

Trip report Pantanal, Brazil : 13.10.11 – 25.10.11.

We have never really been looking for big cats on our travels. Torres del Paine in January 2011 changed all that. On a number of occasions we spotted Pumas and the closest one came was about 3 meters from us. We cannot remember when our hearts pumped that fast the last time but it was an experience to remember. We were smitten. We have been to the rainforests of Latin- and South America many times but never coming closer to a Jaguar than a frustrating print on the river bed. With Pantanal we hoped to change that and to be on the safe side we booked a 10 day tour with Jaguar Eco Lodge. We also decided to try a few other lodges to see some different animals, Pouso Alegre Eco Lodge and Araras Eco Lodge. I guess no lodge with self respect can do without the name 'Eco' in it. If Jaguar Eco Lodge had turned off the lights during the day they might have come closer to the meaning of it. As we already have planned our trips for 2012, we have decided to go for the Snow Leopard in 2013.

We booked directly over the internet with the recommended Jaguar Eco Lodge in the northern Pantanal. An energetic multilingual Julio, our guide for the first days, picked us up in a minibus at our hotel in Cuiaba for the 6-7 hour long journey on a dusty Transpantaneira Road. It did not take long before we had spotted our first **Marsh Deer** and families of **Capybaras** and a number of water birds and Caymans, but no price for spotting those. We arrived at the lodge late afternoon and soon thereafter we went on our first walk behind the lodge, which did not produce any mammals. The first night drive with Julio also did not produce any mammals, which was not very surprising as Julio only pointed the light in front of the car and talked the whole time.



Jaguar Eco lodge offers simple accommodation and good food. The organization is somewhat chaotic, but, all in all, everything worked very well. Breakfast is served at 5 am and around 5:30 am you leave for the one hour long drive to Puerto Joffre where you take a boat on Rio Cuiaba for probably the best Jaguar viewing on the planet. This is how you spend your time here, driving back and forth from the lodge and jetting up and down on the river. The one hour drive mornings and afternoon/evenings is very nice with some good spotting opportunities, for mammals, reptiles and birds. It is like a zoo without cages.

On the second day it was time for Jaguar spotting so it was not very difficult to get out of the bed. The hour long drive did not produce much. Once out on the river it only took an hour or so before we found Julio with his head down towards his knees, like in a prayer or in deep sleep. I shook his knee and asked him to wake up. He said he was not sleeping but thinking. Another boat had had some troubles with the motor, he said, and he was thinking about them and their sorry state (when we asked them later that evening they did not have any motor problem, their driver only went very

slow). We found Julio in that non-sleeping position over the next three days apparently feeling sorry for a situation that could have been but never was. With all that deep daily thinking we can safely say that he is the most compassionate guide we have ever had.

Luckily, on Rio Cuiaba, you are not necessary dependent on a good guide to see the Jaguars in Pantanal as you are not alone on the river and, anyway, we asked Julio to follow Eduardo as much as we could, to the dismay of one angry elderly English lady he was guiding. After two hours we saw our first troop of 5 **Black Howler Monkeys**. As we got closer they quickly disappeared into the trees and after another hour we spotted our first **Jaguar**, a female enjoying the fresh breeze on the river bed. We were some 30 meters away and tried to film and photograph her as well as we could, which is not that easy from a rocking boat. This was something of the most beautiful creature we have ever seen. We stayed with her for a few hours before our boatman wanted lunch. We did not feel good about leaving her but they assured us that she would be there when we returned. She was not and we were a bit frustrated as we thought we may not see another.

After lunch the hunt continued and we went in into one of the Three-brothers river, three narrow tributaries to Rio Cuiaba. It did not take long in early afternoon to spot our first family of **Giant-river Otters**. There were 9 of them, including three babies. They seem to be used to boats and did not care too much that we were around. They were fishing, eating and playing only a few meters from us. We saw them there on several occasions over the next few days as well as in Rio Piquiri.



