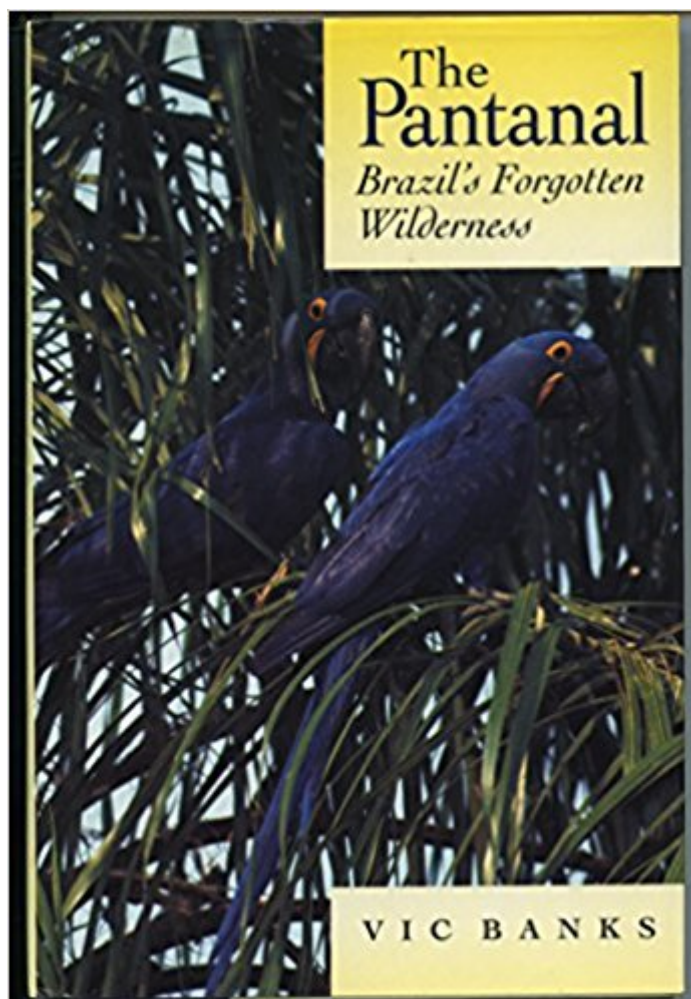


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# The Pantanal: Brazil's Forgotten Wilderness



## Synopsis

The Pantanal (Portuguese for swampland) is an immense flood plain, part of the Paraguay River Basin in western Brazil, eastern Bolivia and northeastern Paraguay. Annual torrential rains turn the region into a vast inland sea; after the floods recede it becomes a lush grassland with water holes that support an extraordinary variety of wildlife. In Brazil there are two protected reserves and huge, privately owned cattle ranches. Freelance photojournalist Banks has traveled in the Pantanal eight times since 1983. He tells a woeful story: illegal hunters, miners and commercial fishermen are stripping the region; in the surrounding high plains, farmers are using enormous amounts of agrichemicals; enforcement efforts are lax to nonexistent. While the media and environmentalists are concentrating on the tropical rain forests, grasslands are going up in smoke and a vital ecosystem is being destroyed. Banks visits officials, politicians and noted Swedish filmmaker Arne Sucksdorff in his quest for enlightenment on the Pantanal. Readers will enjoy his account of journeys in this exotic and unfamiliar region; they will quail at his description of a wild animal market in Rio.

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## Customer Reviews

The Pantanal (Portuguese for swampland) is an immense flood plain, part of the Paraguay River Basin in western Brazil, eastern Bolivia and northeastern Paraguay. Annual torrential rains turn the region into a vast inland sea; after the floods recede it becomes a lush grassland with water holes that support an extraordinary variety of wildlife. In Brazil there are two protected reserves and huge, privately owned cattle ranches. Freelance photojournalist Banks has traveled in the Pantanal eight

