into the undergrowth whilst we repositioned the boat on the opposite shore, a technique we used several times. For the next forty minutes or so, we watched and photographed all manner of behaviour as the pair watched us, walked along a bit, watched us and came down to the water to cool off. It was a fantastic encounter and one I shall always remember, like all of them but it wasn't over yet. Happy, we started our journey back toward Porto Jofre only to find another Jaguar, this time a big female, snoozing on the bank. Once again, a very relaxed Jaguar and a fantastic prolonged encounter we stayed with her for some time, initially watching from a distance before doing some slow drift-bys at close range. Four Jaguars in the space of an hour and a half and all before lunch on the first day, can't be bad, the pressure was off! In the extreme heat of the day we headed back to Porto Jofre for a break and a welcome lunch, with Champagne thanks to Caroline and a celebration of a fine mornings work! After a deserved rest, we were ready for more relaxed attempt in the afternoon. The hour's break after lunch gave many the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the plethora of birds including some noisy but elusive Hyacinth Macaws which were now resting in the trees behind our rooms. The afternoon session went pretty much the same as the morning, though with few mammals bar the rather common Capybara. No Tapir, no Tamandua just the odd distant Black and Gold Howler. Plenty of birds of course, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Great Black and Grey Hawks, the lovely Roseate Spoonbill, numerous kingfishers and more Skimmers, a good year this year. Our return to Jofre after dark and

armed with spotlights was very successful indeed. Numerous Band-tailed Nightjar and both Greater and Lesser Fishing Bats were entertaining but the icing on the cake had to be our fifth Jaguar found watching us from the water's edge. Despite being in amongst quite thick vegetation it was quite easy to see, bathed in the green filtered spotlight we use to avoid disturbing the animals. A magnificent thickset cat difficult to judge in light but looking rather huge, we watched for a while as it walked along before vanishing into the undergrowth. After dinner the spotlighting session was never going to be a surprise after the day we'd had and in fact produced very little other than numerous Caiman and the odd transfixed Capybara and once again Red Brocket but it was nice to be out in the cool evening air.

### **31<sup>st</sup> July**

Another early breakfast and we were on the boat again and pretty much followed the previous days routine though checking another tributary in the process. We saw plenty to keep us occupied and having been so successful the previous day, were afforded the time to photograph anything that took our fancy. This inevitably meant Capybara being Capybara, some more elusive primates and the odd Iguana. We of course searched constantly for Jaguar but today seemed quiet, very few tracks, little sign of nervousness from prey items but it was good to be on the river despite the heat. We returned to Porto Jofre for lunch as usual but with a determination to once again find a Jaguar in the afternoon. It actually took us most of the afternoon but we eventually succeeded in our mission and set the new WildWings record for the number of sightings. A toilet stop, the discovery of still wet tracks, a cruise with the boat carefully along the shoreline, the discovery of more tracks having crossed the river, a bend and a gorgeous cat on a bank. Astonishingly this cat was familiar, it was Jaguar number four, the rather relaxed female having walked probably ten kilometres overnight. Once again we were afforded the time to soak her up, putting the boat on the opposite bank, she was so calm we were allowed just to watch. Not that she did much, she watched us whilst we watched her, she lay down and we took pictures. After thirty minutes we took the boat to her, drifting by numerous times whilst she just looked down on us, bemused by all the attention. Her distinctive nostril scar looking slightly better than the previous day though her temperament remained the same, she'd seen it all before!

Our return to Porto Jofre after dark, spotlighting the banks as we went along was again full of surprises. The icing on the cake tonight however was a huge Ocelot found hunting the riverbank which initially caused quite a lot of confusion, especially from the back of the boat where the view was perhaps not as good. We did try and squeek it out for a while but it had evidently gone the other way, on a mission for food by the looks of it. We returned elated and after another excellent meal once again returned to the Transpantaneira for a spotlight session. Despite finding two different sets of fresh Jaguar tracks, finding a moribund young Anaconda that had been hit by a vehicle and the ever resident Red Brocket, we saw very little. Even the Great Horned Owls were elusive and refused to play ball. Still can't complain, six sightings of five Jaguars in two days is exceptional, I'm still smiling now!

