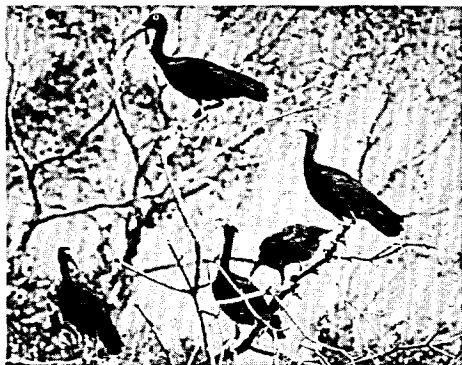


## PANTANAL

By Richard Belliveau



One of the most rewarding side trips in Brazil is to the "Pantanal", a vast interior swampland known for its tremendous variety of birds and other wildlife. Our jumping-off point for a visit to the area was the city of Corumba, perched high on a limestone ridge facing Bolivia on the upper reaches of the Paraguay River, where a century ago Brazil fought its last and most devastating war with a neighbour state.

The town is like some colonial jewel, with sculpted pastel buildings, palm-lined streets, and welcoming public squares; while down below a river winds and merges into the marshland wilderness. There is a lot of Indian blood in the people of Corumba – along with the typical Brazilian mix of all races – and the city is reminiscent of

French or Dutch colonial towns in Asia. Oddly enough, it is not at all like the Portuguese colony of Macao, as one might expect it to be. In 1935, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described Corumba as a town that seemed to have been imagined for a novel by Jules Verne; the rooms in the hotel were damp from the swamps, and "the food was abominable because the countryside being unproductive or undeveloped cannot provide for the needs of the two to three thousand people who are resident."



It is the profusion of birds that really make this place a natural paradise – graceful white herons perch on spindly branches or mass on leafless trees, several varieties of green, blue or grey red-breasted kingfishers can be seen, and cormorants dry their wings in the sun after a dive. We spotted patrolling hawks and platoons of bent-beak vultures keeping the highways and swamplands clean, and occasionally saw emus wandering about the fields and racing each other just to show-off their running speed.

Perhaps the strangest feathered creature we saw was the huge white stork-like bird with the bald black head and splashy red neck, called the "jaburu". These birds look like superannuated politicians and roost in nests as big as opera boxes. (Was there deliberate satire when Brazilians named the official residence of the Vice-president of the Republic in the new capital of Brasilia the Jaburu Palace?). The bird I most admired was the tucano, the black bird with the monstrous orange nutcracker beak. These are impossibly top-heavy birds, but they take on an elegant grace and beauty in their own habitat.

There are also many kinds of domesticated birds, including a herd of fat and stupid turkeys, chickens, a blue arara macaw, and a parrot that whistles the first two bars of the national anthem which he learned from television.

