

Trip report: Above the Canopy!

Brazil



Brazil August 2010

Itinerary

14 days Mato Grosso State, Brazil.

- 20 Aug Depart London
- 21 Aug Arrive Sao Paulo, transfer to Cuiaba, transfer to Chapada dos Guimaraes. overnight Pousada do Parque.
- 22 Aug Chapada dos Guimaraes o/n Pousada do Parque.
- 23 Aug Transfer back to Cuiaba, and onwards to Alta Floresta, transfer Cristalino Jungle Lodge.
- 24 Aug Cristalino Jungle Lodge
- 25 Aug Cristalino Jungle Lodge
- 26 Aug Transfer to Alta Floresta and back to Cuiaba Transfer into Pantanal. o/n Fazenda Santa Tereza (Pantanal Wildlife Centre)
- 27 Aug PWC
- 28 Aug PWC and transfer to Jaguar research centre at Porto Jofre. o/n houseboat
- 29 Aug JRC Porto Jofre area
- 30 Aug JRC Porto Jofre area
- 31 Aug JRC Porto Jofre area, transfer to PWC.
- 01 Sep PWC transfer to Cuiaba, and then Sao Paulo flight to London.
- 02 Sep Arrive London.

Diary

Arriving at the tiny airport of Cuiaba we were met by Adrianna our brilliant guide for the next couple of days in the Chapada dos Guimaraes area of central Mato Grosso. After leaving Cuiaba city behind we were soon able to glimpse our first views of the cerrado countryside and the bizarre sandstone rock formations of the Chapada region. We stopped at a layby to take pictures of the increasingly stunning scenery, the layby had the international coca cola vending machine and a friendly local sat watching the world go by from his deck chair, here we found **Curl crested jay** and **White lined tanager**.

We then headed to our accommodation; Pousada do Parque. The views from the restaurant were spectacular and the hosts were extremely friendly and knowledgeable on the local wildlife. They even deployed their own camera traps and were undertaking several biological surveys, as well as habitat restoration. Being overwhelmed by exciting new birds all around, we had to drag ourselves away as we were due for lunch at a wonderful restaurant next to the famous Chapada waterfall (the tallest free standing waterfall in Brazil).

The surrounding scenery was breath-taking. At last we could start on the birds, some of the highlights were **Squirrel cuckoo**, **Masked tityra**, **Swallow tanager**, **Cliff flycatcher**, **Peach fronted** and **White eyed parakeets**, **Chestnut eared araci**, **Red and green macaw**, and some rustling in the vegetation produced the first mammal of the trip which turned out to be a **Brazilian guinea pig**, (quite abundant in the area), after a tasty catfish meal at the restaurant watching the sunset we found our second mammal which according to Adrianna, was a good record for the site: **Brown tufted capuchin**. The journey back to the lodge after dark produced a real highlight for me: **Pampas deer**, plus a brief glimpse of our only **Brazilian forest rabbit (tappti)**. Whilst enjoying dinner back at the lodge we discussed plans for the next day and opted to head out to an area of open savannah or cerrado where we could also explore an impressive cave system.



At first light we went off in search of birds in the local forest and found many of the more widespread species including **Ruddy ground doves**, **American black** and **Turkey vultures**, **Yellow headed caracara**, **Sayaca tanager**, **Brown chested martins**, **Channel billed toucans**, **Yellow bellied eleania**, **Red legged honeycrepper**, and what for a long time we believed was an armadillo turned out to be **Blue crowned mot mot!** Walking around the forest was really exciting especially when the strange rock formations opened up glades in the forest where lots of the previous night's mammalian activity could be analysed. We found reasonably fresh maned wolf scat (the closest we ever came to maned wolf...just poo!) and Adrianna pointed out jaguar tracks among others in the sand.

Later into the day we drove through the Chapada region calling in at a viewpoint with a landmark stating that this spot was the central point of the South American continent! We passed fields of cotton and saw our first **Greater rheas**, posing **Burrowing owls**, **Southern lapwings** and a large raptor later identified as **Black**

cheded buzzard eagle. We reached the end of the road and set off on foot through temperate forest, scrub and cerrado dotted with termite mounds. Birdlife was quieter at this time of day and we were all feeling the heat, **American kestrels, Blue headed parrot, Boat billed flycatcher** were the pick. We emerged through the trees to see the biggest cave entrance I have ever seen which was very exciting to explore. When we switched off the torches it was pitch black. There were plenty of cave spiders and mammal tracks inside. We made our way back via **White and Crimson crested woodpeckers, Campo flickers, Red legged seriema, White eared puffbird,** unidentified **nightjars** and a brief view of a fox sp. After dinner, Adrianna and I went off for a night walk on foot to try for opossums and we walked back along the dirt track and soon came across many insects including many young tarantula species, and a very exciting rustling which we never found out what it was but suspect it was a Brazilian porcupine feeding high up in the canopy. The rustlings were a bit unsettling and when we also found fresh puma tracks we felt it was safer to head home to the lodge.

