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Hemispheres

DECEMBER 2023



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A jaguar at
Caiman Pantanal

Big Cat Comeback

How a revolutionary rewilding program is making jaguars the star attraction in Brazil's burgeoning safari industry

By Nicholas DeRenzo



“**T**here should be 60 to 80 jaguars around here right now,” biologist Pedro Reali tells me as our open-topped safari vehicle rolls through the predawn darkness. “One thing I can guarantee is that *we* will be sighted by a jaguar.”

We’re departing this morning from Caiman Pantanal, an eco-lodge located deep in the Pantanal, the world’s largest tropical wetland area. A UNESCO World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve, the Pantanal spreads more than 50,000 square miles across western-central Brazil and parts of Paraguay and Bolivia. I took two flights to reach the remote Campo

Grande International Airport, then hopped an additional three-hour car ride through cattle ranches and grasslands to get out here, and I’ve come with one goal in mind: to see jaguars. I scan the darkness, hoping to catch a glint of eyeshine bouncing back in Reali’s spotlight; there’s something eerily thrilling about knowing we’re being watched by South America’s apex predator.

As the sun begins to rise, casting a pinkish glow, we listen intently for the call of a purplish jay, a bird that sounds an alarm when predators are nearby. Reali takes out an antennaed telemetry device, twisting dials with military precision in an attempt to triangulate the location of a radio-collared jaguar. When the signal grows stronger, our driver steers toward it, ostrich-like rheas bounding in front of our vehicle like the *Gallimimus* herd in *Jurassic Park*.

In a clearing, I catch sight of a hulking, collared male named Acerola. It’s immediately clear to me why jaguars have loomed so large in human culture for millennia—why they’ve inspired Aztec and Mayan deities and given their names to sports cars and NFL teams. The third-largest cat in the world, after tigers and lions, they possess the strongest bite of any feline, with

jaws powerful enough to crush turtle shells and bones. Those jaws, Acerola’s, are now mere feet away from us.

“This is a very special jaguar for us,” Reali says in hushed tones, “because we know him from birth.” Acerola is the grandson of Esperança (Portuguese for “hope”), who was the first jaguar to be monitored in these parts and the foremother of Brazil’s burgeoning jaguar safari industry. About a decade ago, the thought of seeing a cat like this would have been a pipe dream, but these elusive ghosts are staging a comeback, thanks to the conservation organization Onçafari, which takes its name from the scientific name for jaguars, *Panthera onca*.

Onçafari’s story begins in 2011, when a São Paulo-born race-car driver named Mario Haberfeld, inspired by decades of travel to sub-Saharan Africa, sought to turn his native country into a safari destination. The only catch? Despite being phenomenally biodiverse, the Amazon rainforest, Brazil’s most famous biome, is so densely packed with plant life that

From above: the lake at Caiman Pantanal; the eco-lodge’s interior





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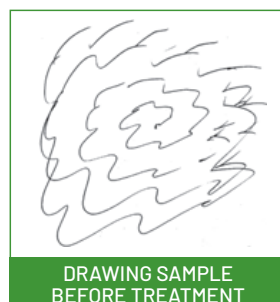
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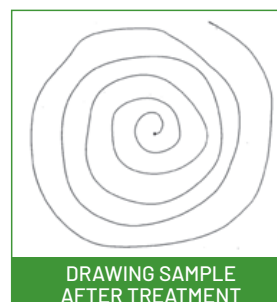
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This page, from
top: a giant
anteater; a
hyacinth macaw;
opposite page:
a jaguar perched
in a tree



person who works in Caiman, they'll say jaguars were legends in the past. They were very traumatized animals, chased and killed by the dozens not that long ago." On top of all that, she adds, "They're basically hiding machines."

To bring the existing jaguars out into the open, the Onçafari team started the long process of habituation, glean- ing lessons from a similar project with leopards at Londolozi Game Reserve, in South Africa's Sabi Sand Nature Reserve. There, conservationists taught locals that big cats were more valuable alive than dead, and they got the elu- sive felines to feel more comfortable with the presence of humans by simply hanging out near them. Habituation is much like a classic detective stakeout: Biologists drive until they spot a jaguar and then sit and wait (and wait ... and wait) until the animal sees the vehicle, and those hairless creatures inside, as a neutral part of the landscape.

***"If you talk
to the oldest
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were legends
in the past."***

it's tough for visitors to actually *see* any animals. Haberfeld set his sights on the Pantanal instead.

Roughly the size of Florida, the Pantanal is a vast landscape of wide- open plains that flood seasonally. Reali describes the region, poetically, as "a plate of soup in the heart of South America." It's home to a wide variety of wildlife—giant anteaters, tapirs, giant otters, capybaras, toco toucans—but to attract guests from around the world, Haberfeld needed a marquee attraction.

"I always say people don't go to Africa to see zebras," Haberfeld says. "It's nice [to see them] when you're there, but you go there to see the lion and leopard."

Alongside the Amazon, the Pantanal is one of the few Brazilian ecosystems where jaguars still live in significant numbers, despite decades of popula- tion decline caused by deforestation, conflicts with local cattle ranchers, road kills, and poaching. (Brazil banned hunting in 1967, but the illegal fur trade meant that the rosettes of jaguars were often seen on fashionable coats well into the '70s and '80s.) The odds of a visitor actually seeing a big cat here back then were slim.

