## Birding Abroad Ltd – Brazil

## The Cerrado, the Pantanal, Cristalino and the Atlantic Forest

## 28 June to 22 July 2026

Brazil is home to the richest diversity of flora and fauna in South America, encompassing four of the world's most remarkable and contrasting ecosystems: the incomparable wetlands of the Pantanal, the vast Amazon Rainforest, the coastal Atlantic Forest and the tropical savannah of the Cerrado. Our itinerary was designed to sample each of these extraordinary biomes, with the Pantanal forming the centrepiece of the tour, complemented by shorter but equally rewarding visits to the others. For birdwatchers and mammal enthusiasts alike, this promised to be the trip of a lifetime, rounded off with a few days of sightseeing in the iconic city of Rio de Janeiro.

Joining Birding Abroad on this adventure were Rob and Helen Adams, Andrew Ashworth and Sarah Hird, Mark and Sue Cook, Pat Degnan, Ken and Carole Pearson, Gill Reid and Keith and Liz Reynolds. Leading the tour were Lance and Nick from Birding Abroad, supported throughout by an excellent team of experienced English-speaking Brazilian guides whose local knowledge would prove invaluable.

**Sunday 28 June:** Our journey began with a British Airways flight departing London Heathrow at 10.20 pm.

**Monday 29 June:** We landed in Sao Paulo at 6.00 am, where, after collecting our luggage, we transferred to the domestic terminal for a LATAM flight to Cuiabá in the state of Mato Grosso. With several hours to spare before our onward departure, we ventured outside the terminal doors for a stretch of the legs. Although little more than airport service roads with scattered trees and scrub, we were surprised to see two magnificent Toco Toucans, their enormous orange bills glowing in the morning sunshine as shown below.



The area provided our first taste of Brazilian birdlife. Saffron Finch, Rufous Hornero, Great Kiskadee, Cattle Tyrant, Chalk-browed Mockingbird, House Wren and Rufous-collared Sparrow were all identified; an excellent and enjoyable introduction to some of the country's familiar species. A dazzling Swallow-tailed Hummingbird became the first 'hummer' of the tour and a tantalising glimpse to what lay ahead.

Field guides and birding apps were already being thumbed through as we checked the local doves before confirming our first Eared Doves. Overhead, 10 American Black Vultures circled effortlessly on the warming air, while Southern Rough-winged and Blue-and-white Swallows swept back and forth above us. Two unexpected Roseate Spoonbills passed overhead as we returned to the terminal for breakfast.

Our domestic flight arrived in Cuiabá at around 12.30 pm, from where we transferred the short distance to the nearby Aeroporto Hotel. Check-in proved rather more bureaucratic and time-consuming than necessary, but eventually everyone was settled into their rooms. With the football World Cup in progress, we joined the locals for an entertaining afternoon watching the latest Brazil match over a few drinks, before thoughts inevitably turned back to birding.

By 4.00 pm the lure of new birdlife proved irresistible. In the very warm afternoon sunshine, we set off for a short walk on the edge of town, where patches of woodland and scrub offered some nice habitat. We were not due to meet our Brazilian guide until the following morning, so this gentle stroll allowed us to become familiar with the local species for ourselves. Our efforts produced a good selection of birds including eight Pale-vented Pigeon, half a dozen Picazuro Pigeon and two Picui Ground Dove. Six Southern Lapwings, a Snowy Egret and a Bare-faced Ibis fed around shallow sandy pools left by nearby construction work.



Southern Lapwing was encountered regularly in open countryside and pleasingly straightforward to identify given the close similarity to their Northern counterpart

Passerines were equally varied, with Tropical Kingbird, Rufous-bellied Thrush, Variable Oriole, Greyish Baywing, Bluish-grey Saltator and both Sayaca and Blue-grey Tanagers all adding interest to the afternoon. The undoubted highlight, however, came as eight spectacular Blue-and-yellow Macaws and five equally impressive Red-and-green Macaws flew overhead, their vivid plumage glowing in the late afternoon sunlight as they made their way towards evening roosts. Several noisy flocks of Yellow-chevroned Parakeets followed, providing a fitting finale to our first afternoon in Brazil.

Returning to the hotel at around 5.45 pm, we rounded the day off with a simple evening meal in the bar before, tired after nearly twenty-four hours of travelling, we finally called it a night. Our Brazilian adventure had scarcely begun, yet already it had offered enough excitement to leave everyone eagerly anticipating what the coming weeks would bring.

**Tuesday 30 June:** Breakfast was at 7.00 am and an hour later we met Guilherme, our guide for the next fortnight, together with our driver Ricardo. After the customary introductions, we loaded the luggage and set off north towards the Chapada dos Guimarães for a taste of Brazil's remarkable Cerrado region. A small group of 10 Fork-tailed Palm Swifts wheeled overhead as we departed the hotel.

Under normal circumstances the drive would have taken around two hours, but extensive roadworks with limits on vehicle size meant a lengthy diversion. Fortunately, the changing scenery more than compensated for the extra time on the road. Leaving the bustling city behind, the landscape gradually opened into a rolling mosaic of grassy savannah, scattered shrubs, woodland and cattle ranches. As we gained height onto the Brazilian Plateau, the scenery became increasingly dramatic, with striking red sandstone escarpments, weathered bluffs and rocky outcrops rising above the surrounding countryside. It was an evocative introduction to the Chapada dos Guimarães, hinting at the spectacular landscapes and wildlife that awaited us. We arrived at our accommodation, the delightful Pousada do Parque, at around 11.00 am and spent some time exploring its attractive grounds.



The lodge immediately proved to be bird rich. Feeders close to the terrace attracted around 25 Ruddy Ground Doves, together with a lively mix of Shiny Cowbirds and the ever-vocal Chopi Blackbirds. Drinking stations and fruit feeders were equally productive, drawing in two Black-faced Tanagers, eight White-lined Tanagers, two Blue Dacnis, two Buff-throated Saltators, four Pale-breasted Thrushes and a single Creamy-bellied Thrush. In the surrounding trees, two Boat-billed Flycatchers flitted between the branches while several brightly plumaged Yellow-tufted Woodpeckers and a lone Little Woodpecker searched the trunks for insects. Six Cobalt-rumped Parrotlets and several restless, Yellow-chevroned Parakeets added splashes of brilliant colour to a thoroughly enjoyable first morning in the Cerrado.

Lunch was served on the terrace at 2.00 pm before we set off on an afternoon excursion to the spectacular Bridal Veil Waterfall (Cachoeira Véu de Noiva), around 45 minutes from the lodge. A steep flight of steps led down to a viewing platform overlooking a vast sandstone gorge, where the waterfall plunged dramatically into a densely wooded valley far below. It was a truly magnificent setting and one of the scenic highlights of the Chapada dos Guimarães.



The gorge had plenty of bird activity. A party of five Curl-crested Jays crossed overhead, whilst three majestic King Vultures circled effortlessly on the thermals alongside ubiquitous American Black Vultures. The rocky ledges supported at least ten Cliff Flycatchers, and a pair of elegant Swallow Tanagers perched obligingly in full view.

Again, the undisputed stars of the afternoon, were the macaws. Throughout our visit, pairs or small parties regularly swept across the gorge, their brilliant plumage glowing radiantly against the red sandstone cliffs. Groups of up to 30 Blue-winged Macaws, ten Red-and-green

Macaws and two Southern Red-shouldered Macaws delighted us with a series of close flypasts. Watching these spectacular parrots crossing the dramatic landscape in the warm afternoon sunshine, was an unforgettable portrayal of one of Brazil's most iconic bird groups.



Blue-winged Macaws dazzle as they fly past

Although the visitor centre was closed, a short walk nearby produced two Channel-billed Toucans and a Social Flycatcher, before we returned to the lodge at 5.30pm.

After dinner we lingered on the terrace, enjoying the warm evening air as darkness settled over the surrounding Cerrado. A magnificent Scissor-tailed Nightjar repeatedly swept over the adjacent field, its remarkably long tail catching the lights from the lodge as it twisted and turned in pursuit of insects. Eventually we retired for the night with the repetitive song of a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl drifting through the darkness. It continued to call intermittently until the early hours, providing an evocative soundtrack to our first night in this remarkable landscape.

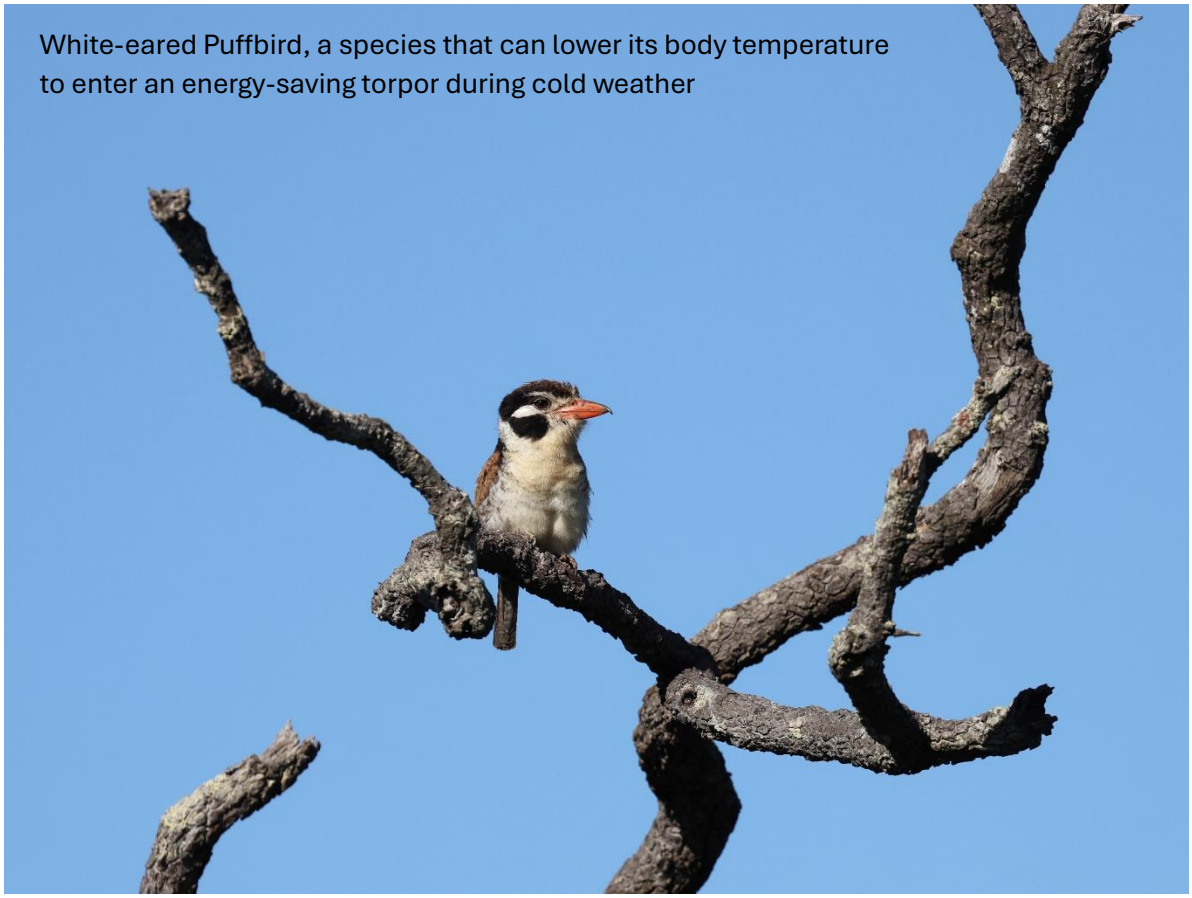
**Wednesday 1 July:** Dawn broke warm and clear with the far-carrying whistles of Undulated Tinamous echoing from surrounding scrub. After an early breakfast at 5.30 am we spent a few minutes around the lodge gardens where two Blue-headed Parrots were perched conspicuously in the treetops, accompanied by a Purplish Jay and a Buff-throated Woodcreeper which worked a nearby tree trunk.

It was an atmospheric start to a day devoted to exploring a variety of sites within a one-hour drive of the lodge, each supporting their own subtle variation of birds. Although often described simply as tropical savannah, the Cerrado is in reality a rich mosaic of open grassland, low thorny scrub, scattered twisted trees and pockets of taller gallery woodland following streams. This diversity of habitats supports a rich birdlife, and throughout the day we discovered that even short journeys between sites could produce an entirely different suite of species.

Our first stop, around 40 minutes from the lodge, saw us walking slowly along a dusty track winding through scrub and scattered bushes. Fence posts provided convenient lookout points for three Burrowing Owls, while small parties of Smooth-billed Ani, both familiar species from previous travels elsewhere in the Americas, fed nearby. Beyond these however, the bird list rapidly took on a distinctly unfamiliar flavour, and we increasingly relied on Guilherme's sharp eyes and encyclopaedic knowledge of both the birds and their calls.

Three Pale-breasted Spinetails were the first of several members of this uniquely Neotropical family that we would encounter during the tour; their long, graduated tails with stiffened feather shafts and warm rufous plumage making them unmistakable. Flycatchers were particularly well represented, with four Plain-crested Elaenias, a single Yellow-bellied Elaenia, together with six Chapada and a single Suiriri Flycatcher. A pair of Red-legged Seriema called loudly across the open scrub, though on this occasion, frustratingly they remained hidden from view.

