



## WILDWINGS

### **BRAZIL JAGUAR TOURS: 24<sup>th</sup> July – 9<sup>th</sup> August and 28<sup>th</sup> August – 13<sup>th</sup> September 2010**

Tour report by Leader Mark Andrews

(Another superb pair of tours, with Puma seen by both groups in addition to the already expected long list of mammals and birds! JBG)

Day 1 Sat 24<sup>th</sup> July and 28<sup>th</sup> Aug Evening flight from Heathrow to Sao Paulo.

Day 2 Sun 25<sup>th</sup> July and 29<sup>th</sup> Aug - After arriving in Sao Paulo, we then took a connecting flight to Belo Horizonte where we finally cleared immigration. After meeting Regina Ribeiro at the airport we loaded up and set off in a comfortable coach for the long six plus hour trip due east to Caratinga where we were to stay for the following two nights. This town is most certainly not on the usual tourist trail, and offers a relatively lively but warm welcome to our first night in Brazil. The Vind's Hotel is right next to the rather ornate town square and being a weekend, the local bars were rather popular! For group one, we broke down and although managed to limp to a service area, the vehicle couldn't be fixed sufficiently so a nearly three hour wait was fortunately made easier as there were at least some birds to look at.

Day 3 Mon 26<sup>th</sup> July and 30<sup>st</sup> Aug - After an early breakfast, we set off for the Biological Station of Caratinga, a private reserve founded to protect the local flora and fauna of the Atlantic rainforest. Within an hour we had arrived at the now regular stop off point by the river on the border of the reserve to look for the first of today's endangered

primates, the Buffy-headed Marmoset. For both groups, this species was very difficult this year and we failed to locate the resident family group. The focus was now to get into the reserve proper and hope to connect with our next target species, South America's largest primate, the Muriqui or Woolly Spider Monkey. We were not disappointed as both groups saw them rather quickly and excellent views were obtained during the day. Both groups also managed to get excellent views of both of Caratinga's other primates, the Brown Howler and the Black Capuchin. The first group edged with the views of Brown Howler as a group of females were found at eye level feeding, each with accompanying youngster. The second group edged with Black Capuchin, which seemed to be everywhere during the visit. Lunch involved a picnic lunch at the reserve centre, with home cooked savory pies and some superb cake, occasionally interrupted by some dazzling bird outside. The afternoon, now with the pressure off consisted of a leisurely walk revisiting various primates and adding to the slowly increasing list of birds. The first group saved perhaps the best until last in the form of a quite fantastic Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth sleeping in a Cecropia tree just above the road. For the second group, the sloth had only recently departed but on searching areas along the river, we finally managed to connect with a couple of Buffy-headed Marmosets returning late to their favoured trees.

Day 4 Tue 27<sup>th</sup> July and 31<sup>st</sup> August - Another long drive, returning back towards Belo Horizonte and onto Caraca National Park. For both groups we called in to see George and Graciema at their wonderful private finca and patch of Atlantic forest to see the resident Geoffroy's Marmoset. Both groups saw these endearing characters extremely well and I'm sure all enjoyed the coffee and cake afterwards in the extremely welcoming family home. After a brief journey and lunch, onward to Caraca NP. This is a 110 sq km transitional zone between the Atlantic rainforest and Cerrado. We arrived in the afternoon and checked into the Hospedaria do Caraca, a working Monastery, the park's centerpiece for a two night stay. The area is very rich in bird life and this was quite obvious as we had a quick look around before dinner. Of the mammals here, priority obviously goes to the magnificent Maned Wolf, South America's largest wild canine with the appearance of a fox on stilts. Feeding the wolves is a nightly ritual at the monastery though when the wolf decides to appear can be a real hit and miss affair, some years not coming in until after midnight. For the first group, this was an extremely difficult vigil as the wolf failed to come in on the first night at all and on the second night, actually only came in briefly at around four twenty in the morning when only two managed to see it, by a quirk of fate. For the second group, we actually saw a wolf in the vegetable garden before the first night which of course, perhaps unsurprisingly then came in before we'd gone to dinner. Repeat visits throughout both nights by individually, two wolves was of course much appreciated, extremely unfortunate that the first group couldn't have witnessed this.

