

Pantanal Excursions III

The drive to Caiman Ecolodge began around noon and lasted all afternoon. Anderson drove carefully and was authoritative about the wildlife. Lynn and I were the only passengers and upon arrival at the lodge were greeted by the only other guests, Dorothy and Jim. Everything about this lodge was high quality. Two bilingual guides were assigned to us, one (Rafael) for mornings and one (Rachel) for afternoons and evenings. Three vaqueros worked as drivers and guides along with Rafael and Rachel but they spoke Portuguese only. When not with us they worked the 36,000 head of cattle.

On two occasions the vaqueros fished for piranhas using a baited hook on a throw line. Once there was a nibble a deft jerk of the line set the hook and the piranha could be pulled onto shore. They practiced catch and release. Near a small lake in the woods, guarded by mosquitoes, the caught piranhas were left flopping on the shore. This attracted caimans who by now had grown to recognize the nature of the event. They made quick work of the piranhas, crunching them down. At the northern boundary of the property there was a wide river and the piranhas there were bigger. No caiman were around this swift flowing river and the fish were released back into their natural milieu.

On arrival at the lodge we were greeted by a family of very stout capybaras.



Capybara family

In addition a large group of peccaries, also well fed, met us.



Peccaries

In the heat of the day evidence for the name of the lodge was everywhere.



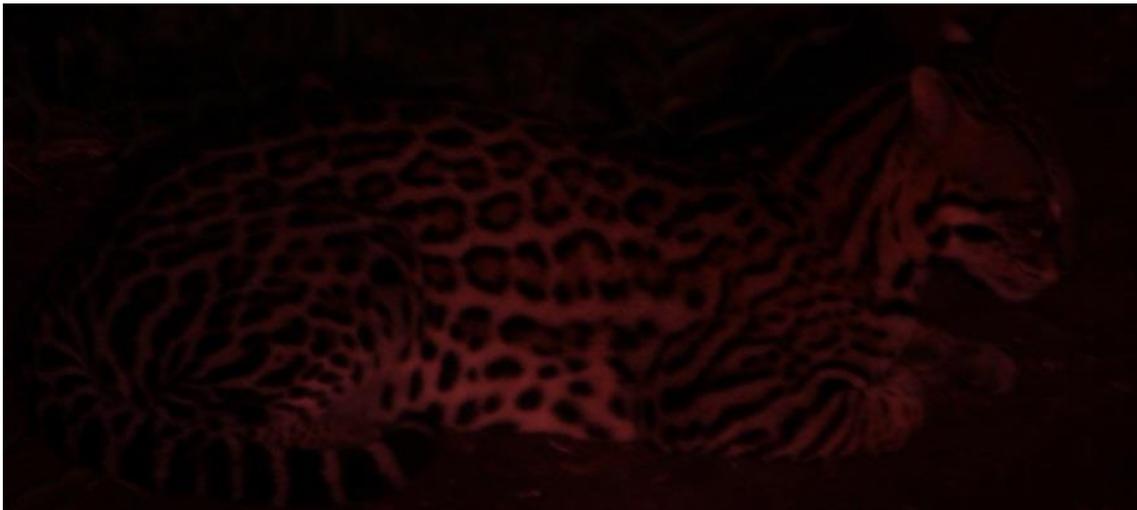
Eponymous caimans

On one of our excursions we saw the third variety of stork found in the Pantanal, after seeing many wood storks and many jabiru storks, the Maguari stork.



Maguari storks

On a night drive we get a real treat, spotting an ocelot.



Ocelot at night

Even in the dark the beauty of this cat shines. We spotted jaguar footprints and puma footprints, both fresh, but the ocelot was the only cat we saw during the entire trip to the Pantanal.

I have mentioned crab eating raccoons and crab eating foxes. These names mean that these omnivores also like eating crabs. At night we saw a *snake eating fox*. That is, a crab eating fox catching and killing a snake. Some of the snakes there can also eat a fox, that is, a *snake eating fox*. On an excursion near the end of our stay we saw coatis.



Coati

The highlight of the last night excursion was a tapir crossing the road right in front of us.



Brazilian tapir

The tapir is the largest mammal in the Pantanal, up to 250 kilograms and 6 feet long. It is a relative of the rhinoceros. We saw their footprints several times. These prints are easy to identify because they have three large toes. Another late sighting of note was a capuchin monkey in a tree above the trail along which we were hiking. These monkeys have prehensile tails.



Capuchin monkey

On this same hike we saw a blue trogon, one of the spectacularly colored birds.



Blue trogon

On May 29 Anderson came early in the morning to drive us to Campo Grande so we could fly to Rio via a connection in Sao Paulo. When we arrived in Rio our guide, Yuri, took us to the Miramar Hotel in the Copacabana region of Rio. The Miramar is a five star hotel across the street from the beach. It was a very comfortable respite from the wilds of the Pantanal. On May 30 Yuri convinced Lynn to take the cog train up Corcovado Mountain. This train goes up steeply and there is a big drop-off next to the train much of the way. This had Lynn scared. The famous *Cristo Redenter* is at the top.



View of Rio from above Corcovado Mountain

The view of Rio from the mountain top is spectacular and Lynn took many pictures and was glad she decided to go up there. The beach on the right of the picture above could be seen from the Miramar's rooftop.



Miramar rooftop view of Copacabana beach

On May 31 we flew home from Rio. The trip was a success, even without a jaguar sighting. The people we met were delightful, the guides were expert and the food was delicious, especially the passion fruit mousse in Chapada lodge.