Next morning we set off early again seeing many new species including **Rufous tailed jacamar, Barred antshrike, Large billed antwren, Short crested and Streaked flycatchers, Silver beaked tanager, Black throated saltator** and many more.

Adrianna drove us back to Cuiaba airport at the end of our time in Chapada, she was a marvellous freelance guide who combined excellent English with deep local knowledge. She was friendly, flexible and always helpful. We can thoroughly recommend her.

Back to Cuiaba airport we saw **King vulture** en route but didn't have time for pictures. We waited to board our flight to Alta Floresta looking around at the other passengers trying to guess who else might be heading to Cristalino. The journey to Cristalino was smooth and the humidity of the Amazonia hotel we stopped at for check in was a shock. We were driven through the countryside of cattle pasture, merging into savannah, then scattered forest becoming increasingly dense, which eventually became an unbroken sea of green, trees taller than anything in Europe with foliage or bromeliads and ferns growing on every inch of available space. We got as far as we could by vehicle then switched to motorboat to complete the final stage of the journey down the Cristalino tributary.

“Welcome to paradise” was the phrase we were greeted with when we moored up at the lodge. Paradise is the only word to describe the Cristalino Jungle Lodge. The beautiful black water river (low in nutrient and sediment content) and its surrounding rainforest forming part of the mighty Amazonian rainforest around us was pristine in its volume of life, diversity and health. No logging or impact by man has ever occurred in this region which is great considering it is the most biologically rich forest on earth. Even while Karen and Sandy, the two superb volunteer guides were giving us an introductory talk, I was aware of about 10 different bird species in

the corner of my eye. Cristalino Lodge has recorded an incredible tally of over 600 species of bird! **Spix's Guan** was the first to be recorded on my camera.

After marvelling at the entire site we went for dinner with the other guests to find out the plan for tomorrow. There was a superb atmosphere in the open area bar at night, everyone exchanging stories of what they had seen.

An early morning start guaranteed by the local red-handed howler monkey troops, meant that we were up before first light listening to the sounds of the forest around our accommodation. When we set off by boat after breakfast it was impossible to keep up with the volume of birds, but it was actually very difficult to see, let alone photograph many of them. **Violaceous trogon, Paradise jacamar, Red throated piping guan, Razor billed currawong, Sunbittern, Green ibis, Greater yellow headed vulture, Plumbeous kite, Swallow tailed kites, Bat falcon, Band tailed antbird, Red and green, Scarlet and Blue and yellow macaw and Green kingfisher** were some of the highlights. We then headed to a natural salt lick where our guide picked up the scent of **White lipped peccary** in the air so we very cautiously approached on foot. We crept to within 10m of them before they flushed, so we all headed up the tree house hide that has been constructed to overlook the salt lick and waited to see if they returned which they did and gave incredible prolonged views.

We spent the rest of the day on foot exploring the forest and climbing to the top of the only hill in the region for a fantastic view of the surrounding forest, where a flyby from a pair of **Red and green macaws** was appreciated.

As dusk fell we took to the boat again for a spotlighting safari, we found plenty of caiman eye shine and had extremely close views of both **Cuvier's dwarf caiman** and **spectacled caiman** the latter we even got to touch as our guide grabbed a youngster to show us up close.

The next few days were spectacular and some of my favourite ever days in the field; superb birds including **Razor billed currawong, Scarlet macaws, Dusky billed parrotlet, Tooth billed wren, Spangled cotinga and White throated toucan**, reptiles including some great encounters with 3 snake species one after another, a captured **Flat headed snake** that was released away from the kitchen, then a mega rarity **Southern Amazonian coral snake** on the track to the accommodation and then **Green parrot snake**. Others included **Aquatic coral snake, Yellow spotted river turtle, Toad headed turtle sp, Amazonian racerunners, Amazonian green anole, Smooth sided, Crested forest and Cane toads**, many butterfly species, tarantulas and excellent mammal sightings with **2 Brazilian tapirs, Brown tufted capuchins, White whiskered spider monkeys and Red handed howler monkeys**.



