



# Preserving South America's Wetland

It's one of the most fragile ecosystems on the planet. It's home to at least 15 endangered species. Water lilies six and a half feet wide float on its lakes. No, this is not the Amazon — it's the Pantanal. And it's under threat. By Kevin Raub

It's an adventure most simply described as over the river and through the woods — only in reverse. It begins at Fazenda Santa Sophia, an elegant working cattle farm and internationally renowned horse ranch in the heart of the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Beatriz Rondon, a fourth-generation Pantaneira (as the cow-girls from this region are known) and the grandniece of legendary Brazilian general Marechal Rondon, is leading me on horseback across the land she has called home her entire life. Overhead, hyacinth and scarlet macaws are doing flybys with the regularity of World War II reconnaissance. Below, the waters that flood this region yearly have receded, exposing the swampy ground and, along with it, numerous anacondas that now spend their days traversing the land to the river's edge, a two-hour horseback ride away.

We reach the Rio Negro, and from there, another guide, Ariane Janial, takes me by boat to Fazenda Rio Negro, a historic farm and luxe guesthouse that sits in the middle of one of the most remarkable pieces of land in the entire region, surrounded by stunning brackish lakes — which are a curious oddity in these parts, considering that the nearest body of salt water is 750 or so miles away. Along the route, there are caimans, toucans, massive jabiru storks (endangered birds that serve as the mascot of the region), kingfishers out the wazoo, and hundreds of other colorful and fascinating bird species of which the names are still foreign to me. It's impossibly green, thoroughly wild, endlessly gorgeous, and continuously under threat. This is the Pantanal.

That many have never heard of it is no surprise,



really, but it should be. You see, the Pantanal is the world's largest wetland, a swamp that is about a fifth the size of France and more than 20 times the size of our own Florida Everglades. It's an enormous floodplain in portions of three countries (Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia) that is inundated like clockwork six months of every year, a beautiful quagmire that is home to a third of Brazil's abundant bird population and to enough fascinating animals — jaguars, caimans, anacondas, giant river otters, capybaras — to dizzy even the most fervent naturalist. The Pantanal is a captivating alluvial plain and hosts one of South America's most important ecosystems.

Though the Amazon is more the subject of legend and Hollywood-level attention, it is actually the Pantanal that shines when it comes to wildlife. The numbers are startling: There are 124 species of mammals, 463 species of birds, 50 species of frogs, 177 species of reptiles, 260 species of fish (including scores of vicious piranhas and bullying dorados), and 3,500 species of plants. Due to its topography — wide-open fields free of large trees and foliage — it easily trumps the Amazon as the place for spotting mammals and birds.

But not all in the Pantanal is the stuff of safari dreams. This ecological hot spot, 80 percent of which sits in Brazil's expansive Central West region, is endangered thanks to a number of villains, some of which, ironically, were actually designed to help fight global warming and lessen our environmental impact. "Nowadays, the expansion of sugarcane plantations is occurring exactly on the borders of Pantanal," says Ricardo Machado, director of the Cerrado-Pantanal program for Conservation International, an environmental group that protects the earth's most endangered places. "Many existing pastures are being converted to sugarcane plantations. ... If the demand for ethanol increases and the conservation concern stays focused only in the Amazon, it's very likely that new sugarcane plantations will take over the remaining natural areas."

The jugular of the Pantanal is the mighty Rio Paraguai, a 1,584-mile waterway (on the continent, it's second only to the Amazon in navigable length) that serves as the lifeblood for significant parts of Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Between November and March, the river breaches



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its banks and floods an area some 89,000 square miles in size, greatly hampering travel and habitability but feeding the region.

Yet, that very river currently is central to a proposed plan that could prove the tipping point for an ecological disaster in the region: the Hidrovia project, an estimated \$1.3 billion initiative that would alter the course of the river (by redigging its floor to accommodate large cargo ships) in an effort to reduce the costs of exporting soybeans and other crops from the area. The project currently is designated as a "plan for development," and the issue is being battled out. "If the river bottom is dredged to accommodate large boats, the seasonal flood pulse that spreads on both sides of the river during the wet season can be seriously affected and the natural capacity of the Pantanal to retain water — essentially the natural condition for its existence — will be diminished," says Machado.

And the threats don't stop there. The majority of the Pantanal is privately owned, mainly by soybean and cattle farmers who are constantly butting heads with both ecologists and jaguars. The Pantanal is the last great stronghold for the biggest and most elusive of the American cats, but the jaguar's taste for beef puts it in the firing line of farmers, who don't take kindly to attacks on their inventory (an estimated 40 jaguars are

killed each year). There is a government initiative to financially compensate farmers for lost cattle, but the view of most of the Pantaneiros — who live more or less in a wild, wild West state of mind — is that the money won't ever show up at their doorsteps.

So, what will save the Pantanal? For starters, since 2005, Conservation International has been setting up a network of private reserves in the area, which lure farmers to participate in conservation in exchange for technical and financial support. Thus far, these Private Natural Heritage Reserves have increased protected land in the area by 30 percent.

But it's the ecotourism and sustainable-tourism movements that could prove to be the turning points for the region. As more and more farmers realize they can make their profits soar by embracing low-impact tourism instead of high-impact farming, this remarkable wildlife refuge will thrive, all the while providing tourists with once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to view the area's endearing creatures in their natural habitat.

"The Pantanal is the last stronghold for some of the continent's most endangered and important flagship species, such as jaguars, marsh deer, hyacinth macaws, giant river otters, giant anteaters, tapirs, jabiru



has almost doubled in the past 35 years. ▶



### Traveling to the Pantanal

American Airlines flies direct to both São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. From those cities, it's a quick domestic flight to Campo Grande or Cuiabá, both of which are gateways to the Pantanal. For more information on visiting the region, take a look at the following green operators that offer eco-sensitive trips to the area.

#### IN THE UNITED STATES

##### Focus Tours

www.focustours.com  
(505) 989-7193

#### IN BRAZIL

##### Natureco Natural Ecotours

www.natureco.com.br  
011-55-65-3321-1001

##### Pantanal Explorer

www.pantanalexplorer.com.br  
011-55-65-3682-2800

storks, and more," says Russ Mittermeier, president of Conservation International and the author of the bible on the region, *Pantanal: South America's Wetland Jewel*. "The Pantanal, quite simply, is the best place in South America to view wildlife."

Unless you want to see a jaguar. I spent a month in the Pantanal, and on two occasions, the elusive little kitties managed to cross what would be my path only minutes before me. And at least once, I missed a mother and two cubs by a few hours. Still, I pray I'll have a chance to view them another day. **AW**

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