

Pantanal, Brazil 12th July to 20th July 2015

Steve Firth
Catherine Griffiths

This trip was an attempt to see some mammal species that had eluded us on many previous visits to South America. Cats were the main focus, specifically Jaguar and Ocelot, and we were hoping for Giant Anteater as a bonus.

When we started planning the trip some ten months in advance, the exchange rate was £1 = R\$3.8. The pound strengthened considerably in the intervening period and was £1 = R\$5.0 during the visit. This helped to appreciably reduce costs .

We flew from London to Campo Grande via Sao Paulo with TAM. There was a 10 hour stopover, but the flight was a great deal cheaper than any offered by other Airlines. On the return leg we flew from Cuiaba to London again via Sao Paulo, again with a long layover. The total Cost per person was £943.35. TAM proved to be more efficient than we had expected (we had had a few memorable difficulties with VARIG 15 years previously) and can be recommended.

The Campo Grande to Cuiaba leg was flown with AZUL, booked via their website. The rate quoted, R\$546.50 (£70.84 each at the time of booking) for two people, was actually charged to our credit card as US Dollars \$546.50. This was noticed immediately and after a call to AZUL in Brazil, they swiftly refunded the first charge and debited the correct amount. AZUL are a low cost carrier, but this was not reflected in their service or punctuality.

Fazenda San Francisco, South Pantanal 12th July to 15th July

Web Site: www.fazendasanfrancisco.tur.br/
Email: reservas@fazendasanfrancisco.tur.br

This working farm is well known for providing a very good opportunity of seeing Ocelot. We had arranged to stay long enough to go on three night drives to maximise our opportunities of seeing an Ocelot.

The arrangements had been made well in advance via email contact with Roberta Coelho.

Roberta has a good command of English, replies quickly, is extremely helpful and is passionate about wildlife.

At Campo Grande we stayed overnight at the excellent Harbor Self Burititi Hotel, paying £46 for a "Luxury Twin Suite", including breakfast. The staff were cheerful and happy to help when we had questions.

From Campo Grande airport we picked up a pre-arranged hire car from Unidas. A local tour company, Ekturismo Bonito had quoted R\$900 (£236) to take us to and from Fazenda San Francisco, which seemed a bit steep. The vehicle rented was a Ford and seemed similar to a new model Fiesta and was booked through the rentalcars.com website, costing £106.23 for a 4 day rental. The rentalcars.com website only allowed us to book the pick up of the car at 9.00am at the earliest. After making the booking, I contacted Roberta and asked if she would be kind enough to call Unidas for me to ask if the rental could be picked up earlier. Roberta duly contacted them and arranged the earlier pick up.

My command of Brazilian Portuguese did not come up to scratch, but a helpful lady from the Airport Information Desk cheerfully assisted and we were soon on our way. It is 236km to Fazenda San Francisco (FSF), which took around 4 hours and we saw a few road kill Giant Anteaters along the way.

The girls working at the Office at FSF spoke no English and elicited the help of Enrique, the English speaking resident wildlife researcher. We were soon booked in and off on our first activity, the afternoon Trail Walk. This was led by Armand who was an excellent bird guide and we saw two lifers, a Rusty-collared Seedeater and a Golden (Yellow)-Collared Macaw. On the drive back from the Trail Walk, Armand, who was in touch with other Guides on his radio, made a detour which provided our first views of a Giant Anteater. It was a little further away than we would have liked, but we were in no mood to complain.

The evening night drives were undertaken in a roughly twenty-seat open vehicle. We were the only "serious" wildlife watchers on the night drives, however, the Guides quickly warmed to the fact that we were desperate to see what they could show us and surprisingly catered for us rather than the Brazilian tourists that were accompanying us.

