

Jaguar watching in the Pantanal: The story behind artist Candy McManiman's painting "Hunting"

From the field notes of the late Paul Prevett: August 5-6, 2013: Seeking Jaguar on rivers out of Porto Jofre, Brazil. Photos: Paul Prevett (page 4, top) and Candy McManiman (all others)

There are birds down here of course, and we see many good ones, but they aren't why we have come. The Cuiaba River and several local tributaries near Porto Jofre at the end of Transpantaneira Highway have gained fame in recent years as a place where one can actually expect to see a Jaguar (i.e., not just have some sort of ill-defined chance). I think ever since I first knew what a Jaguar was I have dreamed of seeing one in the wild. A great many years and several near misses later we are trying again, in fact it is the reason for the trip. So the next two days are devoted entirely to finding a Jaguar. I've had a lousy fitful sleep but as we pull away from the dock at 06:00 the soft cool air feels both soothing and refreshing. Dawn and sunset happen remarkably fast in the tropics. At first there is just a reddish smudge on the eastern horizon but before long a blurry silhouette of tropical gallery forest lining the river snaps into sharp focus. I know our chances are good so I feel excited, but there is some gnawing anxiety too. Both Candy and I really want to see a Jag.

The technique is simply to cruise the rivers looking for an animal along the shore, perhaps lying on one of the numerous sand beaches where they often come to rest. Sometimes one remains close to yesterday's location, sometimes not. The different operators carry radios to alert their other boats if a Jaguar is seen. Some operators are known to also listen to the frequencies of competitors. So after a Jaguar is found most

often several boats are soon on their way at top speed. As we are, word is out, already at 07:20! At first I don't realize quite what is going on, then it dawns on me that I am on my way to see a Jaguar! If it is still there. At 07:40 we round a bend in the river and see two boats more or less parked off one bank. Everyone in the boats is looking at the opposite shore. Then we all see the animal. It is an absolutely sensational female, lying languorously on a sandy beach. She is serenely gazing out at the boats, apparently aware that she is the center of attention but at the same time seemingly indifferent. It's no time at all before I hear Candy's camera come into action, clicking away in bursts of 10, 15 shots at a time. As for me I can scarcely believe what I am looking at. What a stunning, gorgeous beast.



All photos in this article are by Candy McManiman except for the caiman (page 4), by Paul Prevett

The Jaguar plops her head down on the sand and, lying on her side, goes to sleep. After a bit she wakes up, rolls onto her belly, peers around, and now drops her head onto her front paws to snooze a bit more. And so on. At about 08:20 the sun has reached her. It is warming up in the Pantanal and the Jaguar starts to pant a bit. Finally she gets up and walks along the beach then up the slope into the streamside vegetation, and continues walking through the grass and shrubs, sometimes in view, sometimes hidden. The boats keep abreast of her. At intervals, where there are suitable breaks in the thick vegetation, she walks cautiously down to the river, stops to scan the shoreline, then goes up higher on the bank again to continue her stroll upriver. Our boatman Wilson says she is hunting caiman. At one point she enters the river, swims along the bank for a bit, then she's back out on land, resuming her steady, purposeful walk.



Capybaras (above) and caiman (next page) are common prey of jaguars.

At 10:10 the procession of stately Jaguar and raggedy scum of boats is still in progress when she crouches low, scurries stealthily towards a dense patch of long grass, and lunges into it. There is a flurry of action that we cannot follow in detail because of the obscuring vegetation, but 2 larger and 2 small (young) Capybaras are now also in frantic motion. The 2 large animals burst out of the cover and plunge into the water and the Jaguar briefly follows them in too, but then climbs back onto the shore and into the thick vegetation again. Suddenly one of the juvenile Capybaras is in the water and, head held high, swims for its life towards the adults who now are well out into the current and quite a distance downstream. We never see the second



young one again. It is impossible to say whether it got away or if the Jaguar killed it, but she did stay in the tangle of grass and bushes for another 5 minutes, mostly just her bum visible to us. Then at 10:20 there she is sitting higher on the bank, and yet again sets off up the river.

