

Pantanal Excursions

The Ecolodges of the Pantanal provide the visitor with multilingual guides who take you on two a day excursions. The first excursion is in early morning when animals are active and temperatures are relatively pleasant. The second excursion is in late afternoon as it begins to cool off from the peak heat of the day and extends into the darkness of evening. Spotlights are used in darkness to view the many creatures that are nocturnal. Each excursion lasts 3 to 4 hours. Mosquitoes and other insects can be a nuisance in the dark. Indeed, Juan of Araras Ecolodge was badly stung three times by a wasp attracted to the spotlight he was using.

Our first “excursion” occurred May 17 in Cuiaba where we spent the night, having arrived too late in the day to go on to Araras Ecolodge. We were told to find a restaurant nearby but not to walk back to the hotel in the dark. We found a hip open air café a short walk from the hotel and had a fine seafood dinner. To my surprise they had Amarula on the drink menu. I had grown fond of this beverage in Africa where the Marula tree grows and produces nuts that give rise to the drink. In Africa the nuts ferment and elephants love them, eating so many that they become drunk and dangerous. The drink is called Amarula or just Marula and is like Bailey’s Bristol Cream, but stronger. Later I also found Amarula at Araras Ecolodge.

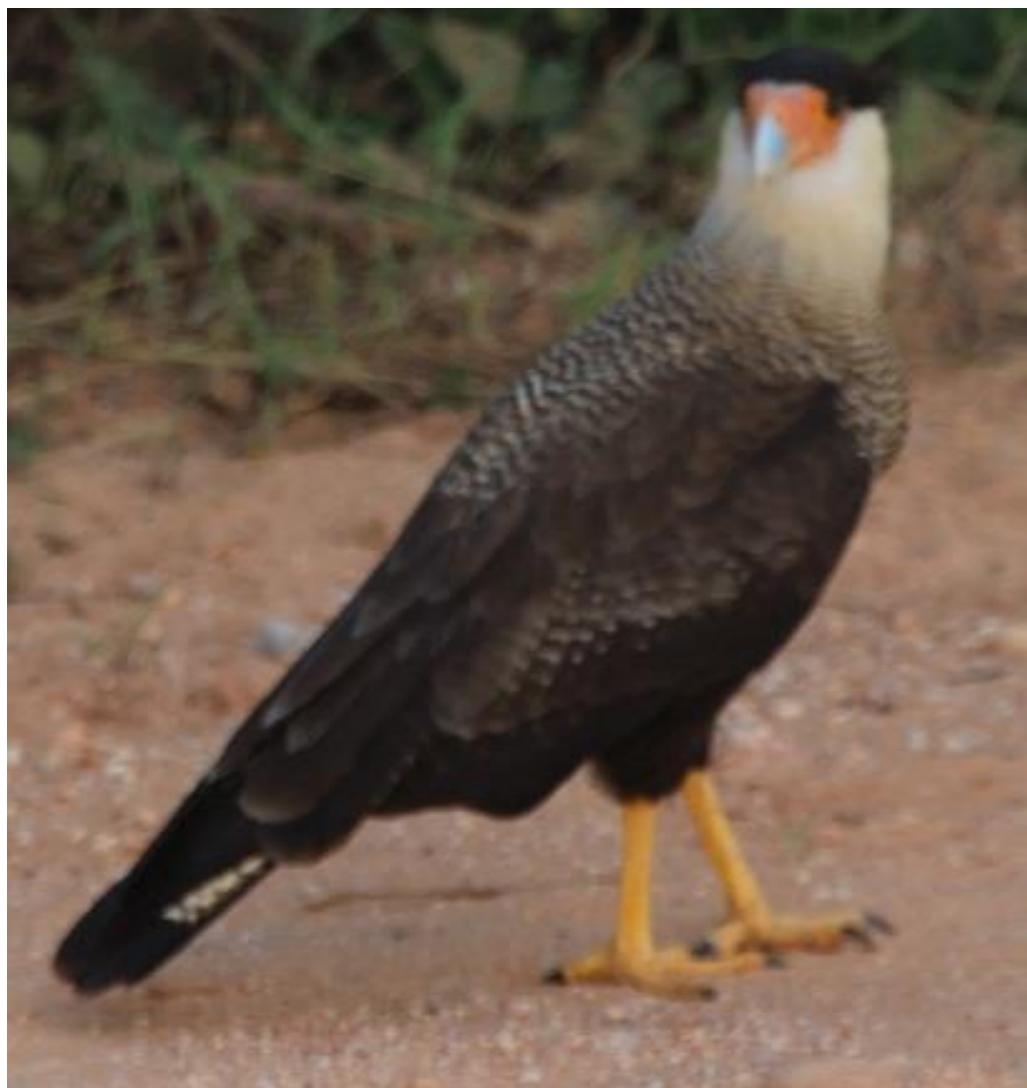
We were picked up at noon on May 18 for a 4.5 hour drive to Araras Ecolodge. The last third of the ride was on a red dirt road. Our guide, Juan, took every opportunity to make the drive to the lodge an educational introduction to the plentiful wildlife. On this transit from Cuiaba to Araras Ecolodge we saw: snail kites, great white egrets, cattle egrets, snowy egrets, black collared hawks, roadside hawks, black ibises, roseate spoonbills, cormorants, whistling ducks, caimans, capybaras, peccaries, a fat lizard, cocoi herons, green herons, parrots, hyacinth macaws, piranhas, caracaras, jacanas, tiger herons, jabiru storks, wood storks, yellow headed vultures, chaco chacalacas, a great potoo, a great horned owl, amazon kingfishers, ringed kingfishers, leaf cutter ants, termite mounds and zebras.



