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A spotlight on the super cats of Brazil

The jaguars of the Pantanal wetlands are about to star in a BBC documentary. *Sarah Marshall* meets the animal A-listers

A black cat crossing your path is considered bad luck by many. But when two felines dressed in rosette-patterned pelts flashed past, I had the distinct feeling it would be a good day. Jaguars, the third-largest cat in the world after tigers and lions, are notoriously tough to spot in the wild. Yet within several minutes of driving through the 53,000-hectare Refugio Ecologico Caiman in the southern Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul, I had already run into two of them. We exchanged fleeting and equally startled glances before they disappeared into a tangle of

sawtooth bromeliads. Heart pounding, I was already confident that more encounters were on the cards. Extending from the Amazon, the Pantanal is the world's largest tropical wetland. Bigger than England, it stretches across two Brazilian states and parts of neighbouring Bolivia and Paraguay. A lattice of waterways swells and recedes with the seasons, giving way to vast savannahs and thick "gallery forests" lining the banks. The Pantanal is wild and remote; most parts can only be accessed by tiring, bone-jangling drives along dirt tracks. Teeming with wildlife, the wetland is a stronghold for the jaguar, whose original habitat has been reduced by almost 40 per cent across Central and South America. The large open spaces of the wetlands make it easier to see

the elusive cat, attracting scientists, photographers and filmmakers. The most up-to-date documentary, *Jaguars: Brazil's Super Cats*, will be screened on BBC Two on September 14. Produced by the team responsible for BBC Two's *Wild Brazil*, and narrated by Sir David Attenborough, it focuses on the work of Onçafari, a jaguar conservation initiative based at Caiman. The story follows an ambitious year-long project to release two orphaned cubs back into the wild after their mother had been accidentally killed in a bundled capture attempt when the animals strayed into Corumba city. Lead field biologist Lili Rampim showed me the one-hectare

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