

Northern Pantanal and Emas 9.–27.5. 2023

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In 18 days we visited Transpantaneira (hereafter TPN), Emas NP and two areas between those where no mammalwatcher has gone before. Overall we got 36-40 species of mammals, depending on how we approach the IDs of small rodents, which seem to be particularly difficult in the neotropics. May is usually not preferred by mammalwatchers for Pantanal, but I can't really imagine visiting this area in an even warmer part of the year – daytime temperatures around 35 degrees were already terrible enough. And despite our visit being “off-season”, we have seen almost everything I could have ever dreamed of, except for Jaguars (as we refused to participate in the tourist boating theater and did not get lucky on TPN) and Ocelots (those not for the lack of effort).

My feelings about the trip are a bit conflicted. The nature, in particular around TPN, is really stunning – TPN may simply be one of the easiest places to watch birds in the entire world - and so is the landscape of the surrounding highlands. The mammalwatching required some effort, but we scored several species that a couple of years ago I would not even have thought about seeing in the wild - and there was an almost constant flux of “something” to see during night rides. On the other hand, Brazil has taken the privatization of land to the absolute extreme: there is simply no accessible public land at all. Fences, locks and no-entry signs are the dominant features of the landscape and even the Emas NP is now less accessible than reported previously.

https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d2=2023-06-01&nelat=-14&nelng=-52&swlat=-19&swlng=-58&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska

Logistics

We flew to/from Cuiabá and rented a car from Localiza. We tried to find a 4×4, but the common rental agencies do not have them on offer. It seems that there may be an option to get a pickup truck (Hilux or similar) from specialized companies, but that would require some asking around (in Portuguese) – and all cars I have seen had open bed, from which, I presume, all our stuff would have been stolen at the first red light. We thus ended up getting a 2WD Jeep Renegade – which looks cool, but has a pretty low clearance and surprisingly little trunk space. Even on TPN, there were some bridges where I had to show the driver from the outside exactly where to turn to avoid underside damage; most side tracks would be outright impassable for the car and we had to turn around even on a “road” shown on Google Maps (more about that later). The car takes both normal gasoline and ethanol, but goes much further on the former, which is a key observation when visiting TPN, where there is no source of fuel, besides possibly, but unreliably, in Porto Jofre.



Black-tailed Marmoset

on booking.com reviews – and those really did not lie: there were **Black-tailed Marmosets** coming into the garden to be fed by the owner.

There is plenty of free wifi around the town, but most hotspots require a valid Brazilian ID number; you may try some fake numbers off the internet with varied success. We got a SIM card from Vivo in a shopping mall – after a long process, because the clerk was unfamiliar with selling cards to people without, again, a Brazilian ID number. We put some credit on it and then we never run out of data, but I still have no idea what the plan was. There is coverage in cities and in some parts of TPN (around Rio Claro for example), but not much outside of that. To travel around Cuiabá, Uber was by far the fastest option, while still really cheap. Propane gas canisters (EN417) can be bought in stores with fishing gear. When paying by card in stores, we needed to always claim that the cards were “credito” (despite them being debit) in order for the transaction to work.

To my surprise, a lot of accommodation options in the area are not found on booking.com, or seemingly any other online service. Google Maps has some ideas where those places are but not all that are shown there are real - exploration in the field is needed. Wild camping is quite difficult in most places, in particular without a high-clearance vehicle. During the entire trip, we have met exactly 5 people who spoke any English - the lady in Localiza, a random customer in a supermarket, Kennedy, Mario and Jeanne (see later). Despite the old adage about Brazil which says that “trying to speak broken Spanish is usually not helpful”, I did have some success with that approach; the rest of the interactions were usually through



Capybara

In theory, we were allowed to drive it “on sealed roads only”, which is funny not only considering that only 2 kms of TPN are paved but because many small streets in Cuiabá (including the one leading to our first accommodation) are just dirt tracks. Before returning, I had the car cleaned (which took about 2 hours) and there were no complaints from Localiza, despite some inevitable bumps and scratches on the underside. When renting the car, my credit card got declined – I later learned that my bank has blocked all my cards after my attempts to buy tickets for mass transit in Atlanta (no idea why) – since others had only debit cards, which were not accepted for the deposit, we had to stay in Cuiabá overnight and wait for my bank to unblock the cards. The Localiza staff was as helpful as possible, they even provided me with a wifi hotspot from a personal phone. The overnight stay was also productive for mammalwatching, because we picked Pousada Sagui for that purpose, based



