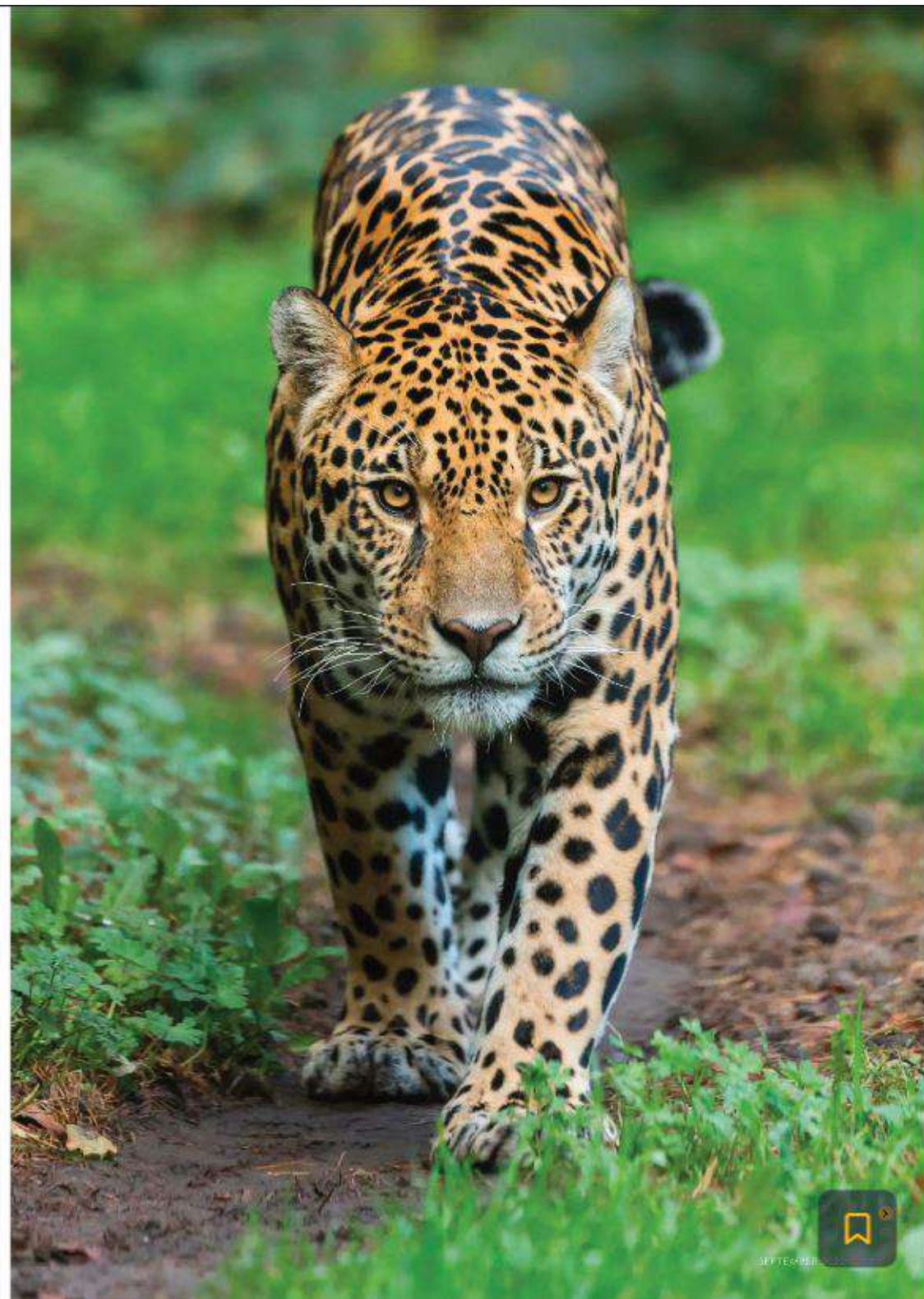


# CAIMANS, CAPYBARAS & VERY BIG CATS

THE SPRAWLING, HUMID PANTANAL WETLAND SUPPORTS ONE OF THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATIONS OF WILDLIFE IN SOUTH AMERICA AND THE WORLD'S GREATEST DENSITY OF JAGUARS. AIDED BY CONSERVATION PROJECTS, THE BIG CAT'S NUMBERS ARE INCREASING, MAKING SAFARI EXPERIENCES IN THIS WILD, WESTERN CORNER OF BRAZIL EVEN MORE REWARDING

