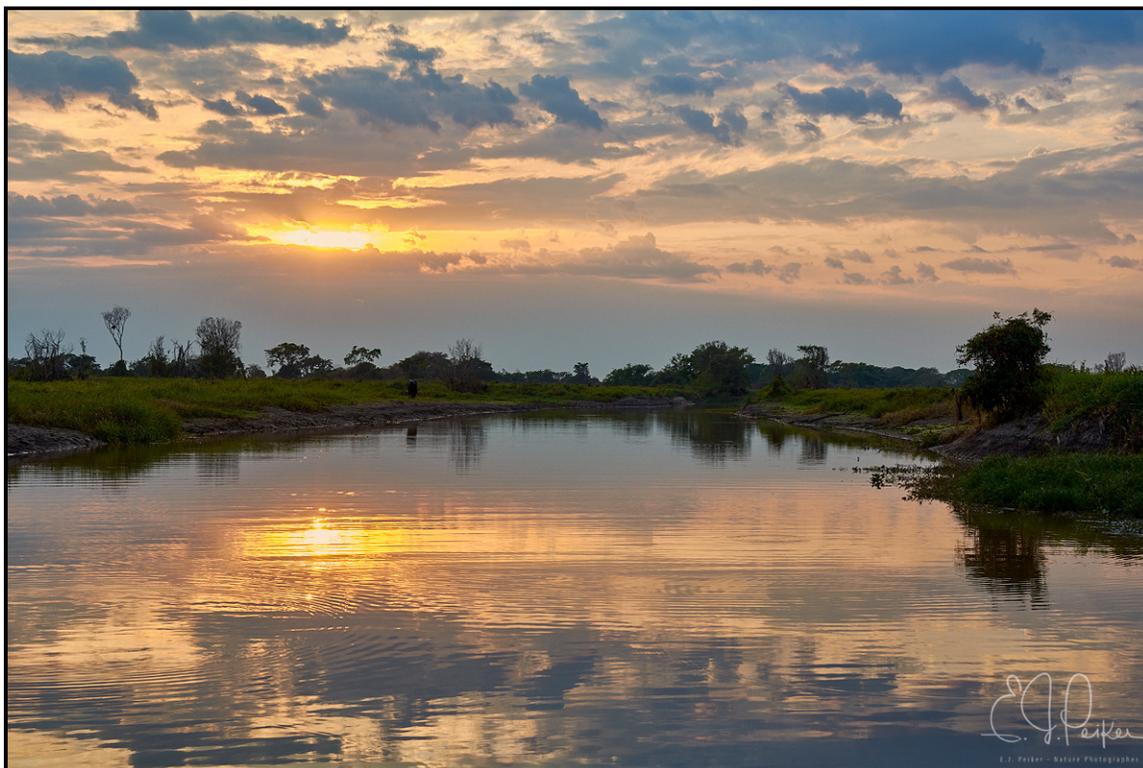


The Pantanal - A Trip Report

by

E.J. Peiker

"I'm sitting on my porch during our mid-day break overlooking the Rio São Lourenço with a view from the state of Mato Grosso into the state of Mato Grosso do Sul across the river. In front of me are 6 Crested Caracara, some inside my minimum focus distance of 10.6 feet, in the tree above me are two Hyacinth Macaw and a Toco Toucan. There is the resort cat resting on my porch, there is a Buff-necked Ibis next door and three horses just strolled by... For real!" – E.J. Peiker - Facebook, Aug 15, 2017



The quote above is a post I made to Facebook from southwest Brazil's Pantanal last month. The Pantanal is part of the world's largest wetlands complex that includes the Amazon to the north and Cerrado to the east. It is home to an incredible array of birds and mammals. The top of the food chain is the magnificent Jaguar and the most highly desired photographic subject in the area.