Lesser Bulldog Bat, Seba's Short-tailed Bats, Pallas's Long-tongued Bats

Google Translate (which works offline for written text). Food is absolutely brilliant in Mato Grosso – almost every place that serves lunch does it as “prato feito”, a self-service buffet, with an overwhelming choice of food, for comically low prices. There are many reports from Pantanal on mammalwatching.com, but most people visit the same lodges or take tours. Rob Jansen's report really stood out among those and was the source of most ideas for us. Overall, in 3 people, we have spent about \$850 per person locally (Cuiabá to Cuiabá), which I think really allows me to feel smug around the “lodges” asking at least \$100 per person per day ...

Besides our typical gear, we have also brought from home an inflatable canoe (Gumotex Pálava) – since we were headed to the world's largest wetland, we presumed that there would be ample space to put it to use, in particular considering that there are over 100 bridges on TPN itself. We could not have really been more wrong – out of all these bridges, only three had really any open water under them. It turned out that in the tropical climate, water is either completely overgrown by impassable vegetation or flowing too fast to paddle against (and there is usually no escape once headed downstream). Yes, there are reports of people who simply went down Rio Cuiabá for a couple of weeks, but we do have a limit to our adventurous spirits. Also we got progressively more and more scared of potential Jaguar attacks while camping (and one group of kayakers was outright removed by the police for that reason). Eventually, we only managed shorter trips on Rio Claro and Rio Mutum (which were still a fantastic experience).

Transpantaneira

TPN is 145 kms of a dirt road, through flat, but surprisingly varied landscape, which, in May, ranged from grassy pastures through thick forest to large bodies of overgrown water. In May, the road surface was completely dry, but it was clear that this was a recent development as the graders were still smoothing out the wet-season damage. Coming from Poconé, the bridges start as solid concrete structures, but they eventually change to wood and get progressively wonkier. One of those, about 20 kms before Porto Jofre, actually collapsed, shortly before we reached it. The car that went down with it had been already pulled out, but oil was still visible in the water. When asked, the locals told us that it should be repaired in about 10 days ... we were quite glad that we hadn't passed it a little earlier! When we returned after 10 days, it was indeed passable, even if works were not completed.



Brazillian Guinea Pigs

Almost all side tracks are either locked or endowed with large “no trespassing” signs; the only exceptions are: the junction at $-17.1174, -56.9396$ from which it is possible to go a few kms west, and the entrance to Rio Claro (which clearly welcomes day visitors). Some of the areas around the road can be accessed through the lodges, but at least in some of them you need to be an overnight guest to get access - at least that’s what we were told personally in Araras (this includes the trail from BarAra) and by email from Pouso Alegre. In Rio Claro on the other hand, we were allowed to park our car for a small fee and set out in our boat on the river – later we found out that the “parking fee” included camping on the lodge’s grounds. The lodge itself looked like it was under some reconstruction and there were no guests, so I am not sure if camping is an option during normal operation, but the staff was extremely welcoming and they would surely figure something out.



White-lined Broad-nosed Bats

We have found several reports of a good wild camping site just outside the Rio Claro entrance, but the place has since grown over. Only a few hundred meters down TPN, on its opposite side, we found another place, where we ended up spending two (non-consecutive) nights - it’s not the greatest place, as TPN is only few meters away behind a single line of trees and there is a lot of loud traffic even very early in the morning, but it works as a last resort for unplanned stays (for example when a bridge collapses and you thus arrive at 2 a.m.) – for planned camping, better try Rio Claro, or the nearby UeSo (which advertises camping). Note that this is the only reasonable wild camp along the entire length of TPN as there is simply no other place to even park off the road – well there are the ruins at $-17.2616, -56.9048$, but there is reportedly extreme Jaguar danger and the safe and reasonable campsites in Porto Jofre are not far (if all bridges stand, that is).