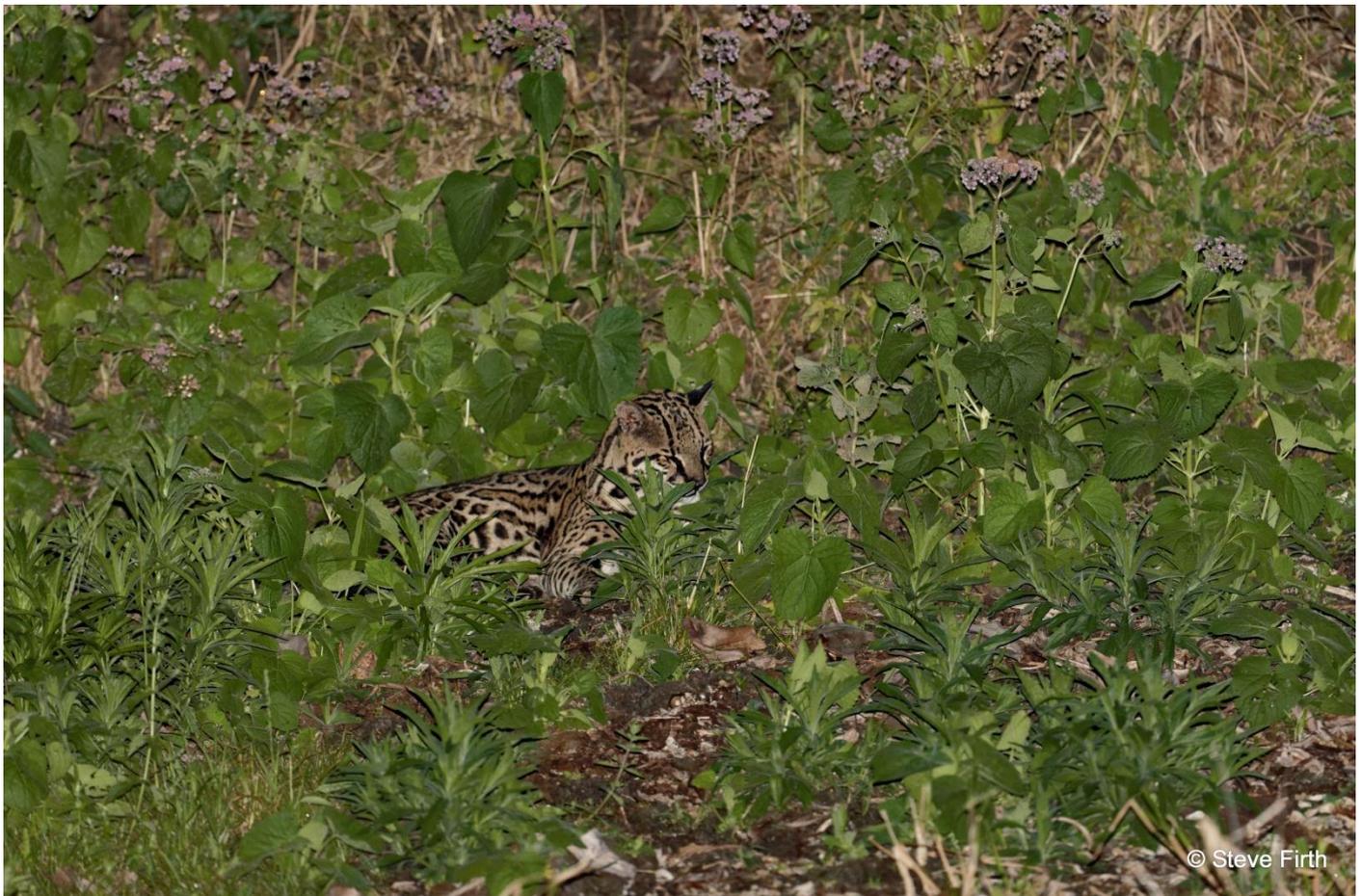
On the first night drive we saw Marsh Deer, a Giant Anteater with her baby on her back and had 4 separate Ocelot sightings.



Giant Anteater carrying baby

Two of the Ocelot sightings were distant and fleeting, but two were closer and more prolonged.





We went to our beds very happy after having had the obligatory congratulatory "snifter". Our second day started with a morning horse ride, which missed out on the hoped for close-up view of a Giant Anteater, but did produce a Hyacinth Macaw.

In the afternoon we went on a canoe on the river. We didn't paddle as we wanted to be able use our binoculars and cameras. The only mammal of note was a family of Black Howler Monkeys. On the walk back from the river we saw a distant Giant Anteater and as dusk fell two Crab-eating Foxes padded past us at a distance of about 6 metres.

Our second night drive yielded Marsh Deer, Crab-eating Foxes, Crab-Eating Raccoon, Giant Anteater, and 2 distant and brief Ocelots.

