

# JAGUARS OF TAMBOPATA **KINGS OF THE RAINFOREST**

LUCAS M. BUSTAMANTE'S ENCOUNTERS WITH  
**THE AMAZON'S APEX PREDATOR**  
IN PERU'S WORLD-FAMOUS NATURE RESERVE

■ The jaguar *Panthera onca* is a large and stocky feline in the *Panthera* genus, and is the only extant *Panthera* species native to the Americas. The jaguar is the third-largest feline after the tiger and the lion, and the largest in the Americas.

While dense rainforest is the preferred habitat, jaguars will range across a variety of forested and open terrains. Preferred habitats are usually swamps and wooded regions, but jaguars also live in scrublands and deserts. The jaguar is notable, along with the tiger, as a feline that enjoys swimming.



TEXT AND PHOTOS  
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It was 4:30 in the morning, and the alarm started ringing! Time to begin another day by boat looking for jaguars along the Tambopata River. We started at 05h00 until almost 14h00, a very long day to say the least. So far I had not been successful during my visit to the Tambopata Research Center in the Peruvian Amazon, a place with one of the highest sightings of jaguars in South America (nearly 20% approximately along the river shore). I woke up, and Pedro, our local guide, started screaming furiously that I was late and would miss the boat. I took all my gear with me, and then I realized that I had forgotten the memory card of my camera in the room. After I grabbed it, I started to run to the beach, when I suddenly noticed a jaguar

footprint in the middle of the trail. I walked ten more meters...and saw my guide and the boatman lying behind a big log, looking at something hidden at the forest edge, just off the main harbor of the lodge, in front of the canoes. There it was! A cat - asleep, it wagged his tail and then looked at us with all the confidence in the world, knowing well who is the king of the rainforest. The only thing missing was the smoke from my camera! Everybody talks about the Brazilian Pantanal as the favorite place to find and photograph wild jaguars. It certainly is... But the advantage of Tambopata is that this location offers you encounters with the world's third largest cat as a real adventure, which you never know how will end. Additionally, encountering them in Tambopata it is a much

more personalized experience. I have visited these Peruvian rainforests many times, two of which I spent looking for jaguars. All in all, I've succeeded in finding four jaguars and photographing all of them. Not to mention the encounters with two pumas and an ocelot, which appeared while I was looking for the jaguar. Conclusion: it is high time to diversify the places to search for big cats in South America. Moreover, surely other varieties of large mammals, dozens of primates, hundreds of birds and thousands of macro models will make your journey pass in the blink of an eye. And if you need more to convince yourself, just check the two articles *Anima Mundi - Adventures in Wildlife Photography* has devoted in the past to Tambopata [here](#) and [here](#). ●

■ The jaguar is a near-threatened species and its numbers are declining. Threats include loss and fragmentation of habitat. While international trade in jaguars or their parts is prohibited, the cat is still frequently killed by humans, particularly in conflicts with ranchers and farmers.