I first heard details about what one might find in the Pantanal about 12 years ago from an Argentinean birder/bird photographer/birding guide and later a local friend and put it on my list of places to one day visit. While in Ecuador in January with the NatureScapes Photo Tours, I learned a lot more about the Pantanal from our South American guide and this set the wheels in motion to finally make it to this remote part of central South America. My trip got off to a bit of a

rocky start upon arriving in Brazil. When I arrived in Sao Paulo and was getting ready to get off the plane I discovered that my wallet was missing. My Passport is in its own passport wallet so I wasn't in danger of immediately being sent back to the USA but I had no money, no credit cards, no anything. The last time I remembered having used it was at security in Phoenix. The flight attendant on the brand new 787-9 that flew me from Dallas Ft Worth to Sao Paulo took apart the seat and we still couldn't find it so I had no choice but to immigrate into Brazil with no money whatsoever. Since Greg Downing, our NatureScapes tour leader for this adventure and a long time friend was about 4 hours behind me and on his way on a United Airlines flight, I texted him what happened and asked him to get me some cash out of an ATM upon his arrival and I would pay him back. As I was waiting for my next flight from Sao Paulo to Cuiaba, just before boarding the aircraft, an airport security worker came up to me and handed me my wallet. The flight attendant had alerted the ground crew to be on the lookout for it and found it on the plane. Even though I had my wallet with all my cards back, by the time the wallet made its way back into my hands about 2 hours after landing, the \$300 in cash that was in the wallet was gone. At least I had my cards and I was able to get some cash from an ATM and my friend did not need to. I filed a report with American Airlines and they are still "investigating" - that money is gone forever. In the future I will split my cards and cash between my regular wallet and my passport wallet so that I don't have a single point of failure. In travel, as in many other things in life, if you can eliminate single points of failure, a highly stressful situation can become tolerable.

In Cuiaba, Pablo Cervantes, our South American guide from Tropical Birding, met us at the airport and whisked us off to the hotel for the night before starting our Pantanal adventure the next day. Pablo is the same guide that helped Greg Downing and NatureScapes handle our Ecuador trip in January and the one that convinced me to take the plunge on this trip.

We really got going on the third day with a long 3 hour drive to our first destination at the Pantanal Mato Grosso Lodge. Two of those hours were on a very rough dirt road, the Trans Pantanal Road. Upon arrival, we had lunch and then the second disaster of the trip befell me – the screen on my iPhone died. No amount of resetting the phone would bring it back to life (It has since been



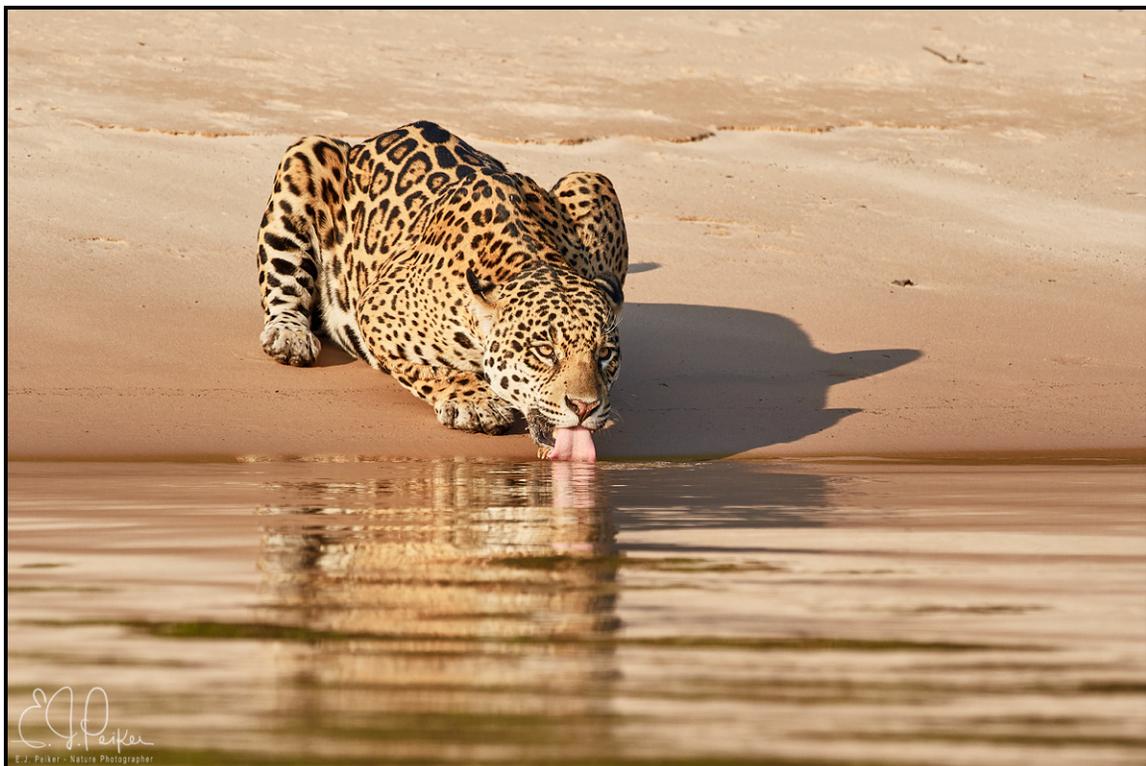
diagnosed as terminal due to a cracked iPhone motherboard – it costs more to replace than a new phone). Shortly thereafter we got on our first small, low to the water, boat cruising through the Pantanal's winding rivers and waterways. We saw many Caiman along with numerous beautiful tropical birds. These included Ringed Kingfisher, Amazon Kingfisher, Cocoi Heron, Black-chinned Hawk, Roadside Hawk, Southern Crested Caracara, Snail Kite, Great Kiskadee, Lesser Kiskadee and many, many more. After a long day of travel and photography we had dinner and called it a night on our first day in this stunning wetland.

