

## Brazil Trip

### July 31-August 14, 2015

#### Background

Linda and I toured Brazil in 1985 as our first serious international birding trip. We had been to Mexico, but this was longer, and a much more involved expedition. We went on a VENT (Victor Emanuel Nature Tours) with guides Robert Ridgely, who literally wrote the book on South American birds, and the legendary Ted Parker.

That trip was a smashing success. We saw and heard 499 species. My records in the birding database don't include any heard only birds, but still, the total is well over 400 species identified in about 4 weeks.

However, we didn't see a Jaguar.

When we were on a trip with Mark Pretti, one of our favorite guides, he casually mentioned that Jaguars are seen regularly on boat rides from Porto Jofre. Linda seized on this and started thinking about a return to Brazil after only 30 years. We were too late to sign up for Mark's regular trip to Brazil, but he agreed to stay over — postponing a trip with his wife Karen — and take us on a private tour.

We recruited two friends, Suzanne Woodcock and Wendy Naruo, to join us.

Spoiler alert!!!



## July 31-August 1: Travel to Cuiabá

We had a curious route to Cuiabá, via Toronto on Air Canada. It isn't as crazy as it sounds, as the flight was the shortest duration available. We caught a late afternoon flight from SFO to Toronto, then after a short layover, hopped onto a plane for São Paulo. That got to SP mid-morning the next day. Then, we walked thru the entire airport to Terminal 1 and caught a flight to Cuiabá. Counting time to get to the airport and to our hotel, it took just about 24 hours, a bit less than usual.

When we landed in Toronto, I thought I'd let everyone know how we were doing. I turned on my phone and immediately got a text message that I had just run up a bill for \$100. A few seconds later, the total was \$300. I quickly disabled International Data Roaming, and called the AT&T number the text message suggested. Apparently, my subscription to an international plan hadn't activated. We managed to fix that before we got to the ramp, and they erased the incredible charges.

We met up with Suzanne and Wendy in SP; we were all on the same flight to Cuiabá. Mark Pretti, our guide for the trip, met us at the airport, a pleasant surprise as we were prepared to walk to our hotel. We could see the hotel from the airport, but Mark told us the hotel offered a free shuttle. His Brazilian — the language also known as Portuguese — was good enough to deal with the telephone. The shuttle arrived quickly and got us to the hotel only a few minutes later than Mark, who walked.

Hotel Taina, our home for one night, was average for something that close to the airport, and had great internet coverage. We ate dinner at Mississippi Pizza, a restaurant down the street, then collapsed.



Breakfast the next morning introduced us to typical Brazilian fare. We found a marvelous buffet waiting downstairs and learned about *Pan do queijo*, wonderful little balls of dough filled with cheese. We had these whenever we weren't eating brekkie in the field. Every version was different, some even claiming to be gluten free, and all were wonderful.

## August 1-5: Pousada do Parque, Chapada dos Guimãres

We spent three full nights at a nice lodge, *Pousada do Parque*, located in the *Chapada dos Guimãres* National Park. *Pousado* means *lodge*, more or less, and *Chapada* refers to the topography of the area, a dry plateau above a tropical forest. The park was a late creation, and there are many private holdings within the boundary of the park. However, it's better than nothing. The area contains mainly dry scrubland, known at *Cerrado*, pronounced cerHAdo, with a few areas of forest. *Guimãres* is a proper noun and virtually impossible to pronounce properly. The accent is on the first syllable, and the "mar" is nasalized.

We stopped at a forest on our way to the lodge, where we spent a couple of hours walking down a dirt road. The road passed thru the forest to an agricultural area on the other side. We managed to see a few

lifers and many *quasi-lifers*, species not seen since 1985. *Amazingly*, we can't remember all the birds we saw on that trip 30 years ago, so they might as well be lifers. Only after checking my database do we know if they are actually new. The overwhelming majority are birds that we saw in 1985, and in some cases again in other locations.

Wendy, a great photographer as well as a terrific spotter, proved her merit within minutes by pointing out a spectacular butterfly. Alas, the *Starry Night Cracker* was too active for me, but she got a good photo that I hope to see later.