WORDS: SARAH MARSHALL

IMAGES: WOLFGANG ALBERT







**S**linking through the tall grass, the feline form ahead of us is mesmerising. She moves lithely, graceful as a burlesque mademoiselle, but her ability to vanish in an instant makes her more nebulous than a ghost. "Seeing this jaguar is

even more special than seeing any other," says Mario Haberfeld, co-founder of Brazilian NGO Onçafari, who's clocked up more big cat sightings than most. "Mainly because she wasn't supposed to exist."

Aracy, the rosetted beauty now crouched in front of us, is a symbol of hope for her species. The granddaughter of Isa, an orphaned jaguar successfully rewilded by Mario and his team in 2015, Aracy is living, breathing proof of nature's ability to thrive if given a helping hand. Rescued by wildlife authorities when their mother was accidentally killed after straying into an urban area, Isa and her sister Fern were destined to spend their lives in captivity. Reluctant to let that happen, Mario and his team embarked on a pioneering, year-long programme to release the big cats back into their natural habitat, training them to hunt and survive without developing a dependency on humans.

Documented by the 2016 BBC documentary *Jaguars: Brazil's Super Cats*, with a narration

by Sir David Attenborough, the project brought global attention to a vast area of Brazil few people could pinpoint on a map.

Wild, unpredictable and, in parts, uncomfortable, the Pantanal is the world's largest tropical wetland. Bigger than England, it sprawls across two Brazilian states and creeps into areas of Bolivia and Paraguay. During the summer rainy season, from December to March, its network of waterways flood; in the dry season, the waters recede, exposing vast savannahs and gallery forests.

After landing in Campo Grande, the capital of Mato Grosso do Sul (the state that contains most of the Pantanal), I'd driven for five hours to reach Calman Ecological Refuge, where Onçafari is based. Road signs gave way to creaking wooden gates demarcating ranches. Six-banded armadillos rattled below their fleshy plates of armour as they scuttled for cover; *pantaneiros* (cowboys) herding cattle stained the sky with amber clouds of dust.

Over 30 years ago billionaire Brazilian conservationist Roberto Klabin added high-end eco-lodge Casa Calman to his family's 204sq mile working cattle ranch. Glossy photographs of the Pantanal decorate Roberto's former home, along with polished sculptures of jaguars — the area's A-list species. Outside, a wooden platform leads to a pond, where caimans sun-bask on the shore and jacana birds hop between lily pads.

Eleven years ago, Roberto invited Mario to base his fledgling NGO on the farm after realising the pair shared a passion: preserving the Pantanal's fragile ecosystem. Although mainly based between Miami and São Paulo, Mario also has a house at Calman, where he invites me for dinner, along with lead field biologist Lili Ramplin. A paean to the cat he's devoted the past decade to protecting, it's filled with jaguar paraphernalia: cups, saucers, plates and even a soap dispenser in the bathroom are daubed in the cat's tawny shades and distinctive, rosette-stamped livery.

PHOTOS: SHARON MARSHALL



Mario Haberfeld (at the wheel) and his team attempt to locate collared jaguars using a vehicle customised by Land Rover to tackle Onçafari's wetland.

Left: A toucan, a common bird sighting in the Pantanal, surveys the vegetable gardens of Calman.

Previous pages: A catfish lurks in a water hole; jaguar sightings by Calman have risen, with 94% of guests spotting one in 2012 compared to 24% in 2016.