Day 5 Wed 28<sup>th</sup> July and 1<sup>st</sup> Sept - A full day in Caraca National Park. A pre-breakfast walk was followed by the always entertaining 'you-have-to-cook-your-own', bewildered

looks as the group are presented with wood fuelled hot plates, a basket of eggs and a few loaves. It doesn't take long to get the hang of it and some amazing concoctions were soon fizzling away. After a nice dose of strong coffee, something you need on this trip, we were off for a productive morning session. We spent it, walking the Tanque Grande Trail searching out our two primate targets Masked Titi Monkey and Black-tufted Marmosets as well as anything else we could find. For the first tour, the Titi Monkey's provided an exceptional encounter with at first one family group found next to the trail being quickly confronted by a rival group, these including a pair with a newborn infant. Displays of threat and an incredible array of vocalizations made this a very special observation. Another group was found close to the river and whilst watching these, a large group of Marmosets appeared and were tempted down close to the junction offering fantastic, close views. For the second group, the Titi Monkey were slightly more difficult, lots of groups vocalising, but hidden in forest. We did find two close animals, which showed very well, again beside the main trail but the Marmosets were proving extremely elusive today though a Red Brocket was some compensation. Both groups enjoyed encounters with one of the region's special birds, the Swallow-tailed Cotinga though the eight feeding together on the first tour was always going to take some beating. Back for a welcome lunch and some free time before continuing in the afternoon. Repeat visits to the monastery vegetable garden to track down Brazilian Guinea Pigs, which usually hang around there drew a complete blank this year, but there were plenty of very habituated Guianan Squirrels to entertain around the car park. In the afternoon we walked the Waterfall trail, which is often less productive mammal wise but has provided a few surprises in recent visits. For both groups sadly this wasn't the case, though thoroughly enjoyed with a nice variety of birds and some rather spectacular landscape views. A seemingly resident Hyacinth Visorbearer was awkward for both groups. Glimpsed on both visits, but not by some of those that most desired it. Those on the second group did however get excellent views of a male above the piscina on the way out of the park. An evening vigil back on the terrace was obviously great for the second group, cold and grim for the first.

Day 6 Thu 29<sup>th</sup> July and 2<sup>nd</sup> Sept - After another productive early morning birding session we were back on the road again for the long drive west to Sao Roque de Minas our base whilst we explore the Cerrado habitat of the Serra da Canastra NP. Stopping off for lunch at a roadside Churruscaria, and a few comfort stops, it's basically the whole day on the road. We arrived early evening and checked in for three nights stay at the family run Hotel Chapadao da Canastra. A foray into the garden before dinner provided a White-eared Opossum for the first group and the one-that-got-away for the second.

Day 7 Fri 30<sup>th</sup> July and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept - The insomniacs among the group were up at first light and enjoying breakfast birding in the grounds of the Chapado. After breakfast, we boarded our bus and headed off, up a rather testing road to the park entrance high above

us. Here we had three main targets, Giant Anteater, Pampas Deer and Maned Wolf, especially for the first group, as the pressure was mounting to find one due to missing out at Caraca. During the week prior to the second tours arrival, the park had been closed due to a huge bushfire that spread rapidly due to the almost drought-like conditions. This fire had ravaged through a huge section of the park with most of the area to the right hand side of the road, black and smoking. This had had a fairly devastating effect on the wildlife with sadly many animals unable to escape in time. The usual brief stop at the source of the Rio Sao Francisco to scan for mammals on the hillsides and amongst the nearby rocky outcrops couldn't have been different between the two tours. For the first, this area produced only the seemingly resident White-vented Violetear doing its rather familiar 'chiffchaff' song, a couple of Streamer-tailed Tyrants and a distant Pampas Deer. For the second tour, a distant Pampas Deer turned into two, which vanished, perhaps due to a Maned Wolf walking up the hillside close to a roaming Giant Anteater! Heading off to an area known as the 'coral' and scanning from the dry stone-walls of this abandoned building works where we found few birds but this did for some include the rather excellently named Firewood Gatherer and a plethora of rather drably marked seed-eaters. Distant dark specks either materialised into Greater Rheas or very distant Giant Anteaters ambling away on the furthest hillsides. So for both groups, the search was on for a nice Anteater that was in the right position and possibility for a closer look. For both groups, we were successful in locating individuals that allowed us to approach and enjoy this bizarre but quite magnificent creature. The first group certainly achieved higher numbers, not surprisingly, considering the fire had ravaged much of the prime habitat. During both tours, we found the Pampas Deer relatively easy compared with recent years with both stags and hinds found at various points, close to the road.