Our main base in the area however quickly became Churrascaria Pantaneira – a cool little motel (with great prato feito for lunch and even greater breakfast) right at the start of TPN. Since one of the most promising parts of TPN for Ocelots is from here to Rio Claro, this establishment is great for night drives – the parking is closed at night, but you get a remote for the gate with your room keys, so you can come and go as you please. We spent three nights there in total, but I can honestly imagine a productive week-long stay on TPN just using Churrascaria as the base.



Marsh Deer



Common Brown Brocket



Black-and-gold Howler Monkey

down the road and some concrete profiles stored at the side of the road all had **White-lined Broad-nosed Bats** and the bridge next to the ruins must have been providing shelter to a **Lesser Bulldog Bat** before its collapse -- the bat was clearly unhappy about the turn of events and circled around in broad daylight. The Rio Claro lodge grounds had one **Azara's Agouti**.

All nights combined, we have spent roughly 22–25 hours slowly driving various parts of TPN at night with one person looking through IR and two (including whoever was driving, usually Eliška) spotlighting around. Starting from Poconé, the first part has more open pastures, there after BarAra, the view gets obscured by bushes, then it gets open again soon after Rio Claro until Hotel Pantanal, after which there are more wetlands, but also forests. The most common animal by far were **Crab-eating Foxes** – already during the first two evenings we saw many, but not much else besides a **Common Red Brocket**. Identifying deer was in general harder than I thought, but I am pretty sure that we also got a **Common Brown Brocket** (from the only side road) at the start of the third evening, when we decided to take the need to return from the fallen bridge as an opportunity for a night ride in the most remote central part of TPN. This was a good idea, because the area around km 95 had quite a few rodents climbing on various plants. I have no idea how to ID those at all, but Venkat gave me his opinions (which he warns are highly preliminary) – at least one of the rodents here then could be **Oecomys**.



Crab-eating Fox



Southern Tamandua

It was only the fourth (and longest) evening of TPN driving when things really went mad with three **South American Tapir** sightings – two roughly 5 kms from the Rio Claro turnoff (one on each side) and one closer to



Gray Four-eyed Opossum



Common Tapeti

Poconé – and a **Southern Tamandua** running parallel with us before climbing a roadside tree (and providing extended views there) just north of the Rio Claro turnoff. We had at first not thought much about this area, because there isn't much of a view from the road into the landscape, but we read about Ocelot sightings there, so we focused on it a bit. During our visits to the northern parts of TPN, we also twice saw **Gray Four-eyed Opossum** and at least five times **Common Tapeti** (including during night walks on Rio Claro grounds). We also took two several-hours long trips in our boat around Rio Claro, one in the middle of the day and one around sunset, but found no mammals this way.

When we finally reached Porto Jofre almost two weeks later, we did a night drive from there. The road to Santa Rosa was not passable in our car and thus we focused mostly on TPN and a few hundred meters of some short roads around. All the mammals on it – **Long-tailed Porcupine**, **White-eared Opossum** and **Gray Four-eyed Opossum** were found quite close to Porto Jofre. Near the campsite, there were again small rodents, possibly *Hylaeamys* according to Venkat.

Finally this section should also include our brief exploration of the other road that starts in Poconé – the road to Porto Cercado. This was much busier after sunset than TPN and there wasn't much view anywhere from the road, but a few kms be-



Long-tailed Porcupine

fore Porto Cercado, we followed a turnoff west, where around $-16.5032, -56.4051$ we found an interesting walkable trail into old plantations and secondary forest, which had several **Gray Four-eyed Opossums** and **Common Red Brocket**. The sides of the road hosted a few rodents, probably *Oligoryzomys* according to Venkat, and more **Common Tapeti**.