Shortly after that, though, she found another, a species of Clear-wing Butterfly. This one posed for a photo. The insect is about 1" (2.5 cm) long. The wings are not completely clear, but have some major transparent areas that you can just make out in the photo.

The lodge was more than acceptable, with excellent food and a manager who spoke English fluently. That is something unusual in this mainly rural part of Brazil.

One of the fun treats at the lodge was a family of Brazilian Guinea Pigs, or Wild Cavy as the mammal checklist has it. Two of them seemed to disagree about something, probably which one has first dibs on the female. Here they are facing off.





A pair of Burrowing Owls had a territory right in front of the lodge. We saw them daily and photographed them on several occasions. Here's one of them checking us out.

We spent several days investigating nearby spots. We returned to the dirt road we visited the first day. I recorded the name as *Vale da Bencao*, which may be close to correct. This was a very fruitful spot, but quite shady. Photography was difficult.



We spent more time visiting a pond near the lodge. This involved a walk of about 30 minutes along a road with some woods on each side. We had good views of a **Sooty-fronted Spinetail** along the way. Almost all spinetails are shy and difficult to see, so getting a photograph of one means that we had a great look.



When a bird's name includes "fronted," it refers to the area above the bird's bill. In this photo, you can barely make out the sootiness used in naming the bird. Ornithologists display a disturbing tendency to name species for the most insignificant feature. On the other hand, most spinetails look similar to this one.

The pond is triangular, manmade, the result of a small dam at one end, surrounded on two sides by small trees. A road runs along the top of the dam. The roadside includes reeds and grasses, but no trees, therefore a good view.

We were standing on the road when Wendy spotted one of the best birds of the trip, a **Planalto Hermit**, a kind of hummingbird. Hermits are notoriously fast flyers and are usually shy and secretive. This one first flew thru a culvert under a small bridge, then fed on some flowers nearby before perching briefly. Maybe Wendy got a photo. The rest of us were too busy making sure we had a good view. We first awarded 4.5 stars, but later upgraded it to our first five-star sighting of the trip. Mark said it was the best look he had ever had of the species.





We returned to this spot several times, sometimes riding down, sometimes walking. Our enjoyment increased markedly when we made the acquaintance of this cute bird, a [Ferruginous Pygmy-owl](#) (*Glaucidium brasilianum*). These small owls, common all over the [Neotropics](#), are semi-diurnal, hunting during day as well as at night. Other small birds harass them, “mobbing,” whenever they see them. Mark summoned this owl every time we visited by playing a recording of the call. He answered immediately and flew to his favorite perch in a nearby tree. This brought a mixed flock to scold him, providing us with a great show. Mark always apologized to the owl, a nice touch.

After three days exploring this interesting area, it was time to move on, into the Amazonian rainforest.

[August 5, 2015: Alta Floresta](#)

We flew from Cuiabá to the small city of Alta Floresta, arriving in late afternoon. We had one night in the Floresta Amazonica Hotel before transferring to Cristalino Lodge. This was partly due to our late planning: there were no rooms available that night at the Lodge, and also to allow some time checking out the grounds at the hotel. There used to be a nest of Harpy Eagles in a small forest on the grounds, but they finally gave up and moved to somewhere less urban.



The forest was too small to contain much wildlife, but we checked it out anyway. Then, we moved on to a fishpond, where we found interesting stuff. First, we had a lecture on the ecology of Brazil Nuts. These cannot be cultivated because of the way they are pollinated and propagated. The trees themselves are huge, with all the nuts far removed from the forest floor. Here is one we saw.

Pollination requires large bees that are big enough to move a hood on the flower to get at the important part of the flower. Other species may steal some of the nectar, but they don’t pollinate. Obviously, given the height of the trees, humans can’t affect this.



The trees are too tall to climb and get the seedpods, which are about the size of a softball. Inside each seedpod are about a dozen of the seeds that we eat. The only way to harvest the nuts is to find the seedpods on the ground and cut them open. Agoutis have figured out a way to deal with this without using machetes: They gnaw a hole in the pod and get the good stuff out. In this way, they help propagate the trees in the forest.