On the first tour, we found a fresh Giant Armadillo burrow where a quick inspection revealed that the animal was actually working its way up the tunnel. Sadly despite much trying and staking the hole out at dusk, this incredible beast was only heard and smelt. Unbelievably, on the second tour, we found two, side by side but sadly the constructor wasn't present it seems. For both tours, we spent a little 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. "Onward and upward" as they say. Across the park, toward the top of Casca D'anta we diligently scanned for areas for anything that moved. 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, and for the second tour did exactly that as a cry of "aahhh, look at these ducklings" as a family of Mergansers scrambled down the stream only metres away. There were other good birds of course, the group's first Crested Black Tyrants, King Vulture, Cinnamon Tanager and several hummingbirds entertained those who wished to 'eat on the hoof'. The afternoon was spent in similar fashion, driving, stopping, scanning locating Pampas Deer and finding more Giant Anteater and during the second tour, lots of Burrowing Owls. We lingered in an area known to be good for wolves but

again drew a blank on both tours. We made it back to the Chapado after dark, but with time to shower before a welcome hot evening buffet meal prepared by the resident chef.

Day 8 Sat 31<sup>st</sup> July and 4<sup>th</sup> Sept – For the first tour, the morning was primarily devoted to searching the Rio San Francisco for the very rare and highly endangered Brazilian merganser visiting the lower park area and its riverine forest. Sadly we failed to locate any mergansers despite checking all of the known areas for this pair. For the second tour, we visited a private reserve fairly close to Sao Roque which we knew was left untouched by the fires. With a rather nice ‘nature circuit’, we enjoyed excellent views of birds like Helmeted Manakin, glimpses of Red-breasted Toucan and prolonged views of Black-tufted Marmoset near to the base of the waterfall. After a picnic lunch we went back up onto the plateau to spend the afternoon searching for whatever we could find. Maned Wolf often hunt from the late afternoon onwards and although always difficult, if you are not in it, you cannot win it as they say. For the first tour this was an ever increasing challenge and we split up to cover all of the favoured areas and hoped that the radios would keep us connected between the coral and the source in particular. A Yellow Armadillo was found and enjoyed by all but the sentinels but sadly no wolf would materialize for those now desperate to see it before dark. For the second tour, it once again couldn’t have been any different. A Maned Wolf was found and watched hunting close to the coral soon after arrival offering good views as it zigzagged about looking for prey, missing several times in the process. Astonishingly, a second wolf was found close to the source and watched, albeit distantly as it ventured up the open hillside. Further Giant Anteaters were seen by both groups, again fairly distant individuals bumbling around. Once again returned back to the Chapado after dark, ready for a stiff drink and a nice hot meal.

Day 9 Sun 1<sup>st</sup> August and 5<sup>th</sup> September - Today was a long travel day as we had to drive the two hundred and fifty odd miles back to Belo Horizonte in order to catch our afternoon flight to Brasilia and then another flight onto Cuiaba. The journey was largely uneventful, apart from taking a long time with a long wait in Brasilia to lengthen the day. We eventually arrived at our hotel, the Amazon Plaza for a brief overnight stay just after midnight.

Day 10 Mon 2<sup>nd</sup> August and 6<sup>th</sup> Sept - 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 daytime 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 the mighty Jabiru, 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 for the first group, a brief stop at Araras Ecolodge's Bar Araras for a quick refreshment fix before continuing our way onto Pixaim. (For the second group, this was base for the next two days, so from here the tours differ by doing the Pantanal section in reverse). After encounters with our first Capybara, the world's largest rodent, Marsh Deer (much easier than their Pampas cousins), a family of Neotropical River Otter (second tour only) and the obvious and numerous Paraguayan Caiman, we arrived at the Beira Rio, Pixaim 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 rather obvious Pantanal Caiman waiting for scraps and the odd Amazon Racerunner. At around four we boarded our boat for the trip east and then back 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 and then promptly disappeared in the form of a Giant Otter. Only one animal, the rest of the family group were either in the burrow or out hunting but from the behaviour of this 'sentinel' perhaps the latter, as it appeared to be guarding, we suspected, they had just increased their number. With a 'guardian' in and out, the views weren't brilliant, despite investigating the boat several times, perhaps tomorrow would offer more relaxed viewing. After thirty minutes or so we returned back along the river in time to see the emergence of the nightwatch, initially Band-tailed Nighthawks followed by the Fishing Bats. Post dinner and we were off again, this time on our newly-arrived open back safari-style truck for a spotlighting session on the Transpantaneira north of Pixaim. It was initially difficult as the area was unusually dry but we still managed a stunning Southern Tamandua at close range, six Crab-eating Fox, a Raccoon, four Brazilian Tapir, Marsh and Red Brocket Deer, actually a very good night!