Next up, a White-eared Puffbird, a ‘sit and wait hunter’, was sitting out prominently in the morning sun watching for any prey on the move.



White-eared Puffbird, a species that can lower its body temperature to enter an energy-saving torpor during cold weather

The colourful tanagers were equally impressive, with White-rumped, White-shouldered, White-banded and Black-faced all showing well, whilst Red-crested Finches and Plumbeous Seedeaters exploited the seed-rich grasslands. A handsome pair of Barred Antshrikes proved particularly popular and four Peach-fronted Parakeets settled obligingly.

A Collared Crescentchest repeatedly called from dense cover and briefly revealed itself, offering tantalising views of one of the Cerrado's most sought-after endemic birds. Above us, under an unbroken azure sky, a Yellow-headed Caracara and a White-tailed Hawk drifted effortlessly on the warming thermals.

A short drive brought us to a narrow ribbon of gallery woodland, a complete contrast to the more open country we had just explored. Following a dusty red-earth track beneath the trees, we immediately found another distinctive bird community. A Moustached Wren sang from dense undergrowth whilst four Great Dusky Swifts powered overhead. High in a fruiting tree, two Lettered Aracaris fed quietly, their colourful bills betraying a close relationship to the larger toucans. Woodpeckers were particularly well represented here, with sightings of a pair of White-wedged Piculets, together with Pale-crested and Lineated Woodpeckers. Two Flavescent Warblers and a single, White-bellied Warbler worked methodically through the middle storey. Although we repeatedly heard the calls of Saffron-billed Sparrows, they stubbornly refused to reveal themselves.

Returning to the lodge by 11.00 am, we enjoyed a welcome break in the shade and, with an England World Cup match being shown live, several of us relaxed over a drink before lunch. Even around the gardens the birding never stopped, with another pair of Barred Antshrikes and a beautiful Purple-throated Euphonia adding to the morning's tally.

Resuming at 2.45 pm, we scarcely had time to leave the lodge before a magnificent pair of Red-and-green Macaws flew into the fruiting bushes near our vehicle providing ridiculously close-range views, as shown in the image below.



Our afternoon destination was another woodland trail, where the cooler shade once again produced an entirely different collection of birds. A lawned area yielded a Masked Tityra and two Pale-breasted Thrushes, with three Eastern Black-tailed Tityras in the trees nearby. The extraordinary electronic calls of Thrush-like Wrens led us to a party of four birds. A pair of Amazonian Motmots sat motionless among the dappled branches, blending so well that they could easily be overlooked. A Tataupa Tinamou emerged briefly into a small clearing before

disappearing back into cover, whilst nearby two Black-fronted Nunbirds perched quietly. Both White-vented Violetear and Fork-tailed Woodnymph became welcome additions to our hummingbird list. A handsome Scaled Pigeon, one of surprisingly few seen during the tour, was another pleasing sighting.

The undoubted highlight of the afternoon came in the form of four superb male Band-tailed Manakins. Members of this fascinating family spend much of their lives deep within the dimly lit forest understorey, making them difficult to observe, so our clear views of these immaculate red and black males were especially satisfying.



As our walk drew to a close, Masked Gnatcatcher, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Chestnut-eared Aracari and Rusty-margined Flycatcher ensured the birding remained consistently rewarding right to the end.

Returning to the lodge at around 6.20 pm for another excellent evening meal, darkness settled once again over the Cerrado. Several Pauraques hawked effortlessly just a few metres from the restaurant terrace, bringing another memorable day to an enjoyable conclusion.

**Thursday 2 July:** Breakfast at 6.00 am was followed by a short walk to an observation tower overlooking the local hill slopes. A handsome Roadside Hawk kept watch as we followed a track through woodland margins where several Blue-headed Parrots and a pair of magnificent Toco Toucans glowed in the early morning sunshine, their oversized bills making them unmistakable against the treetops.

From the observation tower itself we enjoyed sweeping views across the Cerrado, its mosaic of habitats stretching away to distant sandstone escarpments. A pair of Channel-billed Toucans flew past at eye level, followed shortly afterwards by a Wood Stork crossing the valley. Scanning the forest canopy produced our first monkey of the tour, an Azara's Capuchin which moved deftly through the treetops, whilst down in the shaded understorey we

eventually found a pair of Large-billed Antwrens, secretive inhabitants of the dense vegetation.

Returning to the lodge, we packed our luggage ready for departure. Whilst we waited, some fortunate members of the group were rewarded with a magnificent Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle soaring above a distant gorge which disappeared below the forest canopy before most of the group could assemble. Around the gardens, a Black-throated Mango visited flowering shrubs, a final addition to our Cerrado bird list.



Our departure was then delayed when Ricardo discovered a mechanical problem with the bus. Fortunately, alternative transport was quickly arranged and, a little over an hour later, two minibuses arrived to continue our journey. Their smaller size proved an unexpected blessing, allowing us to pass through the roadworks that had delayed our outward journey and avoid the lengthy diversion, keeping us comfortably on schedule.

Back in Cuiabá we paused for lunch at a traditional Brazilian churrascaria, where an impressive selection of expertly grilled meats provided a memorable introduction to one of the country's culinary traditions.

By 1.45 pm we were once again on the road, this time heading south towards Poconé, the gateway town of the Pantanal. Gradually the landscape opened into vast cattle ranches, interspersed with sugar-cane fields and scattered wetlands. Before long, the tarmac road came to an end, giving way to the famous Transpantaneira, a 145-kilometre ribbon of red dirt and gravel stretching deep into one of the world's greatest wildlife havens. The Pantanal is the largest tropical wetland on Earth, a seasonal floodplain covering an area slightly larger than the whole of England. For the next eight days this extraordinary wilderness would be our home, with stays at three carefully chosen lodges allowing us to experience the diversity of habitats and wildlife for which the region is renowned.

We reached our first destination, Piuval Lodge, shortly before 4.00 pm and, after settling into our rooms, eagerly climbed aboard an open-sided safari truck for our first exploration of the surrounding floodplain. It took only moments to appreciate just how different this landscape was from the Cerrado we had left behind. Vast open grasslands, scattered palms, shimmering pools and broad marshes stretched away, creating a landscape that seemed purpose-built for wildlife.

A pair of Southern Screamers stood beside one of the first pools we encountered, their prehistoric appearance reflecting their status as an ancient offshoot of the waterfowl lineage. Nearby, groups of Capybaras, the world's largest rodents, grazed quietly across the floodplain, whilst our first towering Jabirus patrolled the wetlands, their immense size making them visible from great distances. Small flocks of Buff-necked Ibis and the statelier Cocoi Herons fed in the shallows, with dashing Wattled Jacanas delicately picking their way across floating vegetation. Perhaps disturbed by some unknown predator, groups of Nacunda Nighthawk rose regularly from their daytime roosting sites around the edges of the main lake. Totalling more than 100 individuals, it felt quite strange to witness so many nighthawks together in the air, during daytime.



Beyond the marshes, 15 Great Rhea strode purposefully across the drier grasslands, accompanied by a party of four Guira Cuckoos. Every stop seemed to reveal something new. The brilliant blue plumage of a pair of Hyacinth Macaw made an unforgettable first impression as they flew across a nearby clearing, whilst Chestnut-bellied Guans, White-throated Piping-Guans and Chaco Chachalacas, curious turkey-like relatives, proved surprisingly common along the tracks. Raptors also featured prominently, with excellent views of both Aplomado Falcon and Savannah Hawk obtained.

As the afternoon slowly gave way to evening, our attention shifted from birds to mammals. Three elegant Pampas Deer grazed quietly in a secluded clearing, and then, as dusk

deepened, came one of the highlights of the day. A Giant Anteater emerged into a grassy field dotted with termite mounds and ambled slowly across the open ground. Although our views were all too brief before it melted back into the vegetation, there was no mistaking the excitement of seeing one of the Pantanal's most iconic mammals on our very first evening.

Darkness was falling by the time we returned to the lodge. With local knowledge, our driver diverted to the roosting site of a Great Potoo which we found sitting typically upright on a broken tree trunk, ready to commence its evening activities. Several Pauraques were hawking around the vehicle headlights as we made our way back, a couple settling for views on the ground. A hearty evening meal provided the perfect end to an outstanding day, one that had taken us from the rugged landscapes of the Cerrado to the wildlife-rich wetlands of the Pantanal, where the real adventure was only just beginning.

**Friday 3 July:** As we gathered for breakfast at 6.30 am it was surprisingly cool, with low cloud and even a slight mist in the air. The subdued conditions gave the wetlands an altogether different atmosphere, the marshes and scattered trees emerging slowly from the mist as the day came to life.

Birding before breakfast was rewarding. Red-crested and Yellow-billed Cardinals flitted around the lodge gardens, five Crested Oropendolas were busy around their hanging nests, and two remarkably confiding Red-legged Seriema stalked the lawns with slow, deliberate strides, seemingly oblivious to our presence.



About an hour later we climbed aboard our open-sided safari truck and headed out across the surrounding floodplain. Our route initially skirted the margins of the large lake, where several White-rumped Monjita perched conspicuously on low stems, recalling our more familiar wheatears in both posture and habit. Small pockets of dense vegetation concealed a group of four Brazilian Guineapigs, which watched us cautiously before vanishing back into cover as we approached.

Today's route explored different tracks through a mosaic of marsh, woodland and seasonally flooded grassland. In woodland bordering the marshes we found an excellent selection of woodcreepers, including Great Rufous, Straight-billed and Narrow-billed, together with small parties of Turquoise-fronted Amazons moving noisily through the canopy. Two Grey Brocket Deer fed quietly beneath the trees, whilst an Azara's Agouti dashed across the track before disappearing into the undergrowth. A handsome Laughing Falcon perched obligingly, allowing prolonged views before we stopped to explore on foot. During our walk Guilherme introduced us to the fascinating ecology of the remarkable strangler figs, whose roots gradually envelop their host trees over many decades before eventually replacing them altogether.

An observation tower provided magnificent views across the forest canopy and surrounding wetlands. From this lofty vantage point, we notice several Bare-faced Curassows moving through the treetops plus a beautiful pair of Blue-crowned Trogons, a Pale-crested Woodpecker, and the pair of Orange-winged Amazons captured below.



Back on the track another memorable mammal encounter awaited us. A small animal appeared in the distance and, rather than retreating, walked steadily towards us, eventually revealing itself as a remarkably confiding Crab-eating Fox. Brief appearances by two Collared Peccary added to an already excellent morning. Nearby, two brilliantly coloured Orange-backed Troupials shared the branches with a Variable Oriole. Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Short-crested Flycatcher, Chotoy Spinetail and Rufous Casiornis all added to an increasingly impressive list, while another superb Great Potoo, shown overleaf, was found resting quietly, but this time in broad daylight!



As we returned nearer to the lodge, the open pastures around the main lake held three strikingly coloured Campo Flickers, about 15 Giant Cowbirds and three Yellowish Pipits. During our lunch break, several members of the group also managed to find a South American Snipe feeding unobtrusively along the muddy margins of the lake. A few each of both Collared and Pied Plovers occupied the same habitat zone. It was perhaps the sight of approximately 200 Nacunda Nighthawks flying above the main marsh that was the most impressive sighting of the day. Of reptilian interest, Yacare Caiman sat motionless on the banks of the narrow waterways around the lodge.



We set out again at 3.30 pm, once more exploring the extensive network of tracks in the open-sided trucks. A small dyke produced an Amazon Kingfisher and two Green Ibis before we turned back into woodland. A magnificent Crimson-crested Woodpecker showed particularly well, while our first Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures drifted overhead on the afternoon thermals. Common Vermilion Flycatchers seemed to accompany us throughout the drive, frequently perching on roadside fences alongside Tropical Kingbirds, whilst a pair of Grassland Sparrows provided another welcome addition to the day's tally.

As evening approached, the quality of the light softened, and our attention once again turned towards the mammals that become increasingly active at dusk. Although the larger predators remained elusive, we enjoyed further views of a Crab-eating Fox (as shown in the photograph below), rounding the day off with a Common Tapeti, or Brazilian Rabbit, feeding quietly beside the track. Returning to the lodge as darkness settled over the floodplain, we reflected on another rewarding day in the Pantanal, where every drive seemed to reveal a fascinating new combination of birds, mammals and landscape.



**Saturday 4 July:** Another surprisingly cool morning with grey skies greeted the group as we gathered for breakfast at 6.30 am. An hour later we were once again aboard our open-topped trucks setting off along a different network of tracks in search of more wildlife.

Our first stop was a small marsh where a Grey-cowled Wood-rail crept cautiously along the water's edge before melting back into the vegetation. Beyond the marsh, the track entered a belt of woodland, where we were immediately confronted with one of the big challenges of Neotropical birding - the extraordinary diversity of flycatchers. Brown-crested Flycatcher, Plain Tyrannulet, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Fuscous Flycatcher, Snethlage's Tody-tyrant and Pearly-vented Tody-flycatcher all appeared within a relatively short time. Distinguishing them was no easy task, and once again Guilherme's knowledge of calls, plumage and subtle identification features proved invaluable.