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For readers distressed by the destruction of Brazil's rain forest and inclined to further armchair exploration of that country's threatened ecosystems, Banks's first-person travelogue offers a standard blend of background on the 400,000-square-kilometer Pantanal wilderness in southern Brazil, journal-like narration of his progress through the region, observation of its abundant but endangered wildlife, and eco-alert on current environmental abuses. Though photojournalist Banks (National Geographic, Smithsonian, etc.) is an able writer and recounts his share of hairy experiences--a bee attack, precarious crossings of unstable bridges, a hotel room shared with assorted uninvited wildlife--his descriptions of the plethora of birds and animals are almost perfunctory, and he never establishes himself or his mission, an almost idly presented photo expedition, as a lure for reader involvement. Much of the book's first half details Banks's journey through the Pantanal to the national park in its southern reaches; but once he's there, the story plods on without a change of pace or tone through a meal, a disappointing dearth of the wildlife that had been so abundant on the way, a fishing trip without a catch, and, with no more ado, the journey back. No doubt the 60 photographs (40 color, 20 b&w) yet to come will contribute needed life to this relatively bland account. And there is more to chew on in the book's second half, where Banks gets into environmental issues and reports on interviews and visits with Brazilians concerned about the impact of ranchers' land-clearing fires, farmers' agrichemical abandon, gold miners' careless use of mercury, poachers' animal-skin hunting and illegal commercial fishing, and inadequate police enforcement of protective legislation. Another so-so addition, then, to a familiar story that still needs telling. -- Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

After visiting Pantanal, I came back and revised my review to raise the rating to 5 stars. Everything seemed familiar to me when I was visiting; I knew the names of all the animals and was so excited to see hyacinth macaws, remembering how elated Vic was in the book when he found some. I

found myself harking back to the book constantly, as if I had a friend along with me during the journey. I wonder how Vic would react to the changes in today's Pantanal, some for the bad (continued agriculturization) and others for the good (more focus on ecotourism). Vic Banks knows Brazil: he can identify on sight dozens of species of exotic birds, reptiles, and other unusual animals that make their home in the Pantanal, one of the most ecologically diverse places on earth. The book includes many fantastic nature photos taken by the author. Yet this book is not just about flora and fauna, but the entire life of the Pantanal, including the people who live there, from the farmers who are eking out a poor living with their cattle, to the gold miners who are reaping riches by destroying the land, to the army and government workers who are fighting a seemingly losing battle to stop wildlife poaching and the despoiling of this incredibly rich region. Banks' love for this place and his deep concern about what will happen to it comes through in every interaction he has. His book, which was written in 1991, doesn't leave much room for hope that Brazilian authorities are going to find a way to protect this incredible area - so I really wonder how much has been lost since he made this epic visit. The subtitle of the book is "Brazil's forgotten wilderness" and I believe it remains so today.

The Pantanal is a wonderful place. I am just sorry it is now being over run with development.

Superior book about a little known (to me) region. I was so enthralled, I booked a tour to the Pantanal. Thanks to the book, I was quite well-informed. It was the trip of a lifetime enhanced by this book.

Excellent read. Brings back many of the sites and sounds of the Brazilian Pantanal, experienced in many visits. A very special place, wish that it could be 'protected for posterity'. Photographs help to portray the area, together with the 'story'. Harriett Stubbs

This was an unforgettable trip with a photographer and naturalist who traveled the Pantanal, an extensive wetland area that is home to large populations of wildlife. This author changed, forever, how I envision Brazil and the animals and people who live there. His descriptions of these areas of irreplaceable value to Brazil and to our planet provide some historical context for the numerous dangers that threaten extinction of the creatures that live there. He shares the thrill of watching birds, the fear instilled by bees, and the discomfort of oppressive humidity. Could not put it down.

This is a well-written and highly personal account of a naturalist-photographer's adventures and misadventures in one of the least known regions of the Brazilian interior, an area teeming with natural beauty that is rapidly being destroyed. The book begins as a light-hearted journey undertaken by an equipment-laden photographer who negotiates his way into the heart of the Pantanal amid much naive bumbling and enthusiasm. It ends on a note of despair as we encounter the ultimate expression of man's cruelty both to himself and to nature, an illegal wild-life market in a Rio suburb where rare birds are caged and mutilated. Along the way we learn much about the history and geography of the Pantanal and of the political corruption that is endemic to Brazil, which has increasingly come under international scrutiny for practices of which no nation is wholly innocent. There are powerful portraits of leading conservationists, such as the brilliant cinematographer, Arne Sucksdorf, and the famed ornithologist, Helmut Sick. The key to Banks's effective presentation of his ecological message is his personal involvement throughout the narrative: the problems of poaching lead to a day with an incredibly inept and thuggish police patrol; the problems of gold-mining and mercury poisoning lead to a day in the pits. We are treated, moreover, to the full range of Brazilian society, from cowboys and peasants to high-placed officials; comrades and friends jostle for space alongside more dubious types. All in all, this is a fine achievement that should be read by anyone with an interest in environment affairs, Brazilian folkways, or, simply, human adventure candidly told. It is considered the leading introduction to the Pantanal and is the basis for a prize-winning film.

Can promptly and is what I expected

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