For the second group, we stopped and checked into our rooms at Araras Ecolodge as we were doing the trip in reverse order to the first tour due to a wildlife festival being held at the same time. Having passed a couple of distant Capybara on the journey down, here you can suddenly appreciate these huge rodents as good numbers gather around the lodge, regularly coming through the bar area to eat fallen unripe mango. In fact the mango tree is often a hive of activity with a wonderful array of strikingly colourful birds regularly feeding from it, especially toucans, aracarís and parrots. We had arrived in good time for lunch, an 'al fresco' affair surrounded by masses of birds at the feeders, in the trees and on the fenceposts including the Pantanal's 'flagship' bird, the Hyacinth Macaw which nests in the grounds. Free time early afternoon as the midday heat had risen to perhaps uncomfortable levels before a walk down the boardwalk to the canopy tower

through the rather productive forest. This relatively gentle walk produced our first Azaras Agouti, a large group of Coati, interestingly some very dark animals amongst the usual mahogany coloured individuals and Black-striped Capuchin but sadly only distant Black and Gold Howler. There was however, a good selection of birds including localised species such as Mato Grosso and Band-tailed Antbirds, the rather spectacular Blue-crowned Motmot and perhaps scarce, Golden-winged Cacique. After a splendid dinner, most of the selection from the ranch itself, we set off for our first spotlighting session in the Pantanal. Concentrating on the circuit around the ranch itself it was a successful session with Grey-four-eyed Opossum, a strikingly marked Southern Tamandua, a personal favourite, several Brazilian Rabbit, a couple of each of Crab-eating Fox and Raccoon, a Red Brocket and a Marsh Deer.

Day 11 Tue 3<sup>rd</sup> August – Group 1 - An early pre-breakfast boat trip heading east again from the hotel was pretty atmospheric and we arrived in good time to see the Giant Otter family in the process of waking up for the day's activities. This time five individuals, stretching, sliding, investigating the boat, messing about amongst the roots provided a much more fulfilling experience of this huge predator. 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, and 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 on the way down to Jaguar Ecologde, soaking up the atmosphere, seeing our first close Hyacinth Macaws, the fabulous Toco Toucan, so familiar to us from all those Guinness adverts. The traditional 'bat bridge' with a colony of Long-nosed Bats had once again 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 two this year looked like they 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.. After calling in briefly to the abandoned Ibama research station to find once again, the roosting Great Potoo and a group of roosting Seba's Short-tailed Bat's we went back for lunch at the nearby Jaguar Ecological Reserve's Pousada Jaguar and enjoyed a splendid buffet with a few Hyacinth Macaws noisily flying about. Early afternoon and the slow drive south to Porto Jofre, enjoying the wilderness and seeing a number of interesting species including a brief Brazilian Tapir, a Red Brocket, Marsh Deer and numerous family parties of Capybara. 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, it was very cold and this was perhaps shown by just a couple of encounters with nightjars, the odd distant Marsh Deer and a few fishing bats zipping around, it generally felt quiet and we decided to turnaround. The area around the

airfield did however produce once again with two Red Brouket and yet another Brazilian Tapir!

Day 11 Tue 7<sup>th</sup> Sept – Group 2 - Breakfast at Pousada Araras is always a splendid affair, you wake up, wander a few metres, grab a nice cup of coffee and stare at the gathering kaleidoscope of colour buzzing around the bird feeding stations and quite often, trying to steal your breakfast from the plate itself.. This morning we once again took a walk up the boardwalk to the canopy tower. Our primary target here was the ‘Pantanal’ Black-tailed Marmosets, and there are several groups in the area. Today however, they were difficult and took some locating, eventually being found on the fairly isolated island patch, surrounded by water, caiman and relatively difficult to get to. Some managed to get across and saw some of the group of nine though unfortunately not everyone. A good variety of birds also presented themselves in the same area including Great Rufous Woodcreeper and Red-billed Scythbill, Undulated Tinamou , and a brief Blue-crowned Trogon, I think commonly known as ‘sods law’ as the birders hadn’t quite made it across in time. More Azara’s Agoutis and then again a large party of the rather cheeky South American Coati. Onto the tower and scans produced a distant group of Black and Gold Howler Monkey before walking out from the rear of the tower and more forest birds added to the ever increasing list. On the return to the boardwalk, a large group of Black-striped Capuchins sought the relative coolness of this forested area allowing everyone who wanted, remarkably close views. After lunch and some free time, we once again boarded the truck to drive around the ranch area of Araras, visiting the Parrot release area for those illegally caught species confiscated by customs before driving on to the Rio Claro for a late afternoon leisurely jaunt down the river in kayaks and chance encounters with the resident wildlife. No surprises this afternoon, but thoroughly enjoyable with some nice birds seen. After returning for another splendid buffet dinner and seeing Grey Brouket in the process, we once again boarded the truck, excited by the prospect of another spotlighting session in this productive area. After an initial look at the various bats emerging from the fig tree and hunting fishing bats along the corridors, we initially went north along the Transpantaneira, more in a ‘just-in-case’ mode as we had been extremely successful here on the first tour. We had actually only a couple of hundred metres when the lamp struck gold, literally in the form of a stunning female Puma sat beside one of the roadside pools at very close range! Although only relatively brief, she did disappear into the undergrowth but returned briefly to have another look. We moved off to give her time before returning, finding a White-eared Opossum but no further sign of the Puma. A fantastic encounter nevertheless and one we really didn’t expect having seen the our first official Puma, the same cat, only a month before. Continuing on, we managed an impressive dozen Crab-eating Fox, and a solitary Crab-eating Racoon, a fabulous night!