A boat trip on the morning of our third day was quiet and we saw Black Howler Monkeys again and Black-striped (Tufted) Capuchin. A distant Giant Anteater showed up on the drive back for lunch.

An afternoon on a safari vehicle provided further views of Marsh Deer and Giant Anteater.

The final night drive produced a better sighting of a Crab-eating Raccoon, Crab-eating Foxes, and two Ocelots. Right at the end of the night drive, we stopped to watch a Giant Anteater that was a lot closer than we had seen before. The guide on the spotlight shouted to us to look at a spot where he thought he had seen movement. I saw what I thought might have been an ear and Catherine thought that she might be able to make out two ears. We also thought that we might be imagining the ears! Thankfully, after 5 - 10 minutes of waiting we did indeed see movement, which revealed something that we had not been expecting - a Pantanal Cat!



Pantanal Cat

Luckily it did stop and look at us for a minute or so.



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Understandably, this necessitated another "snifter" prior to falling into bed. The night drives had been excellent in terms of mammal spotting. We also saw *Nacunda* Nighthawk and Scissor-tailed Nightjar on each night drive and had great views of a Striped Owl on one drive.



Striped Owl

We went owling with Roberta around the Fazenda's buildings on our last night. We failed to locate a calling Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, but had great views of a Barn Owl and a pair of American Kestrel roosting in the eaves of a building.

On our last morning we had to leave at 8.30am in order to catch our flight to Cuiaba, so were unable to participate in one of the pre-planned morning activities. Roberta volunteered to take us out herself from 6.30am and she showed us an adult Horned Owl together with 3 juveniles in their huge nest and an adult burrowing Owl with 5 juveniles. At least 34 Marsh Deer were counted together in one open field. Roberta was brought up on the Fazenda and told us that she had never seen so many together before.

Mammals seen at Fazenda San Francisco

- Ocelot - *Felis pardalis*
- Marsh Deer - *Blastoceros dichotomous*
- Capybara - *Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*
- Crab-eating Fox - *Cerdocyon thous*
- Crab-eating Raccoon - *Procyon cancrivorus*
- Black Howler Monkey - *Alouatta caraya*
- Six-banded Armadillo - *Euphractus sexcinctus*
- Black-striped Tufted Capuchin - *Cebus libidinosus*
- Pantanal Cat - *Felis brachata*
- Giant Anteater - *Myrmecophaga tridactyla*

Jaguar Ecological Reserve (JER), North Pantanal 16th July to 19th July

Web Site: www.jaguarreserve.com

Email: rejaguar@bol.com.br

Overnight stay at the Hotel Roari in Cuiaba, paying £48 for a "Deluxe Twin Room" including Breakfast. A clean, comfortable hotel just outside the city centre and good value.

At 8.00AM we were picked up as arranged by Eduardo Falcão de Arruda of Jaguar Ecological Reserve.

Eduardo owns and runs JER. He is an accomplished bird guide and is good company.

JER is at km100 on the Transpantaneira and it is a 70-90 minute drive from JER to Porto Jofre where the boats leave to look for Jaguar.

We had emailed Eduardo and made him fully aware that we had no interest in the various other morning and afternoon activities that were on offer. We agreed that for three whole days we would be on the boats in order to maximise our chances of seeing a Jaguar.

During our stay we went on 2 night drives, guided by Eduardo. They were short, only being an hour or so in duration. Sightings were few but included Brazilian Rabbit, Crab-eating Foxes on both trips and a brief look at a Brazilian Tapir before it crashed it's way off the dirt road into the undergrowth. Good views were obtained of a Great Potoo on both nights.

On the first two days the weather was quite cool and the morning drive to Porto Jofre was very cold.

The drive to and from Porto Jofre provided the opportunity to see Marsh Deer and Brazilian Cavy.

