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# Seeing Pantanal specialities along the Transpantaneira

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Pied Lapwing *Vanellus cayana*, Ariosto Island, rio Teles Pires, Mato Grosso, Brazil. Look for this lovely wader on butterfly-, tern- and skimmer-strewn sandbanks (Markus Lagerqvist; [www.pbase.com/lagerqvist](http://www.pbase.com/lagerqvist))

Unlike the two other Brazilian birding areas covered in this issue, numerous birders and other wildlife-watchers visit the country's Pantanal each year. All leave satisfied by the spectacle of large numbers of waterbirds jostling for prime hunting grounds. But not everyone sees the Pantanal's less exhibitionist specialities. This article suggests some areas to look for such species along the Transpantaneira highway.





The world's largest wetland and the aquatic heart of South America, the Pantanal showcases some of the most breathtaking gatherings of birds (let alone mammals and reptiles) that you might ever hope to see. Towards the end of the dry season, when water is a prized commodity, the tiniest of waterbodies can become so packed with storks, herons, egrets and ibises that an uninhabited square metre of water is an extreme rarity. Much birdlife is out in the open—almost within touching distance and easily within photographic reach. Normally a retiring forest bird, the Pantanal contingent of Green Ibis *Mesembrinibis cayennensis* uninhibitedly pose for lenses in shallow lagoons. Roadside nests of Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria*—a morass of thick, metre-long branches enthroning isolated tall trees—attract attention and evoke awe. Maguari Storks *Mycteria americana* lope through vegetated marshes, stalking for aquatic invertebrates. And scores of Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* crowd out ditches at night (and, in some cases, by day).

For most visitors to the Pantanal, this mass of extrovert feather is more than enough. But serious birders tend to want more. Fortunately, the Pantanal is poised at the interface of four major biomes (Amazon, Cerrado, Chaco and Atlantic Forest), each exerting its influence on the area's flora and fauna, so more is what birders usually get. Roughly 475 species are spread across swamps, savannas and semi-deciduous forests<sup>3</sup>, and a typical day list is 120–150 species. This article focuses on some of the Pantanal's less in-your-face specialities, and where to see them.

## The Pantanal

From an ecotourist's perspective, the Pantanal falls into four areas, each covered in detail in a new visitor's guide to the region<sup>1</sup>. In the west, intrepid birders on a tight budget might consider exploring the little-disturbed Pantanal of Bolivia's Santa Cruz province (in preference, we suggest,

Unless otherwise stated, all photographs were taken along the Transpantaneira highway, Mato Grosso, Brazil

Look for Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias* at small, secluded pools or along shady riverbanks (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

Female Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica* prefers calm waterbodies with abundant vegetation (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

There is no easier place than the Transpantaneira to see the globally threatened Chestnut-bellied Guan *Penelope ochrogaster* (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

to the hit-or-miss operations based in adjacent Corumbá across the Brazilian border). At its southern limit, the Pantanal scrapes into Paraguay, where two remote lodges with great potential were trumpeted in *Neotropical Birding* 3<sup>2</sup>. But the two best-known areas both lie in Brazil. Campo Grande in Mato Grosso do Sul provides the main gateway for several widely separated but decent lodges. To the north, the Transpantaneira highway of Mato Grosso provides easy, excellent and varied wildlife-watching; with 15 or so lodges on *fazendas* it is ideal for a multi-venue trip of a week or so and provides the locus for our article. (There are also some good lodges east of the Transpantaneira, notably SESC Porto Cercado where breeding Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* has recently been discovered, but these are outside the geographical scope of this article.)