Day 4 started with about an hour ride back to an area we noticed while driving into the Pantanal the previous day – an area where a large swath of wetland comes right up to the road that is loaded with wading and other birds. We had great opportunities at both resting birds and birds in flight including Large-billed Tern, Jabiru, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Cocoi Heron, Cattle Tyrant, Black Skimmers, and Black Caiman at point blank range. Another equipment casualty occurred as one of the members of our little group had his Nikon 500mm f/4 split in half with the front 2/3 of the lens going to the ground right next to my feet when his camera and lens simply swung quickly on his gimbal head with the bottom of the camera impacting a tripod leg. He didn't drop the rig at all, the camera simply rotated on the gimbal. This has happened many times to any big lens photographer and it was shocking to see an incident like this cause the lens to break in half and launch the heavy front 2/3 of the lens through the air. It was a devastating blow on just the second day of photography.



The afternoon was a repeat of some real nice and easy waterway cruising photographing many birds along the way including Black-chinned Hawks and Crested Caracara grabbing fish out of the water.

Before and after breakfast on Day 5 we photographed around our lodge before leaving for our next destination. This included songbirds like Yellow-billed Cardinal and Saffron Finch and even full frame head shots of Ringed Kingfisher, also Chestnut-eared Aracari. Mid-morning we left for the very end of the Trans Pantanal Road and Porto Jofre, our home for the next 5 nights. Each of the 5 days included a morning and afternoon boat excursion for a total of about 9 hours on the water each day in search of Jaguar and as many birds as we could find along the way. We had our first and one of our best Jaguar encounters in the first 20 minutes of the first boat ride. A male and female were found on an open beach. During this afternoon we saw and photographed mating behavior 4 times as well as other activities by these two incredible cats. Unfortunately we did not have many other good opportunities at photographing these big cats for the next three days even though we saw at least one Jaguar on every outing except one. They were never in the clear and there were essentially no other unobstructed shots to be had. Then came the morning of our final full day at Porto Jofre! I was in the boat that first spotted a Jaguar in the dark bush on a narrow spit of forested land and when he went inland we were hopeful that he would emerge on the other side so we went there as quickly as our boat could navigate the narrow waterways and arrived just as the cat got into the water. He proceeded to swim downstream for about a half mile coming out of the water once across a small sand bar and then back in. As we kept backing up while photographing this cat swimming, we noticed a Caiman in the water just off of the bank behind us and well in front of the big cat. We positioned ourselves for a possible kill and it actually occurred right in front of us. The Jaguar pounced out of the water from the Caiman's left side, grabbed him by the neck, and a large splashy battle ensued. It took quite some time for the Caiman to completely succumb and once he did, the cat dragged the Caiman up a steep ridge and out of sight into the forest. Wow, what a sight! According to the EXIF data from my cameras, the entire encounter from the Jaguar getting into the water to him dragging the reptile out of sight lasted 26 minutes – 20 minutes of that, we were the only boat in the Pantanal at this location.