### **1<sup>st</sup> August**

Today were heading north, back along the Transpantaneira to Pousada Araras. After a relatively leisurely breakfast, we checked out, loaded up our support vehicle with luggage and boarded our open truck for the final leg of our journey. The initial part of the run produced very little in the terms of new species just further confirmation of the magnificence of this wetland world. The truck disturbed huge numbers of water birds, particularly egrets from a feeding frenzy provided by the drying Pantanal. Everywhere we looked, a visual

feast, flowering Jacaranda and Y'pe trees, the Pantaneiros themselves, Capybara, Marsh Deer and water, a lot of water. Getting through this wild landscape requires a lot of bridges, bridges generally made of degradable wood though this year they all seemed to be in a repaired state.

We drove the Santa Isabel Road but apart from a few Blue-throated Piping Guans and a Black-fronted Nunbird little else was noted, certainly not the hoped for marmosets anyway. We called in at Pousada Jaguar for a welcome toilet/coffee stop discovering that our support driver, probably only fifteen minutes in front of us had had a mother and cub Jaguar cross the road right in front of him!! It's all a matter of timing, still we could'nt complain! We continued on to Pixaim for lunch and a midday break at the Beira Rio. For those that just could not rest, forays into the field provided catch up for species such as Greater Thornbird, which were nesting in the compound.

From here we headed north once more and onto Araras Ecolodge, eyes peeled in search of 'Pantanal' Marmoset a species that had so far eluded us. We saw plenty to keep us busy, despite the heat of the day, the best perhaps, close Marsh Deer feeding in wet areas alongside the road. Some rather nice Roseate Spoonbills drew our attention briefly but being rather skittish are often difficult to photograph and today was no exception. A Caiman that had just caught a Snowy Egret was a little more accommodating.

We made it to Araras in good time to check in and for those that wanted to, a brief exploration of the lodge. An initial scan provided views of a number of parrot species, and at least two stunning Sunbittern feeding in the nearby pools. The boardwalk provides access through the wetlands and into a small patch of forest with a canopy tower. We made it to the top but sadly no sign of any primates and a few distant Marsh Deer didn't really compensate. Still with such a fantastic view from the top, some of us lingered a little longer and although just a short distance, only just made it out before dark and the impending biting insects. There was however a distraction as a Tamandua had been discovered right by the boardwalk and offered superb views despite looking rather sickly. After our evening meal we boarded our truck for our first of the best night's spotlighting on the Transpantaneira. Initially we had decided to drive part of Araras's own private circuit opposite the main entrance. Before we had even left the gate we were enjoying watching a Crab-eating Fox feeding on the edge of our compound.

As soon as we entered the drive opposite the main entrance we began to pick up 'eye shine' out in the distance. Both Red and a single Grey Brocket were found feeding in paddocks and alongside the forest edge, the former in reasonable numbers. Back on the Transpantaneira Crab-eating Raccoons were encountered as expected and more foxes but these were soon eclipsed by a close encounter with an incredibly well marked Brazilian Tapir, the white ear tips positively glowing. The use of a green filter, designed for animals with sensitive eyes really came into its own as the Tapir appeared to ignore the light. Sadly noise is always the enemy with these nervous animals and our truck was rather creaky. It was however in an awkward position with tall roadside vegetation masking its route and we soon lost it. We also saw a Coati, quite unusual at night perhaps further indication of the unseasonably dry conditions and another very dark Southern Tamandua as well as further albeit brief sightings of foxes and deer. The hoped for close Ocelot was not to be, for tonight anyway.

