

A large jaguar with a light tan coat and dark spots is lying down, facing left. It is surrounded by dense green foliage and trees. The lighting is natural, suggesting a jungle environment.

# Tracking Jaguars

IN THE BRAZILIAN PANTANAL



The largest tropical wetland in the world is paradise for wildlife photographers, with an amazing array of animals, including crocodiles, monkeys and, if you're lucky, the formidable jaguar

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL GAINS

A string of Portuguese words were suddenly audible through the crackling radio and Fabricio Dorileo deftly spun the steering wheel, turning the boat a full 180 degrees. "Jaguar," he announced for my benefit as we changed gears.

The wind felt cold as we raced up the Cuiabá River and I hung onto my baseball cap for fear of losing it. The sun had barely risen. There would be no clouds to protect us from its assault as the midday temperature was destined to reach 35 C.

This was August, the dry season, when the Brazilian Pantanal is exposed. At roughly 200,000 square kilometres, it is the largest tropical wetland in the world and home to incredible birds and animals, including caiman crocodiles, monkeys, hyacinth macaws and capybaras, the world's largest rodents.

But, as attractive as that might seem, I wasn't paying Dorileo \$2,000 US to take me up and down the waterways looking for

these species. I was after the Pantanal's star attraction — *Panthera onca* — the jaguar. No promises had been made. But the northern Pantanal is as good a place as any in South America to see jaguars. I had flown two hours northwest of Rio de Janeiro to Cuiabá and then endured a bumpy, five-hour car ride to Porto Jofre, during which I spotted many birds and animals. My customized tour also covered four nights' accommodation, meals and a private boat. Now, with luck, I would be rewarded with a photo of my first big cat in the wild.

We turned up a fork in the river and entered what Dorileo called "Três Irmãos," or the Three Brothers River. Another five minutes passed and we entered a narrow tributary and he dropped down to a lower gear. Already there were four or five similar boats in position. The local guides understand a positive experience will help grow eco-tourism in the region and so they co-operate with one another. Radios are vital communication.

"There. Do you see the jaguar?" Dorileo

asked, pointing.

Its head and long back were visible above the water as it slowly waded along the shoreline. Glistening wet in the hot sun, it emerged onto a patch of white sand, revealing its massive body to onlookers. Only lions and tigers are bigger than these cats, but this adult male was as big as any lion I have seen in captivity, maybe 250 kilograms, with short, powerful legs. The rosettes on its stocky trunk contained spots — a unique characteristic of the jaguar.

Occasionally, he sniffed the air. He was on the trail of something, capybara or caiman, most likely. Leaping into the thick brush along the top of the embankment, he would briefly disappear but, as branches snapped and bushes shuddered, we could trace his movement.

By now, the five boats had become 10. Some carried one or two photographers with powerful and very expensive telephoto lenses. Others had as many as five passengers with compact cameras. The tourists came from places such as Italy, Holland and

**FACING PAGE:** A jaguar mother and cub take a drink from the river. This is a rare sight as the mothers keep their cubs well hidden from adult males who would kill the young so they could mate with the female.

**ABOVE:** The stork-like Jabiru is considered the symbol of the Pantanal; a caiman crocodile warms itself along the shore of the Cuiabá River.

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the United States. Two boats carried a pair of National Geographic photographers and a British team filming a Netflix documentary.

As the boats idled, the smell of gasoline fumes was apparent. Even eco-tourism carries a price. The procession followed the jaguar along its path for hours as the hum of engines and clicking of cameras competed with the warning calls of exotic birds high up in the trees. Caimans nervously slipped into the water as they spotted their fearsome adversary approaching.

For a moment, I felt like we were intruders, wildlife paparazzi, but these jaguars are quite used to seeing the boats and are not distracted from their task. Indeed, he took no notice of us at all.