As earlier we are in then out of touch with her. At times it seems like she may have veered inland or decided to hide out for a bit away from the flotilla of boats filled with humans on the river, but then she is sighted again, and on it goes. At 10:50 she slowly,



deliberately approaches the river again. The slinky body language is unmistakable – this time she is stalking a caiman hauled partly out of the water below, head facing into the river. I see her twitch in frustration when the caiman flashes into the river with amazing speed and disappears underwater. She didn't really come close this time. Wilson says he thinks Capybaras actually are easier to catch than caiman although jaguars commonly prey on both animals.

By 11:15 the Jaguar has been out of sight for several minutes. We have

been observing her for at least 3½ hours and are told that many Jaguar lovers like us are not so fortunate. So we break away from the scrum of boats, find a secluded stretch of river bank and after a careful look go ashore to eat our packed lunch. It is a far cry from the many tempting hot dishes comprising a more typical Brazilian lunch but who is complaining? Although he isn't saying anything, maybe Wilson is at least thinking it. Brad says that tomorrow we will go back to the hotel for our midday meal; he cannot in good conscience ask a Brazilian to eat mushy sandwiches two days in a row.

Wilson is always plotting strategy to find Jaguars where other boats may not yet have already searched. He tries the narrow Caxiri tributary first, onto the Carixo Negro then, perhaps counterintuitively, the main Cuiaba River itself again. Although our boat has an overhead awning it's very hot - we guess around 38-39 °C, but cruising along the rivers certainly makes it seem less uncomfortable. As we round a wide sweeping bend we all spot the next Jaguar at nearly the same time. This one is a big male sleeping in the shade on another beach, at first looking like a big mottled driftwood log. His head is just massive, needed to support among the strongest set of jaws in the animal world. Brad says that Pantanal jaguars are the largest, up to 40% heavier than those in the Amazon basin for example. The tawny-orange in his coat is a bit deeper and richer than the female's we saw this morning. No other boats are here so we have nearly half an hour of exclusive quiet and relaxed viewing. The whole time the Jaguar mostly sleeps, stirring a bit from time to time to have a look around. The first boat arrives followed by others at about 4 or 5 minute intervals. About 20 minutes later he rises, certainly a magnificent animal seemingly in peak condition. In the scope I can see his flesh jiggle as he gets to his feet and sets off along the beach. These animals seem in great shape.



Now 13 boats are jockeying and jostling with each other for viewing positions, one boat cutting in ahead of another as we all work our way upstream following the jaguar. Collisions do occur although evidently not today. The sound of revving outboard motors as gears are shifted between forward and reverse to hold position in the current, and the smell of exhaust fumes wafting over the water clash with the occasion. It cannot be denied that there is a bit of circus going on. On the other hand it is far from clear that the Jaguars are actually bothered in any serious way by all the commotion. Nonetheless wouldn't it be worthwhile to have in place some sort of organized structure with operational guidelines, maybe even a training and licensing protocol for guides to help smooth out procedures a bit? Brad says he doesn't know how it could be done - for one thing there are no restrictions to travel on these rivers. It is important to recognize that money is flowing in here and that Jaguars are a main reason, along with guided sport fishing. From that point of view the prognosis for the animals might not be all that dim. Perhaps it is not too large a leap of hope that a combination of self-interest with common sense conservation will work out in the Jaguar's favor, but I personally wonder if there is not a problem brewing.

