

# Jaguar

Eye-to-Eye with the Icon of South American Jungle

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The flehmen reaction of the jaguar male is common way of locating the presence of a female

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 Sao Bento, Pantanal (Brazil):  
*... on the opposite bank, coati searches the ground and a few moments later even a clumsy tamandua comes out of the shadow. Radana is taking pictures of a sunbitter approaching along the water. Finally I cannot resist and I join in myself.*  
*"Oh, guys, there is a jaguar sitting next to you," she whispers suddenly to my ear.*  
*Apparently, she still hasn't fully recovered from yesterday's encounter with a jaguar, I think to myself and ask her: "What Jaguar?"*  
*"Well, the one beside you, behind that branch!"*  
*"... what branch?"*  
*But then I see him too. Sitting a few metres away from me, quietly swinging his tail he is staring straight into my eyes. After yesterday's soirée with the tiger's male I keep my calm though and in cold blood I point my camera at the cat hitting the trigger over and over. Radana is doing exactly the same. ... the jaguar continues gazing at us.*  
*"Mom, who are these strange capybaras? We still haven't had those in class." Rady whispers whimsically and then it hits me as well. Big ears, bulging eyes with apparent surprise – it's a cub that hasn't seen a man yet. A cub!*  
*"His mother will not be far," I mutter between my teeth. "Hurry up, pack everything and let's get*

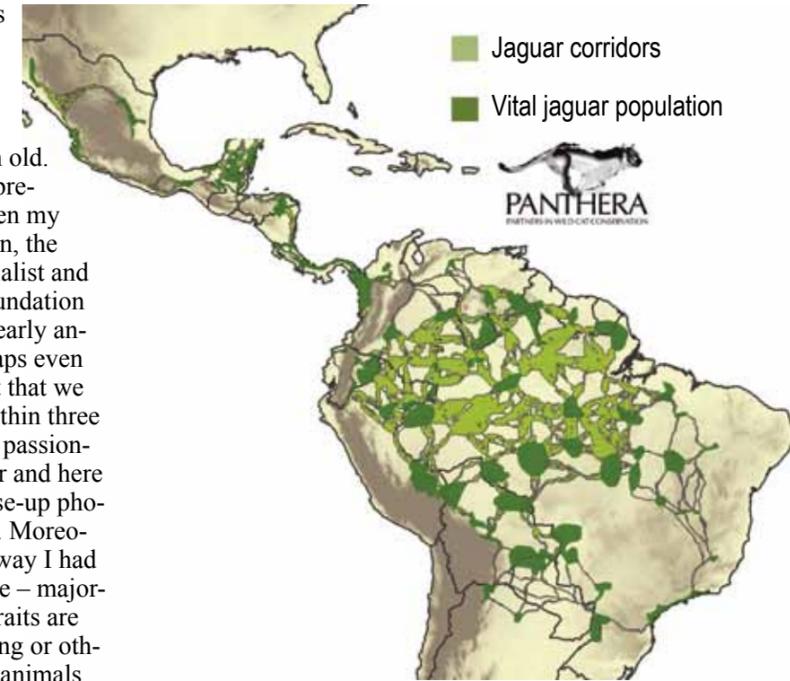
*out of here. But be careful, no quick movements. If the mother is somewhere behind us we have a real problem!"*  
*At the same time, I also wonder how long the jaguar cub has been watching us and mainly how it could have approached so softly that we did not hear a thing. More than anything, the sound of walking on dry leaves resembles the sound of stepping on corn flakes. Now, we are crawling along the bank pretending not to be here at all. "Ah," after some fifty meters of disgraceful stealth I sigh with relief and finally straighten my back. Involuntarily, my eyes fall on the edge of the bank about two or three meters above us. And there she stood! The mother. In all her wild beauty, nervously dancing her tail just like her child and staring straight down at us. I feel completely flabbergasted and shocked, but not for long. To my immense regret, the jaguar slowly and without haste turns around and disappears over the edge of the bank. Totally mistaken, I took her disappearance as a clear call that catapulted me to the top of the steep slope. Catching for breath I now squat scanning the undergrowth with my binoculars in hope that I might get a glimpse of the magnificent beast once again, at least for a moment. "Gone," I turn down to Rady with disappointment while she climbs*

