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Pantanal: Volunteer Travel Program Helps Save Jaguars

by [Marsha Johnston](#)

courtesy of Marsha Johnston

The author takes a tereré break while on a horseback riding trip

Aquidauana, Mato Grosso do Sul - Hardly had Luis Carlos stopped rubbing the damp denim cloth along the wooden spindle inside the hollowed-out palm stump, when our collective hearts leapt.

From downriver, distant yet unmistakable, came a live version of the drawn-out grunt-growl he had just skillfully coaxed from the “jaguar caller.”

So true is the sound the instrument makes, that the jaguar’s response at first seemed merely its echo. But it continued, long enough for us, waiting breathlessly in the boat, to be certain we had fooled at least one member of the Pantanal’s most exquisite creature-clan into believing that we, too, had powerful paws and a glorious spotted pelt.

Any exuberant expressions of the joy and excitement we felt, however, were out of the question. The only way to be sure we would have any chance of glimpsing an “onça-pintada” was to continue the charade.

But Luis Carlos had to keep a rein on the impersonation as well, since our accompanying jaguar expert Leandro Silveira had warned that too-frequent calls without enough of an interval of feline indifference would be more likely to repulse than attract jaguar attention. Sort of like being too eager to start a relationship with a confirmed single.

So we waited silently, letting the vibrations of the jaguar-caller translate our greatest desire into jaguar tongue.

Although we did not see or hear further that night from the jaguar we attracted, hearing one was still heavenly manna for aficionados like ourselves who had come to [Fazenda Rio Negro](#) in Brazil’s Pantanal to assist Silveira with his research. Silveira said it was likely because our cat was either a female with cubs or a young male, both of whom would have been skittish about meeting the “male” that Luis Carlos had imitated.

Our team of seven, from all over the US, had come specifically to study jaguars. But other [Earthwatch Institute volunteers](#) descend regularly into the Pantanal’s near-primeval wetland wilderness to help scientists research everything from peccaries to amphibians and birds.

In fact, Earthwatch runs more trips to the Fazenda Rio Negro in the Pantanal each year than any of its many global destinations. Little wonder, given that

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the 210,000-square-kilometer haven of lakes, rivers and waterways teems with one of the greatest concentrations of tropical wildlife in the whole of Latin America. And strangely enough, says Reinaldo Lourival, Pantanal director for Washington, D.C.-based [Conservation International](#), which funds Silveira's [Jaguar Conservation Fund](#) (see below), few people have heard of it.

That is likely to change, however, as nature lovers like us spread the word.

The trek to get to Fazenda Rio Negro is the first clue to its exceptional wilderness status. First there's an hour flight from São Paulo and a two-hour van ride from Campo Grande before getting into a small private plane that finally zooms low over the 100-year-old ranch house, sometimes chasing one of the ostrich-like rheas up the dirt strip runway as it lands.

Exploring the grounds after greeting Silveira, other research leaders Marion and Samuel, and the ranch's delightful staff, it became quickly apparent that it was not even necessary to leave the ranch grounds to see much of the Pantanal's wildlife. As future Earthwatch research team leader Jeff Himmelstein, on his ninth visit to the ranch, told us, "When we set mist nets for bird censusing in the trees behind the house, we caught more varieties than we did in nets further a field!"

Indeed, in our six days at the fazenda, those of us who were counting logged sightings of over 40 different bird species, most of them within sight of our lodgings. The highlights of these included the nearly daily, pre-dawn raucous gathering of several super-rare, regal blue hyacinth macaws in a tree in the front yard. Glorious ebony-headed, red-necked jabiru storks, standing up to six feet tall, regularly visited the shoreline and pond, as did groups of flamingo-like roseate spoonbills. Buff-necked ibis constantly patrolled the grounds with their high-pitched, dissonant version of a quack, and emerald-bellied hummingbirds plied the house garden's flowers for nectar. One of the funnier sights around the fazenda was the occasional rhea doing its best to jump up into one of the backyard fruit trees to pluck off a snack.

Anxious to infect us all with his enthusiasm for his research specialty, snakes, Jeff also made sure to capture whatever specimen showed up in our vicinity. Luckily for us, neither of the two brightly colored sub-adults found (one in the men's bathroom) were dangerous. One was a hog-nosed false coral snake and the other a leaf green one whose name I forgot. A great teacher, Jeff also regularly enlightened us on the characteristics of the many caiman plying the Rio Negro's waters, even catching and hog-tying one to give us a closer look!