We got a good luck at **Crimson-bellied Parakeets** (called “Conures” in the pet trade). We had seen these earlier in the trip, but we finally got a view in the scope.



A palm tree near the dining area of the hotel produced another



interesting parakeet, Yellow-chevroned, named for the yellow area that is obvious in this photo, but seldom seen that well when the bird flies overhead. Notice how well this bright green bird blends into the background of the tree.

The tree also sheltered **Thrush-like Wrens**, which were difficult to see, but easy to hear. They were Linda's Favorite Heard Bird® of the trip.

Here's another interesting species we saw in our morning walk near the fishpond, Black-fronted Nunbird. There was a nest nearby where he was taking food for a nestling.

After a nice walk around, we boarded a van for the trip to Cristalino Lodge. We stopped along the way at a palm grove where we ticked the Point-tailed Palmcreeper and Sulphury Flycatcher, two birds that depend on this specific habitat. Then, we boarded a boat for the short trip to the Lodge.

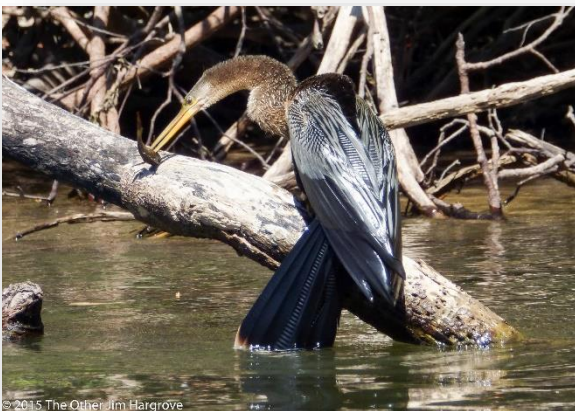


## August 6-9: Cristalino Lodge



Because we started on plans so late, we had to take what rooms were available. That turned out to be the luxury cabins, which were quite nice.

We found the Lodge to be one of the best in the world. Everything was wonderful: the room, the food, the service, and the wildlife. We saw many interesting animals during our short afternoon boat ride and walk thru the forest in the area. Here are a number of nice photos:



This Anhinga (the same species we have in the USA) was working on a small fish. He repeatedly banged the fish on the log trying to soften it up before trying to eat it.

be quite painful if you try to pick the bug up, which we did not do.



This is an example of an “Assassin Bug,” a true bug that seizes its prey and injects poison using a proboscis. Apparently, this can



This spectacular female Bare-faced Curassow was quite tame, but somewhat camera shy. She hung out near the boat dock.





This is the dining area, bar, and library of the Lodge, lit by some solar powered lights along the walkway. The wood is native to the area and quite lovely. Everything about the Lodge was nice.

The food was quite interesting and creative, with recipes using local ingredients. Every meal was an adventure.

One morning, we had reserved space at a canopy tower, one with 128 steps to the second level, where we set up shop. Towers such as this are a wonderful way to view the forest birds. Looking out and down on the trees provides a completely different view from a typical neck-breaker. A pair of White-browed



Purpletufts gave us great looks, but concealed the purple feathers that give them their name. A coffee table book we bought at the Lodge shows what professional photographers can capture. Clearly taken from the same spot, the photo in the book shows the nifty purple tuft. I wonder how long the photographer had to wait to capture that shot.

We saw tons of great butterflies while birding around the lodge. In fact, one day I claimed that I spent more time on butterflies than birds. They are certainly easier to photograph. Here is a sample of the best:









Morpho showing underwing instead of the colorful blue upperwing



Metal Mark perched on top of a leaf instead of the underside as it usually does.