## The Transpantaneira highway

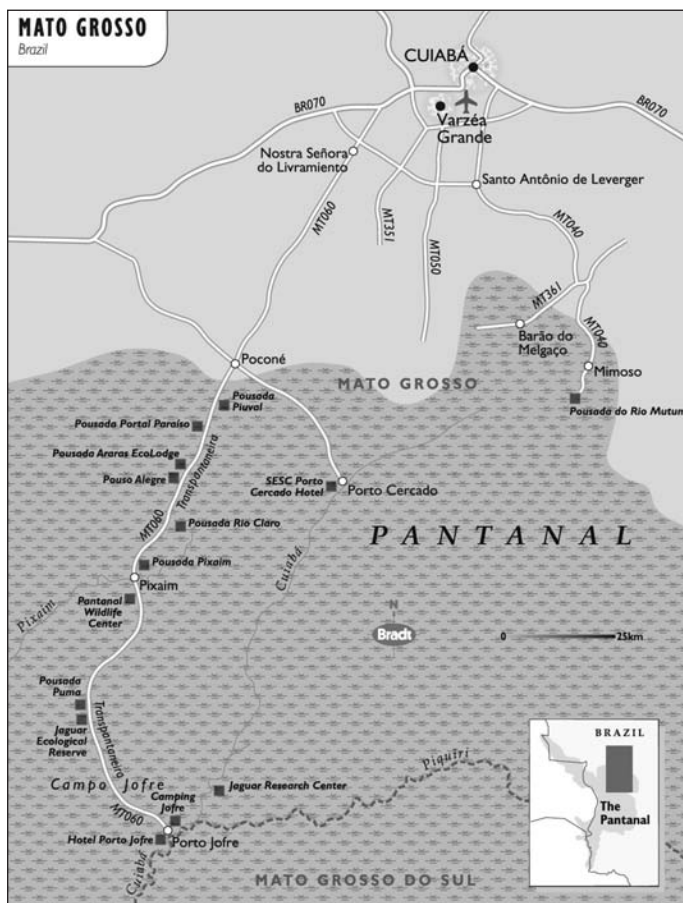
The only road to venture deep into the Pantanal, the Transpantaneira was intended to link Cuiabá in Mato Grosso with Corumbá in Mato Grosso do Sul. Reality, however, never matched the dream and the road actually extends south from the small town of Poconé only as far as Porto Jofre on the rio Cuiabá, c.150 km and more than 120 wooden bridges later. Over its route, the largely unpaved road is lined with ditches heaving with waterbirds, raptors and kingfishers, and crosses a spectrum of habitats: dry grasslands and open scrub in the north gradually cede to denser scrub, semi-deciduous forests and extensive swamps in the south. In broad terms, birding is as equally good along the roadside as in the fazendas that offer ecotourist accommodation. That said, the fazendas offer more tranquil birding, and facilities usually include excellent trails, walkways, observation towers and/or boat trips.

The habitat gradient means that the avifauna changes gradually along the Transpantaneira, so it makes sense to stay at three or more lodges at intervals along the highway (see box, p. 47 and Fig. 1; lodges refer

to their location in terms of distance from the start of the Transpantaneira, so we do likewise). Rather than provide an exhaustive site-by-site guide to the highway's birding spots, we pick out a personal selection of the species that birding visitors are most keen to see and suggest where to look for them.

## Leggy grassland birds

With short grasslands common towards the start of the Transpantaneira, good fazendas to search for Greater Rhea *Rhea americana* (Near Threatened) and Red-legged Seriema *Cariama cristata* include Pousada Piuval and, to a lesser extent, Pouso Alegre. Both species can be seen occasionally from the highway itself in the first 30 km. Better still the area is en route to the Transpantaneira, particularly between Nossa Senhora do Livramento and Poconé, driving



Map of the Pantanal of Mato Grosso, focusing on the Transpantaneira highway and showing sites mentioned in the text (Malcolm Barnes; © Bradt Travel Guides and reproduced with their permission)



from Cuiabá. Good sites for Southern Screamer *Chauna torquata* are Pousada Piuval, Campo Jofre (either side of km 130) and Porto Jofre.

## A heron quartet

More than a dozen species of herons and egrets occur, most of them obvious and abundant. But birders target four less conspicuous and far less common species. The easiest to see is Boat-billed Heron *Cochlearius cochlearius*. Good areas include ditches below bridges in the 10 km north of the rio Pixaim (km 63), the shrubbery and gallery forests flanking that river (particularly west of the roadbridge) and the first bridge south of the Jaguar Ecological Reserve (km 110). The second-mentioned place is also the best site for the diminutive Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus*, recently discovered to skulk amidst the Pixaim's dense riparian vegetation. The shady riverbanks here are also one of two excellent areas for Agami Heron *Agamia agami*; the others are the rio Claro, best accessed from either Pousada Araras EcoLodge (km 32, on the river at the Baía dos Cervos) or Pousada Rio Claro (km 42). More widespread and less skulking (but still demure and solitary) is Capped Heron *Pilherodius pileatus*, which is worth looking for between Nossa Senhora do Livramento and Poconé (driving from Cuiabá), along the first 10 km of the Transpantaneira and at quiet waterholes around Pouso Alegre and Pousada Araras EcoLodge.