Day 12 Wed 4<sup>th</sup> August – Group 1 - Today was an important day, the first day on the river with a very real chance of encountering the ultimate prize for this trip, and the nerves and



awareness were visibly rising, We've always been lucky and although nothing is guaranteed, are always aware that it is possible to fail, was this going to be the first team to draw a blank? After an early breakfast we were off, all loaded into a boat capable of 30 knots (35mph) and with an awful lot of river to cover looking for a cat with exceptional camouflage. We covered some distance in the morning, checking all the favoured areas along the Cuiaba , onto the Piquiri and out towards the 'Three Brothers'. We were aware that they were difficult as other groups had been struggling for several days and there were few reports coming from fisherman. We did encounter a group of six very vocal Giant Otter and a couple of family group of Howler Monkey but the primary target remained elusive. We slowed to photograph black skimmers and a variety of waterbirds gathered on the sandbanks eventually getting back to Porto Jofre at 1300 in time for lunch. In the afternoon we set off in the boat again to concentrate on looking for Jaguar. Whilst traveling up the main river, I spotted something sitting upright on the bank in the distance, thinking it was slightly elongated for a Capybara I steadied the bins onto what had to be a Jaguar. It was a beautifully marked female, and as we approached, she casually walked into the water and swam across, disappearing before emerging from the Water Hyacinth just to the side of the boat. She initially looked at us before continuing with the reason she had crossed the river, she was hunting Capybara. We watched in awe as she began to stalk, with eyes firmly locked on the target animal, slowly stealthily creeping along the edge. Suddenly she launched, disappearing briefly behind a bush at full pace but cracking a branch in the process, alerting the Capybara into escaping by jumping into the river. The Jaguar returned and sat watching us from the riverbank for a while before sauntering off into the undergrowth. A memorable encounter, it's not very often you get to see swimming and hunting behaviour, especially that close! After this, things were relatively relaxed, and although we ambled further upriver enjoying a variety of birds and ever present Capybara we saw nothing new, not that it mattered. Journeying back as day turned to night, our spotlights illuminated small numbers of both fishing bats and the seemingly ever present Band-tailed Nightjars, the nightshift had begun. Another wonderful dinner with the odd celebratory drink, we called it a night and let some catch up on some much-needed sleep.

Day 12 Wed 8<sup>th</sup> Sept – Group 2 - For the second tour, we had the long journey down to Porto Jofre from Araras and after an early breakfast, we boarded the truck, sending the support vehicle ahead. It was a hot dry day and the Pantanal was beginning to have problems as distant bush-fires were clearly gathering pace. Despite this, the journey down to Jaguar Lodge was very productive and a quick comfort stop at Pixaim proved a good move as we found a Tapir feeding close to the road next to the entrance and the family group of six Giant Otters had swum by the bar. By the time we'd got down to Jaguar we'd watched another Giant Otter in a very green pool, seen another River Otter, a group of Long-nosed Bats, eight Coati, Capuchin Monkeys and some Marsh Deer plus a enviable array of birds. Lunch at Jaguar was up to the usual excellent standard and after a midday rest and peruse around the gardens we were once again ready to move on. We called into the Ibama station to see the roosting Seba's Bats but struggled to find the

Great Potoo, eventually spotting it from the truck on the way back to the Transpantaneira. Also re-enforcing the fact that we were now very much in prime Jaguar country, fresh tracks started to appear. The journey from here was certainly productive for birds with large gatherings at the drying pools and by the time we arrived at Campo Jofre for a brief stop we had seen some good stuff. Once again, as in the last trip, we saw the resident Great Horned Owls and Pygmy Kingfisher but a Black-collared Hawk battling with a large False Boa took the prize for most unusual. Just south of here we found a much desired 'legend' in the form of a fairly large Yellow Anaconda and were able to approach the snake to within a metre as it traversed dry ground close to the road. Continuing on, we saw Marsh Deer, a Red Brocket and plenty of Capybara but sadly no spotted cats, despite plenty of indications that they were not very far away. We once again arrived in Porto Jofre with a short period to explore the surrounds before showers and dinner. After dinner, a spotlighting session initially started very well with a superb and very large male Ocelot at the end of the airfield, a Red Brocket feeding alongside the airfield but very little along the Transpantaneira. A return to the airfield last thing before retiring failed to relocate the Ocelot but produced another Brazilian Tapir walking about, a good night and promising vibe perhaps!