	
<p>An “88” butterfly.</p>	<p>An “8b” butterfly. Compare to “88.” Note: this is probably individual variation within one species</p>
	
<p>I wish I hadn’t cut off the tip, but this is simply too beautiful to leave out.</p>	<p>This interesting butterfly sat on Mark’s scope. The blue color shows only from some angles</p>
	
<p>This tiny skipper butterfly was attracted to Wendy’s finger.</p>	<p>A Dagger Wing of some species</p>



We also happened on a wonderful funnel web spider during our walks. She was large, perhaps 3" (7-8 cm) counting the legs, sitting patiently in the web. I tried various settings on the camera in an attempt to get a decent photo. After several fruitless tries, I took a step closer to the web. She vanished in a fraction of a second, back down the funnel. Here's the best of a bad lot. That's the funnel on the right.

Another interesting spider was one we didn't actually see. Mark showed us the lair of a Trapdoor Spider.

This unusual spider builds a deep hole in rotten wood and covers it with a camouflaged top. Then, when she is hunting, which she wasn't when we were there, she waits just under the trap door for some prey to walk by. Then she pops out and grabs it. Meanwhile, if she is threatened, she disappears down the hole and seals the cover shut with some silk. Here is what the nest looks like.

On two afternoons, we visited a "water feature" hidden away in the forest. Three bamboo containers filled with water proved irresistible to many species, including two different Manikins. Unfortunately, the light was too dim for my small camera. Wendy kept clicking away with her professional quality equipment. We'll see if she was able to come up with something. This was one of the highlights of the trip for me.



Here's a quiz bird for you. We saw this during a morning walk to a different part of the grounds. Mark put the scope on this bird and challenged us to ID it. I noted the long, bare legs and guessed that it might be a juvenile Great Black Hawk. Right! Then I said, "Wow. That is sure different from the adult. I never would have guessed it was a Great Black Hawk." Suzanne immediately pointed out, "You just did!" Oops.





I don't want you to get the idea that we focused all our attention on birds and insects. We took several boat rides on the Cristalino River looking for interesting stuff. For example, this Cayman along the shore was active as dusk approached, one of larger ones we saw on the river. (But wait for the Pantanal.)

This immature Rufescent Tiger-heron shows where the name comes from.

Mammals were also in evidence. We saw six different species of monkeys on this trip:

- Brown Capuchins, abundant and noisy. We even had a 5-star look at a pair copulating right in front of us.
- White-nosed Bearded Saki. A group of these followed a larger troop of Capuchins.
- White-whiskered Spider Monkeys. Acrobatic little beasts, hanging upside down on a branch to reach some fruit.
- Red-handed Howler Monkeys: Mostly black, but with the obvious red hands, all four of them
- Black howler Monkeys: Just saw one of these. Usually they are in family groups, so this one may have been kicked out for some reason.
- One to be named later. (See the Postscript.)



We watched a troop of Capuchins for quite a while as they passed over the trail. The adults picked fruit off the trees, took a single bite and dropped the rest on the ground. The young ones descended to the ground to look thru the easy pickings.



And that wasn't the only mammal. Three Capybaras hung around the grounds, sometimes enjoying a mud bath right next to the boat dock. We saw many more of these huge rodents (the largest in the world) in the Pantanal.



As we waited for the boat to take us away, a pair of Giant Otters showed up to fish in the area near the dock. We heard one before we saw it, a loud eerie sound. This picture of one of them is pretty good, but the I like the one I took in 2008 at the Napo Wildlife Center even better.

Thus, our stay at the wonderful Cristalino Lodge ended. After a return to Alta Floresta, we had lunch at the Floresta Amazonica before flying back to Cuiabá. There, we ate dinner at a Subway outlet next door before heading to bed early.

Early drive planned for the next morning into the Pantanal.

### August 10-12: The Pantanal

This incredible place, the largest freshwater wetland in the world, twice the size of California, is a magnet for birders. During the wet season, 1-2 meters of rain falls onto a flat plain. Without much slope, the water drains slowly, unlike the Amazonian rainforest to the north. When we arrived, the water level on the banks had dropped to expose about a meter of suitable habitat for several species that use burrows in the bank for nest sites. Of course, most tourists come as we did, in the dry season when the wildlife clusters around the available water.





Many of the trees were flowering, especially *ipei* trees, yellow and pink particularly. Here is one of the best.

As we drove down the *Transpantanereia*, we encountered our first roadside pond. There we came upon a newly hatched *float* of Caymans. A number of the healthier young basked on the back of the mother, sometimes climbing over each other.