**2<sup>nd</sup> August**

Breakfast at Pousada Araras is always a splendid affair. The reason is simple, we ate outside with a kaleidoscope of colour buzzing around the bird feeding stations. Aracaris competing for position with macaws and parakeets, cardinals and cowbirds. Throw in passing Hyacinth Macaws, titbit thieving Rufous Hornero's or the sheer spectacle of wetland birds moving about, and it's hard to drink your coffee in peace. This morning we took a walk up the boardwalk to the canopy tower. After a lot of searching and listening we eventually located a group of 'Pantanal' Marmosets, our tenth primate species involving maybe three or four individuals quietly feeding in trees behind the pools. Ten metres further and we were watching a bird party which included Great Rufous Woodcreeper, Red-billed Scythbill, the endemic Matto Grosso Antbird, Undulated Tinamou, Blue-crowned Trogon and although a male Helmeted Mannakin called, he refused to show himself. A little further and some noisy leaf-litter alerted us to a small party of the rather cheeky South American Coati. This lovely animal in its resplendent rufous phase were a joy to watch, and evidently we were too as their long snouts stuck out from the denser vegetation indicating we were under close scrutiny too. Several Azara's Agouti then put in an appearance with one very confident individual literally walking across the trail beneath us. Onto the tower and scans provided some distant Marsh Deer, Feral Pigs but once again no primates. The first few hours after lunch were free for everyone to do as they pleased. Some returned to the main boardwalk where the 'Pantanal' Marmosets were still proving elusive. Others explored the other boardwalk and tower, discovering a number of mature Marsh Deer, and at one stage five Sunbittern. The afternoon saw us return to the boardwalk for a circular stroll. The morning's 'bird-party', was still present allowing some catch-up time. The Coatis were still creating Coati mayhem as usual though who could tire of these comical characters. At the canopy tower we turned left following the sandy track through the palms which can be good for Armadillo, just not today. We did however find a close group of Black-striped Capuchin with a particularly close and relatively amiable male, much to the delight of the 'paparazzi' although there never seems to be that perfect position. Continuing on and out into the open area we recorded many birds but little else. A pair of Bat Falcons was a good find and the Yellow-rumped Caciques feeding on the flowering trees added a dash of tropical colour. Looping back through the rear of the boardwalk woodland we heard but failed to see those elusive marmosets presumably back on their way to their tree hole. Back at the ranch, we were amazed to see Fishing Bats leaving their roost hole in the same tree as the nesting Hyacinth Macaws and Great Horned Owls. It was a sizeable emergence and it was interesting to watch the owl watching the bats. Some of the bats had started hunting forays in the adjacent field when all of a sudden, the male owl suddenly focussed, took off and in a diving swoop caught one mid air, killing it on the restaurant roof before bringing it back to the waiting female, presumably to give to the chicks. Never thought I'd ever see that happen, assuming fishing bats were just too fast. After another splendid dinner spread we returned to the truck for our final night's spotlighting. Having had so much success the previous night to the south, we once again ventured the same way almost immediately recording a number of both Crab-eating Foxes, Crab-eating Racoons, a Marsh Deer, Red and Grey Brocket. The big surprise as we neared a bridge was the sight of a Giant Anteater right in the middle of the road, ambling toward the bridge, Strikingly marked, especially under spotlight, we slowly followed this superb animal until we lost it in heavy cover. A little further and Regina's tap on the roof to stop the driver with a concerned, "was that just a termite mound?" had us reversing back down the Pantanal. It wasn't of course, instead, close to the road sat quite a small but superbly marked Ocelot. Sadly it moved back into cover fairly quickly and although we could see it, or bits of it, it refused to be squeaked out, instead deciding to go the other way, into the darkness. We

travelled further down toward the Beira Rio before turning the truck to return back. We had'nt travelled that far before once again the truck came to a sharp halt, there to the left of us was not one but three Brazilian Tapir! One fairly quickly disappeared into long grass but the other two, away from each other offered a superb and prolonged view of this magnificent animal. The highly mobile proboscis, clearly testing the air ,not sure what to make of the situation. Once again the green filter working in our favour, neither dazzling, or disturbing, it was a great encounter. We continued back, searching slowly, just in case the Ocelot had reappeared, or anything else for that matter but apart from the old crab-eaters very little else was seen.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> August**

A pre-breakfast walk was perhaps a little ill timed for today after nearly three months of drought, the heavens opened and we got rather soaked . Our final breakfast of the trip was indoors, such was the ferocity of the rain at stages and with a dramatic backdrop, it was rather dark. With plenty of time and in reality little to do apart from short photographic forays in between showers the morning was rather leisurely. After an early lunch and a final pack , we loaded our comfortable coach and headed north toward Cuiaba and our flight back to Sao Paulo. After a week of hot, dry weather the much anticipated cold front was now clearly on its way from the far south and the skies overhead filled with rather ominous looking cloud formations. Arriving at the airport in Cuiaba with plenty of time to check-in, before the hordes arrived was an appreciated bonus though with our flight delayed perhaps not so. Arriving in Sao Paulo whilst our London flight was boarding was rather stressful and we no time to bid farewell to those in the group that were staying on or Regina, more a case of run and hope! Fortunately we made it, the plane waiting for us, and a minibus to take us there, a successful end to another excellent tour.

Report and species list by Mark Andrews.

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