Common Red Brocket

Emas NP

Inspired by several reports, we took the long drive to Emas. At the northern entrance, we were turned away, because it is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. The southern entrance seemed to be closed on Sundays and Mondays instead; since it was Tuesday, we were happily greeted by the friendly English-speaking ranger Kennedy – and a couple of **Free-tailed Bats** (that probably can't be IDed further) living inside the roof of one of the entrance buildings. Kennedy showed us the small triangle of roads between the entrance and the headquarters at Rio Formoso, where we were allowed to visit without a guide, and the campsite near Rio Formoso, where we were allowed to camp (as camping at the entrance was no longer possible). Happy about this arrangement, we started exploring, only to meet Kennedy again – this time he told us that he had spoken with his boss and that the promised land was now taken away from us: no camping at all and triangle visits only during daytime. Properly pissed, we contemplated leaving altogether, but we instead moved to Hotel Pousada das Emas in Chapadão do Céu, where we arranged for a late arrival and came back to the park.



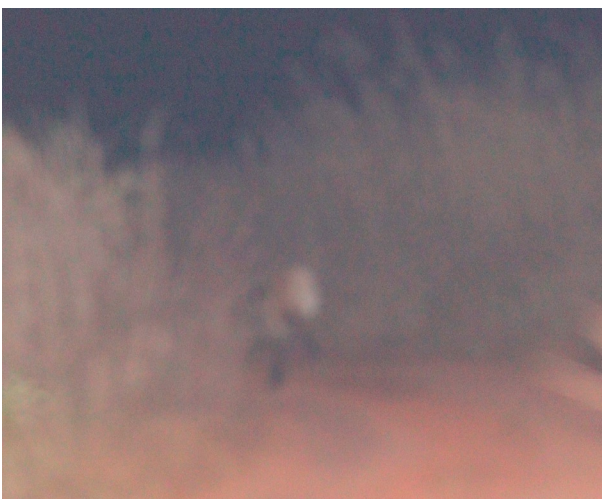
Free-tailed Bats

Being given no choice, we hired a “guide” – a guy who, for some 200 BRL, sat mostly quietly in the back of our car for a few hours and gave us about four unnecessary driving directions during the whole evening. To make up for the inconvenience, immediately after entering the triangle, still at daylight, we had a **Maned Wolf** running across the road – sadly too fast for a photo. Only a short while later, a herd of **White-lipped Peccaries** crossed the same road (the one which follows the fence west). Having a guide with us, we were allowed to continue across Rio Formoso, but this road is not great for mammalwatching, because it's mostly in a ditch – still, we got another **Maned Wolf** across the road in the distance and I managed one very funny photograph.



Collared Peccary

Emas had one aspect that we were woefully unprepared for: it was actually quite cold, around 10 degrees, and with open windows, we got pretty frozen, but we still continued exploring the nearby corn fields after we dropped off the guide. We were rewarded by a **Tapir** (in corn fields!), **Collared Peccary**, **Marsh Deer** and a rodent quite strikingly different from the other ones that we saw so far – maybe *Holochilus* according to Venkat.



Maned Wolf, seriously



White-lipped Peccary



Six-banded Armadillo



Southern Naked-tailed Armadillo

Northeastern Pantanal

At this point, we basically looked at the map and tried to guess some places where we maybe could access some water to take our boat for another spin. The first choice fell on Rio Piquiri, which we wanted to access using the roads MT-370/MT-140 shown on Google Maps. This was quite foolish, as we did not get even half way through and had to turn back roughly around $-17.1374, -55.2539$ because the sand on the road was way too deep for a 2WD car. On the way there we stopped for the night at “Rancho do Jorge” – the only one from a cluster of sports-fishing accommodations on the banks of Rio Itiquira that we found to be open. The access road from the highway had (during the day) **Six-banded Armadillo** ($-17.1016, -54.8432$) and, more importantly,



Pampas Deer



Flat-faced Fruit-eating Bat



Giant Anteater



Southern Tamandua



Fox or deer? Probably fox, but this photo confuses people.

Southern Naked-tailed Armadillo (−17.1027, −54.8820); a night walk on the last kilometer of the road produced **White-eared Opossum** on a tree and an unidentified small rodent.