A confiding Chestnut-vented Conebill lingered long enough for everyone to enjoy excellent views, but perhaps the greatest surprise came in the form of a pair of Mato Grosso Antbirds. With so many pages of the field guide devoted to an apparently endless succession of antbirds, antwrens, antshrikes and other ‘ant-things’, it would have been easy to dismiss them as rather uninspiring. Seeing these beautifully marked birds at close quarters quickly dispelled that misconception and left us with a warm appreciation of one of South America's most characteristic bird families.

The woodland trail crossed several rustic wooden bridges spanning narrow channels, where we encountered our first Sunbittern. Its intricate patterning and elegant appearance fully lived up to expectations, and by the end of the day we had enjoyed sightings of three more individuals.



The first of three Whistling Herons was also here, motionless in some shallowly submerged vegetation, with a few Plumbeous Ibis close by. Nearby marshy vegetation held a stunning Scarlet-headed Blackbird together with five Unicoloured Blackbirds, while Solitary and Yellow-rumped Caciques moved noisily through the trees and several Yellow-chinned Spinetails skulked in dense waterside cover. Watching over the activity from an exposed perch was a handsome Crane Hawk.

Eventually the woodland gave way to an expansive marsh, opening dramatic views across the floodplain. Here we found a Jabiru nest, while Rufescent Tiger-heron, Ringed Kingfisher, Anhinga and Large-billed Tern all became additions to the tour list. An unexpected bonus came in the form of around 40 Lesser Fishing Bats roosting together in riverside trees, an impressive colony and a reminder that the Pantanal's wildlife extends far beyond its celebrated birds.

We returned to Piuval Lodge shortly before midday for a well-earned break. Most of us, however, found it impossible to ignore the birds around the lodge and nearby lake, where there was always something to watch.

Setting out together again at 3.30 pm, we spent our final afternoon further exploring the varied habitats surrounding Piuval. As on previous days, every change of habitat seemed to produce

another rewarding sighting. Bat Falcon and Eastern Olivaceous Woodcreeper added some early quality, but it was the Hyacinth Macaws which stole the show with superbly close views.



Mammals continued to impress just as much as the birds. Azara's Capuchins moved through the woodland canopy, two Crab-eating Foxes showed well, an Azara's Agouti crossed one of the tracks, and the afternoon concluded with excellent views of a South American Tapir, one of the Pantanal's most iconic inhabitants.



By evening the cloud had finally broken, and the setting sun cast a rich golden glow across the floodplain, illuminating the treetops and marshes in warm light. It was a wonderfully peaceful end to our stay at Piuval Lodge, and a fine conclusion to two memorable days exploring this wildlife-rich northern corner of the Pantanal.

**Sunday 5 July:** After breakfast we continued south along the famous Transpantaneira, pausing for a group photograph beside the well-known wooden road sign. As we travelled farther south the landscape became noticeably wetter. Broad marshes and more roadside pools spread away on either side of the road and, although it was the dry season, the remaining water acted like a magnet for wildlife. Every few kilometres another promising wetland appeared, each worthy of investigation. A graceful Roseate Spoonbill fed quietly in one roadside pool, but it was the next extensive marsh that brought us to a more prolonged halt. The air was filled with the calls of White-faced and Black-bellied Whistling-ducks as flocks wheeled overhead before dropping back onto the flooded grasslands. Among the marsh vegetation, Black-backed Water-tyrants and White-headed Marsh-tyrants flitted between exposed perches, while a pair of elusive Greater Thornbird remained hidden until one eventually climbed into view. A single Rusty-collared Seedeater was the only individual we encountered during the entire tour.

The waterways were equally productive. Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers patrolled the channels, their distinctly different sizes making identification surprisingly straightforward when seen together.



A Ringed Kingfisher emerges from a successful dive

Herons were becoming an increasingly familiar feature, and today we added both Green-backed and Little Blue Herons to the tour list, alongside ever-growing numbers of Great Egrets and Limpkins. Although often mistaken for a heron, the Limpkin belongs to its own unique family, more closely related to cranes and rails, and is highly specialised for feeding on freshwater ‘apple snails’. Several Snail Kites circled overhead, searching the wetlands for

this very same prey (of which there are several species here), all of which act as the primary engines of nutrient cycling and are one of the key foundations of the food web in the Pantanal.

A small copse surrounding a remote farmhouse offered welcome shade and another change of habitat. Here a Rusty-fronted Tody-flycatcher made repeated sallies from low branches, while flocks of Grey-breasted Martins hawked effortlessly overhead. Two Great Black Hawks and regular Roadside and Savanna Hawks en-route completed another productive morning along the Transpantaneira.



Savannah Hawk – their long legs help them walk easily through tall grass

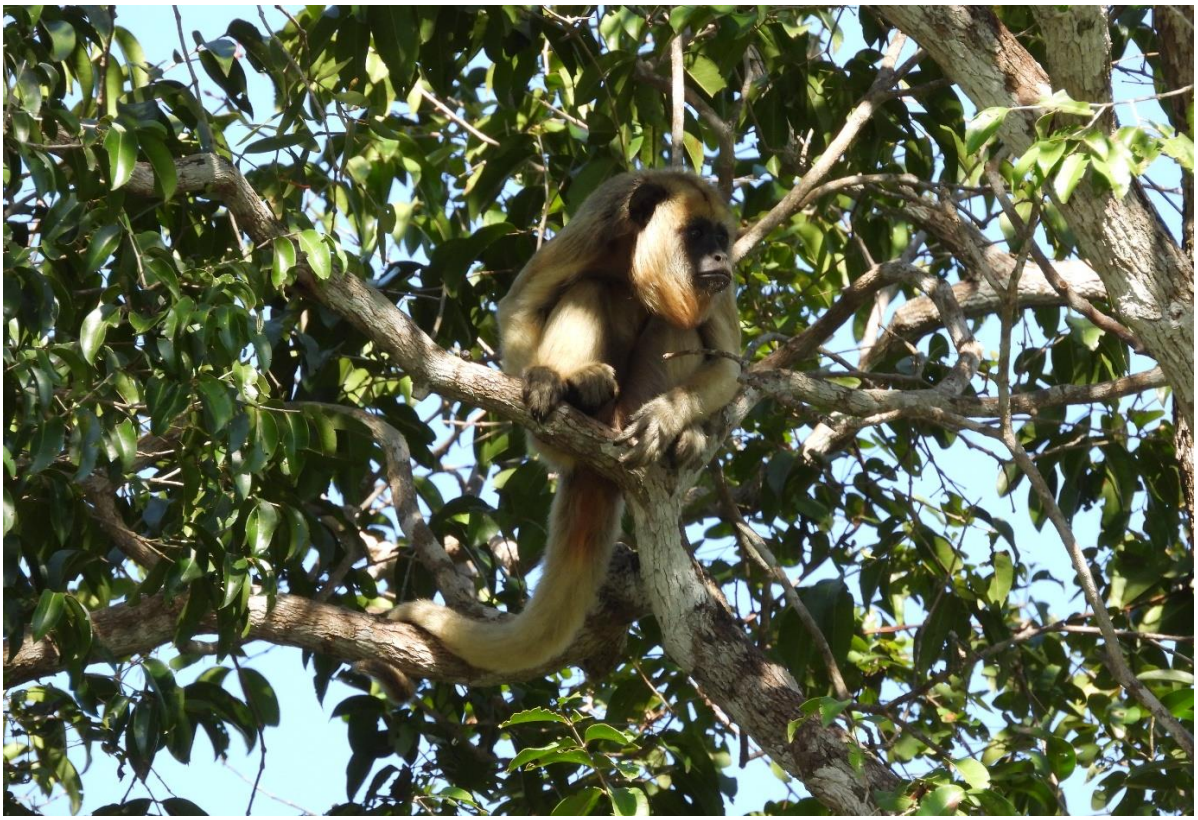
We reached SouthWild Lodge at around 11.30 am and, after settling into our rooms, enjoyed lunch before setting out again at 1.30 pm. This afternoon's excursion offered a completely different perspective as we transferred to two small boats to explore the maze of channels winding through the wetlands. Experiencing the Pantanal from water level revealed a quieter, more intimate side of the floodplain. Yacaré Caiman basked on muddy banks or slipped silently beneath the surface as we drifted past. White-winged Swallows perched on overhanging branches, Rufous-tailed Jacamars darted from the shadows after passing insects and Grey-cowled Wood-rails crept cautiously along the riverside margins. Many of the familiar herons and kingfishers appeared once again but seeing them at such close quarters from the boats made for a completely different experience. As always, there were new birds to be discovered. A pair of Lesser Kiskadee and a Pale-legged Hornero provided useful comparisons with their more widespread relatives, whilst a glittering Gilded Sapphire was added to the hummingbird list.

Returning to the lodge at around 4.00 pm, we soon made our way to a specially constructed viewing hide hidden within the woodland. Local guides had established a discreet feeding station here, and the site had earned an enviable reputation for regular visits by Ocelots.

Settling into the hide, we waited in near silence as daylight slowly faded and anticipation steadily grew. On this occasion the elusive cat chose not to appear. Instead, two Crab-eating Foxes emerged to investigate the clearing, providing an enjoyable consolation prize. As darkness gathered, the raucous calls of Turquoise-fronted Amazons echoed through the forest as they returned to their evening roosts, accompanied by the distinctive voices of Chaco Chachalacas. It was a wonderfully atmospheric end to another rewarding day, and during the night the haunting call of a Common Potoo drifted through the darkness around the lodge.

**Monday 6 July:** After breakfast we departed at 6.30 am on another boat excursion, this time along the Rio Claro, around 40 minutes' drive from SouthWild Lodge. Even before reaching the river, the morning provided its share of excitement. A Southern Tamandua, or Lesser Anteater, suddenly crossed the road ahead of us. Unfortunately, only those seated towards the front of the vehicle managed to secure good views before it disappeared into dense vegetation. Despite a brief search, the elusive animal could not be relocated, a reminder that even in the Pantanal the most eagerly anticipated wildlife encounters can be wonderfully unpredictable. A little farther on we enjoyed better fortune when a 'squadron' of around 20 Collared Peccary emerged from the roadside scrub. One after another they trotted across the track in single file or twos before vanishing into the undergrowth, allowing everyone excellent views of these engaging mammals.

Reaching the jetty, we boarded two small boats beneath a swirling flock of around 20 Black-headed (Nanday) Parakeets, whose noisy calls echoed across the river. Today's channel was noticeably broader and deeper than those explored the previous afternoon, offering a slightly different perspective on the Pantanal's waterways. As we drifted quietly downstream, familiar kingfishers and herons lined the banks, while several Black-collared Hawks surveyed the river from exposed branches. High in the riverside trees, movement among the foliage revealed a troop of ten Black and Gold Howler.



The striking black coats of the mature male monkeys contrasted beautifully with the rich golden fur of the females and young. Largely folivorous (leaf eaters), they seemed entirely unconcerned by our presence and, despite their formidable reputation, remained silent throughout our visit, never uttering the deep resonant calls for which they are famous. On the reptile front, two quite stunning Green Iguana were spotted basking in the overhanging branches.

Birds continued to appear at every bend in the river. Our only Grey-headed Tanagers of the tour fed quietly in the canopy, whilst a Rusty-backed Spinetail worked through floating vegetation beside the channel. Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Plain Tyrannulet, Short-crested Flycatcher, Lesser Kiskadee and Pale-legged Hornero all re-appeared to ensure an excellent morning's birding.

As we approached the jetty on our return, a Neotropical Otter surfaced briefly before disappearing almost as quickly as it had appeared. Only a lucky few managed to catch sight of it before it slipped away, another fleeting but memorable reminder that wildlife will reveal itself only on its own terms.

Back at Pousada Rio Claro, a welcome coffee and ice cream was enjoyed before we returned to SouthWild for lunch and a welcome rest during the warmest part of the afternoon.

We resumed at 3.30 pm with a leisurely walk around the trails close to the lodge. Greater Thornbird and an Aplomado Falcon were among the more notable birds seen, whilst lively flocks of Monk, White-eyed and Peach-fronted Parakeets kept us entertained as they wheeled noisily overhead.



Peach-fronted Parakeet. It was a challenge but also a joy to see so many different Psittacidae on the tour, an iconic family of the Brazilian countryside

Several members of the group climbed a spiral observation tower to enjoy eye-level views of a pair of nesting Jabiru, an unforgettable eye to eye perspective on the tallest flying bird in the Americas.



Around the lodge flowering shrubs attracted both Glittering-throated Emerald and Cinnamon-throated Hermit, while a pair of Scaly-headed Parrots dropped in to feed. As evening approached, we made a second visit to the woodland hide in the hope that the elusive Ocelot might finally appear. Once again, we settled into silence as dusk gradually enveloped the forest, listening to the calls of a Tropical Screech-owl and the increasingly distant clamour of parrots making their way to communal roosts. Despite our patience, the Ocelot remained hidden for a second successive evening, although another confiding Crab-eating Fox

emerged to investigate the feeding area. By the time we headed back to the lodge by torchlight, the forest had fallen almost silent. Although the Ocelot had once again eluded us, the day provided another rich mixture of memorable birds, fascinating mammals and those tantalising glimpses of wildlife that make every day in the Pantanal feel like a new adventure.

