

Underneath the Arches - The continuing saga of a bat quest in Brazil



Photos © Derek Smith 2006

After spending two long days peering out of the windows of the coach into the parched grass of Caraca National Park, hoping to see a giant anteater (how can such a big animal be so elusive), the Pantanal was a shock to the system

The phrase "Transpantanal Highway" evokes the mental image of a six laned highway leading into the distance, but the asphalt is soon replaced by dirt road. It is the dry season, and the wildlife is concentrated into the remaining wetland. Remember the children's book "Where's Wally?" with its crowded vista containing Wally somewhere (and you had to look hard because there was so much else to distract you). Well the Pantanal is like that only more so. It is heaving with wildlife, close up and personal.

In the wet season the water level is much higher and they have built bridges over some of the myriad water channels; and already you have fallen into another trap. Think bridges and I conjure up images very far removed from the ones facing me now. These bridges are wooden and look alarmingly rickety.

There is something marginally disconcerting about sitting in a truck whilst your driver walks onto a bridge and starts relaying the wooden sleepers over which he is about to drive, and you wish this wasn't the moment that your eyes have spotted an accumulation of suddenly vigilant cayman and that your mind to inquire whether cayman eat human flesh. The bridges are of course sturdier than they seem but, standing underneath one as a car crosses above is disconcerting as the bridge

winces and the sleepers bounce up and down. It's like lying under a bed with several obese children trampolining on the mattress overhead. And what, you might well ask, is any one in their right mind doing standing in such a foolhardy place? You already know the answer, for in this most unlikely of places are bats. We are creeping up on them cameras at the ready, pausing at each step to check that they aren't going to take flight. Just as we draw close a truck crosses the bridge, which judders alarmingly. We expect the bats to take flight as the plank they are roosting on is shaken violently, but they are used to this and remain motionless.

Confident at their unflappability we continue to talk them until we have them in our sight. With perfect symmetry seven proboscis bats are lined up with one of the nuts that hold the bridge together. They aren't hanging by their feet but are using all fours, the better to show the white zig zag stripe on their back and their tiny elongated faces, looking for all the world as though some-one has pulled their noses just once too often and they haven't gone into shape.



Confident that these bats are unspookable we moved in. One of our number clambers with great care and very smoothly onto one of the bridge supports. His body weight causes a barely discernable shudder. Barely noticeable to us perhaps, but it's enough for the bats. In a blink of an eye they have taken to the sky, retaining their tight formation like the Red Arrows aerial display team.

We leave the bridge swiftly hoping they will soon return, sensing that the watching cayman may well be as unimpressed by our clumsiness as we are.



With apologies for the somewhat murky appearance in black and white, but these bats did pick a substrate on which they were very well camouflaged

Jude Hirstwood