Day One on the River

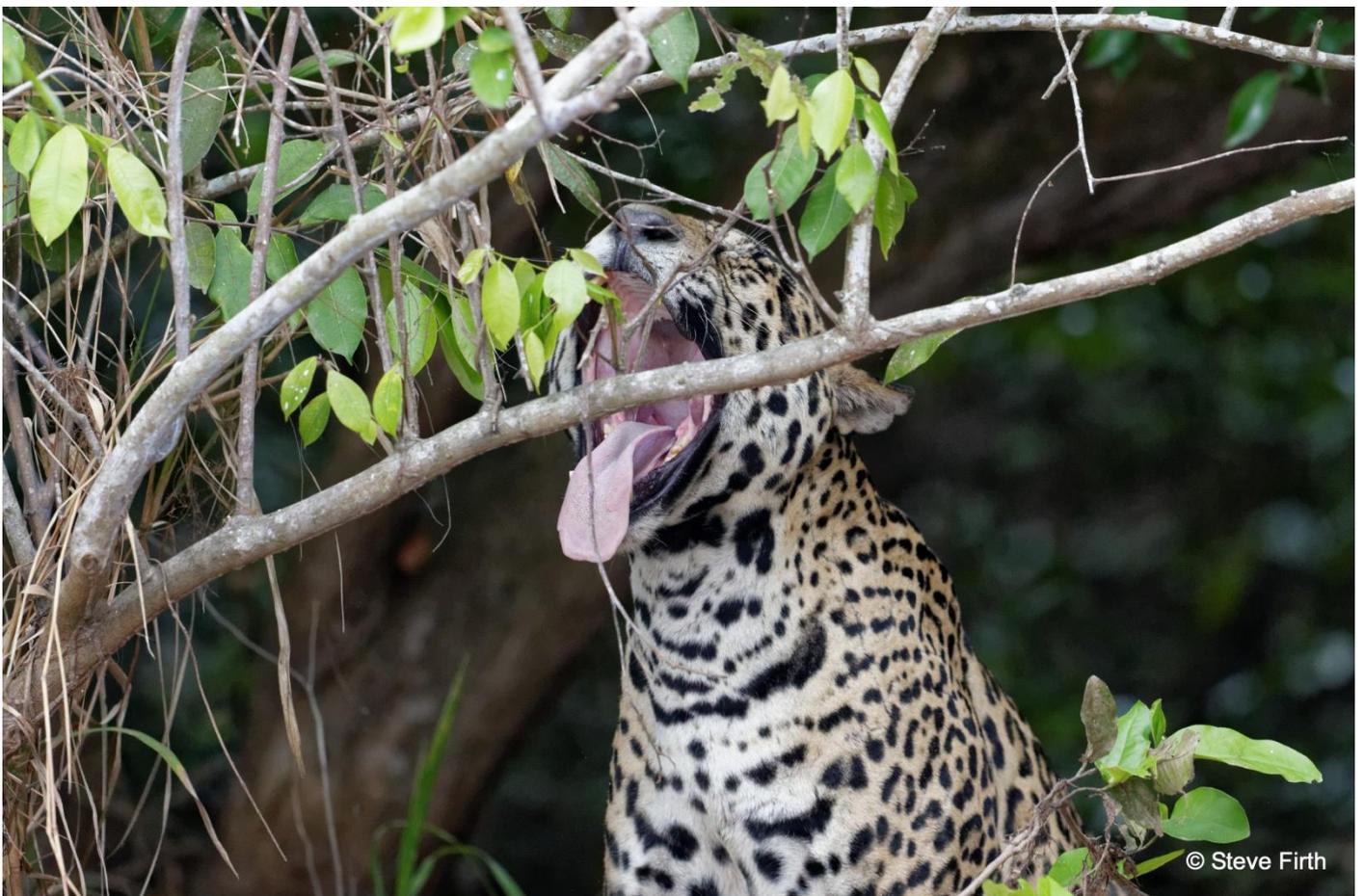
Approximately 6.5 hours on the river from 9.00am.

After a few hours of searching Eduardo announced that there was a Jaguar lying on the river bank ahead.