On two of our boat excursions, we went south, instead of North for nearly an hour or 35 miles into the southern Pantanal where we river cruised smaller and narrower channels that provided many bird photo opportunities. On the second of these cruises I finally photographed a 16 year old nemesis! The Green Kingfisher is a small tropical Kingfisher that just barely ranges into the southern parts of Texas and the southernmost border regions of Arizona. Ever since I became aware of this bird 16 years ago I have been on a quest to photograph it. This includes numerous long distance automobile trips and even some longer airliner trips. While I have seen it a couple of times, I have never been able to photograph it... until the 5th morning in Brazil's Pantanal! Working with my boat driver with the engine off and him positioning the boat using an oar just a few inches at a time to get shots that were unobstructed by branches, vegetation and general jungle "stuff" I ended up taking about 800 frames of this beautiful and elusive little bird. Knowing that I had several really good shots despite the dense jungle environment that the Green Kingfisher seems to like, a feeling of euphoria that I had not felt for a while came over me.



Another issue cropped up one week into the trip. My email/internet provider suddenly cut-off access to my email. They realized one week in that I was connecting through an unrecognized server and decided to cut me off. I went through their whole identity verification process but on the last step it requires a Capcha picture matching exercise which does not authorize the server I am connecting from. At this point, all communication with the outside world had been lost - broken phone, no email, no text messaging... I finally figured out how to make Siri make an international call to my Internet and Email service provider without the use of the screen and they were able to authenticate my ID and turn my email back on – a big hassle that took about an hour to figure out.

Our final morning in Porto Jofre was spent photographing the array of bird life around our hotel. This included Bare-faced Curassow, Chestnut-cheeked Aracari, Great Kiskadee, Wattled Jacana, Bare-faced Ibis, Southern Screamer, and Toco Toucan among others.



The previous night brought a very heavy rainfall that lasted for about 7 hours. It turned the very dusty Trans-Pantanal Road into a big giant strip of mud for nearly 100km. Some bridges also got damaged. At one point we got out to inspect a bridge when a driver on the other side didn't want to cross it in his Land Rover. Several planks had collapsed in the center. Our bus driver and the Land Rover driver decided to move some planks around and then the Land Rover crossed successfully. Whether or not a 6 ton bus would make the crossing was very much in doubt, at least in my mind, but we did make it. After about 4 hours of driving in mud we arrived at Pousada Piuval, a private reserve and lodge just outside the Pantanal National Park's border. After lunch and check-in we did a little birding and then came upon a Giant Anteater which we photographed for at least an hour. My streak of bad luck continued while photographing the Anteater. I had noticed earlier in the day that the Vibration Reduction (VR) was acting up on my Nikkor 80-400mm lens. It would make the image less stable in the viewfinder rather than more stable and oscillate the image side to side in the viewfinder. I was able to reset it by remounting the lens and powering the camera on and off but by afternoon, not only was I not able to correct this behavior, I wasn't able to shut the VR off – this resulted in only about 1 out of 10 Anteater shots being critically sharp. The next morning armed with just my fully functional 500mm lens and a 1.4x teleconverter, we did more of the same as the day before photographing more birds that I had never seen before like Peach-fronted Parakeet, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, Chalk-browed Mockingbird, Guira Cuckoo and Campo Flicker. After lunch we hit the road back to civilization in Cuiaba, had a farewell dinner and packed our bags for the morning flights to Sao Paulo, the start of the 25 hour journey home. Everything went smoothly on the way home with no further issues. It is interesting to note that with 6 Canon shooters, one Sony shooter and two Nikon shooters, plus some Sigma lenses, only Nikon gear struggled with the harsh environment

with two high end lens failures. My D500 and Sigma 500mm f/4 performed flawlessly and way beyond my expectations. I also had a D7200 with me along with the Nikon 16-80mm f/2.8 DX lens and the aforementioned failed 80-400mm f4.5-5.6G with me on the trip.



Overall it was a great trip, despite the set-backs I suffered along with the difficulty of eating a vegetarian diet in Brazil – I ended up eating rice and beans for lunch and dinner virtually every day. The Pantanal is a beautiful place with an incredible array of wildlife. I photographed 62 species of birds of which 48 were brand new to me. In addition I photographed 8 mammal species including the Jaguar and also two reptile species. Even though the Pantanal is just becoming well known on a worldwide basis (birders and photographers have been aware of quite some time) we already saw signs of overexploitation of this land by tourism and really stupid people behavior but it isn't as out of control as many places yet. I see it going that way though. If it is a place that is on your bucket list, and it should be if you are a serious wildlife photographer, I would recommend getting to the Pantanal sooner rather than later; before over exploitation of the area by massive amounts of tourism degrades the experience.

Disclaimers

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