

Episode 116: The Pantanal

Summary

Back in Brazil, Nick and Wendy visit the world's largest wetlands area: the Pantanal. In particular, they talk about the animals they saw while they were there.

Transcript

Nick: For today's conversation, Wendy and I are back in Brazil, and we're in the southwestern part of Brazil in a place called the Pantanal, which is the world's largest swamp¹, or largest wetlands area. Umm, now, if that doesn't sound too appealing, it's also, uhh, considered to be the best place for wildlife viewing in all of South America, and that's pretty much the reason why we're here.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, and we did see a lot of wildlife in the end in the four days that we stayed here, so I'm pretty excited about that. At the beginning, I was afraid that we weren't going to see that many animals, because we got here at what I thought was going to be the tail end² of the dry season, but it seems that the rains came much earlier this year and they have been doing that for the past couple of years, uhh, which is probably a result of climate change. So it was already quite wet when we arrived and that makes it a bit more difficult to see animals, just because in the dry season, they all have to come to the river to drink, and so it's very easy to see them there. But now, there are lakes and ponds³ all over the place, so they can get water anywhere. So you have to have a little more patience and a little more luck, but in the end I think we were pretty lucky.

Nick: Yeah, I think so too. So the Pantanal is really far from basically anywhere else in Brazil, and certainly the other people who we've spoken to who are here, you know, they've been flying from São Paulo or from other areas to get here. Umm, we ... it turned out that we were pretty lucky in the end, because we came overland from Bolivia and coming through the eastern part of Bolivia, when you cross the border, you're basically dropped right at the doorstep of⁴ the Pantanal.

Wendy: Yeah, and the wetlands themselves, they actually do carry on across the border a bit into Bolivia, and also a little bit into Paraguay, I believe. But Brazil, as

¹ swamp: wet or muddy area where agricultural is not usually possible

² the tail end: the final part, the very end

³ ponds: very small lakes, sometimes artificially created

⁴ right at the doorstep of: very close to

far as I know, is the only country that's really set up for tourism in the Pantanal, where you can really, you know, get into it and view the wildlife and experience life here.

Nick: Yeah, and I'm sure that by far the biggest part is in Brazil anyway.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: So we had an interesting introduction when we came here. Basically, we had taken a van to a point at the side of the highway, and then we had to get out of that van and then there was a truck that was going to come from the guesthouse, if you like, that we're staying at, that was going to come and pick us up. And we got out of the van and there was, I guess, a swamp right next to the road, and we just got attacked like you wouldn't believe by mosquitos, as soon as we got out of the van.

Wendy: Yeah, they were biting us absolutely everywhere, all over our face, all over our arms, whatever was exposed. And, umm, yeah, just in the couple of minutes that it took us to, you know, fumble around in our bag and find our mosquito repellent, we had already been bitten many times before that.

Nick: Yeah, like literally 15 bites for me, at least, in about two or three minutes. And usually I only get bitten on my ankles and then sometimes on the underside of my wrists, but I had bites on my forehead, I had bites, umm, on my neck, on my legs, everywhere. And they were huge too, they really became these big welts⁵. Umm, and so then we thought that that was going to be what it was going to be like for the whole time that we were in the Pantanal. And fortunately they told us, 'No, once you get to the place where you're staying, there aren't as many mosquitos as there are at the side of the road there.' So that was lucky in the end.

Wendy: Yeah, and that was true. There aren't that many mosquitos. There are still plenty, but, uhh, it wasn't totally unbearable, umm, in the guesthouse the way that it was in that area when we first arrived.

Nick: And so in the Pantanal, there are what we've been calling these guesthouses. What they call them are *fazendas*, which is a kind of farmhouse, umm, I think. And then some of these have been converted into guesthouses and so now they call them *pousadas*, which means like a travellers' inn, but it's more like a rural guesthouse. And so the facilities are quite basic, but we have everything we need here. And so basically you stay there and then you make these activities or do these activities in the morning and in the afternoon, uhh, while you're here. And so that's what we've doing. And so we've been walking through the jungle, we've been taking boat trips and then we've also been taking some jeep safari type of trips. I think we both felt that the boat trips were the most enjoyable part.

⁵ welts: large raised bumps on the skin

Wendy: Yeah, umm, although today we went on our jeep safari and we did actually see quite a few animals, a lot more than I had expected. From what I had read and heard from other people, I thought that the boat trips were really going to be our best chance for seeing wildlife, and ... and we did. We saw a lot of birds. The birdwatching was fantastic on the boats. And we saw some mammals as well. Umm, and it's just fun to be on a boat.

Nick: Yeah, so there is this river that goes near where the guesthouse, and so we actually took two boat trips, one going one way up the river and one going the other way down the river. And, uhh, each time we were on the boat for about three hours, and you see all kinds of birds, and there are a lot of beautiful birds, colourful birds. We saw toucans, which are always a favourite bird of ours.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And there's actually a toucan nest right behind our guesthouse. And so he has a nest in a hole inside a tree and our guide showed it to us the first day. And so if you can kind of sneak up on him, umm, you'll have no idea that he's there, and then suddenly if you get close enough to the tree trunk, then he'll realise that someone is there and he'll peep out, and suddenly there's a toucan with this great big bill⁶, uhh, peeking out⁷ of the tree at you, and then he'll fly away. But, yeah, uhh, that was a real highlight for me, was seeing the toucan.