**Tuesday 7 July:** Once again, the morning dawned surprisingly cool beneath grey skies as we bade farewell to SouthWild Lodge to continue our journey. Even before reaching the Transpantaneira, wildlife made itself known. A magnificent Marsh Deer grazed quietly beside the track, while two Whistling Herons stood motionless in a roadside ditch. Almost every pause beside a patch of woodland seemed to reveal another new bird, this morning including a drumming Lineated Woodpecker and a Great Rufous Woodcreeper working methodically up a nearby tree trunk.

As we travelled south, we continued our now familiar routine of stopping wherever the habitat looked especially inviting. The first marsh produced three elegant Capped Herons, whilst we caught up with a White-lored Spinetail at last, a species we had heard on several previous occasions but never managed to see.

With every kilometre the wetlands became more extensive and birdlife correspondingly richer. Snail Kites appeared in increasing numbers above the marshes, while Green-backed Herons were noted as especially numerous, with seven counted at one productive stop alone. In another stretch of riverside vegetation, a dazzling Scarlet-headed Blackbird glowed against the reeds, whilst a pair of Donacobius gave excellent views. This distinctive species, the sole representative of its family, is renowned for its cooperative breeding behaviour, with older offspring remaining to help their parents raise subsequent broods.



The famous wooden bridges of the Transpantaneira offered perfect vantage points from which to scan the marshes below. From one bridge we located both a Purple Gallinule and a well-hidden Boat-billed Heron, while two wary Muscovy Ducks reminded us just how different truly wild birds appear compared with their familiar domesticated relatives.

As we penetrated farther into the heart of the Pantanal, the sheer abundance of wildlife became ever more striking. One rewarding stop produced around 100 Limpkins, 30 Maguari Storks, 20 Jabirus and another 30 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks, all feeding within a relatively small area of marsh. Raptors were constantly overhead, including 15 Crested Caracaras, eight each of Savannah and Roadside Hawks, together with two White-tailed Hawks. The surrounding scrub held Common Tody-flycatcher, whilst two scarce Cinereous-breasted Spinetails provided a particularly satisfying find.

We reached Hotel Pantanal Norte at Porto Jofre around 12.30 pm, where our comfortable rooms overlooked the broad Cuiabá River. Lunch was taken with a dozen Hyacinth Macaws sitting in the surrounding trees, a suitably spectacular backdrop before the afternoon's eagerly anticipated boat excursion into the heart of Jaguar country.

Porto Jofre is an isolated outpost at the southern end of the Transpantaneira and enjoys legendary status amongst wildlife enthusiasts. During the dry season, falling water levels concentrate fish, caiman and other prey into shrinking waterways, creating the finest place in the world to observe the magnificent Jaguar in its natural habitat. This abundance of food even allows these normally solitary cats to tolerate one another far more readily than elsewhere within their range.

At 2.30 pm we climbed aboard two motorboats and headed out along the Cuiabá River. On the wider channels our skilful boatman covered distance quickly before slowing to a controlled drift whenever promising stretches of shoreline or quiet backwaters demanded closer inspection. Every overhanging branch and muddy bank was scrutinised, the anticipation growing steadily with each passing bend. Our first memorable encounter came not with a cat, but with a family of five Giant River Otters. Expertly spotted by our boatman, the animals appeared completely at ease as they played together along the bank, diving repeatedly beneath the surface before emerging with fish or chasing one another through the vegetation. Watching these charismatic mammals at such close range was a wonderful experience in itself.



A variety of herons and kingfishers remained familiar companions along the riverbanks and a singing Buff-breasted Wren and a pair of Great Antshrikes added further interest. Yet, however enjoyable the birding was, everyone's thoughts inevitably kept returning to one possibility.

The network of boatmen searching the rivers maintain constant radio contact, sharing news of significant sightings. Suddenly a call came through. Our boat swung smartly around, and we accelerated into another channel before gently drawing alongside several other vessels, their occupants all focused intently on the riverbank. There, resting quietly on the muddy shoreline sat a Jaguar. An adult female, she appeared completely relaxed, glancing occasionally towards the assembled boats with little more than passing curiosity. For several magical minutes we simply watched in silence, captivated by the power and beauty of South America's largest cat. Her magnificent rosette-patterned coat glowed softly in the afternoon light as she surveyed her surroundings, oblivious to the excitement she had created. Perhaps she had already fed, for after resting she quietly rose walking gracefully along the bank before disappearing silently into the forest. If there had been one overriding ambition for the tour, it was to see a wild Jaguar. Thanks to the skill of our guides and boatman, and a little good fortune, that dream had already become reality.



As we made our way back towards Porto Jofre, dusk settled over the river. More than 100 Band-tailed Nightjars hawked tirelessly above the water, while the evening delivered one final spectacle. Hundreds upon hundreds of Snail Kites, perhaps 750 or more, streamed overhead towards their communal riverside roosts, filling the sky in one of the most remarkable avian gatherings of the entire tour.

It was a breathtaking finale to an unforgettable day. Over dinner that evening there was, unsurprisingly, only one topic of conversation - the magnificent Jaguar that had so willingly shared a few precious moments of its world with us.

**Wednesday 8 July:** After the excitement and sense of fulfilment that accompanied our first Jaguar sighting, today was dedicated to simply immersing ourselves in as much of the Pantanal's extraordinary atmosphere as possible. With boat excursions planned for both morning and afternoon, there would be ample opportunity to savour one of the world's great wildlife spectacles at a more relaxed pace.

Following breakfast, we boarded our launch at 7.00 am and set off once again along the Cuiabá River and into the maze of channels that thread their way into the wilderness. There was no urgency today. Instead, we allowed the river to reveal its treasures at its own pace, drifting quietly beneath overhanging trees and around reed-fringed bends where wildlife waited around almost every corner. We found ourselves appreciating views of many of the birds that had become familiar companions over the previous few days. Everyone had their own favourites. For some it was the elegant Rufescent Tiger-herons stalking the shallows or perhaps checking the differences between Boat-billed Heron and Black-crowned Night Heron; for others it was the glowing pink Roseate Spoonbills, whilst the succession of Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers continued to delight. Raptors were never far away, with superb close views of Great Black Hawk, Black-collared Hawk and Crane Hawk. Large-billed Terns patrolled the wider channels and Black-backed Water-tyrants the reed margins, whilst the ever-present Donacobius added constant movement and song.

Once again, the stars of the day were the Jaguars. Remarkably, we enjoyed prolonged views of three different individuals during the morning alone. One had attracted a flotilla of wildlife boats as it crouched silently on a fallen tree overhanging the water, apparently watching an unsuspecting Yacaré Caiman below. Whether it was genuinely contemplating an attack or merely resting was impossible to know, but eventually it abandoned the idea, rose with effortless grace and disappeared into the riverside vegetation.



A second individual provided an altogether different spectacle. It emerged briefly from dense cover before slipping almost silently into the river. Swimming with remarkable confidence, only its powerful head and shoulders remained visible above the water as it crossed more than fifty metres of channel before climbing effortlessly back onto the bank.

Seeing a Jaguar in the wild is an experience that is difficult to describe adequately. Stockier and more heavily built than a Leopard, they are every bit as graceful, combining muscular power with extraordinary agility. Their broad head, deep chest and massively built shoulders hint at immense strength, while the beautifully patterned rosette-marked coat provides surprisingly effective camouflage amongst riverbank shadows and tangled vegetation. The undisputed apex predator of these waterways, there is an unmistakable air of calm self-assurance about a Jaguar. They never appear hurried or wasteful in movements, each deliberate step conveying quiet confidence and complete mastery of its surroundings. Watching such an animal at close quarters, entirely wild and perfectly at home in its own domain, was both a privilege and one of the defining experiences of the tour.

Other mammals also ensured the morning remained memorable. Eight tiny Proboscis Bats roosted together in a neat row beneath a slender stick projecting over the water, their bizarre, elongated noses immediately drawing attention. Three Black and Gold Howler monkeys fed quietly in the riverside canopy, while our only Brazilian Porcupine of the tour was discovered resting high in a tree. Its pale yellowish spines were clearly visible, serving as an effective defence against potential predators. Capybaras remained a familiar feature of the riverbanks, with well over 60 individuals recorded during the course of the day.



Our afternoon excursion proved every bit as rewarding. Astonishingly, we encountered a further three different Jaguars. It would have been easy to imagine that repeated sightings might somehow lessen the excitement, yet quite the opposite proved true. Each encounter revealed a different aspect of the animal's behaviour and character, and every sighting deepened our admiration for this magnificent predator and strengthened our appreciation of

just how exceptional the Pantanal is as a refuge for one of the world's most charismatic mammals.

As on previous evenings, our return journey unfolded beneath a sky alive with over 70 Band-tailed Nightjars hawking above the river. Ahead of us, hundreds of Snail Kites gathered from every direction before settling into their communal riverside roosts. Against the rich orange glow of the setting sun, their dark silhouettes gradually melted into the gathering dusk, providing another unforgettable conclusion to the day.

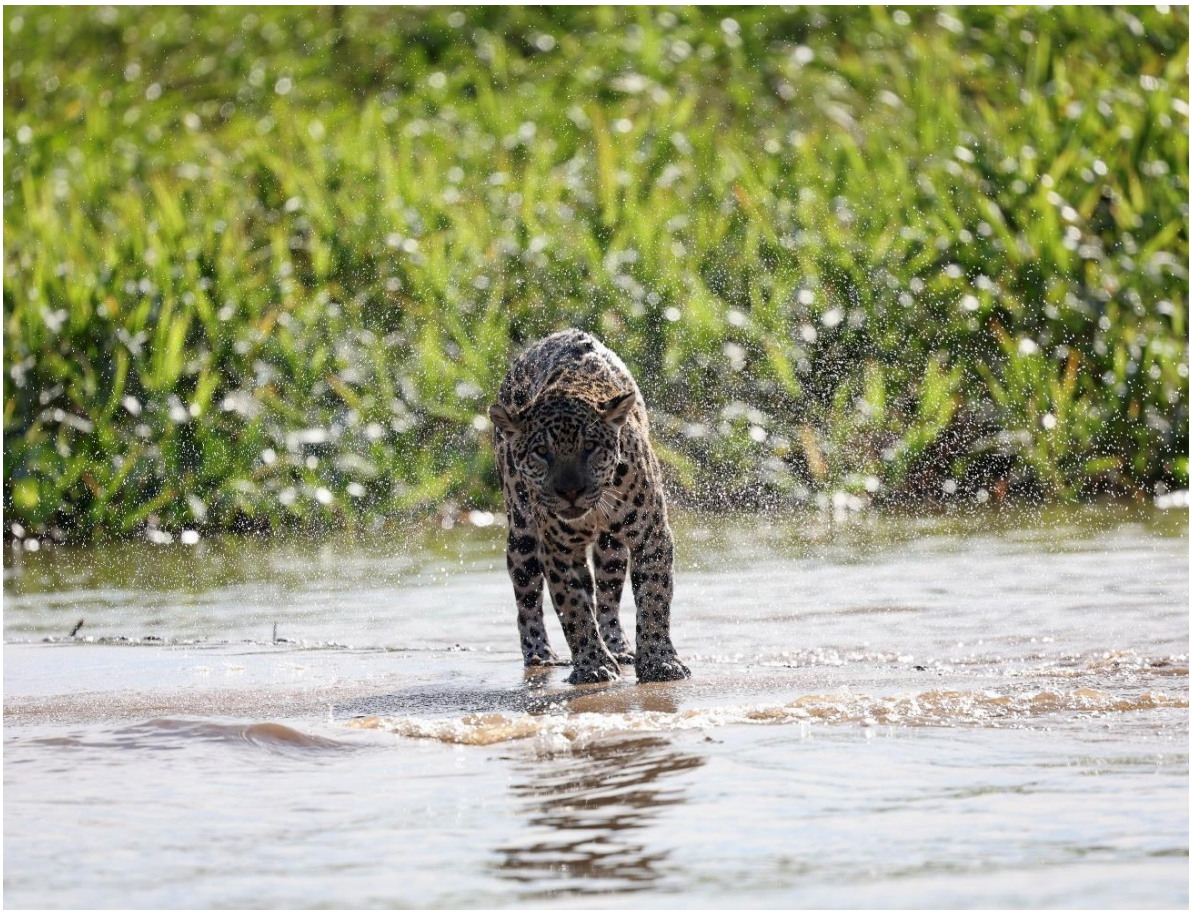
**Thursday 9 July:** This was our final morning at Porto Jofre and our last opportunity to explore the Pantanal. After the excitement of our first Jaguar encounters and yesterday's more leisurely immersion into this extraordinary wilderness, today's boat excursion gave a chance to simply savour the landscape one final time and appreciate just how wonderful this great wetland really is.

Following breakfast, we set off once more along the Cuiabá River before venturing into a different network of channels, as far as 35 kilometres away at one stage. Under bright blue skies, with a cool river mist still lingering above the water, our boatman opened the throttle, and we sped effortlessly across the river to explore quieter backwaters. As the bends slipped by, it became increasingly apparent just how little of this wilderness we had actually seen. Beyond every turn lay another river, another lagoon or another endless expanse of marsh stretching away towards the horizon.