Caiman by the road



Amazon kingfisher



Caracara on road



Greater potoo silhouette



Capybara on road at night

Our first night drive was the same day, May 18. We saw crab eating raccoons, a potoo on a post, a night heron, rabbits, capybaras, a tamandua or collared anteater, a baby caiman and a giant anteater. Not too bad a first day of wildlife observation!



Tamandua

Anteaters do eat ants but they are designed to eat termites, having powerful claws that enable them to break into the concrete-like shells of the termite mounds. The jabiru storks caught my attention not only because of their bright red necks but because they reminded me of the jaribu storks we saw in Kenya.



Giant anteater



Jabiru stork

One cannot help imagining that a dyslexic birder got the spelling of one or the other awry. Google was of little help in solving this puzzle and had one site that referred to the jaribu as the jabiru of Africa. Crab eating raccoons are omnivorous. The Pantanal is home to red land crabs that can be seen at night along the roads and during mating season in large numbers migrating to water holes. When available they are considered delicacies by the raccoons, or so I was told. Crab eating foxes also like them. We saw many foxes at night.

At breakfast on May 19 we ate outside. Our food was attacked by purplish jays, red-crested cardinals and caracaras. We hiked to a 25 meter tall tower on a raised narrow boardwalk. We spotted 2 toco toucans and 3 agoutis along the way. Several caiman were also seen. At one point we heard much splashing and were told by Juan that we just missed seeing otters. Our return was uneventful until we came to the narrow exit from the boardwalk where three large caiman blocked the way.



Caracara waiting for breakfast



Red-crested cardinals at breakfast



Chaco chachalacas and immature tiger heron on boardwalk



Caiman guarding boardwalk exit

For the afternoon excursion we went kayaking. On the way we saw rheas, the South American version of the ostrich. These are bigger than their Australian counter-parts, the emus.



Rhea

We were all so eager to see new birds and other animals that our eyes played tricks on us. I saw a “dried leaf” bird. Juan spotted a “feral pig” anteater and Gerd insisted on leaving the truck to photograph a “spotted tree bark” anaconda. Once we calmed down we did see very pink roseate spoonbills, lapwings and savannah hawks. Having watched the sunset from the kayaks we went back to the lodge in darkness. We saw blue fronted parrots and crab eating foxes. Later we went for a short night drive and saw deer, rabbits, a tarantula on the road, a red land crab on the road and many foxes and raccoons.



Tarantula



Red land crab



Crab eating fox asleep at night