We rounded a turn and the river narrowed again. As the jaguar walked along the sandy shore, our boat was nearest. Only about 15 metres separated us from this enormously dangerous predator. One bite can crush the skull of a caiman and so I felt particularly

Dorileo grew up on this river and has operated Pantanal Safaris for 12 years from his home in Poconé, three hours up a dirt road that is generously called the Trans-



**ABOVE RIGHT:** Hyacinth macaws, a threatened species, along the Cuiabá River in the Brazilian Pantanal.

**MIDDLE:** A capuchin monkey watches a tourist with curiosity.

**BOTTOM:** A pair of river otters, also a threatened species, argue over a fish one has caught.

pantaneira Highway. Like his colleagues, he spends July to December here earning enough money to support his wife and young daughter throughout the year.

Nearly all the land in the Pantanal is private farmland and, for a century, jaguars have been killed to protect the cattle. They are now classified as a "near threatened" species. Dorileo says when he was a young boy he joined his uncles in the hunt, but they have since become conservationists out of respect for the animals and their home. They also know they are on to a good thing.

An hour passed before the radios came alive and we set off again, bouncing in the wake created by the boats ahead. As we rounded another bend at top speed, we passed tiger herons, white herons and giant storks known as jabirus, as well as the ubiquitous caimans. We were not surprised to see the flotilla had already assembled up ahead.

Dorileo smiled and nodded and there, to my amazement, I saw, through a clearing in the forest, a pair of very young jaguar cubs being groomed by their mother. Her tongue bathed the one nearest as they sat looking out from beneath trees.

"It is very rare to see the jaguar cubs," Dorileo told me. "The mothers hide the cubs from adult male jaguars. Most of the time, we start seeing the cubs when they are more than four to six months old."

Having quite unintentionally given us a glimpse of her family, the mother led the young ones out of sight. Everyone relaxed and there were smiles all around. Winter stood up in his boat to stretch.

"Talk about beginner's luck," I said to him. "This is my first day in the Pantanal and I see cubs."

"Every day is beginner's luck here," he responded with a smile.

For about 25 years, Winter has been shooting big cats for National Geographic and has earned several major international awards for his wildlife photography. On his first visit to the Pantanal, he said, it was Dorileo's uncle who served as his guide.

There would be no more sightings that evening so, after 12 hours on the river, we

departed for our respective accommodations. My lodging was in Porto Jofre, about 100 kilometres from the Bolivian border, and offered hot showers and air conditioning.

A pair of hyacinth macaws, a threatened species, has taken up residence here and watched me from trees overhead as I walked to the dining room. Over a buffet dinner, I hatched a plan to meet Dorileo at the boat at 6:30 a.m. Accordingly, it was lights out at 9 p.m.

The next morning, an anaconda hung from a tree as we made our way back to Three Brothers River. A couple of boats had stopped, but we would not be distracted. As we motored along, we spotted a jaguar swimming across the river ahead of us. With their huge paws, they are excellent swimmers. The boats slowed. We watched the jaguar reach the shore then disappear into the jungle.

Further along, I spotted a river otter eating a fish and we headed in its direction. As fortune would have it, a second otter surfaced nearby. These animals ordinarily look so timid, but they evidently don't enjoy sharing their food, even with neighbours. There followed a frightening encounter as they bared their teeth and snarled, threatening each other.

Across from where we had seen the large male jaguar the previous day, a cub lay in the shade on the side of a hill. The boats lined the river offshore waiting for action.

Eventually, someone spotted movement and the cameras fired into action. The mother wandered down the hill toward the river and the cub followed. Side by side they crouched, lapping up water. The cub sat down and looked at us for five minutes before deciding the shade was preferable and it returned to its original spot.

Over the next two days, we would see jaguars in different locations. I don't remember how many because Dorileo and another guide had discouraged me from counting. Rather, they valued the opportunity to spend a day with a jaguar in its natural environment, to watch and admire these creatures and to gather an appreciation for the Pantanal.