

Amazing Amazonia



One man's love story with the Amazon Basin and its elusive apex predator, the endangered Jaguar, has resulted in a collection of truly stunning images. *Anima Mundi's* first Guest Wildlife Photographer shares them with us

Roberto Fabbri: A Wildlife Photographer in his own words

Born in Rome, Italy, and a photographer for the last 45 years, I had an unusual start in the underwater world. It happened in the early 60's during my first discovery of scuba diving. U/W photography in those years was really challenging, equipment was "invented" day by day, Rolleiflex and Hasselblad were the only camera manufacturers offering U/W housings. In 1968, in the waters of the Red Sea, on a reef off Port Sudan, I had the luck to photograph a Manta ray giving birth and even today, after so many years, my images are the only evidence of such an event in the wild. My work was published in magazines all over the world. In 1969 I won the Silver Star at the prestigious International Underwater Photography Contest, the Premio Maurizio Sarra in Italy; David Doubilet, the American grand master of U/W photography and *National Geographic Magazine* photographer, won the Gold.

I have been living for last 14 years in Belize, a small country in Central America; I was immediately attracted by the wonders and beauty of its wilderness, its forest, its wildlife and the underwater

world of its barrier reef, the second longest in the world. In 2002 I made the transaction to digital, facing all the problems and challenges of this new photographic era. During the last few years, I have organized many expeditions to the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, in Peru, a vaste area of rainforest, home to many National Parks: Parque Nacional del Manu, Reserva Nacional Tambopata, Parque Nacional Bahuja-Sonene. Traveling in these areas is always problematic considering the equipment a photographer normally carries, now adding laptops, hard drives, portable electric generators, etc. But the hardships are always worth it: the chances to encounter wildlife are good, the rewards for the wildlife photographer are extremely satisfying. In 2009 I traveled to the Pantanal in the state of Mato Grosso in Brazil; I spent several weeks at the Jaguar Research Center, a small tent lodge owned by the renowned zoologist Dr. Charles Munn, a pioneer in eco-tourism. My goals for the future: to travel more in the remote areas of South America, especially Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. There is so much wildlife to see. ●



During the time I spent at Lago Huitoto in the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, an oxbow lake formed by the flood of the Rio Madre de Dios, I always encountered abundant wildlife. These three baby Black Caimans, *Caiman niger*, were part of a large group sunbathing on a log on the beach side. I got very close and they did not pay much attention to me; in fact this particular one, to show his total indifference, yawned in my face! Rainforest of Lago Huitoto, Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.

Baby Black Caiman,
Caiman niger,
with a nasty fly on the head
sucking its blood,
Amazon Basin of Madre
de Dios, Cocha Cusiyacu,
Peru, South America.
Cocha is the Spanish
and local name for oxbow
lakes, those temporary
natural basins formed by
the flood of the great rivers
in the Amazon basin.



Chestnut-eared Aracari,

Pteroglossus castanotis, outside his nest. Toucans, parrots and macaws don't build conventional nest as other birds do using leaves, straw or sticks, but they nest in natural cavities they find in trees, where females lay their eggs. It is believed they use the same nest over and over. This picture was taken using a Nikon D2Xs with a Sigma 300-800 mm, a total focal length of 1200 mm due to the crop factor of the DX format; the lens was mounted on a carbon fiber tripod, and because of a silly mistake by the photographer a few minutes later it fell in the murky waters of the Rio Manu, an affluent of the Rio Madre de Dios! Our very brave female cook grabbed the tripod by one leg just before it sunk in the river, and the combined weight pulled her into the river, but with bravery she held to her catch! There was no hope of repairing the lens, but at least I still enjoy the tripod. Rain forest of Parque Nacional del Manu, Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.



The Amazon Basin of Peru

The Amazon basin of the Madre de Dios has been my destination for four expeditions, from 2004 to 2007.