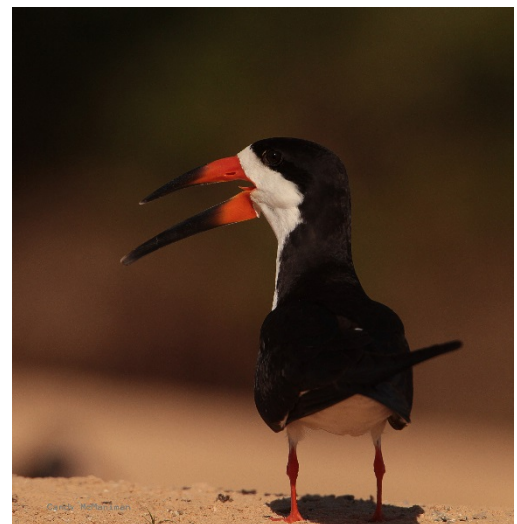
Whatever such misgivings, Day One of our Jaguar quest has been a tremendous success. And day two turned out to be more of the same, although first off was a special treat involving a different but likewise charismatic mammal. Not long after we set out in the boat we encountered 5 adult Giant Otters moving downstream along the river bank. As usual they were dipping and diving, bringing up Stone Catfish to eat adjacent to the boat, sniffing noses and otherwise interacting in all the endearing ways otters routinely do. They certainly were entertaining although I found myself wondering why we were staying with them so long when there might be more Jaguars to be seen. The answer came when Wilson shut down the outboard and threw out an anchor at a particular spot along the bank just before the otters caught up to us, when the whole party went ashore, clambered up a slippery muddy slope and into their den under the base of a tree.



Giant otter adult and juveniles near den

In a minute they all tumbled out again, followed by 5 pups, 2 a bit smaller than the other 3. The youngsters appeared overjoyed at seeing the adults and I am sure that every single otter sniffed and nuzzled every other otter, and the young ones had a terrific time frisking around and climbing over all the adults. Obviously this was a communal den with offspring of 2 females, apparently a great example of a well integrated extended family. I missed seeing him actually do the scenting but we noticed a male smearing and smoothing mud with his front paws around a kind of semi level terrace just below the den. It looked like he was touching up some damaged masonry but the intent surely was to warn off any other Giant Otters who might happen by. Just before we departed a couple of otters (males?) swam a short distance further along the bank where a caiman was partly hauled out. They obviously wanted it out of there and I was surprised how quickly the caiman recognized their low vocal threats and actually moved off into the river. Apparently otters use the same tactic with Jaguars too near their dens.

And then we went looking for more jaguars. And saw 4, including yesterday's female for the second time we think. One encounter involved a large female and a smaller, no doubt younger male hanging out together in the shade of thick shrubbery at the top of the river bank. At one point the male got up and circled the female in a way that clearly indicated what he had in mind. But apparently he was given a message because he abruptly moved off a little way and lay down again. Not long afterwards the female rose and without so much as a backward glance set out through the grass and thickets lining the river. The male watched her go but did not bother to follow, perhaps understandably put off by her lack of reciprocal feelings. So our final jaguar tally was 5 animals in 6 encounters over the 2 days with animals under observation for about 6½ hours. Candy and I were, and now back home remain thrilled - could we have even hoped for as much? Birds? Ah yes, we saw them too. Particularly in early morning we saw Blue-throated Piping-guans, Chaco Chachalacas and Bare-faced Curassows in trees lining the river or flying from one bank to the other, all terrific cracids. Pairs of very sharp Pied Lapwings and Collared Plovers together with a few Large-billed and Yellow-billed Terns often shared the sand beaches that jaguars, capybaras and caiman used, and in one instance an aggregation of 65 Black Skimmers. We returned to the hotel both days in the last soft but intensely colorful light of dusk over the west bank of the Cuiaba River. Pauraques flashed by in numbers. We guesstimated maybe 200+ on the second evening - certainly there was abundant food for them as our faces were buffeted by flying insects as we sped along. It was hard at times to sort out Pauraques from larger Greater Bulldog (aka Fishing) and Lesser Bulldog Bats also pirouetting over the water. We just marked down "100s". ■



More information: Candy McManiman's webpage: <https://gallery.artistsforconservation.org/artists/1046>
The International Conservation Fund of Canada (ICFC) featured "Hunting" on the cover of its 2019 Annual Report. ICFC's [November 2019 newsletter](#) included a remembrance of Paul.

This page: Three “terrific cracids”: Chaco Chachalacas (*right*), Blue-throated Piping-guans (*below left*), Bare-faced Curassow (*below right*)

Preceding page: Pied Lapwing (*left*), Black Skimmer (*right*)

All photos: Candy McManiman