PHOTOS: ALAN/ SARAH MARSHALL

On a shelf sits a 3D paper model of the predator made by an artist Mario found on Instagram, while a customised big cat statue greeting guests in the porch was bought at a charity auction as part of São Paulo's annual Jaguar Parade charity event. Verging on the obsessive, the immaculately curated collection has — Mario assures me, with a wry smile — been amassed over many years.

A retired racing driver, Mario doesn't seem like an obvious candidate for a conservationist. But after years spent travelling the world driven by a passion for spotting iconic species — from pandas in China to polar bears in Churchill — he felt compelled to do something for the animals in his own country.

"I wanted to develop ecotourism based on animal sightings," he tells me, setting a jaguar-print napkin on his lap. "In particular, I wanted to demonstrate that the jaguar is worth more alive than dead by providing employment opportunities for communities and a model for others to replicate. We're an NGO that wants our local partners to succeed because that's the only way, in the future, people are going to conserve."

Borrowing a habituation technique used with leopards by Londolozi, a conservation-focused safari lodge in South Africa's Greater Kruger, Mario recruited a team of biologists and embarked on a mission to familiarise reclusive jaguars with vehicle engines. Distancing himself from the practices of petting zoos or domestication, he describes the process as "a natural encounter". "They don't gain anything from it, and they don't lose anything from it," he insists. "We've never fed the animals."

As for any risk involved in altering an animal's behaviour, he points to studies carried out on both habituated and non-habituated jaguars where little or no differences were found.

His team would spend hours around the cats, coughing each time they edged closer so as not to startle them. The animals were carefully monitored and only ever tracked

by vehicle, ensuring they'd never become too familiar with humans. Esperança (whose name means 'hope' in Portuguese) was one of the first animals Onçafari collared in 2012, allowing them to track her with a telemetry device. The lauded matriarch's acceptance of humans has been inherited by a succession of cubs, making Caiman Ecological Refuge arguably the best place in the world to see jaguars in the wild.

"In 2012, we had 35 sightings, but we see that in a week now," explains Lili, the effusive power-house driving Onçafari's ongoing research work.

The statistics say it all: in 2021, 99% of guests at Caiman saw a jaguar compared to 24% in 2014. Plus, only a small proportion of those were collared, indicating that a new generation of wild animals feel comfortable with the presence of vehicles.

#### Tracking down the truth

To better understand the field work Lili and her team are doing, I join a children science day experience with Onçafari — available to guests at Caiman for a fee. At 6am, an open-top, canary-yellow Land Rover collects me. The company, which has donated several off-road vehicles to Onçafari, recently launched a series of limited-edition vehicles in honour of the NGO's 10th anniversary. It's one of several high-



**Stumpy capybaras wade through shallow lagoons, seemingly oblivious to crafty egrets hopping on their backs for a free ride**

Clockwise from top left: The Ilê do Negro runs through the Santa Sofia conservation area, where Mario Haberfeld hopes to start ecotourism projects; capybara with its young; two chestnut-bellied guans rest on a cow skull at Caiman; field biologist Diogo Lucatelli checks camera trap footage as part of a project to study and habituate tapirs





Water lilies at sunrise in the Pantanal wetland, which sprawls some 42 million acres across Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay

profile partnerships forged by Mario. Bushnell, for example, provides camera traps, airline Gol Intelligent Airlines supplies select flights for NGO workers and The North Face has designed the staff uniform.

"Since I was 12, I was racing go-karts and I needed sponsors," Mario explains, as we leave the gated grounds of Casa Calman, the refuge's main lodge (jaguars have become such a frequent presence here, a perimeter electric fence was installed last year as a safety precaution). "What I learned in the racing world, I applied here."

Driving slowly through retired pastures commandeered by forest, wire fences are the only evidence this pristine area was ever strictly managed. Fronds of donkey tail grass glow strawberry-pink with the first rays of daylight and delicate spider webs glisten in the early-morning dew. Perched on the weathered slats of a wooden gate, a roadside hawk scans for his breakfast. Stumpy capybaras (the world's largest rodent) wade through shallow lagoons, seemingly oblivious to crafty egrets hopping on their backs for a free ride.