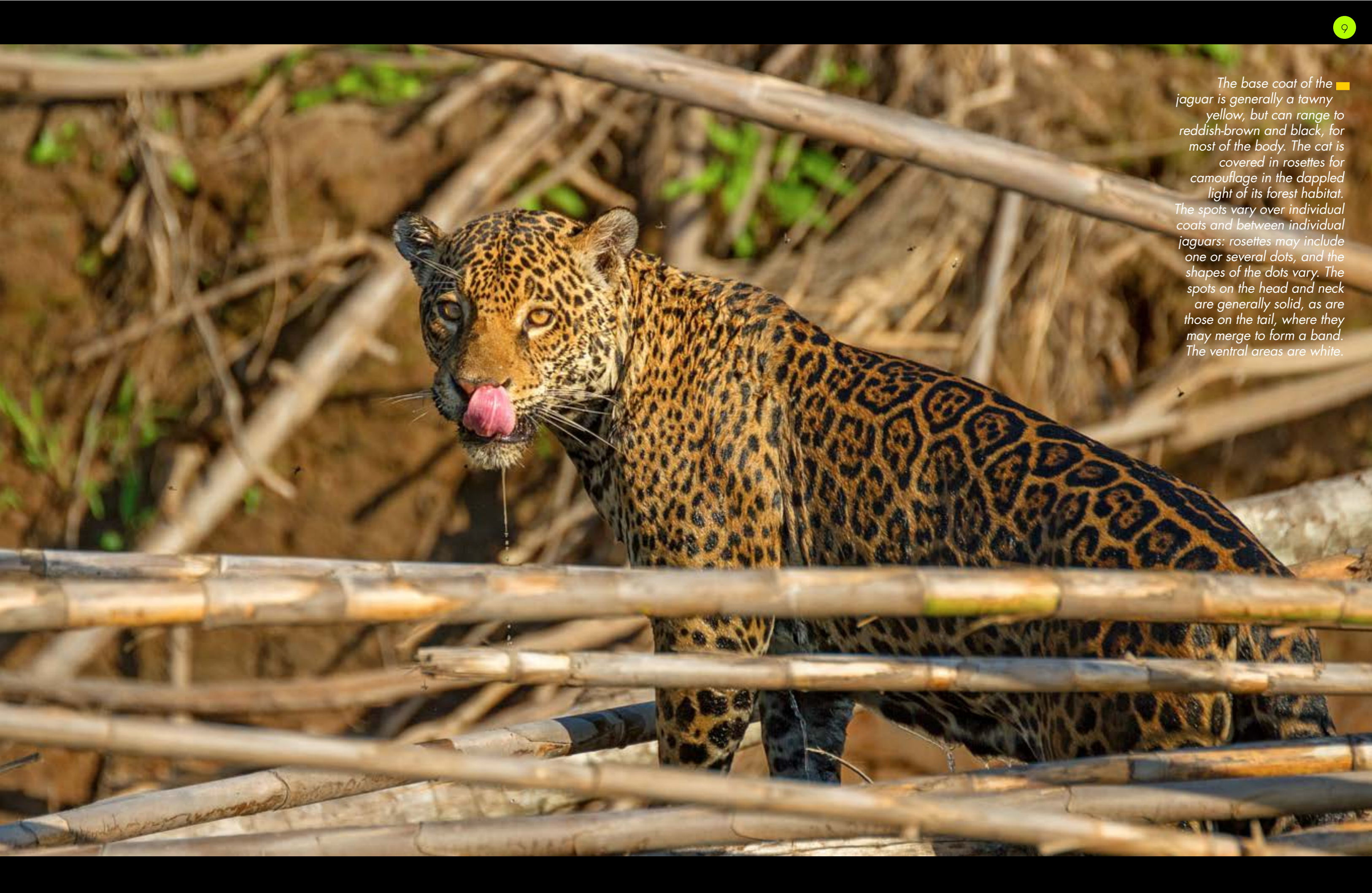


The jaguar is a solitary, opportunistic, stalk-and-ambush predator at the top of the food chain (an apex predator). It is a keystone species, playing an important role in stabilizing ecosystems and regulating the populations of the animals it hunts.



■ A short and stocky limb structure makes jaguars adept at climbing, crawling, and swimming. The head is robust and the jaw extremely powerful, with the third highest bite force of all felids, after the tiger and lion.





The base coat of the jaguar is generally a tawny yellow, but can range to reddish-brown and black, for most of the body. The cat is covered in rosettes for camouflage in the dappled light of its forest habitat. The spots vary over individual coats and between individual jaguars: rosettes may include one or several dots, and the shapes of the dots vary. The spots on the head and neck are generally solid, as are those on the tail, where they may merge to form a band. The ventral areas are white.



Like all cats, the jaguar is an obligate carnivore, feeding only on meat. It is an opportunistic hunter and its diet encompasses at least 87 species. Jaguars can take virtually any terrestrial or riparian vertebrate found in Central or South America, with a preference for large prey.