## Cracids

Undoubtedly the Pantanal's rarest bird, in global terms, is the Chestnut-bellied Guan *Penelope ochrogaster*. With a population of 1,000–2,499 and a fragmented distribution spread over an estimated 5,100 km<sup>2</sup>, this Vulnerable species tops most birders' wish lists for a Pantanal trip. Fortunately, the guan is moderately common along the Transpantaneira north of the rio Pixaim. It is fairly easy to see at Pouso Alegre, even along the entrance track, between the forest patches at Pousada Piuval, and along the rio Pixaim itself. At the end of the highway, the triangle of forest between Camping Jofre, Hotel Porto Jofre and km 146 is another good site.

## The sunny duo

Few birders can fail to experience a thrill when they come across a Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias* or Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica*. Both species share a preference for the well-vegetated fringes of quiet, narrow, shady rivers and may often be found

## TIMING

The Pantanal is great year-round, but cyclical water levels mean that wildlife-watching varies considerably with the season. Transpantaneira tourism peaks during the dry season (July–September). Wildlife throngs around scarce water resources, trees bloom, transport is usually feasible with a saloon car (but drive carefully, particularly after rain) and temperatures are usually agreeable (sometimes even cold). Late September to late November can be uncomfortably hot. From December–April water levels rise, and navigating the Transpantaneira becomes a tricky proposition from January onwards. Lodges do what they can to stay open in the rainy season, but most, particularly towards the south of the Transpantaneira, are forced to close.

within a few score metres of one another. Boat trips along the rio Pixaim west of the roadbridge, the rio Claro from Pousada Araras EcoLodge and amongst tributaries of the rio Cuiabá (east of Porto Jofre, particularly beyond the Jaguar Research Center) offer the best prospects of seeing the duo. But also check tiny secluded pools for Sunbittern: those at Pousada Piuval, Pousada Araras EcoLodge and Pouso Alegre are good, as is the pond by the official entrance gate to the Transpantaneira. For Sungrebe, check waterbodies from bridges, particularly in the final 10 km of the highway.

## Pied Lapwing

Classic Pied Lapwing *Vanellus cayanus* habitat comprises sandbanks along wide, open rivers. The best chances of seeing it are along rio Cuiabá east of Porto Jofre towards rio Piquiri. Lapwings often scuttle alongside roosting Yellow-billed Tern *Sternula supercilialis*, Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex* and Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*, and often through clouds of butterflies.

## Parrots and doves

Seeing Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* is an undoubted highlight of any Transpantaneira trip. The world's largest parrot is easier to see here than anywhere else, particularly favouring areas with *acuri* palms. Most tourist fazendas host breeding Hyacinth Macaws, with nests often within sight of the breakfast table. Birds draw attention to their presence with their raucous call, so 'dipping' them is difficult. Sites where this Endangered macaw can be seen easily include Pousada Piuval, Pousada Portal Paraíso, Pousada Araras EcoLodge, Pouso Alegre



Clockwise from top left:

The punky Helmeted Manakin *Antilophia galeatus* is easily seen in gallery forests (Cortez Austin; [cortezaustinphotography.com](http://cortezaustinphotography.com))

Most fazendas have at least one pair of nesting Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

On secluded, shady rivers, look for the delectable Agami Heron *Agamia agami* (Cortez Austin; [cortezaustinphotography.com](http://cortezaustinphotography.com))





Above left: Male (top) and female (bottom) Mato Grosso Antbird *Cercomacra melanaria* (Kjetil Schjolberg; <http://kjetilschjolberg.com>); a Pantanal speciality

Above right: Dull-capped Attila *Attila bolivianus* is widespread along the Transpantaneira but inconspicuous (Kjetil Schjolberg; <http://kjetilschjolberg.com>)

Above: White-lored Spinetail *Synallaxis albilora* is one of the Pantanal's target ovenbirds (Markus Lagerqvist; [www.pbase.com/lagerqvist](http://www.pbase.com/lagerqvist))

(where the owner has planted hundreds of the *manduvi* trees in which most macaws nest), Pantanal Wildlife Center, Jaguar Ecological Reserve and Porto Jofre/Camping Jofre.