There was time to enjoy some of the lesser moments that make wildlife watching so rewarding. We paused to watch an Anhinga wrestling with an improbably large fish that it had skilfully speared, repeatedly attempting to manoeuvre its prey into a position where it could be swallowed. On this occasion, however, the meal appeared to be rather more ambitious than the bird had anticipated.

Before long, another unforgettable Jaguar encounter unfolded. A female walked quietly along a bank before slipping gracefully into the water and swimming to an exposed sandbar where she gave herself a vigorous shake, droplets scattering in the afternoon light. Our boatman expertly held position against the current, allowing us prolonged views as we again watched South America's apex predator in its natural domain. Even after so many remarkable encounters during the previous two days, the thrill remained undiminished.



The exposed sandbank supported its own rich birdlife. Around 50 Black Skimmers rested alongside eight Large-billed Terns, four Yellow-billed Terns and small numbers of both Collared and Piping Plovers. Above the marshes a dark-phase Short-tailed Hawk circled, providing an excellent opportunity to compare it with the ever-present, Black-collared Hawks, Snail Kites and Great Black Hawks. A Bat Falcon perched prominently atop a dead tree, while a flock of ten Maguari Storks drifted effortlessly overhead on rising thermals, bringing to mind our own White Storks back in Europe.

The farther we travelled, the more obvious it became that these waterways represented only a tiny fraction of the Pantanal. Much of this immense floodplain remains inaccessible except by specialised expeditions, leaving vast tracts of marsh exactly as nature intended. It was a humbling thought that, despite all we had witnessed during the past week, we had experienced only a small glimpse of the world's greatest wetland ecosystem.

The morning however, had another surprise in store. Our boatman eased quietly towards a tangle of dead branches overhanging the water and began searching intently amongst them. Curious glances from the group soon turned into broad smiles as he pointed out a basking Yellow Anaconda. Although only around two metres in length, with many years of growth still ahead of it, it was nonetheless another memorable sighting in an already remarkable week.

Before returning to the lodge, we enjoyed two further Jaguars, bringing our total to a dozen sightings of at least eight different individuals during our stay at Porto Jofre. It was an astonishing tally, each encounter as exciting and memorable as the first.

After lunch we reluctantly began the six-hour journey, with occasional stops, north along the Transpantaneira towards Cuiabá. Although the focus had now shifted towards the next stage of our adventure, the journey still had wildlife to offer. Two elegant Marsh Deer grazed quietly beside the marshes, whilst seven South American Coatis scampered across the track.

The Pantanal had exceeded every expectation. More than simply a place to see Jaguars, it had revealed itself as one of the world's richest wildlife landscapes, a place where birds, mammals, reptiles and wetlands combine on a breathtaking scale. Above all, it is a wilderness that still belongs to nature, and we left feeling privileged to have shared one of Earth's truly great natural spectacles.

That evening, after another excellent Brazilian barbecue, we returned to the Aeroporto Hotel in Cuiabá in readiness for our flight north to Amazonia the following morning.



**Friday 10 July:** After the excitement of the past week, today was largely devoted to travelling as we set our sights on the Amazon Rainforest. Breakfast was a leisurely affair at 8.00 am before we returned to Cuiabá Airport for our flight north.

Unfortunately, Azul airline schedules meant there was no direct connection to Alta Floresta today, so our flight was to Sinop which then necessitated a five-hour road journey after landing. It was one of the few logistical frustrations of the tour, but travel in South America often demands a degree of flexibility and, with Cristalino Lodge awaiting us, the extra journey seemed a small price to pay.

On arrival at Sinop we were met by lodge staff who transferred the group into two minibuses for the drive north. At first the landscape was dominated by extensive maize and cotton fields,

where three Great Rhea and five Burrrowing Owls were seen from the vehicles, and a minimum of 40 Crested Caracara counted. Gradually the character of the countryside began to change. Forest remnants became more frequent before merging into tracts of Amazonian woodland as we approached Alta Floresta. Anticipation grew steadily as we realised we were entering an ecosystem unlike any we had previously experienced on the tour. Ten dazzling Blue-and-yellow Macaws swept overhead, their brilliant plumage providing a colourful welcome to the region.

By dusk we approached the embarkation point along a sandy track where four Boat-billed Herons were noted and our vehicle headlights revealed five Blackish Nightjars and a single Pauraque. Our luggage was loaded into small motorboats for the final stage of the journey as we then sped across the pale waters of the broad Teles Pires River before turning into the darker, tannin-stained waters of the Cristalino River and by torch light edged into the lodge moorings at 6.30pm. We received a warm welcome from the staff before settling into our comfortable rooms and enjoying an excellent evening meal. The long day's travel had been well worthwhile. We were now in one of the planet's most celebrated natural environments and settled into what is widely regarded as one of the finest wildlife lodges in the Amazon Basin, ready to begin exploration early in the morning.

**Saturday 11 July:** The rainforest stretched without apparent end, its immense canopy forming a living green roof which filtered tropical sunlight into a mosaic of light and dark shadows below. Towering emergent trees rose proudly above a dense middle canopy including tangled vines, both these shading a richly vegetated understorey. Rivers were bordered with riparian habitats and seasonally flooded forests, where overhanging branches and quiet backwaters created a complex world teeming with specialised wildlife. Our programme over the coming days was centred on exploring each of these habitats in turn, whether by boat, on foot along forest trails or from the lodge's impressive canopy observation tower.

This morning breakfast was at 5.00 am, after which the group divided into two. The plan was to alternate groups over the following days so that everyone could enjoy the same opportunities. One hour later we assembled at the jetty, one boat setting off towards the canopy observation tower with Guilherme, whilst the other group headed for an isolated forested island, with local guide Priscilla, a member of the lodge staff.

Even around the jetty the rainforest was already coming to life in the first light of dawn. The riverside tangles held a couple each of Band-tailed Antbird, Amazonian Streaked Antwren, Drab Water-tyrant and Red-capped Cardinal, providing an enticing introduction to the birdlife that awaited us. Once in mid-channel, a Long-billed Starthroat buzzed just a few metres above us, darting after tiny airborne insects to supplement its nectar diet, while two White-necked Jacobins sat quietly absorbing the first rays of sunshine.

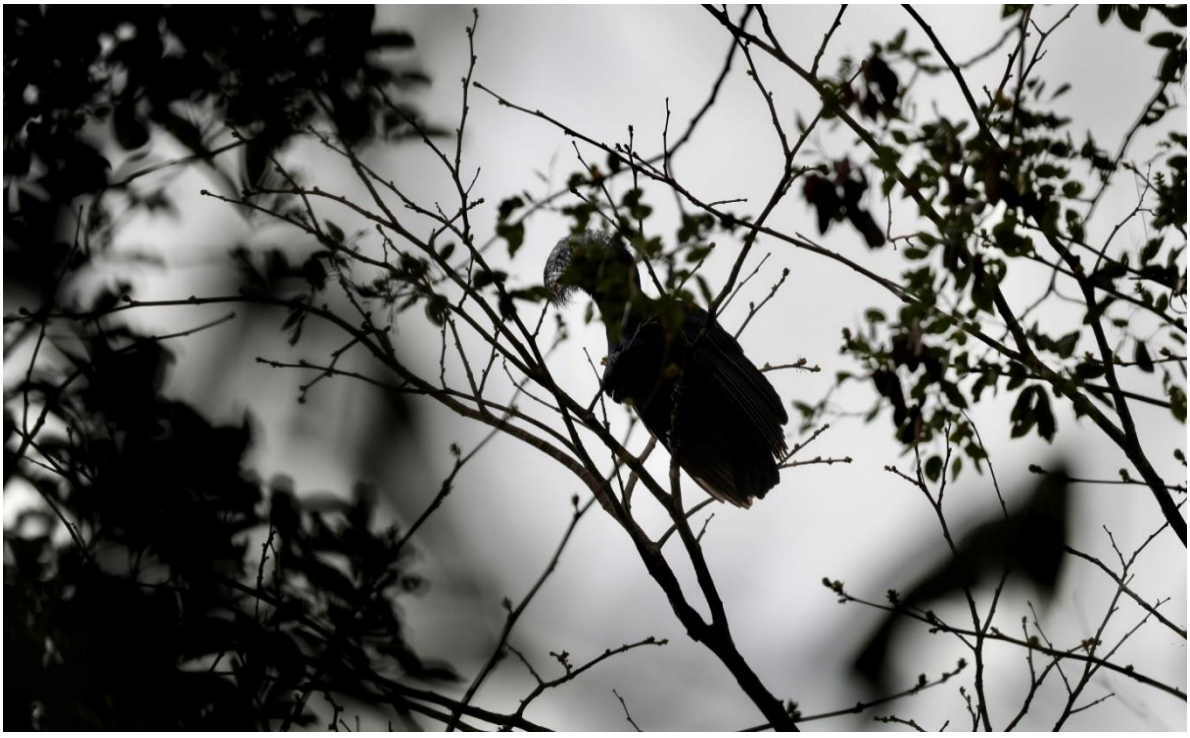
Priscilla's crew headed downstream, where White-banded Swallows flitted low over the water and a fine Green-and-rufous Kingfisher showed alongside the more familiar Amazon, Ringed and Green Kingfishers. In riverside trees were Cream-coloured Woodpecker whilst closer to the confluence with the Teles Pires River we encountered at least eight Swallow-winged Puffbirds. Then the parrot activity began in earnest. Seventy White-eyed Parakeets streamed overhead, followed by two Blue-headed Parrots and a group of five Scarlet Macaws, their brilliant colours catching the early sunlight as they swept across the river.

The river itself provided a wonderfully open viewpoint into the otherwise dense forest, like a giant natural viewing platform moving through the heart of the Amazon. A pair of Western

Red-necked Aracaris and a single Curl-crested Aracari flew across the river, followed by a Red-throated Piping-guan sitting in tall riverside trees. A male Spangled Cotinga, with its striking blue plumage, sat conspicuously in the canopy, with a Piratic Flycatcher perched nearby.

We eventually disembarked on Ariosto Island, an uninhabited 567-hectare tract of pristine rainforest used only by researchers studying its ecology. As we came ashore, one of our key targets, an Amazonian Umbrellabird, flew along the treeline. Its shape, silhouette and flight all recalled Black Woodpecker, but it disappeared into the canopy before everyone could enjoy a good view.

So began a gentle walk into the forest, accompanied by the soft, mournful calls of a Blue Ground Dove. The forest floor was no less busy than the canopy. Lines of leaf-cutting ants carried their tiny loads of foliage along well-worn trails, while an Azara's Agouti crossed quietly ahead of us and two Tufted Capuchins moved through the high branches above. We were shown the entrance to an armadillo burrow, although its elusive occupant was nowhere to be seen. Priscilla then located another Amazonian Umbrellabird, this time sitting quietly in the mid-storey giving everyone good views of its extraordinary black crest and feathered throat wattle. This was a much more satisfying encounter with this unusual and highly sought-after Amazonian bird.



The walk entered a clearing which provided an opportunity to look upwards and out across the forest, where a Black-and-white Hawk-eagle and Black Caracara circled overhead, accompanied in the distance by a King Vulture and two Swallow-tailed Kites. Back amongst the foliage, Golden-bellied Euphonia and several Grey-chested Greenlets added some splashes of colour to the morning.

We returned to the lodge at midday, where the forest's wildlife was still very much on show. Around 100 Dusky-billed Parrotlets and 80 Madeira Parakeets had gathered near the staff buildings to take minerals from slightly soapy water seeping into the ground. Their noisy presence and vivid plumage provided a lively backdrop to lunch, during which we were

reunited with the other half of the group who had spent their morning at the canopy tower. Their experience had been equally rewarding, with the 50-metre-high viewpoint providing a completely different perspective of the vast forest. Two White-cheeked Spider Monkeys commenced the morning's entertainment before a succession of colourful *psittacids* confirmed we had entered prime parrot country. This morning's observations including12 Green-thighed Parrots, eight Blue-headed Parrots, four Golden-winged Parrots, three Red-fan Parrots, two Yellow-crowned Amazon and even three Hyacinth Macaw, the latter being a recent colonist in the area, their brilliant blue plumage unmistakable against the forest. Amongst other highlights from the tower were singles of Black-bellied Cuckoo, White-necked Puffbird, Brown-winged Mourner, Crowned Slaty Flycatcher, Purple-headed Honeycreeper, a female Black-tailed Trogon, a male Black-girdled Barbet, six Red-billed Toucans, three Spangled Cotinga, three Bare-necked Fruitcrows, two White-winged Shrike-tanagers and the fine male Pompadour Cotinga pictured below.