One of the highlights of our stay at Cristalino was a trip to the top of the 50m high canopy tower constructed to give visitors a unique view over the canopy of the forest, enabling views of the difficult to see canopy species. We found many excellent species from here such as **Red necked aracari**, **Olive oropendola** and **Red throated caracaras**.

Cristalino contains both flooded forest (várzea) and terra firma (does not flood) which supports different communities. The Amazon basin is twice the size of India and extends for over 5 million square km. Thankfully the rates of deforestation are now declining, and Cristalino is a perfect example of how sensitive ecotourism can sustain preservation.

It was very hard to leave Cristalino, but excitement of what was to come was good compensation. We were taken for lunch in Alta Floresta before we went back to the airport. We turned up at a vibrant restaurant where an all you can eat BBQ was on offer in addition to a main 3 course meal. We didn't go hungry!

The flight back to Cuiaba was smooth and we were picked up and back into Cuiaba traffic again, and the local election seemed to be only days away by the amount of press it was getting around the City. We called into to a petrol station to stock up on water and at a friendly souvenir shop in Pocone. As we left the city we reached the beginning of the famous Transpantaneira road that navigates the northern Pantanal, the other main road heads into Bolivia. The Transpantaneira starts off a tarmacked normal byway but the further south you travel the more the road deteriorates and better the habitat becomes. As the light was starting to fade we saw our first Pantanal characters including **Yacare caiman**, **Jabiru storks**, **Great egrets**, **Capybaras**, **Striated herons** and **Mosquitoes**. As dark fell we found our first **South American coati**, a fantastic animal, as it was solitary it was almost certainly a male (**Coatimundi**) as they rarely socialise with the troop when they become fully grown.

The next morning was staggering, we opened the door to about 30 new bird species on the doorstep around the feeders of our accommodation: **Saffron finch**, **Purplish jay**, **Scaled dove**, **Yellow billed cardinals**, **Blue fronted parrot**, **Southern crested caracara**, **Yellow chevroned** and **Monk parakeets** and top target **Toco toucans**.

After a hearty breakfast it was off on a boat trip through the waterways of the Pantanal which produced enormous numbers of herons, egrets, ibises, kingfishers etc. The scenery was very much dominated by gallery forest, open savannah and a network of rivers, pools and swamp. The Pantanal is the world's largest wetland, around the size of England and is the floodplain for the Amazon rainforest. Lots of heron species including; **Agami, Boat-billed, Rufescent tiger, Cocoli, Striated and Little blue herons, Ringed, Green, Amazon and American pygmy kingfishers, Black collared, Great black, Crane and Roadside hawks** some of the many birds seen. We walked among the **Yacare caiman** in the hundreds, which was a superb experience, and watched while **Yellow bellied piranha's** demolished a large catfish around our boat.

Unfortunately the truck was out of action during our stay which reduced our chances of many nocturnal mammals hoped for on night drives.

On other days we went out on foot finding many more birds including the magnificent **Hyacinth macaw**, that was always seen in pairs as they are monogamous, some **Crab eating foxes** gave fantastic views at dusk and **Golden tegu** and **Paraguayan caiman lizard** were found cooling off during the heat of the day. Thanks to the expert local knowledge of our guides we managed to find both **Common** and **Great potoo** in their daytime roosts which was a highlight.

We were sharing our time at the two Pantanal lodges with the award winning American wildlife photographers Joe and Mary Macdonald who were leading a group of photographers.

We then made the journey to literally the end of the road at Porto Jofre (the end destination of the Transpantaneira). Sightings en route included many **Capybara**, our first **Giant otters, Orange headed blackbird, Fork tailed flycatcher**. A distant small mammal crossing the road was probably an agouti, but got away unidentified. However halfway down the road a **Neotropical river otter** gave a better view but was still too distant for any pictures. The drive along the Transpantaneira was very dusty but the views from the open top roof truck were fantastic and everywhere you look was a caiman, heron, egret or American wood stork.

Arriving at Porto Jofre we went straight out onto the boats in search of more wetland species including **Buff necked and Plumbeous ibis, Limpkin, Snowy egrets, Sungrebe, Osprey, Green iguanas and Black howler monkeys** were easily found. We made our back in the fading light to the houseboat for dinner, surrounded by nighthawks and **Greater fishing bats**.