Other good Transpantaneira parrots include Yellow-collared Macaw *Primolius auricollis* (occurs in most forested areas), Blue-crowned Parakeet *Aratinga acuticaudata* (particularly at Pousada Piuval, Pouso Alegre and Pantanal Wildlife Center) and Nanday Parakeet *Nandayus nenday* (particularly at Pousada Rio Claro and the Pantanal Wildlife Center). Among columbids, Long-tailed Ground Dove *Uropelia campestris* occurs only in the savanna of central Brazil and east Bolivia, so the Pantanal is a great place to look for it; target the first 70 km of the Transpantaneira, where doves feed in open areas or rest in adjacent scrub. The roadside itself is a good place to look (drive slowly!), as are Pousada Piuval, Pouso Alegre, Pantanal Mato Grosso Hotel and Pantanal Wildlife Center.

## Nightbirds

The Transpantaneira is good for nightbirds. Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus* is the most frequently encountered owl, but more exciting (albeit more elusive) is Black-banded Owl *Ciccaba huhula*. Since being discovered in the Pantanal, this owl is sporadically seen at sites such as Pousada Piuval (in the lakeside forest), Pouso Alegre and just south of the Jaguar Ecological Reserve. There are well-known day-roosting Great Potoo *Nyctibius grandis* at Pouso Alegre and Pantanal Wildlife Center. Piuval, Alegre and the Pantanal Wildlife Center, lying in the drier northern Transpantaneira, offer a good variety of nightjars, notably Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis torquata*.

## Hummingbirds

The Pantanal is not overendowed with hummingbirds, although some common species such as Glittering-throated Emerald *Amazilia fimbriata* and White-tailed Goldenthrout *Polytmus guainumbi* visit flowers in lodge gardens. Birders tend to target the localised Cinnamon-throated Hermit *Phaethornis nattereri* and Buff-bellied Hermit *P. subochraceus*. The latter prefers gallery forest, so look for it around the *baia* at Pousada Piuval, in the scrubby fringes to the gallery forest flanking the rio Pixaim at the Pantanal Wildlife Center or near the Jaguar Ecological Reserve. Cinnamon-throated Hermit leks along the track connecting the Transpantaneira at km 146 with the river at Camping Jofre. Other 'hummers'

to look out for include a trio of migrants: Frilled Coquette *Lophornis magnificus* from the Atlantic Forests (recorded at Pouso Alegre and Pousada Piuval), Blue-tufted Starthroat *Helioaster furcifer* from the south and Long-billed Starthroat *H. longirostris* from Amazonia.

## Woodpeckers

The two key woodpeckers along the Transpantaneira are White-fronted Woodpecker *Melanerpes cactorum* and Pale-crested Woodpecker *Celeus lugubris*. The former is difficult, with Pousada Piuval and Pouso Alegre being best. The latter is fairly common in most forested areas. Good places include the trails at Pantanal Wildlife Center and Hotel Mato Grosso, the forest along the river at Pousada Rio Claro and the forest edges at Pousada Piuval. Cream-colored Woodpecker *C. flavus* occurs in a few areas; here, this Amazonian species is towards the southern limit of its distribution.

## Ovenbirds

The Transpantaneira's two key furnariids are both *Synallaxis* spinetails. Cinereous-breasted Spinetail *S. hypospodia* occurs mainly in shrubs alongside flooded grasslands towards the end of the Transpantaneira. The other target is White-lored Spinetail *S. albilora*, which usually inhabits drier terrain, but often still near watercourses. It is common; good places to look for it include the paths connecting forest islands at Pousada Piuval and the boardwalk behind Pousada Araras EcoLodge.