After lunch we had a short rest before resuming at 3.30 pm, travelling a few kilometres by boat to a secluded forest hide where fallen logs had been fashioned into small drinking troughs which were regularly topped up with water. At first birds appeared only sporadically, usually arriving for just a few seconds before melting back into the surrounding vegetation. As the afternoon cooled however and the sun began to sink, more birds started to arrive, the pace gradually increasing towards dusk. This was a session where an experienced guide proved invaluable, as we attempted to identify and record the visitors while still allowing ourselves time to enjoy the spectacle. The succession of antbirds and antshrikes was particularly impressive: Spot-winged Antshrike, Cinereous Antshrike, Spix's Antwarbler, Plain-throated Antwren, Bare-eyed Antbird, Xingu Scale-backed Antbird, Saturnine Antshrike and Black-faced Antbird all came to visit, whilst foliage-gleaners included Rufous-rumped. A Ruddy Quail-Dove, more familiar in appearance but no less welcome, provided the finale to the session.

It was an absorbing end to our first full day at Cristalino. By now we were beginning to appreciate that the Amazon rarely gives up its secrets immediately. Rather than overwhelm visitors with obvious abundance, it gradually unveils its treasures, rewarding quiet observation and persistence.

After dark, dinner involved an excellent fish barbecue, the day being capped off by television coverage of England's win against Norway in the World Cup.

**Sunday 12 July:** After breakfast we were away by 6.15am, setting off upstream in our two boats along the dark, almost black waters of the Cristalino River. The forest was already stirring in the early morning light, and a Green-and-rufous Kingfisher and Sunbittern provided a fine start to the day's exploration. An islet provided refuge for a Neotropical Otter, which watched us glide quietly past before disappearing from view.



Constant scanning of the riverbank proved very worthwhile when an Agami Heron was spotted skulking in the shallows and then moments later a South American Tapir clambered out of the water before promptly clambering up the bank and vanishing into the riverside vegetation. A Ruddy Pigeon passed overhead, followed by three each of Western Red-necked Aracari and Red-fan Parrot.

We eventually drew into the bank and set off on foot into the forest, where Guilherme introduced us to one of the more curious botanical inhabitants, the so-called 'walking palm'. Its distinctive stilt-like roots spread above the forest floor, giving rise to the long-standing belief that the palm can slowly move towards better light and firmer ground. How much truth there is in the idea remains contested, but the extraordinary structure of the tree was fascinating in itself. There was plenty more to discover at ground level, with a wealth of botanical interest in the understorey, including a flowering Passionflower as well as Wild Pineapple growing beside the trail.

The forest was alive with sound, although much of its birdlife remained hidden amongst the foliage. The extraordinary cat-like whistle of a Screaming Piha rang through the trees, its

voice carrying surprisingly far through the forest. Thick-billed Euphonia, Amazonian Plain Xenops and Fork-tailed Woodnymph were more obliging, providing fleeting but welcome views as we worked our way along the trail. Gradually the vegetation became more open as the path climbed towards exposed rocky ground, and suddenly the forest opened out before us. After several days at ground level, it was a chance to absorb the sheer scale of the forest, a reminder that what we had explored on foot represented only the smallest fraction of this vast ecosystem. We settled down with ‘scopes trained on the distant canopy, where a Hook-billed Kite sat obligingly, accompanied by two Channel-billed Toucans and a Red-billed Toucan.

Perhaps, though, it was the parrots and macaws passing over the treetops that provided the most memorable spectacle. During our time at the viewpoint 10 Blue-headed Parrots, eight Scarlet Macaws, six Blue-and-yellow Macaws and four Golden-winged Macaws crossed the forest, their vivid colours flashing against the unbroken green canopy. Each passing flock seemed to bring another burst of life and colour to the vast landscape below.

The smaller inhabitants of the forest were no less impressive. Three superb Opal-rumped Tanagers and two Masked Tanagers showed well in the surrounding trees, whilst a Bare-necked Fruitcrow, Red-stained Woodpecker and Paradise Jacamar came in for good views. After an hour at this natural watchpoint, we descended through the forest and resumed our boat journey further upstream.

Our next destination was a true giant of the Amazon, a Brazil Nut tree estimated to be around one thousand years old. Its enormous trunk, some five metres in diameter, was a spectacular reminder of the immense scale that some of the forest's trees can attain.



Returning to the lodge for lunch at 12.30 pm we passed a female Flame-crested Manakin sat quietly on a nest constructed on a log overhanging the water. It was another small but intimate glimpse into the extraordinary life continuing at every level of this ancient forest.

Resuming at 3.30 pm, our afternoon destination was once again the secluded hide in the forest, where the drinking troughs were replenished with fresh water and we settled down to wait for the birds to appear.

As before, the Amazon did not immediately reveal its treasures. A Brown-winged Schiffornis was the first to call, but gradually, almost imperceptibly, the forest around the hide began to stir. One by one birds appeared, often for a few seconds only before melting back into the surrounding vegetation: Snow-capped Manakin, White-crowned Manakin, Fiery-capped Manakin, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Dot-backed Antbird, Rufous-capped Antthrush, Black-spotted Bare-eye, Black-faced Antbird, Blackish Antbird, Red-crowned Ant-tanager, Plain-throated Antwren, Spot-backed Antbird plus Saturnine and Cinereous Antshrikes.

It was a remarkable gathering of small, often secretive forest birds, and although many were unfamiliar to us, that hardly mattered. Here, we simply enjoyed the succession of striking birds. Without such carefully positioned hides and a water source, many of these shy species would require days, perhaps weeks, of patient searching to encounter. The arrangement gave us a privileged window into a world that normally remains hidden within the forest.

With dusk approaching we began the boat journey back to the lodge, thinking the day's birding had ended. Then our boatman suddenly eased off the throttle and stared intently into the bare branches of a huge tree. His expression and animated gestures immediately told us that something special had caught his eye. We followed his gaze and, almost unbelievably, there it was: a majestic Harpy Eagle.

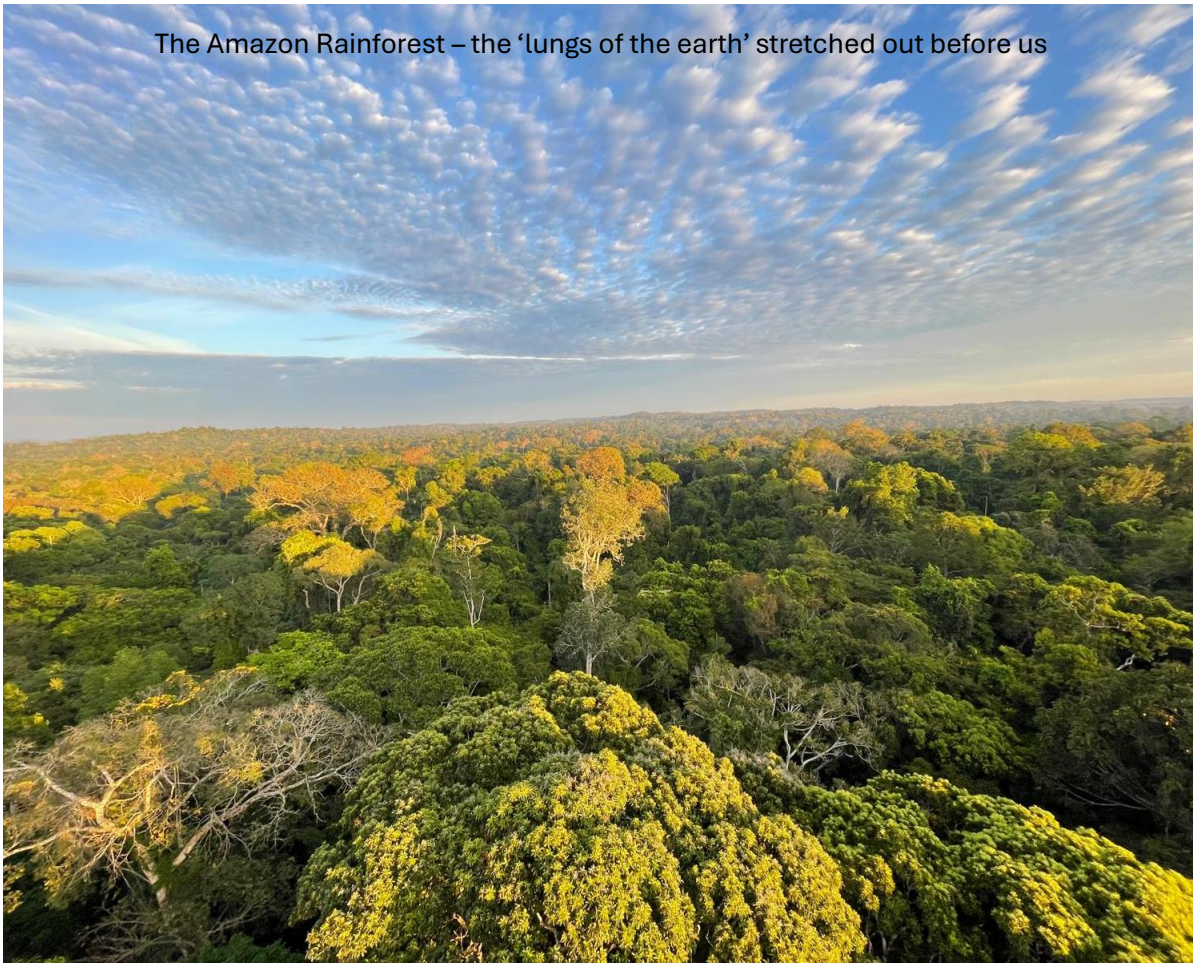


Both boats drew together as we watched this magnificent raptor perched high above us. Cameras were raised, ‘scopes trained and field guides consulted as we repeatedly checked the key features, scarcely daring to believe our luck. The bird was feeding on a prey item, apparently a monkey, and showed no particular concern about the gathered watchers below. Even in the fading light its enormous size, powerful structure and distinctive crest were unmistakable.

We knew of course that Harpy Eagles are thinly distributed in this part of Amazonia, and that our chances of encountering one was extremely slim. So, to discover one so unexpectedly, at the end of an already exceptional day, was therefore a moment of genuine joy. We watched until the gathering dusk made further observation difficult, leaving the eagle still perched in the great tree as we reluctantly moved away. There was one thought on everyone's mind: would it still be there in the morning?

Once back at the lodge we enjoyed another a fine evening meal, followed by a personal presentation from Guilherme about the Cristalino Lodge and reserve, including its history, geographical extent and the important scientific and conservation work undertaken there alongside responsible eco-tourism.

It was a lovely conclusion to a remarkable day. The Amazon had revealed itself in many different ways, from the vast green panorama viewed from the forest heights to the tiny, secretive birds visiting a hidden pool, and finally to one of the world's most magnificent and elusive eagles appearing almost by chance at dusk. There was little doubt amongst the group that Cristalino was a very special place indeed.



The Amazon Rainforest – the ‘lungs of the earth’ stretched out before us

**Monday 13 July:** This was our final morning at Cristalino, and after breakfast at 5.00am we were soon on our way, once again dividing into two groups to visit Ariosto Island and the canopy observation tower. Before that, there was one burning question on everyone's mind: was the Harpy Eagle still there? A short boat ride later provided the answer. Remarkably, the great bird was still perched in the same tree, now much easier to see as the light strengthened to reveal its extraordinary form. What an unforgettable bird it was. Word had already spread among the local guides and boatmen, and before long several more boats had gathered, all hoping for a glimpse of Amazonia's most powerful and sought-after raptor. Eventually we had to tear ourselves away and continue with the morning's programme.

Those visiting Ariosto Island encountered many of the species enjoyed by the other group a couple of days earlier, but this time were particularly fortunate to find a group of six Amazonian Umbrellabirds. These were somewhat more obliging than the earlier encounter, although still characteristically wary and prone to disappearing into the canopy. Around the forest clearing Grey-crowned Flatbill, Purple-throated and Rufous-bellied Euphonias and Turquoise Tanager added colour to the morning.

A short stop during the return boat journey produced an Amazonian Tyrannulet, whilst two Black-collared Swallow swept past and three Capped Herons provided another colourful sighting. Repeated attempts searching shaded trees in the mouths of numerous small streams entering the main river finally paid off when an American Pygmy-kingfisher appeared, a tiny flash of colour amongst the riverside vegetation and a reward for our persistence.

We were reunited for lunch, when the group that had visited the canopy tower related an equally rewarding morning high above the forest. Their most exciting discovery was a fine Crested Eagle, which proved to be a new bird for our guide Guilherme, and particularly memorable sighting for him near the end of his time with us. Almost as imposing as the Harpy Eagle, it sat prominently in the largest trees, occasionally flying from one to another, surveying the forest below for potential prey, which can include smaller monkeys. An impressive supporting cast included 10 Red-bellied Macaws, new for the trip, five Green-thighed Parrots, four Orange-winged Amazon, three each of White-necked Puffbirds and Black-girdled Barbets, a Bat Falcon, a Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet, also new for the trip, and a single Red-fan Parrot. The succession of colourful encounters continued with five striking Spangled Cotingas and three red male Pompadour Cotingas spotted amongst the canopy foliage, accompanied by a male Black-faced Dacnis and two dazzling Paradise Tangers. More subtly marked species included Crowned Slaty Flycatcher, Variegated Flycatcher and Tooth-billed Wren, whilst four each of Olive Oropendola and Red-billed Pied Tanager completed a terrific final morning's observations.