Day 13 Thu 5<sup>th</sup> August – Group 1 - Another early departure by boat in search of big cats, relaxed of course as the pressure was off after yesterday's female but inspired and driven to find more. We headed straight upriver toward the Piquiri as we felt this looked good the previous day but checked the area where the female was and the entire riverbank alongside, just in case. The previous day we'd found a Buffalo that had been killed by an obviously large male Jaguar but despite no sign of the cat, the buffalo had moved. Difficult to imagine how much power it takes to drag a full grown buffalo! At the Piquiri we found a very showy and extremely entertaining group of seven Giant Otters that we watched at close range for quite some time. Individuals playing on the bank, rolling around in the sand and perhaps most memorably eating fish, one of which had a huge blue catfish whose head was considerably bigger than the otter. It kept moving it around, holding it up amongst whilst balanced on riverside vegetation before munching away, much to the delight of the photographers. Eventually, they started to move off on another mission and we left them and continued looking for Jaguar. Whilst travelling along part of the 'three brothers' we struck gold again, a large male Jaguar on the riverbank just to the side of us. We slowed down and got into position and although momentarily disturbed, this cat relaxed quickly, lay down and ignored us. He'd been through some battles, perhaps some recent courtship as he had plenty of open wounds and perhaps most surprising of all, sported a relatively hard to see radio-collar. We watched and photographed him for a while before he got up and sauntered off into the undergrowth. It was now getting late, so it was power on back to Jofre for lunch however not before discovering a pair of Jaguar lying together on the Cuiaba riverbank. The male was quite stunning, dark, big and well marked, the female much paler but not exactly small herself. The encounter was unfortunately fairly brief as the female got up and walked into the undergrowth rapidly followed by the male but I don't think anyone was complaining. The

afternoon session out on the river, we still looked hard but didn't find anymore cats. We did enjoy views of Black and Gold Howler Monkey and spent time looking at the huge variety of waterbirds before a more successful night in terms of bat numbers as we returned after dark. The after dinner spotlighting session once again was very slow on the Transpantaneira but it was very cold. On returning back towards Jofre, we saw an Ocelot sauntering away down a side track and as we were right on top of it when we saw it and had to reverse, not everyone got onto it. A Red Brocket close to the airfield was perhaps poor consolation.

Day 13 Thu 9<sup>th</sup> September – Group 2 - So the second tour, pressure on and an early departure from Porto Jofre for this groups first day on the river in Jaguar country, once again, heading east along the Cuiaba. Although we searched the riverbank in all the favoured areas, we'd decided to head out to the 'three brothers' fairly directly because of what we knew from a few weeks before and from what we'd heard on arrival in Jofre. There had been no Jaguar sightings for four or five days and quite a few folk had missed them, some of our group were a little worried. We need not worry for too long though as whilst navigating a very narrow stretch of cut through, we suddenly came across a cat swimming just ahead of the boat, literally! This cat then somehow launched out of the water in an explosion of spots and spray, cleared a sandbank and launched an attack on a Capybara, narrowly missing the rodent, though this was all so fast and mostly in audio for us, before climbing up the bank and watching us from behind vegetation. A female, she then prowled around for a short distance before disappearing off into the forest, evidently on a mission. A rather action packed and memorable first encounter! Continuing on, we also came across the family of six Giant Otter though they didn't linger around very long but again at one point they were very vocal and seemed agitated at some very close caiman. We presumed on the last trip that this group had young close by and with that in mind, left them alone. We continued on enjoying the masses of gathered skimmers and plovers on the sandbanks before returning back in the heat of the day, elated for lunch and free time back at Jofre. We returned to the river in the afternoon and continued to search for signs of Jaguar enjoying good views of Capuchins and Howler Monkey and birds like Sungrebe and Sunbittern, stunning when they fly! Whilst traveling back after dark, we had excellent views of both species of Fishing Bat, handy having a boat that can keep up with them and the usual array of nightbirds. We also spotlighted a Brazilian Tapir coming down to the riverbank but were saving the best until last. As we got closer to Jofre, we could see an area of riverbank being spotlit and there, right in the middle of the beam was Jaguar. We drifted in close and watched this very calm female watching us completely out in the open. It was the female from the first trip, easily identified from the distinctive face pattern and she was still close to where we first saw her, which was very close to where we were staying. Amazing how they can hide when they want to. We watched her for a while before some idiot turned up in another boat and put a second spotlight on her causing her agitation at which point she got up and walked off. Dinner with drinks was a blur as we celebrated a good day on the river.