Around 200 jaguars have been registered at Calman Ecological Refuge in the past decade, with an estimated 60 currently frequenting the area. At the time of my visit, seven of those have been collared (but that number is likely to increase in the next few months). Holding aloft a telemetry device, biologist Pedro Reali tries to locate Tupa, a hulking male, whose name — meaning "thunder" in local Tupi dialect — belies his silent, feather-light steps. Beeps ping through a receiver grow louder, indicating the animal is close.

Unperturbed by our presence, he allows us to follow him into the grasslands, while Lili regales us with heart-warming anecdotes of previous encounters with the big cat, including the time she lovingly picked maggots from a wound in his nose, ultimately saving his life. Once Tupa vanished into the distance, Pedro produces a bag of dental paste to create a cast of his footprint as a memento for me to take home.

Collaring undoubtedly makes it much easier to locate jaguars for visitors, but tracking devices are also important tools for collecting scientific data. Science has and always should be the primary motivation, says Mario.

Back at Ongafari's research centre, we scroll through a database of videos taken from camera traps over the years. "The standard literature says jaguars are solitary," Mario





Clockwise from above: Acerola fruit in the garden of cowboy Seu Domingos Retiro Arara, who's worked at Calman for decades; saddles and stirrups hang inside a stable at Calman; six-banded armadillo sniffing the air for scent, a common sight in the southern reaches of the Pantanal region

says, referring me to footage of multiple jaguars sharing a carcass. "We also believe jaguars mate for pleasure or as a way to protect their young by distracting threatening males."

Although many of these surprising findings have been detailed in academic papers, Mario admits the scientific community initially scorned his efforts. "In the beginning, it was very hard. People couldn't understand what the heck we were doing," he says, recalling the surprised expression of government officials, when he revealed his only professional experience was as a racing car driver.

"But a lot of people who criticised us in the past have since become our partners because they've seen what it's possible to learn from habitation. No one had ever followed jaguars in this way before."

Over time, Onçafari has achieved international acclaim. Working alongside conservationist Kristine Tompkins and the Rewilding Argentina Foundation, it helped reintroduce the first male jaguar into the Iguazú Wetlands, in northeast Argentina, in January 2022. A further stamp of scientific approval was given when Mario was invited to become a board member of Panthera, the only global NGO devoted to wild cats.

Now respected as an expert conservationist, Mario has generously made sure data collected

by Onçafari is open-source. "The more information that gets published about these animals, the better," he says.

#### A land to protect

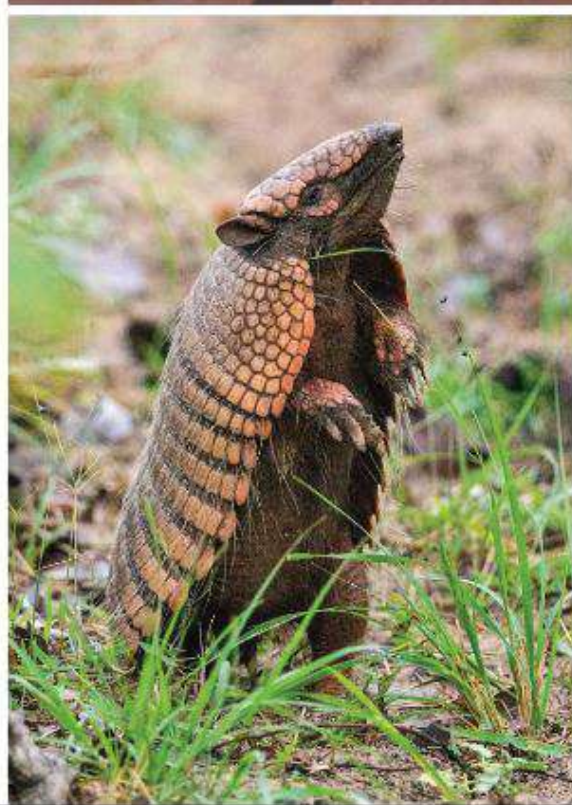
Once dispersed throughout the Americas, jaguars have lost almost 80% of their range, largely due to conflict with humans. Although the Pantanal is one of their last strongholds, almost 95% of it is privately owned farmland, where the presence of an apex predator like the jaguar is seen as a threat to cattle.