This vast area of tropical and rain forest is home to two major National Parks and to the Tambopata-Candamo Reserve Zone:

- Parque Nacional del Manu (Manu National Park) is just immense with 3,785,000 acres of pristine habitat, ranging from the grassy puna highlands on the Cordillera Oriental at 14,000 feet, to the wet tropical forest of the Amazon lowlands. In terms of biodiversity Manu has the highest numbers of plants and animal species in the whole world.
- Parque Nacional Bahuaja-Sonene with 1,365,000 acres.
- Tambopata-Candamo Reserve Zone with 3,650,000 acres.

These three large areas of wilderness, in terms of biodiversity, have the highest number of plants and animals in the world; over 1,000 species of birds, 20,000 species of plants, 1,200 species of butterflies; this is wildlife heaven, one of the best eco-tourism destination in the world. I visited the Parks more than once, but time has always been the problem - one will always need to spend long months, if not actually years, in order to appreciate what the nature of the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios has to offer. The only way to move around is by boat; rivers are the only highways. One can easily travel for miles and miles in total wilderness, with little contacts with humans, and we all know where there is water there is life. Wildlife is abundant on the riverbanks, offering frequent encounters with families of capybaras, white and black caimans, large flocks of macaws, birds in large quantities, monkeys, giant otters, tapirs and even with the elusive jaguar.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*, flying over the waters of Lake Summerset, Lakeland, Valrico, Florida.



Black-collared Hawk, *Busarellus nigricollis*, caught just a fraction of a second before catching a fish in the Rio Pixaim, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.





Jabiru stork,
Jabiru mycteria,
 flying over the waters
 of Rio Pizaim,
 Pantanal Wildlife
 Center, Pantanal,
 Mato Grosso, Brazil,
 South America.



Andean Cock-of-the-rock,
Rupicola peruviana, male, female is rusty orange with
 small crest and brownish wings and tail. This is the
 national bird of Peru, found in middle and low levels of
 cloud forest vegetation, especially near rocky streams.
 Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.



Immature Harpy Eagle, *Harpia harpyja*, the largest bird of prey of the Americas. This one was about six months old and couldn't fly yet, waiting for its mother to bring food. Rain forest of the Amazon Basin of Rio Colorado, Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.

Harpy Eagle

In early 2006, a friend from Peru, Alex Torres - a birdwatching tour guide - contacted me because he knew of a nest of an Harpy Eagle. These enormous birds of prey, the largest in the Americas, always build their nest on very tall and isolated trees with absolutely no climbing vines, to protect their eggs and chicks from predators. On this occasion the nest was on a private property close to the gold town of Colorado, on the Rio Madre de Dios; the only activity in this little town has always been gold mining, generation after generation.

A flimsy metal scaffolding acting as an observation tower was installed just 100 feet (30 meters) from the nest tree: it was 110 feet tall, a really scary and unpleasant daily climb. For a full week I spent every day - from dawn to sunset - precariously perched on a small wooden platform installed at the top, and apart from the chick of the harpy eagle it was not the best time of my life! I never had the chance to see or photograph the mother, only the baby; she came three times bringing food, and we missed her on every occasion.



A couple of Hyacinth Macaws, *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*, a common encounter in the Pantanal. Pantanal Wildlife Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



Keel-billed Toucan, *Ramphastos sulfuratus*, the national bird of Belize, caught inside (outside) his nest carrying a fruit in his beak for his chicks. Toucans, parrots and macaws don't build conventional nest such as those of other birds but they nest in natural cavities they find in trees, where they lay the eggs. It is believed they use the same nest over and over. Belize, Central America.



Giant Otter, *Pteronura brasiliensis*, eating the fresh catch of the day, a heavily armored catfish called *cascudo*. Giant Otters are categorized by the IUCB Red List as an endangered species. Oxbow lake of Sao Pedrinho, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

Spectacled Caiman, *Caiman crocodilus*, with his catch of the day in the mouth, a *cascudo*. Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas State Park, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.