After lunch we said our thanks and farewells to the staff who had looked after us so brilliantly. As our boat pulled away from Cristalino's jetty, we looked back through the trees and across the dark waters with a growing sense of affection for a place that had made such a powerful impression in such a short time. Three days had barely allowed us to scratch the surface of this immense ecosystem, yet the experience had been very rewarding: forest trails, towering canopy, dark-water rivers, secretive antbirds, colourful parrots, monkeys and, of course, the unforgettable Harpy Eagle. There was also a strong sense of gratitude. Cristalino is a place where the value of preserving the forest is woven into the way the reserve is managed, researched and visited. We had been privileged to experience only a tiny fragment of it, but it was reassuring to know that its modern custodians remain committed to protecting what survives there.



Our flight to the coastal south of Brazil was not until the following afternoon, so we spent the night at nearby Alta Floresta. Our accommodation, Fazenda Anaca, was a small and very attractive lodge with lovely gardens and a pool, providing the perfect setting to relax and recharge our batteries after the intensive days in the Amazon.

Even here though, our birding opportunities were not over. Sugar-feeders provided some more familiar hummingbirds, but beyond the lodge gate, Guilherme led some of the group (those not swimming in the pool that is!) along a short woodland corridor created to maintain connections between surviving forest tracts. Such corridors are important in allowing birds and other wildlife to move freely between feeding and breeding areas, helping to reduce the isolation of populations in an increasingly fragmented landscape.

As so often during the tour, a new area brought new birds. A small lake held a pair of Brazilian Teal and three Muscovy Ducks, while flooded palms provided roosting and feeding sites for ten Red-bellied Macaws and two Palmcreepers, the enigmatic sole member of its own genus. A Speckled Chachalaca climbed through trees on the far side of the lake before eventually flying across towards us, quite prehistoric in shape. The evening air was alive with flycatchers making short sallies from their perches: Bright-rumped Attila, Yellow-browed Tody-flycatcher, Sulphury Flycatcher and Ochre-lored Flatbill. A Buff-throated Woodcreeper methodically worked its way up a palm, with three Bar-breasted Piculets in neighbouring trees. Above us, several Sick's Swifts and Fork-tailed Palm Swifts sliced through the evening sky, whilst three Chestnut-fronted Macaws arrived to settle in for the night.

As the light faded from the woodland, the soft, rhythmic calls of a Tropical Screech-owl began to drift across the trees, as another day drew to a close.

**Tuesday 14 July:** We enjoyed a fine breakfast before setting out for a morning's birding in the Alta Floresta area. After the intensity and extraordinary diversity of Cristalino, this was to be a more relaxed session, exploring an eco-friendly ranch about 45 minutes away which offered a pleasing mosaic of open grassland, woodland and lakes, and yet another reminder of the remarkable variety of habitats packed into this part of Mato Grosso state.

The approach lane wound through open cattle pasture, where coarse, clump-forming grasses covered the fields. A few Blue-black Grassquits were feeding amongst the vegetation, but it was the striking, Red-breasted Meadowlarks that immediately caught our eye, nearly 30 being counted as we headed through. Several dazzling males were particularly impressive as they displayed across the grassland, their rich colours standing out against the muted pasture.



Red-bellied Macaws passed overhead, and several Burrowing Owls stood sentinel beside their burrows, surveying the morning from their low vantage points. A small pool held a White-faced Whistling-duck, Limpkin and several Southern Lapwings, more familiar birds after the identification challenges of the Amazon forest. Nearby two White-tailed Kites hovered effortlessly over the open country.

Gradually the track entered woodland and the character of the birding changed. Three Spix's Guans were new for the tour, as were White-winged Becard, Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet and Snethlage's Tody-tyrant. Eight Paradise Jacamars left the treetops as they swooped down chasing insects on the wing, whilst two new hummingbirds delicately worked the flowers: a Reddish Hermit and Rufous-throated Sapphire. Somewhere deeper in the woodland the fluty notes of a Slate-coloured Grosbeak carried through the trees, whilst the repeated calls of a Razor-billed Curassow suggested that another prize was nearby, though it stubbornly remained hidden. A Blackish Antbird was equally frustrating, revealing just enough to confirm its presence but never quite giving us the unobstructed view we wanted.

As the morning warmed, raptors began to take advantage of the rising air currents. A Grey-lined Hawk and a dark-phase Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle soared overhead, joined by a

couple of Swallow-tailed Kites, their deeply forked tails making them instantly recognisable against the brightening sky.

Eventually we reached a lake, where we paused in the shade and took time to simply enjoy the surroundings. Even here there were surprises. An American Pygmy-kingfisher appeared a couple of times, whilst beneath the canopy a tiny bird flitted amongst the foliage. This proved to be a Short-tailed Pygmy-tyrant, considered to be the smallest passerine in the world (hummingbirds are not passerines), barely 6 cm long and weighing only around 4.2 grams. Its bright moss-green plumage gave it an almost Firecrest-like appearance, though on an even smaller scale. So ended our final morning in this region of Brazil.



Heading back to the lodge we bumped into Sue who reported seeing a Tayra on her morning walk around the lodge. After lunch, we made our way to Alta Floresta airport for the 4.20 pm flight to Campinas, near São Paulo. After an unfortunate delay caused by the non-arrival of one piece of luggage, we eventually checked into the rather chaotic Ramada Hotel for a one-night stay, ready for the final phase of our Brazilian adventure. A morning flight to Rio de Janeiro lay ahead, so, after a bar meal and a drink we all retired for the night.

**Wednesday 15 July:** Following breakfast we returned to Viracopos Airport, where we gave a heartfelt and very fond farewell to Guilherme for his superb support, guiding and friendship over the previous fortnight. He had proved everything we could have wished for: knowledgeable, patient, endlessly helpful and great company throughout. After leaving us at the airport, Guilherme was to board a bus for home in São Paulo where a well-earned rest was to begin with dinner at his mother’s. Meanwhile, we took the 11.40 am Azul flight to Rio de Janeiro for the final phase of our Brazilian adventure: four nights devoted to exploring the Atlantic Forest.

Although the Amazon is South America's largest and best-known forest, Brazil's Atlantic Forest is no less remarkable in its importance for wildlife. Once stretching along much of the

country's eastern seaboard and inland into parts of Argentina and Paraguay, this ancient woodland is renowned for its extraordinary diversity and, above all, its remarkable level of endemism. It is a place where evolution has worked in isolation to produce an astonishing array of plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth. Sadly, it is also one of the world's most threatened ecosystems. It was the first Brazilian environment encountered by European colonists more than 500 years ago, since when it has suffered centuries of clearance and fragmentation, with only around 12% of the original forest remaining. What survives, includes some wonderfully intact tracts of tropical and subtropical forest, precious refuges for a wide-ranging wildlife community.

As we flew along the coast towards Rio, the spectacular coastline and mountains around Rio provided an impressive introduction. Our driver was waiting at 2.00 pm to take us north-westwards, away from the city and into increasingly forested hills, our destination being the delightful Itororo Ecolodge. The journey took almost two and a half hours, initially skirting the magnificent natural harbour of Rio, where at least 60 Magnificent Frigatebirds wheeled effortlessly above the water, before turning inland. Gradually the city landscape gave way to intermittent small towns and villages surrounded by rolling, sometimes steep, and densely forested hills.



Itororo Ecolodge lies at around 1,200 metres in its own secluded valley within the vast Tres Picos State Park, an important stronghold of Atlantic Forest habitat. The surrounding landscape was immediately enticing, with the promise of a very different suite of birds from those we had seen so far. The lodge itself offered excellent birding right on the doorstep, with well-stocked feeders, while its location provided access to several other sites and altitudes within the park. Our plan for the coming days was to explore several carefully selected sites in the area, searching for the forest's many specialities and endemics.

On arrival we met the lodge owners, as well as Daniel, our bird guide for the next few days. We noticed a couple of Slaty-breasted Wood-rails feeding quietly on a lawned area below the lodge. There was, however, one important piece of business to attend to that evening:

the England v Argentina World Cup semi-final. Sadly, as history will tell, the result was not the one we had hoped for. Ah well – next time perhaps!

Outside, the Atlantic Forest stretched away into the darkness, and after the extraordinary landscapes of the Cerrado, the Pantanal and the Amazon, we had arrived in another completely different world. There was plenty to look forward to. A good night's sleep would restore us, ready to discover whether this final chapter could live up to everything that had gone before.

**Thursday 16 July:** Breakfast was at 6.30 am, after which we spent an hour or so exploring the immediate surroundings of the lodge, checking the feeders and beginning the process of getting our 'eye-in' to a new bird community. We didn't have to venture far to encounter our first Atlantic Forest specialities: 20 Maroon-bellied Parakeets and five Plain Parakeets arrived at the feeders shortly after breakfast. Several Ruby-crowned, Black-goggled and Golden-chevroned Tanagers provided an early introduction to the remarkable variety of this family whilst two Northern Surucua Trogons and a pair of Swallow-tailed Cotingas perched quietly nearby.

The forest was already alive with unfamiliar sounds. What sounded remarkably like a referee's whistle proved to be a Brown Tinamou calling from deep in the understorey. Several guans also appeared around the lodge, here represented by Dusky-legged Guan (a close-up of the head shown below). It was becoming clear that although we had only just arrived, we had entered a very different birding world.



Daniel led us onto a trail into the surrounding forest, and the change of habitat brought another succession of new possibilities. Every few metres seemed to offer another sound or movement to investigate. The extraordinary voice of a Bare-throated Bellbird carried far across the forest, eventually leading us to a bird perched high in the bare branches of a

distant tree. The mellow notes of several Rufous-browed Peppershrikes floated through the canopy, adding to the soundtrack as we worked our way along the trail.

Gradually the forest revealed more of its inhabitants. A White-collared Foliage-gleaner worked methodically through a bamboo tangle, whilst Yellow-browed Woodpecker, White-rimmed Warbler, Rufous-crowned Greenlet and Ochre-faced Tody-flycatcher appeared along the trail. Rufous-capped Spinetail and Rufous-headed Tanager added colour, while several Eastern Olivaceous Woodcreepers climbed steadily up the trunks and a couple of Scale-throated Hermits buzzed around flowering plants. Two Buffy-tufted Marmoset, an endemic mammal of the Atlantic Forest, were located, with calls and several short views detected.

Back near the lodge the feeders proved an ideal introduction to the sheer diversity of the Atlantic Forest, allowing us to study some of its specialities at close quarters. Four Violet-capped Woodnymphs, two White-throated Hummingbirds and eight Brazilian Ruby's visited the sugar feeders, whilst fruit placed nearby attracted Blue Dacnis, and a colourful assortment of tanagers, including Magpie, Chestnut-headed, Burnished-buff and the striking Brassy-breasted shown below.



After lunch at 1.00 pm we took more time relaxing around the lodge, keeping an eye on the feeders and surrounding trees. A Yellow-eared Woodpecker was a welcome addition to the list, along with a couple of Hooded Siskins. We then ventured back into the forest for another session with Daniel, whose ability to pick out the quietest calls and slightest movements was proving invaluable. An Ochre-rumped Antbird called from the undergrowth, whilst Bertoni's Antbird, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Planalto Tyrannulet and Euler's Flycatcher were all added to a growing list.

A small hide with seed scattered in front produced one of the afternoon's highlights. From the shadows of the undergrowth came eight extremely wary Spot-winged Wood-quail, their reluctance to emerge making every fleeting view feel well earned. A Grey-fronted Dove was considerably more obliging, its pale forehead catching shafts of sunlight filtering through the forest canopy. The manakins, meanwhile, were rapidly acquiring a reputation for requiring

patience and a good deal of luck, so watching four Pin-tailed Manakins was particularly satisfying, a classy male being shown below.





Spot-winged Wood-quail spend their days walking the forest floor in small groups, having a ‘freeze and crouch’ defence and roost high up in trees to avoid ground predators

Our first full day in the Atlantic Forest had been a steep but thoroughly enjoyable learning curve. We had entered a forest where almost every path seemed to offer a different challenge, with new calls to learn and unfamiliar plumages to recognise. We were relying

heavily on Daniel's skills and experience, which proved invaluable, with evening log revealing we had located 31 species of Atlantic Forest endemic bird. It was particularly pleasing to discover that Daniel was co-author of a new book on the birds of this region of Brazil, clearly, we had found the right person to help us unlock this fascinating final chapter of the tour.

**Friday 17 July:** After breakfast at 6.00 am we set off an hour later, this time heading towards the town of Duas Barras, about 30 km away, to explore a more open landscape of rolling hills, pasture and scattered woodland. The morning was cool and fresh beneath a brilliant blue sky, which promised another warm and sunny day ahead. After the enclosed forest around Itororo, this was a strikingly different face of the Atlantic Forest region, where remnants of woodland, hedgerows, pasture and scattered trees combined to create a rich mosaic of habitats.

As soon as we pulled over to park, roadside fence lines proved productive with three White-rumped Monjita, a Swallow Tanager and a Cliff Flycatcher being quickly located. Scattered bushes produced Brown-crested Flycatcher, Chestnut-vented Conebill, Yellow-lored Tody-flycatcher (often called Grey-headed Tody-flycatcher), Yellow-olive Flatbill, Rufous-fronted Thornbird and Gilt-edged Tanager. A Glittering-bellied Emerald performed nicely on the flowers. Just along the road, six each of the spectacular Streamer-tailed Tyrant and Long-tailed Tyrant were making repeated sallies from wires and fence posts to intercept passing insects. A single Yellow-browed Tyrant joined them, giving us an excellent opportunity to watch the different flycatchers working their own favoured perches and airspace.