Later in the afternoon we spotted another female Jaguar, but did not get a very good view as she stayed inside the bushes. Late afternoon, not far from Puerto Joffre, we went into another small tributary, the last one for the day. Another Jaguar female was relaxing by the water not caring too much about us. After half an hour she crossed the river in front of our boat. We could not believe our eyes. I did not want to believe my eyes when another f***ing boat came and blocked my view and film camera, but I was allowed to go onto the beach and could continue to film her crossing the river which was even better. We did not want to leave her just yet and stayed on as she disappeared into the bush. She came out a bit further away, but she was not alone. 2 young babies followed her and they were in no rush and did their Jaguar thing in front of our cameras. I was even allowed to go on land again on the other river side to film her and the cubs. Apparently this is not a common sight and was the first time Eduardo had ever seen it. So, on the first day we had seen as many Jaguars as monkeys, which was a bit surprising. Not that we are complaining.



Too see Jaguars is not a sure thing though, even during the good season. We had 2 more days of good warm weather and we saw 2 Jaguars each day on the river bed, including one big male and one juvenile. On the last three days on the river we had bad and cold weather and did not see anyone. Even in September, supposedly to be the best month for Jaguars, they had five days of consecutive rains, a very very unusual occurrence and no one found any Jaguars in that time.

Pantanal offers excellent viewing of other mammals as well. We wanted very much to see Yellow Armadillos (Six-banded Armadillo) and the best place to see them so far north was at another lodge at Rio Piquiri. Supposedly one is habituated at this lodge and comes out every day around 1 pm and she had two babies when we were there and it was a sure thing to see her. Twice we went there and twice we saw nothing. The frustration left however when we realized that we had already seen them in the southern part of the Pantanal 8 years ago. Going to the Piquiri Lodge however was not a complete waste of time though. On one occasion we spotted another Jaguar under a few bushes on the way back and on another occasion a **Brazilian Tapir** drinking water by the river in the late afternoon. While looking at the Jaguar on the way back from the Yellow Armadillo two **Black-striped Tufted Capuchins** passed by swiftly. On one occasion we found a family of Long-nosed Bats hanging under a tree on the river bank. On a couple occasions, early mornings and late afternoon, on the

camping ground at Puerto Joffre, a couple of **Brazilian Guinea Pigs** crossed the road in front of our truck.



You drive back to the lodge at sunset and if you have someone knowing how (willing) to use the torch it can be quite productive. Julio did not, maybe he was thinking again. Our third guide, Tito, knew and it made a difference. Apart from a **Crab-eating Fox** we had not seen any wildlife on any of the drives back. One evening about 7, a cat came running towards us on the road. It turned out to be an **Ocelot**. He seemed not to mind us too much as long we kept still. He was strutting around sniffing bushes. When he came too close he went down into the bush. A couple of times we went back with the car some 50m and waited and after a while he came up again on the road walking towards us again. We had hoped to see an Ocelot, but for sure not as well as we did.



On day five we decided to take a break from the boat trips to a walk behind the lodge. A bad decision as this was the last day with really good weather. Junior was our new guide, a very nice young man but with no interest in wildlife. We had seen him a few days earlier with an American couple who were very interested in birds and had specifically requested a birding guide and were not too happy. Anyway, he was supposed to take us on the walk but he did not know the way, so an old man came with us to show him and us the way. The walk takes you through a dry low growing forest on a very wide well marked path. It was the end of the dry season so the trees did not have many leaves. We hoped to see Pantanal Marmosets and it is supposed to be good for Black Howler Monkeys as well. A couple of **Azara's Agouti's** crossed our path. We really really wanted to see the Marmosets, but still no luck. Junior may not have known, or being interested in wildlife but seemed to know a lot about Gucci and Armani. He was a very good boatsman though and at least he tried hard and did long hours with a smile on his face, so in a few years time, who knows.