**Southern
Tamandua,**

*Tamandua
tetradactyla*, upside
down, feasting on a
large termite nest on a
tree in the rain forest
of the Amazon Basin,
Rio Las Piedras,
Madre de Dios, Peru,
South America.

Red Howler Monkey,

Alouatta seniculus,
female, carrying
on her back her newborn
baby in the trees
of the rain forest
of the Manu National
Park, Amazon Basin of
Madre de Dios, Peru,
South America.





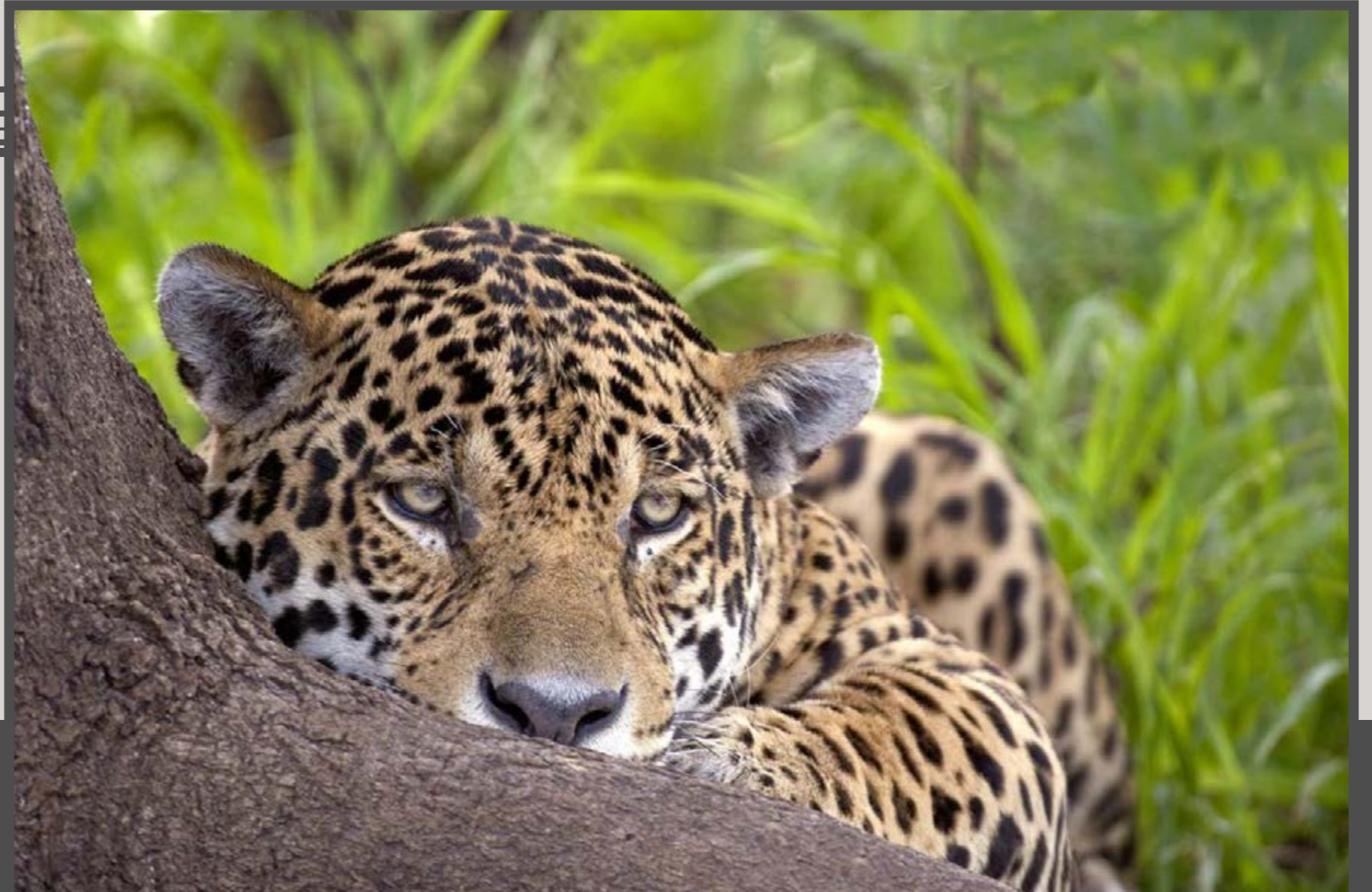
Roseate Spoonbill,

Ajaja ajaja, in flight,
carrying nest
building material.
Alafia Banks,
Tampa Bay,
Florida.

Red and Green Macaws, *Ara chloroptera*,
at early morning clay lick, getting their daily dose
of mineral dietary supplement. Rainforest of Rio
las Piedras, Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios,
Peru, South America.



A very large male Jaguar,
Panthera onca, resting on the banks of
 Corixo Negro, an oxbow lake. Encontro
 das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State
 Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal,
 Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



Brazil and the Jaguars of the Pantanal

My quest for jaguars started when I saw the first one in my property in Belize, in 1999. I was slowly driving on our access road when I first saw her, a small young female less than 100 feet away. I stopped the car, stepped out and slowly started walking toward her. She did not move, she was staring at me; as I reached a bit closer, she turned around and walked slowly in the bush. No camera! I saw this cat many times over the years, even with her cub and more jaguars, all inside my property, but never when I was carrying a camera. We are sited just a few miles from