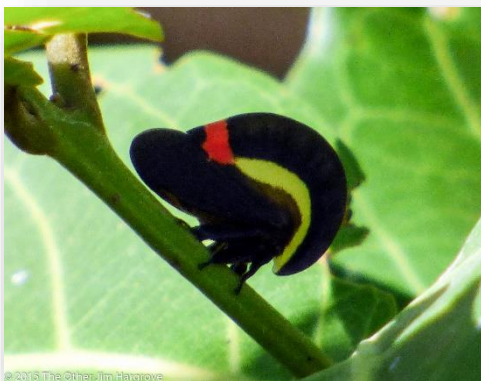
One bold and enterprising youngster found the safest place in the pond, at least until mama decided to submerge.



After crossing 34 rickety bridges (more on this later), we arrived at the turnoff to *Fazenda Santa Tereza*. *Fazenda* means *ranch* or *plantation*, but this one was a lodge on the *Rio Pixaim*.

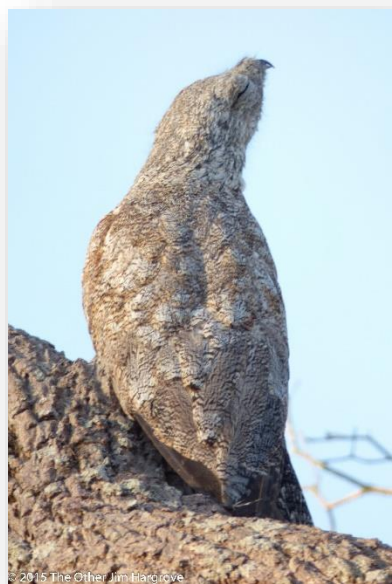
A tree on the grounds housed a nest of a Jabiru, one of the signature birds of the Pantanal. The nest

also accommodated Monk Parakeets, which have also established themselves in Austin, TX, among other places. A Greater Thornbird seemed to be interested in the huge nest as well. This was a good year for Jabirus, at least the pair that had this nest. They had four chicks.



The woods along the river yielded perhaps the most interesting insect of the entire trip. Mark called it a Leafhopper. We're not really sure where its head is.



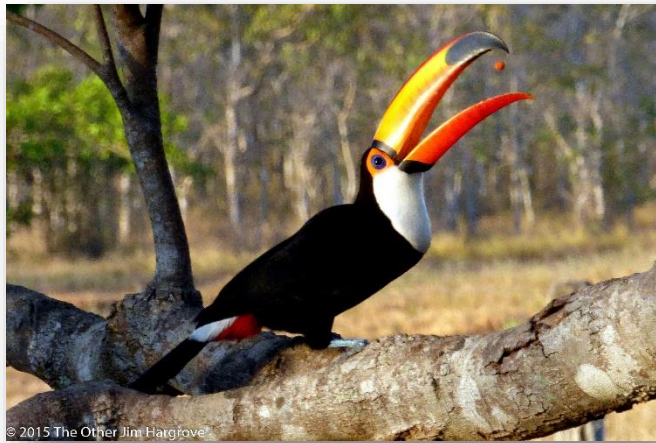


A short boat ride and a walk took us to the day roost of a Great Potoo, an amazing example of camouflage. From a distance, the bird looks like a part of the tree. Even up close, it blends in well

A Cattle Tyrant and Scaled Dove were easy sightings around the lodge where they shared food offerings with numerous Yellow-billed Cardinals and one Red-crested Cardinals, as well as other birds.







In addition to this bird feeding operation, the lodge put out dog food, kibble bits, for birds that don't eat seeds, such as this Toco Toucan that Linda captured in the act of throwing a bit into its huge bill.

After exploring this area for a couple of days, it was time for the great Jaguar Hunt. We rose at 3:30 and hit the road toward Port Jofre. This took two hours along the Transpantanereia, crossing numerous bridges in the dark. On the return trip,

when we could see the bridges, we were a bit alarmed. I was appointed to keep track of how many bridges we crossed. The total was 91, in a space of about 80 km. Put another way, we crossed one on average every minute and twenty seconds. One of these was so bad that when our driver saw it in daylight, she got out and rearranged the boards before crossing.