## Antbirds

The most interesting antbirds both inhabit forest near water and typically forage in pairs: Band-tailed Antbird *Hypocnemoides maculicauda* and Mato Grosso Antbird *Cercomacra melanaria*. The range of the latter is centred on the Pantanal, and the region marks the southern limit of the range of former, an Amazonian species. Mato Grosso Antbird is fairly common wherever there are shrubs and thickets in or close to gallery forest. Band-tailed Antbird is common in gallery forest, especially along the rio Pixaim and rio Claro. Planalto Slaty Antshrike *Thamnophilus pelzelni* is a relatively recently split species in a taxonomically fascinating genus; good sites include the forest islands at Pousada Piuval, Pouso Alegre, Pantanal Wildlife Center and the forest adjacent to the Pantanal Mato Grosso Hotel.



## Tyrants and manakins

Roadside scrub is as good a place as any to look for Rusty-fronted Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilotriccus latirostris*, which can be very common. Stripe-necked Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus striaticollis* can be found in such areas, but are easier in tall gallery forest. Anywhere can be good for these species, but we suggest trying insect-laden areas near bridges over watercourses along the 35 km or so south of the rio Pixaim. An interesting recent discovery is Subtropical Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx acutipennis* at Campo Jofre (km 130).

Dull-capped Attila *Attila bolivianus* and Pale-bellied Tyrant-Manakin *Neopelma pallescens* are neither conspicuous nor easy to see. Dull-capped Attila should be present in any dense forest, but the forest islands at Pousada Piuval may be your best (indeed, the only!) bet for the tyrant-manakin. Helmeted Manakins *Antilophia galeata* are considerably more co-operative and occur in most forested areas, particularly gallery forest. Good sites to try include the boardwalk behind Pousada Araras EcoLodge, forest east of the lodge at Pantanal Wildlife Center and farther along the rio Pixaim towards Pantanal Mato Grosso Hotel, plus the track connecting the Transpantaneira at km 146 with the river at Camping Jofre.

## Wrens

It is only relatively recently that birders with an ear for vocalisations identified the full range of *Thryothorus* wrens occurring along the Transpantaneira. The trio to look and listen for are Moustached Wren *T. genibarbis*, Buff-breasted Wren *T. leucotis* and Fawn-breasted Wren *T. guarayanus*. The forest along the rios Pixaim and Claro are good for both Buff-breasted and Moustached Wrens, and the best habitat for Fawn-breasted Wren seems to be farther south, around km 115 near the Jaguar Ecological Reserve.

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## TRANSPANTANEIRA LODGES

There are roughly 15 accommodation options along the Transpantaneira, with more secreted away on side roads or along rivers east and west of the highway. Details of some of the best lodges for wildlife-watching can be found in a new wildlife-watching guide to the whole Pantanal<sup>2</sup>, so we keep things short by just giving the websites of the sites mentioned in this article and their location (which Transpantaneira lodges give in terms of distance along the road).

**Pousada Piuval**, km 10: [www.pousadapiuval.com.br](http://www.pousadapiuval.com.br); **Pousada Araras EcoLodge**, km 32: [www.araraslodge.com.br](http://www.araraslodge.com.br); **Pousa Alegre**, km 34: [www.pousalegre.com.br](http://www.pousalegre.com.br); **Pousada Rio Claro**, km 42: [www.pousadarioclaro.com.br](http://www.pousadarioclaro.com.br); **Pantanal Mato Grosso Hotel**, km 62: [www.hotelmatogrosso.com.br](http://www.hotelmatogrosso.com.br); **Pantanal Wildlife Center**, km 63: [www.pantanalwildlifecenter.com](http://www.pantanalwildlifecenter.com); **Jaguar Ecological Reserve**, km 110: [www.jaguarreserve.com](http://www.jaguarreserve.com); **Hotel Porto Jofre** and **Camping Jofre**, km 147: [www.portojofre.com.br](http://www.portojofre.com.br); **Jaguar Research Center**, access from km 147: [www.jaguarresearchcenter.com.br](http://www.jaguarresearchcenter.com.br)

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