the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, the Belize Jaguar preserve, a National Park of 140,000 acres, created in 1981 by the celebrated zoologist and jaguar expert from the W.C.S. Alan Rabinowitz. Spotting jaguars in the wild and not being able to take images of them frustrated me to the extreme; I ventured in the Cockscomb Basin many times, but results have been always disappointing: a lot of footprints, but no cats. In 2009 I was contacted by Dr. Charles Munn, a well known zoologist and eco-tourism promoter, to visit his Jaguar Research

Center, located inside the 270,000 acres Meeting of the Waters State Park (Encontro das Aguas). This is in the Pantanal, in central-western Brazil, an area the size of the UK which features some of the finest wildlife viewing in South America. Dr. Munn was aware of my previous four expeditions to the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, and he knew of my obsession for jaguars; he wrote to me "...just come to JRC, I can guarantee you will encounter as many jaguars as you want!". I was a bit skeptical, but he was right: in 15 days I counted 35 of

them, of which 11 unique sights. I saw jaguars performing all kind of actions: swimming in rivers, mating, lazily resting on the river banks, hunting for capybaras and caimans, and even a mother with a two months cub. It was just amazing! The size of these well-fed cats is quite impressive: in Central America, where food is scarce, a mature male jaguar can barely reach the weight of about 150 pounds, but in the Pantanal - where food is abundant - a male can easily exceed 300 pounds, the weight of an African female lion.



A very large male Jaguar,
Panthera onca, resting on the banks of Corixo Negro, an oxbow lake, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