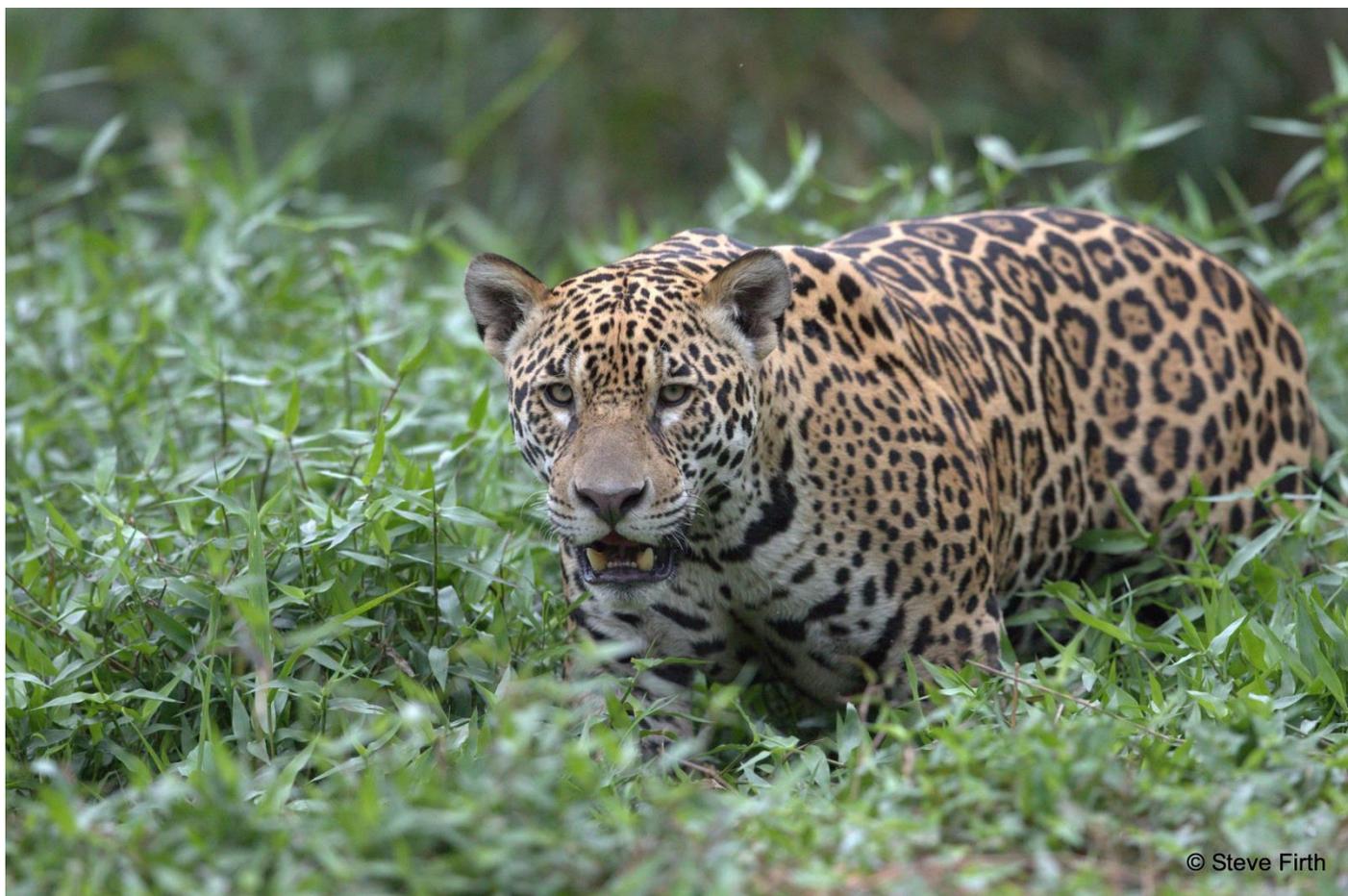
Eduardo manoeuvred the boat adroitly and it came to rest against a fallen tree, in front of a male Jaguar, that we later were able to identify as Maxime. We were spellbound and had around 10 minutes observing Maxime before another boat arrived. A few minutes later Maxime slowly made his way out of sight and left us high-fiving each other enthusiastically.



Maxime



An hour later and we were watching "Andre", a big Male Jaguar, prowling along the river bank for over 20 minutes. It was an excellent sighting and the pressure was off after two great sightings in one day. We were surprised at how close we had been to both Jaguars.



Andre

Day Two on the River

Approximately 6.5 hours on the river from 9.00am.

We were guided today by Abigail Martin.

Abbie is a Field Biologist working at JER and is in the process of compiling a Jaguar Identification Project database for the area.

If you obtain any Jaguar photographs, please consider posting them on her Facebook page, "Jaguar Identification Project", as a way of assisting the Project. If the Jaguar you have photographed has not been seen before you have the honour of choosing a name for it.