A short drive brought us into gently rolling countryside, where lightly wooded green hills descended into pastoral valleys grazed by cattle. A pair of Firewood-gatherers was busy around its remarkable, oversized stick nest, whilst a couple of Wing-banded Horneros were singing vigorously nearby. Overhead, a pair of White-tailed Hawks circled effortlessly in the warming air.

We moved on to a broad, lush river valley where Masked Water-tyrants were actively flycatching along the watercourse and a Green-barred Woodpecker worked busily around the base of a tree.

Here, scattered Araucaria trees added another distinctive element to the landscape, their characteristic 'monkey-puzzle' silhouettes standing proudly above the surrounding pasture. Among them we found White-eared Puffbird and Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, whilst a small patch of woodland produced a trio of 'ant' things: Spot-breasted Antvireo, Plain Antvireo and Ferruginous Antbird.

Lunch today was al fresco, simply sitting on the grass and looking out across the splendid farmland and rolling countryside. By 1.15 pm we were on the move again, visiting a site where Three-toed Jacamars were known to occur. Five of these rather special birds showed almost immediately, their distinctive appearance and habit of making short sorties from favoured perches making them particularly enjoyable to watch.

The surrounding lane proved equally productive, with Chestnut-backed Antshrike, Creamy-bellied Thrush, Greater Crescent-chested Puffbird, Yellow Tyrannulet, White-bearded Manakin, Pileated Finch, White-barred Piculet and Lesser Woodcreeper all adding to the afternoon's haul. Small parties of Double-collared Seedeaters and Blue-black Grassquits worked the grassy banks, joined by more Pileated Finches. Once again, although we were well away from the depths of the forest, the landscape still had plenty of surprises in store.

Later in the afternoon we returned to Itororo and enjoyed some time to relax before making a final excursion into the forest as the light began to fade. This time the target was not another brightly coloured endemic but the wonderfully named Long-trained Nightjar. We settled quietly beside a woodland ride and waited. Then, after only a few minutes, a bird swept silently into view above us. Its extraordinary long tail feathers streamed behind it as it twisted and turned through the evening air, making three spectacular flypasts before disappearing once more into the gloom. It was a mesmerising way to end the day: a ghostly bird, almost all wings and impossibly long tail, performing briefly in the fading light before the forest swallowed it up again.

**Saturday 18 July:** Breakfast was at 6.00 am before we set off for the forest surrounding the headquarters of the “Parque Estadual dos Três Picos” as the signs depicted, about 45 minutes away. We arrived at 7.35 am to find a brisk wind stirring the treetops, the surrounding canopy swaying gently above us, but in the more sheltered areas below, bird activity was undiminished. One of our targets was the endemic Scaled Antbird and, pleasingly, it soon appeared at close quarters, proving to be a fine-looking bird with its boldly patterned plumage giving it a passing resemblance to a Black-and-white Warbler.



A Red-necked Tanager called repeatedly but remained frustratingly hidden, while fruiting trees attracted three Flame-crested Tanagers together with Violaceous and Orange-bellied Euphonias.

A well-marked trail led from the park headquarters into the forest and, being a Saturday, was already popular with local families. The human activity seemed to have little effect on the birds however, and we soon began to encounter a succession of species. Eight Green-headed Tanagers were particularly dazzling, their brilliant colours standing out against the deep greens of the forest. As we progressed, more species emerged from the vegetation, including five Star-throated Antwren, four Streaked-capped Antwrens, two each of Grey-hooded Flycatcher, Chestnut-crowned Becard, White-barred Piculet and Saw-billed Hermit,

and singles of Streaked Xenops, Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner and Chestnut-bellied Euphonia.

Once again, the extraordinary complexity of the forest was becoming apparent. Every layer seemed to offer its own opportunities, from the leaf litter and tangled undergrowth to the mid-storey and canopy, with different birds exploiting each specialised niche. A Rufous-capped Motmot was singing somewhere ahead of us and took some patient searching before it eventually revealed itself in the mid-storey.

The trail eventually brought us to a magnificent Jequitibá tree, one of the great giants of South American forests and among the continent's tallest and longest-lived trees. Such ancient trees act as forest sentinels, their massive structures creating humid microclimates and providing footholds for epiphytes, orchids, vines and countless other organisms, in turn creating yet more niches for wildlife. Here, appropriately, we found an Eared Pygmy-tyrant, one of the smallest passerines of the Atlantic Rainforest.

By 11.40 am we had made our way back to the vehicles, moving a short distance along the main road to a popular Brazilian barbecue restaurant, bustling with families enjoying their Saturday lunch. Fully sated, we returned to birding by 1.00 pm, taking a shady path through the forest towards a clear-running stream. A fine male Blue (Swallow-tailed) Manakin provided an immediate flash of colour, followed by a Large Pale-browed Treehunter, Yellow-olive Flatbill and a male, Red-crowned Ant-tanager close to the water. Here our attention turned to stream margins, searching among the rocks and fallen timber for something more elusive. Suddenly a bird appeared bobbing on large boulder. It resembled a miniature dipper in actions, but its dark brown plumage was profusely spotted below - a Streamcreeper no less! It hopped its way amongst the boulders and debris, busily probing for food in any damp soil and tossing leaves aside as it progressed.



Arriving back to the lodge at 4.15 pm, we had time to relax and enjoy the birds around the feeders. As the light began to fade, we made one final pre-dusk excursion and were rewarded with further views of the Long-trained Nightjar patrolling its territory, whilst a Tropical Screech-owl began calling from the surrounding woodland. The forest was still yielding its secrets, even as our time here was drawing towards its final morning.



These images show Green-headed Tanager above and Violet-capped Woodnymph below, both multi-coloured gems of the Atlantic Forest



**Sunday 19 July:** This was our final morning's birding in the Atlantic Forest, so we arranged an optional guided walk with Daniel, leaving others free to relax or explore independently.

At 6.00 am we headed towards the small forest hide. We had walked this trail several times, but at dawn the forest soundscape made the strongest impression. A Variegated Antpitta called repeatedly within the undergrowth, but like several species in the dull morning light, it stubbornly refused to come closer and show. Behaving similarly were Bare-throated Bellbird, Black-billed Scythebill, Scaled Woodcreeper Grey-bellied Spinetail, Black-throated Trogon, Giant Antshrike, Cryptic Antthrush (also known as Such's Anttrush) and Drab-breasted Bamboo-tyrant who all revealed their presence only through their calls. We were reminded that in a forest this dense, hearing birds is often just as rewarding as seeing them. A small party of five Spot-billed Toucanets eventually gave us good views amongst the dappled sunlight of the mid-story (see below), while two Scaly-headed Parrots landed in nearby treetops, allowing us to zoom in for a final look at their colourful plumage.



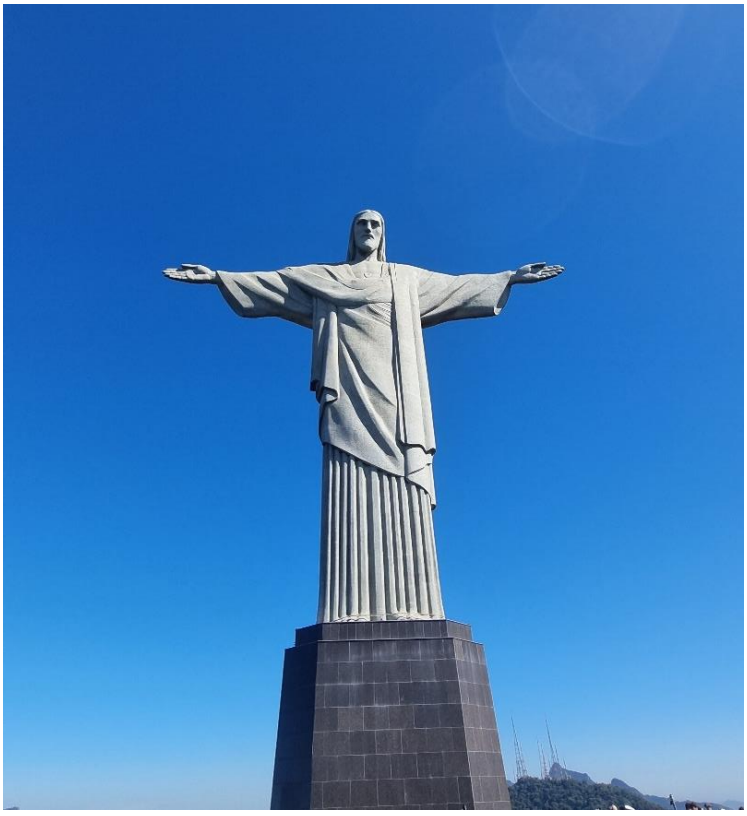
Breakfast was at 7.15 am, after which the whole group set out together for one final walk from the lodge. Remarkably, even after several days of exploring the same trails, new birds continued to emerge. Green-backed Becard, Sharpbill, Yellow-legged Thrush, Grey-capped Tyrannulet, White-shouldered Fire-eye, Rufous Gnateater, White-browed Foliage-gleaner and White-throated Woodcreeper were all added to our tour list, some seen for the first time though others finally revealed themselves after having previously been heard only. We had explored only a tiny fraction of this extraordinarily diverse biome, but the experience had left a lasting impression: a forest of remarkable endemism, intricate habitats and seemingly inexhaustible wildlife, where apparently familiar trails continued to hold secrets.

After lunch at the lodge, we expressed thanks to Daniel for his truly first-class guiding and said our farewells to the lodge staff who had looked after us so well. Then it was time to begin the drive back to Rio de Janeiro, where we arrived at around 4.30 pm to check into our

boutique hotel in the Santa Teresa district. After so many early starts, it was good to have a more relaxed evening as we gathered to watch the World Cup final, pleased with the result.



**Monday 20 July:** With our birding complete, today was devoted to exploring Rio de Janeiro. A large minibus collected us at 9.00 am, and, accompanied by an English-speaking guide, we headed to the base of Corcovado, a 700-metre granite peak located within the Tijuca National Park. From here we travelled by rack railway to the summit, visiting the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue, with magnificent views of the city all around.



Next, we headed to Ipanema beach, walking across the white sand giving us a chance to witness some of Rio's famous coastal scenery. Heading further, Copacabana was the next destination where we enjoyed a fine Brazilian barbecue lunch at a splendid restaurant, with Brown Booby, Kelp Gull and South American Tern offshore.

In the afternoon we continued to Sugarloaf Mountain, being captivated by the spectacular panorama as we ascended by cable car. From this elevated viewpoint, the extraordinary urban landscape Rio unfolded below including its mountains, forested slopes and sweeping coastline.

Later we returned to Santa Teresa for a leisurely walk through its atmospheric streets, including a visit to the famous tiled Selarón Steps, before returning to our hotel for our final evening together.



The group at Ipanema beach alongside a statue of the composer of "The Girl from Ipanema"

**Tuesday 21 July:** Our final morning was deliberately unhurried, with free time allowing some of the group to pack and relax around the hotel while others took a short walk to enjoy a last taste of Rio. Just after lunchtime however, it was time to head to Rio de Janeiro International Airport for our evening flight back to London Heathrow. The journey home passed smoothly, and we arrived on schedule the following day.

So concluded our Brazilian adventure. What had started amongst the Cerrado landscapes around Chapada dos Guimarães had taken us deep into the extraordinary wetlands of the Pantanal, where Hyacinth Macaws, Giant Anteaters and, most memorably, Jaguars provided some of the tour's greatest wildlife moments. From there we travelled into the immense Amazon Rainforest at Cristalino, discovering a completely different world of forest layers, rivers, canopy giants and extraordinary bird diversity, culminating in the unforgettable and entirely unexpected sight of a Harpy Eagle. Finally, the Atlantic Forest provided a fitting finale:

a different avifauna and a new set of challenges, with its remarkable list of endemics continuing to surprise us right through to our final morning.

Across these landscapes we encountered an astonishing variety of birds and wildlife, but the experience was about much more than the length of the checklist. It was the early morning mist over the Pantanal, the Jaguars moving silently along the riverbanks, the macaws flashing colour over the Amazon canopy, the bird calls echoing through the Atlantic Forest, and the sheer scale and diversity of Brazil's natural landscapes that will remain with us.

For a wildlife tour group, Brazil had provided everything we could have hoped for, and considerably more. It was challenging at times, even though the itinerary worked exceptionally well, with some long journeys and inevitable travel complications, but the rewards were immense.

Most importantly, the tour was made special by the enthusiasm, good humour and companionship of everyone who travelled with us, together with the outstanding knowledge, patience and friendship of our local guides. These are the things that turn a wildlife tour from a series of sightings into a shared adventure, and this had certainly been an adventure to remember.

Our thanks go to all the participants for making this such a memorable and enjoyable tour, and to Andrew Ashworth, Sarah Hird, Ken Pearson, Liz and Keith Reynolds for the use of their photographs in this report.



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