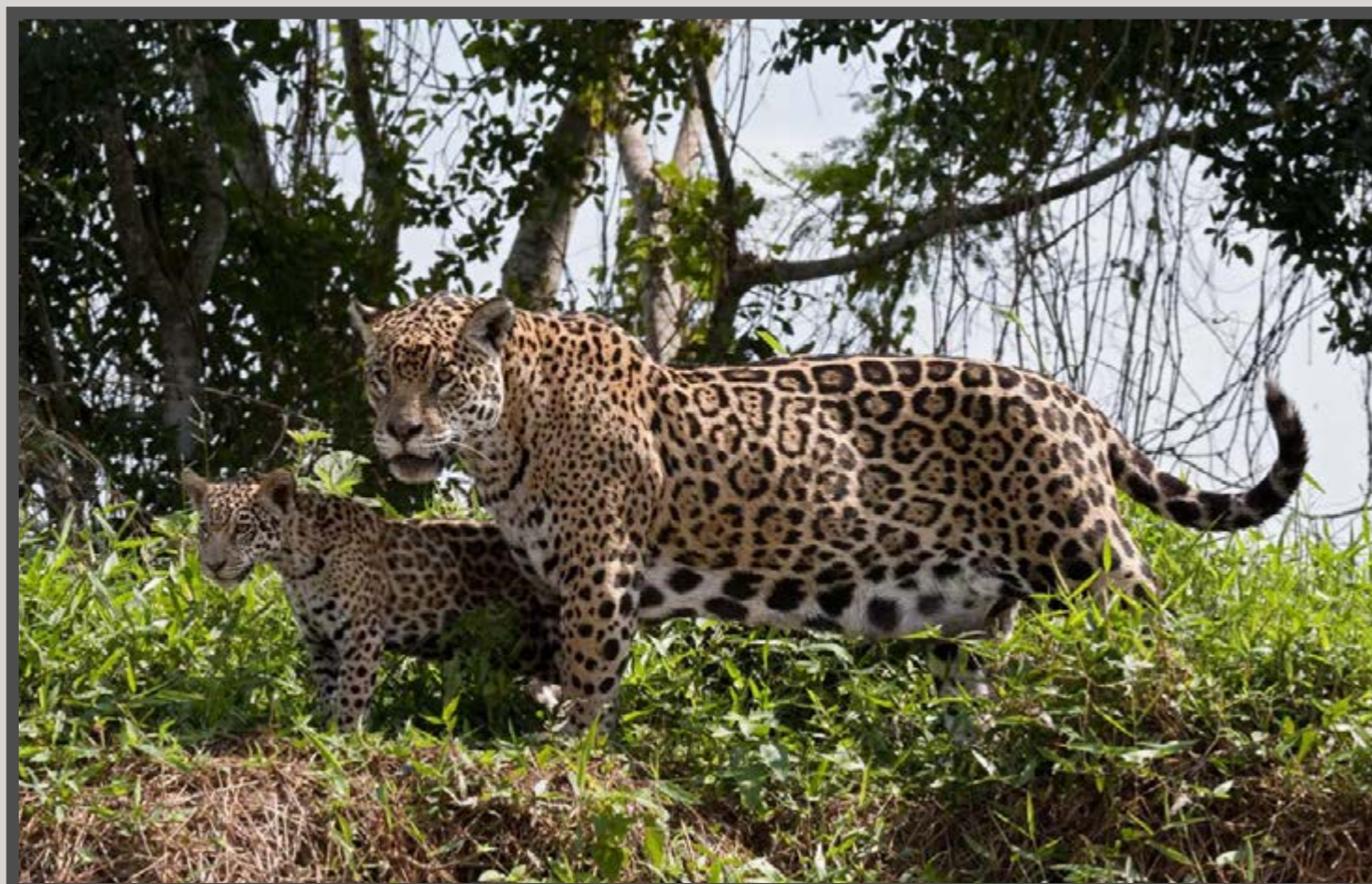
A large and mature female Jaguar,
Panthera onca, with her young cub, probably less than two months old, hunting for caimans on the banks of Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

A young male Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, probably no more than two years old, his mother behind him, resting on the banks of the Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



A very large male Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, resting on the banks of Corixo Negro, an oxbow lake, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

A large and mature female Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, hunting along the banks of Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



A large and mature female Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, with her young cub, probably less than two months old, notice she is pregnant again, on the banks of Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

**A very large
male Jaguar,**

Panthera onca,
resting on the sand
banks of Rio Tres
Irmãos, Encontro
das Águas (Meeting
of the Waters) State
Park, Jaguar
Research Center,
Pantanal, Mato
Grosso, Brazil,
South America.





Ringed Kingfisher,
Ceryle torquata, with the fresh catch
of the day, Rio Pixaim, Pantanal
Wildlife Center, Pantanal, Mato
Grosso, Brazil, South America.