With the exception of counting caiman along the river, our daily data gathering tasks revolved exclusively around mammals - capybara, river otters, crab-eating foxes, peccaries, feral pigs, tapirs, agouti, coatimundi, howler monkeys, giant anteaters, deer, armadillos, ocelots, pumas and, of course, jaguar. While we saw - and heard - only traces of the region's cats, we saw everything else, including a whole troop of howler monkeys complete with babies clinging to their mama's breast and a southern river otter busily spraying the river bank to mark his territory.

In fact, the Pantanal's profusion of life easily tempts you into a state of such great expectation that you can be forgiven for being disappointed when the mammal count is slow! You can actually feel bored, for example, in having seen only five different crab-eating foxes, one of which was trailing a caiman along a dirt road, two sets of puma tracks and an agouti in a single morning!

It is then, however, that the more subtly enchanting natural pleasures of the Pantanal take over. Like being hypnotized by the intermittent angry buzz of crispy dragonfly wings, sounding like some kind of motorized card-deck

shuffler, that punctuated the silence every time the berry-red beast threw itself against the windshield in an effort to fly free.

Besides, excitement at the Fazenda Rio Negro is not confined to animal pleasures! Where better to sample tereré, the bitter, cold tea through the pantaneiro's silver strainer spoon and cow's horn? And not just any tereré, but a cup prepared with crystalline water from a pond full of plantlife and in which your horses are standing, but with no ill effect? Or trip to live strains of the simple, happy strains of the music of the "vaqueiros," the cowboys of the Pantanal?

An Earthwatch holiday in the Pantanal is not for everyone, particularly not for those who think "Brazilian vacation" translates only as sporting a thong and sipping exotic drinks on a Rio beach.

After all, not everyone would find it funny to be chased up the beach by a 5-foot-long caiman intent upon making a free meal out of the big catfish you just caught; or dare swim in a river where piranha live; or think it the thrill of a lifetime to hear a jaguar call out to you while you contemplate a dazzlingly star-studded night sky.

But anyone who dreams of experiencing the awesome beauty of a place where nature, rather than man, is still in charge may well shed the same tears of sadness I did at having to reboard the plane for "civilization."

Ranches Relearn Their Jaguar Relationship

Protecting jaguars from the only predator to threaten their existence in the Pantanal, the pantaneiro, is no easy proposition.

In fact, given the 200-year-old tradition among the region's hardy ranchers to simply eliminate "cattle-killing" jaguars at every opportunity, program director Leandro Silveira acknowledges that he was reluctant even to attempt a protection program. "Unless you are enhancing the ranchers' lives in some way, it won't work because there is no real economic interest for them to keep jaguars on their land," explains the 30-year-old researcher who has been studying jaguars in Emas National Park and the Pantanal for the last 7 years.

But the program has signed on 14 ranches in the region since September, 2002, and others are clamoring to be admitted. The draw? Ranchers are financially reimbursed for every verified killing of a steer by a jaguar. In exchange, all they have to do is leave the jaguars alone.

In addition to bringing them health care and compensation, the program has taught ranchers how to use digital cameras and helped give them a stronger sense of community. Reinaldo Lourival, director of CI Pantanal, plans to build a school for the children of the program's participants next year. Furthermore, the researchers' hard data about the exact causes of death of cattle has shown them, sometimes to their embarrassment, that jaguars are responsible for a mere fraction of the losses they typically claim.

The Fazenda Rio Negro, a half-hour by plane from Aquidauana, is the headquarters for the Pantanal Conservation Fund, a joint venture between Earthwatch Institute and Conservation International. Within the larger aims of the initiative, the fund has three long-term objectives:

- * resolve human-jaguar conflicts that lead to jaguar killing
- * establish a 300,000-hectare jaguar reserve on private ranchland
- * develop a compensation program that can be used in other regions

Relying on Brazilian university students and Earthwatch volunteers, Silveira is

also looking at whether it would be possible to establish a corridor linking jaguar populations in Emas and the Pantanal.

Marsha Johnston, currently based in California, is a freelance writer and producer specializing in sustainable development and conservation issues. She has a particular passion for Brazil and for the phenomenal jaguars of the Pantanal.

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