A working ranch, Calman Ecological Refuge is living proof cattle and jaguars can comfortably co-exist if the land is properly managed. Cattle grazing grounds are rotated, sharing some areas with wildlife and on average, only 3% of cattle are lost per year to the big cats. But it takes more than numbers to convince Brazil's staunchly conservative *pantaneiros* to protect a perceived enemy.

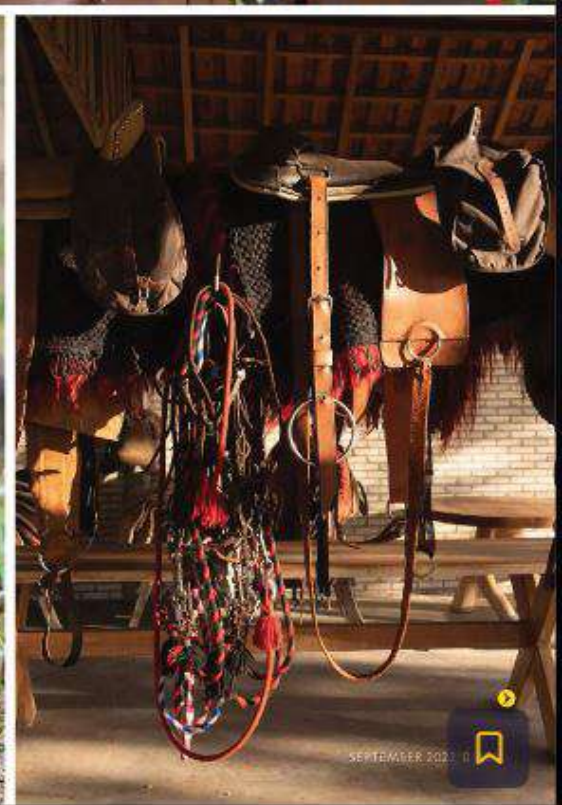
Eager to gauge local opinion, I head to a sub-station on the ranch, to meet a cowboy who's been employed by Roberto's family for decades. Welcoming me into his garden, which is filled with acerola trees, Seu Domingos Retiro Arara, courteously duffs his straw hat. As integral to his daily wardrobe as pants and socks is the robust, leather 'gualaca' belt around his hips, slung with a knife and sharpener — a sign he's rarely away from the field.

Sitting down to a country breakfast of cassava, minced meat, rice, beans and deep-fried cheese bread, he tells me the south Pantanal is suffering its worst drought in a century. Wildfires, he says, are the biggest threat to farmers. Not jaguars. In fact, over time he's learned to live alongside the animals, appreciate their value and realise there are far bigger pressures jeopardising his way of life.

Attitudes across the country are also changing. Until recently, most Brazilians couldn't understand why anyone would want to visit a place 'full of flies and insects'. But — in line with a global trend — the pandemic has fuelled an appreciation for nearby nature. Another driver for the region's newfound popularity, Mario tells me, is the success of Brazilian telenovela *Pantanal* (it regularly pulls



TRACES: AWE IN ACES SARAH MARSHALL







BRAZIL

**Only one road runs through a tangled forest of lofty palms, broad ferns and indeterminable tree species likely to send botanists into an excitable head-spin**

in several million viewers), which follows the fortunes of a woman who morphs into a jaguar.

Despite the area's blossoming superstar status, the state offers little protection against the growing menace of agricultural cultivation. Instead, that responsibility has been largely left to philanthropists like Roberto and Mario.