The second day was dominated by **Giant otters** which we had only managed brief glimpses of before, but now were treated to point blank views of the (river wolves). We were able to watch several groups for hours and could see all the interactions between family members. They also demonstrated how successful they were at

hunting in the murky Pantanal waters by hauling out catfish almost the same size as themselves.



The next morning was slightly misty giving a beautiful setting to the still rivers we were navigating. It was about 30 minutes into our dawn search when we heard news of a cow that had drowned in the river overnight and as we entered the area, we could make out a shape in the distance that we realised was the underside of a cow and behind it pulling on the bottom half with its massive canines was a huge male **Jaguar!** I was straight on to it with the camera, and an hour and a half later was still taking pictures when it came out of the shadows to chase off the gathering **Black and Lesser yellow headed vultures.** In the same hour and a half we saw a party of 5-6 **Giant otters** successfully fishing, a **Brazilian tapir** swimming across the river and many birds. We had to drag ourselves away when he became full and moved into thicker cover. But it wasn't long until we were looking at **another male Jaguar.** This time it was sitting sunbathing on the top of a riverside cliff, again giving tremendous views. We couldn't believe it when after lunch we heard news of a 3rd **Jaguar** and it wasn't long before we were looking at yet another male **jaguar.** Unbelievable.

The day ended with **Greater and Lesser fishing bats** hunting along the river.

The next morning started with more **Giant otters** allowing us to hear their out of this world gargling noises as they eat. We headed back upstream to where we saw the last jaguar the day before and after a little searching found him again but this time the views became sensational of this eye watering feline. It started when he stalked along the edge of river showing intermittently before deciding to cross the river, where he swam within 7 m from the boat. Joe and Mary McDonald's group and another couple of boats also shared the experience and all that could be heard for 20 minutes were cameras clicking until someone broke the silence "Well are we all having a good time"?

The Pantanal in the dry season is the best place in the world to see a jaguar due to their high density and habit of hunting and sunbathing along the many water courses.

Unfortunately I was starting to come down with a very nasty virus by the end of the day and was very limited in what we could do. However we continued to find more mammals including our first **Red brocket deer**, more **Black howlers**, **Black striped tufted capuchin**, and a 4th **Jaguar** on the last day was almost too much for the memory card.

The journey back to the Pantanal Wildlife Centre was very productive with birdlife and we searched the open areas for **Marsh deer** where we found several individuals of this endangered deer species. A brief night drive was cut short by a thunder storm but we had a glimpse of a young **Brazilian tapir**, **Red brocket deer** but missed out on a **Crab-eating racoon**.

Due to illness the last day was cut short as we headed back to Cuibia earlier to see a doctor in Pocone first. Thanks must go to the wonderful staff at the Pantanal Wildlife Centre for their help. The journey back home was straight forward but unpleasant and luckily the virus did not last long once back home in the UK.

This trip was organised on a tailor made basis by the wonderfully professional and knowledgeable team at Reef and Rainforest Tours, which many thanks are due. Thanks must also go to the excellent guides at all the lodges we stayed at and the fellow travellers we met along the way for their help, good humour and superb ability to find wildlife.

Identified Species lists.

Mammals:

- Brazilian guinea pig 4
- Brazilian forest rabbit (Tappati) 1
- White whiskered spider monkey 10
- Red handed howler 2
- Brown tufted capuchin 12
- Black striped tufted capuchin 2
- Black howler 8
- Brazilian Tapir 4
- White lipped peccary 24
- South American coati 5
- Crab eating fox 2
- Jaguar 4
- Neotropical river otter 2

- Giant otter 25+
- Marsh deer 3
- Pampas deer 1
- Red brocket deer 1
- Lesser white lined bat 4
- Long nosed bat 16
- Greater fishing bat 11
- Lesser fishing bat 2

Reptiles and Amphibians

- Western amazon coral snake 1
- Aquatic coral snake 1
- Flat headed snake 1
- Parrot snake 1
- Paraguayan caiman lizard 1
- Green iguana 3
- Golden tegu 1
- Toad headed turtle 1
- Yellow spotted river turtle 14
- Yacare caiman 500+
- Spectacled caiman 4
- Cuvier's dwarf caiman 2
- Chaco spiny lizard 6
- Amazonian racerunner 16
- Smooth sided toad 4
- Crested forest toad 1
- Cane toad 2