"You couldn't find jaguars anywhere," says Lilian Rampim, Onçafari's oper- ations coordinator, who I chat with at the organization's headquarters, back near the lodge. "If you talk to the oldest

The next question was, could Onça- fari actually help *increase* the local jaguar population? With that goal in mind, the organization devised a rewilding program to teach animals who had been injured or rescued and were living in captivity how to fend for themselves again.

The program started in 2015, when Onçafari took a pair of orphaned four- month-old cubs named Isa and Fera (a veterinarian had accidentally killed their mother while trying to move her from a populated area) and placed them in an enclosure roughly the size of a soccer field. The team replaced the cubs' meat with increasingly larger live prey: chickens, pigs, capybaras,





“In a way, the game drives feel like family reunions, as the guides and biologists catch up with their old friends.”

caimans. Instinct kicked in, and Isa and Fera became successful predators. After two years in captivity picking up skills—you can almost imagine the training montage—they were collared and released into the wild.

“We were the first team doing it this way,” Rampim says, “and I really wanted to transform that into a model. We wanted to publish and send to places—like, ‘This is the recipe [for rewilding].’”

Rampim would get her wish. The released jaguars began hunting,

dispersing, and, most importantly, mating, refilling the region with cubs. While there were fewer than 10 jaguar sightings at Caiman Pantanal in 2011, with only about 1 percent of guests seeing the big cats, there were 1,180 sightings here last year, with 100 percent of visitors spotting at least one. Onçafari is now exporting its rewilding program to other biomes across Brazil, including the Amazon and the Cerrado savanna (an endangered grassland), and testing it on species such as pumas and maned wolves.

Onçafari’s rewilding process doesn’t only benefit the jaguars: It helps the entire ecosystem shift back into balance. I’m here during the dry season, so the Pantanal isn’t flooded, meaning there are seemingly endless fields and forests to explore. We encounter elusive tapirs ambling along the road, crab-eating foxes scurrying in the brush, giant anteaters rooting around in the dirt.

Hyacinth macaws squawk in the tree-tops. The largest flying parrots in the world, they’ve recently been brought back from the brink of extinction by a conservation project called Instituto Arara Azul.

There’s something extra special about seeing jaguars, though, and not just for me: In a way, the game drives feel like family reunions, as the guides and biologists catch up with their old friends. We meet a female jaguar named Tata as she sits, paws tucked under herself like a house cat, on the dock of the lake at the lodge. (No kayaking expeditions today...) We happen upon Surya, who lounges lazily at sunset, flicking flies with her tail, occasionally lifting her head to let us know she sees us. And we witness three different mating pairs—including Fera, who kicked off the rewilding success story—as they, um, work to repopulate the Pantanal.

One evening, after dark, Reali shines his

Above: guests on safari at Caiman Pantanal watch a jaguar prowl the tropical plains

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Above: a firepit lights up the evening at Caiman Pantanal

red-filtered spotlight on an uncollared young female, Surya's daughter Juba, whose presence thrills the team. She hadn't been seen with her mother in a while, which might have meant that she had set out on her own earlier than expected—or that she'd been killed. Here, offering us a photogenic *streeetch*, Juba is the model of health, and the whole crew breathes a sigh of relief.

Before a morning safari, the staff jokes that there's nothing left for me to see—I've even checked hard-to-spot residents like tiny ocelots, which are basically one-tenth-scale replicas of jaguars, off my list. I'm not the only one who's having success, either: Over my breakfast of *pão de queijo*

(cheese bread), I hear a fellow guest tell the activities manager, in an apologetic tone, "I would like to inform you, no more safaris for us. We saw too many sightings, and we want to enjoy the pool."

I'm happy I don't follow their lead, because shortly after my party heads out that morning, we stumble upon Oliver, a rewilded male puma, perched on a branch, hiding his face from the morning's first rays. Pumas may seem like apex predators, but next to jaguars they're lithe and lean—ballerinas alongside linebackers. Oliver came from a local rehab center after having been "rescued," although that term is often misused. (Overeager animal lovers will sometimes inadvertently

kidnap a cub from its mother while she's off hunting or otherwise out of sight.) This is only the second time he has been spotted since his release, so we spend a long time just sitting with him. "There's no secret to habituation," Reali says. "It's patience and time. It's better to be careful, because if we scare him, he may remember that. We need to work to become background noise."

For his part, Haberfeld, despite being at this for more than a decade, still seems in awe of these predators. "He would be stuck in a cage if it weren't for this," he says of Oliver. "Ecotourism-wise, it's just the beginning."

AN ALTERNATIVE BRAZILIAN SAFARI

If you're more of a dog person, Onçafari runs another program that might be of interest to you. A five-hour drive northeast from Brazil's capital city, Brasília, in an endangered grassland known as the Cerrado, the organization is habituating and rewilding maned wolves. These exceptionally quirky canines look a bit like red foxes on stilts, have a "roar-bark" that cuts through the night like something out of a horror film, and emit an odor that's so similar to the smell of cannabis a zookeeper in Rotterdam once called the police on them. Operating out of a lovely lodge called Pousada Trijunção, Onçafari offers maned wolf-oriented safaris. (Guests should also keep an eye out for melanistic jaguars, aka black panthers.) The lodge also educates local farmers on eco-friendly methods, and even breeds animals such as red-footed tortoises and rheas to sell as ethically sourced pets to help stop poaching in the adjacent Grande Sertão Veredas National Park. pousadatrijuncao.com.br



Felipe Castellar (firepit); Vinicius Vianna (maned wolf)