The last 4 days we finally got a real guide Tito. He was sympathetic, energetic and very knowledgeable. He was also born in the Pantanal (a cousin of Eduardo). A good guide really makes

the difference. Night drives around the lodge can be very productive. On a couple of drives with Tito we spotted one Jaguar, 2 Brazilian Tapirs and one **9-banded Armadillo** swiftly crossing the road, giving us a full 3-4 seconds view.

Pouso Alegre Eco Lodge is a big hacienda some 7km off the Transpantaneira. It is good value with good food, nice enough rooms and very good walking opportunities, not too bad after so many days on the boat. On the way too Pouso Alegre we spotted five **South-American Coatis**, some **Red-Brocket Deer** and plenty of Marsh Deer. These were very common on the premises too. On the first night drive we could add 6 Crab-eating Foxes and 4 **Crab-eating Racoons** to that. They seemed to be very common and we spotted them night as well as a few **Brazilian Rabbits** during the day.



Early mornings we walked around in the forest patches around the lodge desperately looking for the Pantanal Marmosets. Some American students had seen a troop one day before we came and Tito heard them and this was the closest we came to them here, we walked with someone that heard them. We saw a few troops of Black Howler Monkeys and Black-striped Tufted Capuchins though and Azara's Agoutis were plentiful in the forest and around the lodge.



After the afternoon drive on the second day we went to the upscale Araras Eco Lodge, some 12 kilometers from Pouso Alegre to book a room. Just when we arrived the receptionist came running and shouting that a **Giant Anteater** was only a kilometer away, so we drove fast, ran with our cameras and got a descent view. Tito and other guides were careful that we stayed where we had the wind in our faces. We got a room for two nights and booked a barbeque tour to a nearby river. Tito told us that the Pantanal Marmosets were virtually guaranteed there, or that was how we understood him anyway. We felt we were on a roll and later the same evening 2 Brazilian Tapirs delighted us with their presence at Pouso Alegre.



The barbeque tour took us to a small river about one hour drive from Araras. The meat was very nice however, we did not see any Marmosets. Later we were told by the manager that most people see them, so maybe we only were unlucky. When the other tourists went on their canoeing trip and later went piranha fishing we were bored and went into the forest ourselves and found a big family of 14 Giant River Otters and our first, but not last, **Neotropical River Otter**. On our way back a **Six-banded Armadillo** ran along the road but swiftly retreated into the bushes when we came. We would have loved to follow him but as we sat in a big truck with many others we had to stay put in the truck.

Maybe the best place to see animals at Araras is along the board walk to a lookout tower. Azara's Agoutis, Black Howler Monkeys, Black-striped Tufted Capuchins, Crab-eating Foxes, and Crab-eating Racoons abound and were quite approachable. About half way on the board walk there is a pond and on numerous occasions, morning and afternoon at least one, sometimes two, Neo-tropical River Otter were fishing in the muddy shallow water. In a big tree just outside the lodge we found a group of roosting **Greater Fishing Bats**.





The night walks were also productive with a Grey Four-eyed Opossum and 2 Brazilian Tapirs as highlights. One night, walking back from the tower, firsts we heard something munching and then we saw a big grey ass. We knew this could only mean one thing, a Tapir, so we positioned ourselves in what we hoped was a good position in front of her and hoped she would come out. After a lot of munching they did, first one head popped out and then a second smaller version, her baby. Unfortunately the baby was not that small and had grown out of her strips, our how you put it. They were not even 5 meters from us and just enjoyed dinner. We stayed for an hour or so with them and enjoyed every minute of it before they went away.



The last day was a day we reserved for Pantanal Marmosets. We went back and forth on all available tracks, but no sign of them, and we were not happy. The weather had turned worse. The air was heavy and the clouds dark and we expected some heavy showers. On the last walk we did, the track to a second tower across the big road, around five in the afternoon we first heard then saw 5 very agile **Pantanal Marmosets**. Apparently the Marmosets were not a myth after all. 10 minutes later it poured down. Even though we could not take a photo of them at least we saw them and we walked back very wet and happy.

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