Day 14 Fri 6<sup>th</sup> August – Group 1 - 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. We called in at Pousada Jaguar for a welcome toilet/coffee stop before continuing on to Pixaim for lunch and a midday break at the Beira Rio. Here, the waiter came running in to announce that there was a Tapir in the back garden! Amazing views as it walked across the grass before making its way down to drink at the river. From here we headed north once more and onto Araras Ecolodge, eyes peeled in search of any species that had so far eluded us. We did find a Giant Anteater, a well marked individual that showed how nimble the species can be by doing a Houdini through a wire fence before ambling off into the termite mounds. Some rather nice Roseate Spoonbills drew our attention briefly but being rather skittish are often difficult to photograph and today was no exception. We made it to Araras in good time to check in and for those that wanted to, a few hours exploration of the lodge. Capybaras have become acclimatized to the lodge and wander around the grounds with such confidence it still seems totally bizarre watching these massive rodents wandering past only a couple of feet away. The boardwalk provides access through the wetlands and into a small patch of forest with a canopy tower. Some went to the top where the views over the surrounding area are quite spectacular, others chose to check the adjacent marsh area seeing the ever present Sunbitterns stalking the edge. A group of Coati entertained, playing hide and seek in both the vegetation and then the trees, showing an incredible adaptability to an already inquisitive nature and disturbing for many, their first Azaras Agouti. We also saw the sometimes elusive 'Pantanal' Marmosets when we bumped into a family group along the boardwalk. After our evening meal, another splendid one I might add, we boarded our truck for our first of potentially the best night's spotlighting on the Transpantaneira. Initially we had decided to drive part of Araras's own private circuit opposite the main lodge before rejoining the road. We did manage to see six Crab-eating Foxes and five Racoons, Red Brocket and Marsh Deer

Day 14 Fri 10<sup>th</sup> Sept – Group 2- Day two on the river out of Porto Jofre for another go at finding Jaguar. Once again we headed upriver with the primary aim of searching the 'Three Brothers' area and the entrance to the Piquiri. Once again we had success in the same area as the previous day with what may have been the same female. Unfortunately, she was on the move and the views were basically tail end as the cat moved along the bank and into cover. We held back as other boats, with folk who'd struggled until now for four days finally got to grips with their target. It was a good day on the river and despite following similar patterns, everyday's different and we enjoyed views of a good variety of wildlife including another brief battle between snake and prey, this time a Great Black Hawk and a rather stunning Yellow-tailed Cribbo, Green Iguana, both larger primates,

plenty of Capybara activity and a nice encounter with the larger group of seven Giant Otter. It was however the afternoon session that was perhaps the icing on the cake. We had gone out again after lunch and were slowly working our way back to Jofre after dark when the spotlight hit two Jaguar on the bank of the main river. A courting pair, that stared out at us snarling before wandering off into the undergrowth. They were obviously mid 'play' and the vocalizations ringing out into the night were quite incredible. Jaguars mating can be quite a violent affair with the female wounding the male fairly regularly it seems and the sounds certainly reflected that, combined rather strangely with very loud purring. They did come out to look at us again, slightly further up the bank before continuing, once again unseen behind some dense vegetation were we left them to it as it were, needless to say that we arrived back at Jofre positively buzzing! Now with Puma, Jaguar and Ocelot on the trip list, we had a little celebration.....

Day 15 Sat 7<sup>th</sup> August – Group 1 - A pre-dawn walk along the boardwalk and palm area to the rear of the tower failed to find any hoped for opossums but a climb up the tower resulted in a fabulous encounter and experience by chance. A large family of Black and Gold Howlers had slept overnight in the tower it seems and we woke them up. Initially appearing rather groggy and slightly miffed, they soon settled down and gave us a live, up close and personal full monty group howling session. It was incredible to watch as they rose in unison only feet away, but the sound was just awesome, fantastic stuff. This group's first breakfast at Pousada Araras with the sheer avian spectacle surrounding it was thoroughly enjoyed. Afterwards, we took a walk back up the boardwalk toward the canopy tower and out through the back. It was a good morning, we had great views of the Marmosets again plus the usual suspects, Agouti, Coatis and a wealth of good birds including Matto Grosso and a variety of woodcreeper's including the Scythbill, After lunch and some free time, we boarded the truck and journeyed across to the horse ranch, and the parrot release area seeing a River Otter in the pools there. Onward, through various dry forest patches, we arrived at the beautiful Rio Claro for some late afternoon kayaking. Perhaps one of South Americas most desired heron species, the Agami had been seen on this stretch in recent weeks but today certainly wasn't visible. We did get close to a number of nice birds but the best was undoubtedly the two Tapir that snook along the bank, one of which came down to drink close to the canoes. On the way back to the lodge we spotlighted yet another Tapir, the ninth! This one stood in the middle of a pool, drinking and totally unconcerned by the cameras aimed it's way. After another splendid dinner, mostly produce from the lodge itself, no air miles here, we boarded the truck for our final spotlighting session. Full of hope that we would get a longer view of an Ocelot little did we know what would really happen. We'd done a short circuit, picking up a couple of foxes when we decided to check an area of the Transpantaneira, just to the north of Araras. As we passed a woodland patch, my lamp caught something that I initially thought was just another fox however re-checking the eyeshine was just a little too bright, too yellow. We stopped and put the beam onto it as it walked along the edge where it went from clearly a cat, to that's a big cat, to \*\*\*\* it's a Puma!! Not one but two as it clearly had something smaller following it along, a cub. It was a fantastic