Working in collaboration with several private donors, Ongafati's latest and most ambitious project has been the purchase of the neighbouring 135sq-mile farm, Santa Sofia. Historically, the amount of water in this area of the world's has impeded development. Mario tells me during a 90-minute boat ride to reach the property. But 30% of the land has dried in the past 30 years, presenting worrying possibilities. Currently, only one road runs through a tangled forest of lofty palms, broad ferns and indeterminable tree species likely to send botanists into an excitable head-spin. It's a lost world so pristine in parts, I wonder if any human has ever set foot here.

The former owner, a cantankerous old woman who was once accused of illegally selling jaguar-hunting safaris, confined herself to a small area, meaning under 2% of the land has been touched.

According to Mario's masterplan, a mix of investments, including carbon and biodiversity credit, pasture rental and tourism will make Santa Sofia self-sustaining. Confident that

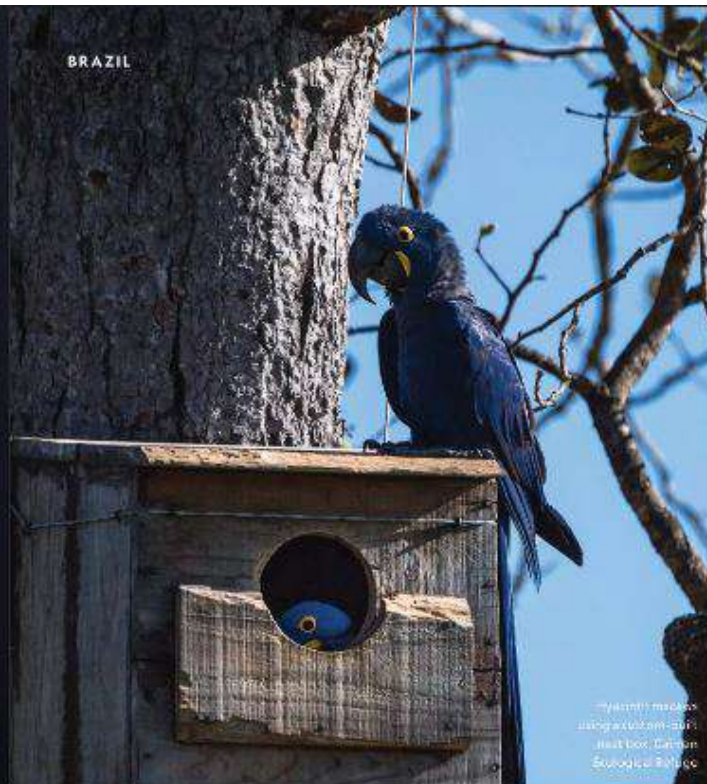
the Pantanal is South America's answer to Botswana's Okavango Delta, he's in talks with several African safari operators that want to set up camps and has secured licenses to rewild Pantanal fauna on site — injured or unwanted domesticated animals that would otherwise end up caged in sanctuaries. Days trips between Santa Sofia and Caiman will start later this year.

There's certainly enough wildlife to justify a safari. On a boat trip along the black-water Rio Negro, I watch kingfishers shatter the glassy reflections of mangroves; during a walk, I look up to see a rainbow of scarlet macaws overhead; and on one lucky, early-morning drive, a family of elusive maned wolves saunters across the path in front of us. It's proof jaguars aren't the Pantanal's only animal attraction.

#### All creatures great and small

Back at Caiman, I visit the Instituto Arara Azul (IAA), an NGO that's been protecting hyacinth macaws since 1990. Biologist Nelva Guedes started the project to boost populations of the world's largest parrot species, declining due to the illegal pet trade and the destruction of slow-growing, cavity-filled mandevilla trees (favoured by the fussy birds as nesting sites).

Fellow biologist Kefany Ramalho takes me to see one of many artificial nest boxes on the farm. Territorial birds swoop and squawk as her colleagues use ropes and harnesses to scale 'surrogate' trees, checking to see if any of the



BRAZIL

Hyacinth macaws using wood-nest-boxes built by Caiman Ecological Refuge

wooden homes are occupied. Meanwhile, she downloads footage from a camera trap. "I don't know how many lifetimes we'd need to analyse this data," she sighs, as a pair of novelty, macaw-shaped earring jangle from her ears.