Our inability to penetrate Pantanal deeper in this area was disappointing, but the stretch of the road between the descent into the Pantanal flat and the deep sand looked interesting enough to stay for a night drive. Already during the day we saw many **Pampas Deer**, peacefully coexisting with the cattle. The night drive brought another **Southern Tamandua** (−17.0776, −54.9819), our only **Giant Anteater** (−17.087432, −54.962975), 2 **Crab-eating Racoons** and a **Flat-faced Fruit-eating Bat** sitting on a tree (−17.1096, −55.1402). There were also some **Crab-eating Foxes**, some more **Pampas Deer** – and an animal for which we still can't decide which of the two it was! We had a peaceful wild camp at −17.0774, −55.1863 (disturbed only by the somewhat loud cattle on the other side of the fence) and added a **South-American Coati** in the morning.



South-American Coati

oded or were absurdly expensive, we came back, found the owners and arranged to camp by the river for two nights for petty change. The campsite was extremely basic, with a rustic shower/toilet with muddy river water, but we were there alone, with unlimited access to the river. My personal theory about this place is that someone has entered wrong coordinates for a campsite on Google, the owners started noticing people coming to camp and simply went with it.

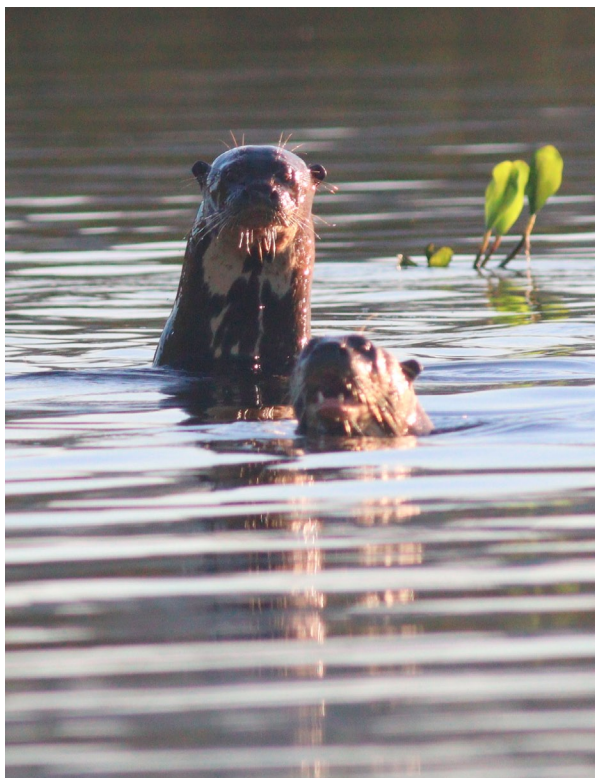


White-eared Opossum

As a last resort for boating, we chose Rio Mutum around Mimoso – an area that had some lodges and campsites on Google Maps and looked quite touristy. It really wasn't – at least not in this season. We first tried the campsite shown at −16.3401, −55.8376 by Google as “Pousada do Mariano”, but nobody was there. After trying some other places around, which were either deserted, had access outright flo-



Crab-eating Raccoon



Giant Otters

exploring them, a troop of **Azara's Capuchins** crossed the bridge above us; some more of those later turned up right next to the campsite. In principle, all of these species were right next to the bridge, so the boat was not required for mammalwatching, but it was an extremely interesting thing to do. The access road to the campsite had more unidentified rodents.

North of Cuiabá

We somewhat arbitrarily decided to explore the area on the northern shores of Represa de Manso. There were some campsites shown on Google Maps, but everything was closed (one place supposedly because of increased Jaguar danger) and the only camping option we found was directly at the gas station in a village, so we wil-



South-American Tapir



Proboscis Bats

We made three trips on the river from the campsite – upstream, the open water ended in vegetation after three kilometers, downstream it continued without obstacles, passing a few lodges, eventually leading towards a large lake, but as the current was growing visibly stronger during our stay, we also limited the exploration to just a few kms in order to be able to come back. This area reportedly does not have Jaguars, but we saw **Giant Otters** at least three times from the boat – right next to the road bridge and further upstream. Under the bridge, we found **Proboscis Bats**, and just as we were



Azara's Capuchin

dcamped (stealthily on someone's land) instead. The only animals found were a **Tapir** (-14.7947, -55.7008) and a **Crab-eating Fox**.