Birds

- Anhinga
- Neotropical cormorant
- Bare faced ibis
- Plumbeous ibis
- Buff-necked ibis
- Green ibis
- Black-crowned night heron
- Boat-billed heron
- Striated heron
- Rufescent tiger heron
- Little blue heron
- Agami heron

- Snowy egret
- Great egret
- Cattle egret
- Capped heron
- Cocoi heron
- American wood stork
- Jabiru stork
- Roseate spoonbill
- Southern screamer
- Muscovy duck
- Brazilian teal
- American black vulture
- Turkey vulture
- Lesser yellow-headed vulture
- Greater yellow-headed vulture
- King vulture
- Osprey
- Swallow-tailed kite
- White tailed kite
- Snail kite
- Plumbeous kite
- Hook billed kite
- Crane hawk
- Broad winged hawk
- Roadside hawk
- Savannah hawk
- Great black hawk
- Black-collared hawk
- Black chested-buzzard eagle
- American kestrel
- Bat falcon
- Laughing falcon
- Red throated caracara
- Yellow headed caracara
- Southern crested caracara
- Greater rhea
- Limpkin
- Red-throated piping guan
- Blue-throated piping guan
- Spix's guan
- Rusty-margined guan

- Chaco chachalaca
- Red legged serima
- Bare faced curassow
- Razor billed curassow
- Wattled jacana
- Gray-necked wood rail
- Purple gallinule
- Sunbittern
- Sungrebe
- Pied lapwing
- Southern lapwing
- Large billed tern
- Black skimmer
- Yellow billed tern
- Ruddy ground dove
- Blue ground dove
- Picui ground dove
- Scaled dove
- White tipped dove
- Picazuro pigeon
- Blue winged macaw
- Hyacinth macaw
- Blue and yellow macaw
- Scarlet macaw
- Red and green macaw
- White eyed parakeet
- Peach fronted parakeet
- Yellow chevroned parakeet
- Orange winged parrot
- White bellied parrot
- Blue headed parrot
- Blue fronted parrot
- Monk parakeet
- Smooth billed ani
- Guira cuckoo
- Squirrel cuckoo
- Little cuckoo
- Burrowing owl
- Common potoo
- Great potoo
- Rufous nightjar

- Blackish nightjar
- Amazonian swift
- Black throated mango
- Fork tailed woodnymph
- White chinned sapphire
- Amenthyst woodstar
- Violaceous trogon
- White tailed trogon
- Blue crowned mot-mot
- Ringed kingfisher
- Amazon kingfisher
- American pygmy kingfisher
- Green kingfisher
- Rufus tailed jacamar
- Paradise jacamar
- Swallow winged puffbird
- Black fronted nunbird
- White eared puffbird
- Red-necked aracari
- Chestnut-eared aracari
- Channel-billed toucan
- White throated toucan
- Toco toucan
- Campo flicker
- Crimson crested woodpecker
- White woodpecker
- Amazonian barred woodcreeper
- Great woodcreeper
- Rufous cacholote
- Great antshrike
- Barred antshrike
- Rufus winged antwren
- Band tailed antbird
- Spangled cotinga
- Bare necked fruitcrow
- Screaming piha
- White crowned manakin
- Masked tityra
- Yellow bellied elaenia
- Cattle tyrant
- Black-backed water tyrant

- Lesser kisadee
- Great kisadee
- Boat-billed flycatcher
- Fork tailed flycatcher
- Streaked flycatcher
- Variegated flycatcher
- Cliff flycatcher
- Short-crested flycatcher
- Tropical kingbird
- White winged swallow
- White-banded swallow
- Southern-rough winged swallow
- Brown-chested martin
- Black capped donacobius
- Unicoloured blackbird
- Rufus-bellied thrush
- Pale breasted thrush
- Crested oropendola
- Olive oropendola
- Chopi blackbird
- Shiny cowbird
- Giant cowbird
- Scarlet headed blackbird
- Orange backed troupial
- Silver beaked tanager
- Sayaca tanager
- Palm tanager
- White-lined tanager
- Swallow tanager
- Red crested cardinal
- Red capped cardinal
- Yellow billed cardinal
- Red legged honeycreeper
- Rufus-bellied euphonia
- Saffron finch
- Purplish jay
- Curl crested jay
- Blue-black grassquit
- Rufus collared sparrow
- Saffron billed sparrow