But efforts have been rewarded: in the two decades since the IAA has been based at Caiman, the local hyacinth macaw population has risen from 80 to 400. Sadly, the ongoing threat of fires and climate change means the birds could once again be classified as endangered in 2023.

While Kefany invites guests to monitor her birds and plant native mandevilla trees as part of a reforestation programme, Ongafati is busy on the other side of the ranch with more projects, including attempts to rewild injured or unwanted pumas and habituate tapirs. Field biologist Diogo Lucatelli, who's leading the Tapirapé Project, takes me on an evening drive to search for the shy, snout-nosed herbivores. Often referred to as 'living fossils' because they so closely resemble their earliest ancestors, they put us to shame in terms of evolutionary longevity, having been around for 80 million years (we've been around for less than 1% of that time).

Having carefully identified several of their favourite routes, Diogo has created artificial clay ticks to lure the animals so he can record

their behaviour on camera. Eventually, he hopes one will step into a trap they've set, allowing vets to dart and collar it.

Despite using the same habituation technique applied to jaguars, the process is much slower with tapirs. "To feed them would be much easier," explains Diogo, during our stake out of one site. "But we don't want to do that. We've chosen the hard way, because this needs to be based on science."

Accordingly, we wait. In silence as the sun becomes a faint whisper and sounds of the night intensify. Screeching louder than Grand Prix drivers burning rubber off the line, an army of frogs dash to secure their nightly positions, while acrobatic fishing bats splash like skimming stones across the surface of a lagoon. Shining brighter than the lights of Manhattan, a million reptilian eyes stare back at us from the water — but our tapir is nowhere to be seen. For now, he remains lost in a 'lost world'.

Driving back to Casa Caiman, I'm struck by the irony of animals roaming freely on land once dedicated to cattle farming. But Mario and his team have shown that, if given an opportunity, the natural world will find a way to flourish. As trees grow taller and paw prints increasingly decorate trails, there's every chance the Pantanal could become even more beautifully bewildering than it is today. **B**



#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways flies daily, nonstop, between Heathrow and São Paulo. European carriers such as Air France, Iberia, Latam Airlines and TAP Air Portugal offer one-stop flights via their European hubs. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [airfrance.co.uk](http://airfrance.co.uk) [iberia.com](http://iberia.com) [latamlines.com](http://latamlines.com) [tap.com](http://tap.com)

**Average flight time:** 12h.

To reach the Pantanal, fly nonstop from São Paulo to Campo Grande with Latam Airlines or Go! Intelligent Airlines. [go.com.br](http://go.com.br)

It's a four-five-hour transfer by road to Caiman Ecological Refuge, arranged through a tour operator or the lodge.

#### WHEN TO GO

Winter (June to August) sees pleasant temperatures of 20-28C, rising to 30C in the spring dry season (September to November), the best for spotting jaguars. The rainy season (December to April) renders some areas impassable and brings intense mosquito activity.

#### PLACES MENTIONED

Ongafati [ongafati.org](http://ongafati.org)  
Instituto Arara Azul  
[institutoarara.org.br](http://institutoarara.org.br)

#### WHERE TO STAY

Caiman Ecological Refuge, from BR\$3,852 (£596) a night all-inclusive, based on two people sharing a suite, excluding alcoholic drinks, excursions and an environmental fee of BR\$500 (£77) per person. [caiman.com.br](http://caiman.com.br)

#### MORE INFO

Visit Brazil [visitbrazil.com](http://visitbrazil.com)  
A Visitor's Guide to the Great Wetlands of Brazil (Bradt Travel Guides), £16.99

#### HOW TO DO IT

Absentcumbie & Kent offers a seven-night trip to Brazil, including five nights all-inclusive at Caiman from £6,999 per person, based on two people sharing. Includes flights, transfers and two nights in Rio de Janeiro. [absentcumbie.co.uk](http://absentcumbie.co.uk)

Above: A Brazilian cowboy leads a herd of cows near Caiman