Finally we wanted to pay some kind of a visit to Chapada dos Guimarães. The national park does not seem to allow any night time access (and even daytime is quite limited) – and everything else in the area is, in the typical Brazilian fashion, private. From Rob Jansen's report, I got interested in Jmacá das Araras and we decided to stay there for two nights, despite the slightly outrageous cost of \$50 per person and night.

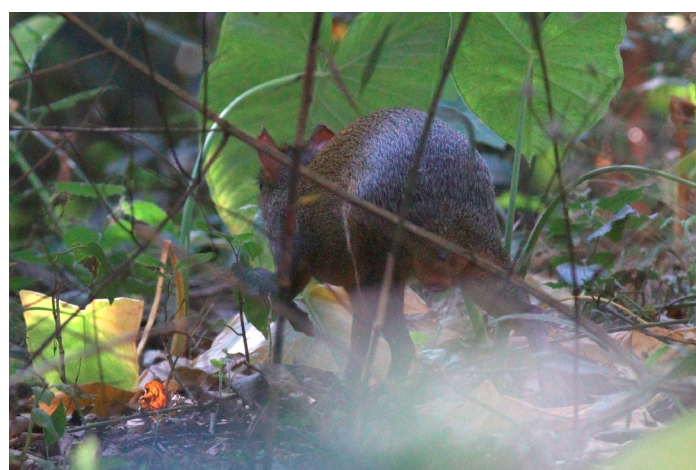


Kinkajou

Mario and Jeanne, the owners, complete the list of English-speaking people that we have found in Brazil -- they are nice people and pleasant company and the place, while small, is really well maintained and radiates their relationship with nature. Mario in particular, when given the appropriate space, is able to talk about random facts of nature for hours on end. The main draw for mammalwatchers here is the relatively reliable **Kinkajou** – we saw it both nights, but were already familiar with the species from Ecuador. More interesting for us was finding a **Bare-tailed Woolly Opossum** beside the access road, a few hundred meters away. One building on the property had roosting bats – **Pallas’s Long-tongued Bats** and **Seba’s Short-tailed Bats** – Mario was at first reluctant to talk about them, because he thought we were complaining about the bats (which sometimes flew into our room at night when we walked in or out), but he relaxed when he understood that we actually just want to see them. **Azara’s Agouti** was repeatedly seen around, a troop of **Azara’s Capuchins** crossed the access road twice and a small rodent (possibly *Calomys* according to Venkat) lives close to the bathroom. Mario also told us stories about other mammals sometimes coming to the property – Tapirs, Anteaters, even Night Monkeys, but over time, we understood that the encounters described happened over months, not days.



Bare-tailed Woolly Opossum



Azara’s Agouti

Species list:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Azara’s Capuchin | Southern Naked-tailed Armadillo | Free-tailed Bat sp. |
| Black-and-gold Howler Monkey | South-American Tapir | Lesser Bulldog Bat |
| Black-tailed Marmoset | Marsh Deer | Flat-faced Fruit-eating Bat |
| Crab-eating Fox | Pampas Deer | Seba’s Short-tailed Bat |
| Maned Wolf | Common Red Brocket | Pallas’s Long-tongued Bat |
| Crab-eating Raccoon | Common Brown Brocket | White-lined Broad-nosed Bat |
| South-American Coati | Collared Peccary | Common Tapeti |
| Kinkajou | White-lipped Peccary | Capybara |
| Giant Otter | White-eared Opossum | Long-tailed Porcupine |
| Giant Anteater | Gray Four-eyed Opossum | Azara’s Agouti |
| Southern Tamandua | Bare-tailed Woolly Opossum | Brazilian Guinea Pig |
| Six-banded Armadillo | Proboscis Bat | 1–5 species of small rodents |

Appendix: small rodents with ID suggestions kindly provided by Venkat Sankar



Around km 95 of TPN. Upper right possibly Oecomys.



Porto Jofre, left two possibly Hylaeamys



Porto Cercado, possibly Oligoryzomys



Emas, possibly Holochilus



Mutum, unknown



Jamacá das Araras, possibly Calomys