*up long tree roots freely hanging down the sandy bank. It was as she reached the top and stood next to me when it happened. Right where she stopped, beneath her feet, there was sort of a dull thump, a rope of roots swung open to the side and from underneath the bank a powerful jaguar fired out. With a long jump he landed in the mud at the bottom of the semi-dry stream. Two three more jumps and he reached the opposite side of the river bed. Then with one final mighty leap he flew up and with incredible power without even touching the bank he jumped over it and through the forest wall which noiselessly closed behind him. In just a few moments the jaguar was gone. But the phased image of the scene is still rewinding in my head. I'm staring at the fascinating slow motion film loop*

*re-playing images of broad back muscles and, unlike in reality I even hear a rumbling echo of his jumps in the background. Radana also still glares deliriously at the spot on the opposite shore where the jaguar turned into a ghost. She is still in shock. I think it only now dawns on her that she climbed up the bank less than half a meter from the jaguar's head. Just the mere thought of what might have happened in case of eye contact with the predator chills her to the bone. Descending the bank we find a spacious cavity under the tree trunk. Apparently, the jaguar's den.*

A slightly modified entry from my journal recounts a meeting with three jaguars in a dry river bed in the space of less than a hundred meters and within less than fifteen minutes. It all happened early in

the morning and in terms of ethology it was very unusual, especially the presence of adult male close to a mother with a cub about seven month old. Was the female already prepared to mate again? Even my friend Rafael Hoogesteijn, the experienced jaguar specialist and zoologist of Panthera foundation in New York couldn't clearly answer this question. Perhaps even more puzzling is the fact that we observed five Jaguars within three days. My wife Rady is a passionate wildlife photographer and here she managed to take close-up photographs of wild jaguars. Moreover, it all happened in a way I had not even thought possible – majority of "wild" jaguar portraits are done at the price of taming or otherwise manipulating the animals.



A six months old Jaguar watched us curiously ten long minutes. Then he disappeared into the woods



Jaguar gaze eye-to-eye grounded me and filled me with respect...

The depicted *encounter* took place on the Panthera Foundation farm Sao Bento in the Brazilian Pantanal. Actually, as a wildlife painter I meet with jaguars quite frequently, but in most cases I am aware of their presence through their typical vocalisations, footprints, marks, and prey remains. Thus the shy jaguar is at most times merely a ghostly apparition to me and the eye-to-eye encounters are extremely rare.

Jaguar (*Panthera onca*) is the most powerful predator of the Americas

and according to The IUCN Red List falls into the category of Near Threatened. Currently there is said to be a limited jaguar population even in the southern USA, from where the jaguar territory extends down to northern Argentina. Unexpectedly and despite of what most of the literature proposes the molecular-biological analysis suggests that the jaguar does not form any subspecies and the entire population is genetically homogeneous. Research on their food habits revealed another surprising discovery. As a top preda-

tor, the jaguar is a complete opportunist, but the findings in some farms in the Pantanal (wetland ecosystem, savannah and tropical deciduous forests) are nonetheless quite unexpected. The most common catch there is the spectacled caiman, and only then comes the abundant capybara and hoofed Artiodactyla. This obviously does not apply to other populations of jaguars, for instance in the Amazonia where food supplies vary. Food appetence of jaguars is closely related to their conflicts with farmers because a significant part of the

jaguar population lives in the areas with extensive cattle production (the Venezuelan llanos, Brazilian, Bolivian and Paraguayan Pantanal, Bolivian Beni, etc.). I met with Rafael Hoogsteijn for the first time in the middle of the llanos about ten years ago when he had already been studying this problem. His research has yielded wide range of knowledge crucial to protection of Jaguars. It becomes clear, for example, that on farms where hunting of wild animals is regulated or totally banned and some land is left fallow livestock

predation by jaguars is limited and jaguars focus more on their natural food. The economic benefit of such measures can be expressed in higher profit, not to mention conservation of at least some parts of natural ecosystems. Thus, it is demonstrated that the jaguar-farmer conflict is often unnecessary and motivated by prejudice and ignorance. There are many possible measures to jaguar protection suggested by Rafael but education, public awareness, and support for farmers by the NGOs and state institutions are perhaps the most

important ones. Jaguar population is also threatened by two other major factors: illegal hunting and habitat loss and its fragmentation. Therefore, the New York Foundation Panthera came up with a mega-project to link vital jaguar populations by natural corridors (The Jaguar Corridor Initiative / [www.panthera.org](http://www.panthera.org)). What was initially a purely idealistic obsession of several experienced conservationists and zoologists led by Alan Rabinowitz recently proved to be a very successful project gaining more and more respect and admiration.

Jaguar first sipped the water, tried the water temperature with his paw, and then decided to swim across the river to the other side