One Jaguar was seen today for about 2 seconds only, standing on the river bank in the distance, before retreating into the vegetation.

We did get good views of a Neotropical River Otter and three Giant River Otters.



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Neotropical River Otter



© Steve Firth

Giant River Otter

Day Three on the River

Approximately 7.5 hours on the river from 9.00am

Eduardo was guiding us today. A nice surprise was a Brazilian Porcupine high in a tree. Giant River Otters were seen very well.



Brazilian Porcupine

Eduardo stayed out on the river longer than usual as he was clearly wanting to find another Jaguar for us.

His persistence paid off right at the end of the day. A Jaguar had been seen by others, but was not visible by the time that we arrived in the area. Eduardo chose his spot to wait out in the fierce heat. Twenty minutes later saw a female Jaguar materialise on the river bank directly across from where we were.

Her coat seemed wet as though she had been in water recently. Once again Eduardo showed his prowess at manoeuvring the boat into an excellent position and we enjoyed lovely views of the female Jaguar that we later discovered to be "Patricia".



Patricia

Mammals seen from Jaguar Ecological Reserve

- Marsh Deer - *Blastoceros dichotomous*
- Capybara - *Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*
- Crab-eating Fox - *Cerdocyon thous*
- Black-striped Tufted Capuchin - *Cebus libidinosus*
- Neotropical River Otter - *Lutra longicaudis*
- Giant Otter - *Pteronura brasiliensis*
- Brazilian Tapir - *Tapirus terrestris*
- Brazilian Porcupine - *Coendou prehensilis*
- Brazilian Cavy - *Cavia aperea*
- Brazilian or Forest Rabbit - *Sylvilagus brasiliensis*
- Azara's Agouti - *Dasyprocta azarai*
- Jaguar - *Panthera Onca*

Pousada Currupira d'Araras, Serra das Araras 20th July

Website: www.pousadacurrupira.com.br

This Pousada is located 120km north of Cuiaba and is well known for having a Harpy Eagle nest in it's grounds. We were aware that the nest had been abandoned by the female a month or so before our arrival. However, we still wanted to visit as there were some bird species that could be seen there that we had not seen before.

Eduardo had liaised with them to arrange a "Day Pass" to allow us to bird there and on the recommendation of Paulo Boute I had asked for the services of Alex their resident bird guide. The Day Pass cost R\$200 (£43), which covered both of us and included a very nice buffet style lunch. This was extremely good value.

Eduardo had arranged for a driver to take us from JER to Currupira and then back to Cuiaba later in the day, at a cost of R\$300 (£64). We left JER at 4.00am and it took around 5.5 hours to reach Currupira, eating our packed breakfast as we drove. On the Transpantaneira at about 5.00am we saw an Ocelot on the road, before it ran away from us on the road before ducking into the road side vegetation.

Shortly after we arrived we bumped into Paulo Boute who was leading a Photography Tour Group. We had no idea that he would be there and we had the opportunity to thank him in person for the information that he had generously provided pre-trip.

Alex proved to be an excellent bird guide. Amongst other birds we saw: Undulated Tinamou, Tataupa Tinamou, Brazilian Teal, Rusty-margined Guan, King Vulture, Least Grebe, Ferruginous-Pygmy-Owl, Black-tailed Trogon, Blue-crowned Trogon, Blue-crowned Motmot, Swallow-winged Puffbird, Brown Jacamar, Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, Blue-headed Parrot, Dusky-headed Parrot, White-eyed Parakeet, Black-throated Antbird, and Magpie Tanager. While wandering off by ourselves prior to lunch, we wondered why the tree next to us was creaking so often when there was no wind. It wasn't the tree creaking, but a group of Red-shouldered Macaws.

It was a long, hot day finished by a forced route march through the forest to get us back to our vehicle in reasonable time to drive back to Cuiaba. A loud rustling just off the forest track proved to be a Six-banded Armadillo. He was initially skittish, but after we stood quietly for over five minutes he approached Catherine head on, stopped six inches from her toes, lifted his head as high as he could and then sniffed very loudly!

He was way too close for the lens that was on my camera, but it was a nice way to end a very enjoyable trip.

There were holes dug by Six-banded Armadillo everywhere, so this should be a good place to see them.

In total we saw 18 mammal species and 158 bird species.



Six-banded or Yellow Armadillo