Two bridges were in such bad shape that we avoided them altogether, preferring to drop down to what was now dry sand and go around. I'm wondering what they do in the wet season. Maybe they use boats.

At any rate, we arrived at Porto Jofre on the banks of the Cuiabá River, which we learned was only five hours from Cuiabá when traveling downstream. That compares favorably to driving on the Transpantanereia.



Before boarding the boat, we photographed some [Hyacinth Macaws](#), the largest parrot in the world. We saw quite a few of these around the grounds. These birds were in serious decline in 1985 on our previous visit to the area. The [IUCN Red List](#) classifies the species as *vulnerable*, but that is an improvement from 30 years ago.

At about 6:30 am, we set off to look for a Jaguar. The manager of this operation assured us that we had a 99% chance of seeing a Jaguar today, meaning that unless we were very unlucky, our quest should be successful.

Of course, thank to my spoiler at the beginning, you know that we did locate one. Here's how it works. A flotilla of small boats holding 4-8 people, or two people and tons of camera equipment, set out to scour the area. When one boat locates a cat, the others rapidly converge on the spot.

We were lucky to have Mark on board, as he spotted the cat that we photographed, so we were the fortunate first boat. We had fabulous views of a mother and a cub about one year old. We watched as the mother came down to the river for a drink of water. Then, she retreated into the bushes. However, as she walked we caught sight of her and the cub several times through openings in the vegetation.



Once, we saw the mother mark a tree by rubbing her cheek against the trunk, just like our housecats do at home. Here's photo of her as she marks another.

This was truly fabulous. By the time we left and headed back to the boat dock, other boats were already arriving.

While the other boats tried to duplicate our view, we stopped on a side channel and added a few birds to our list. Then, we decided to head back to *Fazenda Santa Tereza* in time for an afternoon boat ride.



We had the best boat driver for this ride, and saw many difficult species, and photographed a Sunbittern for the nth time. Finally, darkness forced us to end this momentous day.

### August 13, 2015: Leaving the Pantanal

After a last check of the forest, we started our return trip. We stopped for lunch at another lodge, *Pousada Piuval*, close to the start of the *Transpantaneira*, where we finally had a chance to sample *Pacu*, a local fish. It tastes more like chicken than fish.





Outside the dining area, Linda spotted some Campo Flickers, large woodpeckers that eat ants. In fact, that is exactly what the bird in this photo was doing, though the ants are too small to see. Very few birds eat ants. The name *Antbird*, etc., refers to their habit of following swarms of army ants to eat the insects chased out of hiding.

A Greater Rhea foraged in a nearby pasture. This one is eating an insect that it

caught, throwing it into its beak just like the Toucan did with the bit of kibble.



Several Buff-necked Ibis, one of the prettier members of its family, also found the pasture to their liking.

However, our favorite sighting of the afternoon was not a bird; it was a lizard, a Black and White Tegu. At more than a meter in length (counting the tail), it was impressive for size alone. Very cooperative, it posed for several photographs. Its cousin, various kind of “tree lizards” tend to scurry away when spotted. This

fellow was much slower.

With that, we said goodbye to this fantastic area and headed back to Cuiabá, where we spent the night Hotel Deville, much nicer than the Taina, albeit a 15 minute taxi ride from the airport. I had Pacu again for dinner. It still tasted like chicken.





August 14, 2015: Postscript. Morning in Cuiabá

Our flight back to São Paulo didn't leave until mid- afternoon, so we had time to kill in Cuiabá. We took a taxi over to *Parque Mae Beneficia*, in the middle of town. This was a typical city park, with playing fields, lots of joggers, even a class of school children. However, in a natural area, we managed to find our reason for going there, a troop of [Silvery Marmosets \(\*Mico argentatus melanura\*\)](#). Several joggers stopped to make sure we knew where to look. One mother had a young one riding on her back. When she stopped on a tree branch, I took the final photo of our trip.