Nick: Yep, definitely. And there's lots of other herons and hawks and all these other birds. Some birds that, umm, that we know about from other areas, like kingfishers, and then other birds that are probably unique to this area. Umm, and so they're just scattered, you know, all the way up and down the river, and so you get to see a lot of those, which is great. There's also caimans, which are small alligator or crocodile creatures which are in the water and you see a lot of them. And they're, you know, it's always a bit scary seeing the eyes peeking out of the water, but they're quite small and they don't actually attack humans, which is nice of them.

Wendy: Yeah, we're too big for them, I think.

Nick: The other thing we saw, which was very interesting, on the water, was we saw a group of otters, and they were huge.

Wendy: Yeah, they're called giant otters, and I had never heard of them until I started reading about the Pantanal and the animals that live in the Pantanal. And so one of the animals that was mentioned was the giant otter. And I don't think I've ever seen any other otters in real life, so I don't know exactly how big a normal otter is, but these otters are huge.

Nick: Yeah, so our guide Pedro said they were about two metres in length, umm, which, yeah, it's really huge. And we saw them in the water and then one of them

⁶ bill: an elongated beak (beak: the mouth of a bird)

⁷ peeking out: glancing or looking quickly through an opening from inside

got out of the water onto the sand bank and, umm, started moving around a lot and didn't really seem too impressed with us, or too happy to see us.

Wendy: No, he was kind of barking and growling⁸ and, yeah, making sounds to let us know that we were not welcome there. Umm, but, yeah, he almost looked like a seal, he had quite a long tail behind him. Umm, yeah, it was something really interesting to see, 'cause I didn't even know that that animal existed.

Nick: Yeah, like a big seal with limbs⁹, and, yeah, also just with this extended, elongated tail. So, yeah, that was really something. We also saw capybaras, which are the world's largest rodents, uhh, which doesn't sound very nice, but they actually are really cute.

Wendy: Yes, umm, probably cuter than rats, for example. Umm...

Nick: I think that's fair to say.

Wendy: Umm, so they look like a giant guinea pig, you might say. And they're covered in brown fur, and they seem to be in families. Whenever we've seen them, there's been a mother and a father and then a couple of babies. And they're really cute and they hang out in the water a lot. Umm, they don't actually eat anything that's in the water. They eat grass, so they go up on land to feed, but the water is actually their form of protection. So whenever a jaguar or other predator comes, then they will run and jump into the water. And they can actually, umm, dive down and stay underneath the water for several minutes, for, you know, maybe up to 10 minutes. And that's how they can escape from predators.

Nick: Right, and the other thing that we saw today just on the side of the road, umm, as part of our jeep safari was an armadillo.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Which is this crazy little, I don't know, critter¹⁰. It has this shell casing that covers the entire body and so it's just very unusual to watch it walk around.

Wendy: Yeah, and I think, well I know that we do have armadillos in some parts of the U.S. Uhh, Texas is known for having armadillos. Umm, but I don't think I'd ever seen an armadillo before in real life, either. So I was very excited to see him. He was very cute.

Nick: Alright, so after a few days in the Pantanal, uhh, we've seen a lot of things. And, umm, now it's time to move on and see what other adventures are in store for us in Brazil.

⁸ growling: making angry noises

⁹ limbs: arms and/or legs

¹⁰ critter: creature, animal

Comprehension Questions

1. Why was it easier for Nick and Wendy to reach the Pantanal than it is for most tourists?
2. What happened to Nick and Wendy when they first arrived in the Pantanal area while waiting for a truck to pick them up?
3. According to Wendy, what do capybaras use the water for?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Their new house has a huge backyard that faces the river. There are a couple of small _____ there too and ducks often come to swim in them.
2. Our dog starts _____ as soon as he sees the neighbour's cat. He doesn't like the cat at all.
3. The platypus is an Australian aquatic animal that has a notable _____ that looks like that of a duck.
4. The kids were playing hide-and-seek and one of them was _____ out of the wardrobe when he heard a scream coming from outside.
5. After travelling around the world for two years, they're at _____ of their trip now, with just one more country to go: Japan.
6. In the movie series *Shrek*, the title character just wants to live in his _____ and not be bothered, but that doesn't happen.
7. Some people think a mouse is a pest, but I think he's a cute little _____.
8. Arachnids are animals with eight _____. The most obvious example is a spider.
9. If you go to Cape Town, apart from all the fabulous things to see and do in the city itself, you're also _____ of South African wine country.
10. She got an allergic reaction to something while on holiday and all these _____ started appearing on her body.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to visit the Pantanal? Why or why not?
2. Which of these animals that Nick and Wendy described would you like to see the most: a toucan, a giant otter, a capybara or an armadillo? Why?
3. Do you have mosquitos where you live or have you been to a place with lots of mosquitos? What do you do about them?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because they came overland from eastern Bolivia, which is closer than any major destination in Brazil to the Pantanal.
2. They got bitten by mosquitos.
3. They use water to escape from predators because even though they are land animals, they can stay underwater for several minutes.

Exercises

1. ponds
2. growling
3. bill
4. peeking out
5. the tail end
6. swamp
7. critter
8. limbs
9. right at the doorstep of
10. welts