sighting, our first official Puma and although close to a hundred metres away, still very clear. She disappeared behind long grass and despite several attempts to slowly and quietly cover the adjacent patch, could not be relocated, not that it mattered, we just wanted more.

Day 15 Sat 11<sup>th</sup> September – Group 2 - Today were heading north, back along the Transpantaneira to the Beira Rio at Pixaim 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 alongside large numbers of Caiman in a feeding frenzy provided by the drying Pantanal. We also called into Jaguar for a short comfort stop and a shot of strong coffee before continuing on. It soon became apparent that the tales we'd heard about a massive fire were very much true and judging by the smoke, was getting closer. After a fine lunch and checking in to our rooms it was free time until it was cool enough to walk and many spent time photographing the smart array of birds visiting the feeders including the neon Troupial. In the afternoon, we walked the nature trail, along the riverbank and into the forest, where there had been a Jaguar here only a few days before. We didn't see the cat but we did manage to locate a group of rapidly moving 'Pantanal' Marmosets, a nice catch up for some. We saw a nice group of Capuchin before finding a hollow fig tree on the way back with an impressive emergence of fishing bats. As darkness fell, the sky glowed orange and an acrid smell filled the air as the fire ravaged forest on the other side of the river, close to the ranch. A Crab-eating Fox appeared on the terrace, awaiting scraps from the restaurant allowing very close views. After dinner, the last spotlighting session was a resounding success despite the fires with A Brazilian Tapir, foxes and racoons and yet another cat, a superbly marked Margay that could be seen partially hidden in vegetation close to the road. Although quite difficult initially its identity became apparent, the different head shape and face, large feet and tail as it attempted to climb up into the vines were quite different to that of an Ocelot. An excellent end to a very successful series of nocturnal sessions.

Day 16 Sun 9<sup>th</sup> August – Group 1 - After another open-air breakfast, a fairly leisurely morning was spent around the lodge itself. Most visited the boardwalk area, concentrating on birds and attempting to get better images of some of the local species and the surrounding area. We had lunch at the lodge before loading up the air conditioned coach for our journey back to Cuiaba and our flight back to Sao Paulo and onward to London.

Day 16 Sun 12<sup>th</sup> September – Group 2 - For the second tour, we had a pre-breakfast boat trip, well pre-dawn actually. We had heard from friends the previous night about some Agami Herons just up stream and were keen to go and have a look. This secretive heron is perhaps the ultimate in terms of looks but getting good views is traditionally quite

awkward. It didn't take long before we found two, one was as expected, difficult to see, creeping around a side stream the other proved to be a real performer, feeding out in the open and allowing a close approach. A stunning individual that certainly soaked up the volley of cameras clicking as it stalked about, a cracking experience. Further up river, we also connected with the now resident Giant Otters and enjoyed close views of individuals as they approached the boat or played on the riverbank. Pausing again to watch the Agami Heron feeding in the open, roosting Boat-billed Herons and a variety of kingfishers and a smart Iguana, we returned back to the lodge in time for breakfast. A fitting end to another fabulous visit to this remarkable region. After breakfast, we packed, said farewell to those that had helped us and boarded our coach for the journey back to the airport. Enjoying the wildlife spectacle as we journeyed north, we arrived in Cuiaba with plenty of time to catch our flight onto Sao Paulo and then London

Day 17 Mon 10<sup>h</sup> August and 13<sup>th</sup> Sept - Arrived Heathrow early PM

Full species list for both tours also available.

To see some of Mark's Jaguar and other photos, please visit [www.smandrews.com](http://www.smandrews.com)

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