

Belize Birding & Nature | Trip Report

January 31 – February 9, 2018 | Written by Bob Behrstock



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Guides: Bob Behrstock & local experts Mario, Ruben (1), Luis, and Ruben (2), with 10 participants: Ginger, Jody, Diane, Bill, Tim, Norma, Neil, Mary Ellen, Marie, and Tamara

Tuesday, January 30

Early arrivals: Bob and Neal arrived in Belize a day early and were transferred to D'Nest, a B&B on the edge of Belize City. There was time for a bit of balcony birding and then a dinner of Mid-Eastern food at the nearby Sahara Grill.

Wednesday, January 31

After a nice breakfast at the B&B, Bob and Neal had time for some neighborhood birding (mangrove edge, gardens, and soccer field) that produced about 30 species, including a few not seen later during the main tour. Mid-day, they were transferred back to the airport, meeting the remaining tour participants arriving during the next hour and a half or so. As we had two vehicles for the transfer to Pook's Hill, most of the group left the airport at 1:30; the last arrivals, Tim, Norma, and Tamara, followed a bit later in the second van. En route we saw a few roadside birds, including Anhinga, various large wading birds, and two small flocks of delightful Fork-tailed Flycatchers.

We were at Pook's Hill by about 4:00 PM, at once finding ourselves immersed in the feeder spectacle of Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobins, and Long-billed Hermits, as a huge Yellow-fronted Giant-Owl (butterfly) flitted about the porch and numerous pairs of Red-ored Parrots squawked overhead, winging their way to their nighttime roost. After getting settled, we reconvened in the bar for a brief orientation by our guide Mario, and an appetizer. At seven, we enjoyed a buffet dinner, mixing with some of the other guests.

Thursday, February 1

We met for 6:15 AM coffee or tea, but our early bird stroll was postponed until 7:00 AM when the rain finally stopped. The driveway area below the cabins produced a variety of doves, warblers, tanagers, and other birds, keeping us amused until breakfast at 8:00. After breakfast, we did a more extensive walk that took us, via forest trails, to an open park-like meadow surrounded by forest. Although it was a rather drippy stroll, we encountered a variety of species including Lineated Woodpecker, perched Red-ored Parrots, Keel-billed Toucan, Couch's Kingbird, and Hooded and other warblers, and our only Pink-checked Cattleheart (swallowtail).

After lunch, we caught up with the bird list. Hearing that Pook's Hill's trails had become quite muddy, at 2:00 PM, we ventured a few miles from the lodge to a variety of disturbed habitats such as light woodland, orchards, and the borders of extensive agricultural fields. With no rain to hamper us, we enjoyed an interesting assortment of birds ranging from more familiar species like Yellow-throated Vireo, and both Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeaks to a curious pair of Barred Antshrikes, Olive-throated Parakeets, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, White Hawk, and, a nice dark-morph Hook-billed Kite. At 6:00 PM, we gathered in the bar for a snack and, for some, a drink, and then had dinner at 7:00 PM.

Friday, February 2

We met for breakfast at 6:00 AM and were on the road by 7:00. There were a couple of stops for birds,

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including roadside chachalacas, Roadside Hawks, Gray Hawk, Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, and Red-billed Pigeon. Arriving at a trail inside the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, we made a fairly level, albeit it misty and muddy hike to a spot overlooking a forested canyon. During the hike, we saw Scaled Pigeon, Squirrel Cuckoo, and a couple participants got a look at what was apparently a Hermit Warbler, a sparse bird in Belize. At the overlook, we had high hopes of encountering an Orange-breasted Falcon. We did see a perched White Hawk, a rather soggy Double-toothed Kite, a soaring King Vulture, and a flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks that bounced around in a nearby tree. Unfortunately, the weather then turned from mist to rain, obliterating our view of the canyon, and we were forced to make the 30 minute retreat back to the vehicles. We ate our lunch at a sheltered picnic table at the reserve's guard house. The picnic was a generous make-your-own burrito feast with huge, fresh tortillas and a variety of fillings, along with cake and fresh fruit.

After lunch, we took a walk on a side road near the guard house, netting just a few birds including Green-backed Sparrow and Acorn Woodpecker, as well as several butterflies including a few glittering Mexican Cycadians, Erato Heliconian, Red Rim, and a Common Bentwing, a lifer for yours truly. On the drive back to Pook's Hill, at least one van paused for a boa constrictor in the road. Close to Pook's Hill, we stopped during the afternoon's drizzle at a pasture that hosted a couple of Wood Storks, Northern Jacanas, Killdeer, Little Blue Heron, roosting Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Gray-breasted Martins, Vermilion Flycatcher, and a flock of Yellow-rumped Warblers that were dropping to the ground to feed in short grasses. Back at the lodge at 4:00 PM, a troop of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys was seemingly waiting for us in a large coral bean tree next to the spot where our vans parked. After a bit of a break, we met in the bar for a snack and bird list, and then enjoyed another buffet meal.

Saturday, February 3

We delayed breakfast so that people could organize luggage a bit then ate at 7:00 AM. Afterward, we finished packing then had time to do some birding just outside the lodge. This short walk was highlighted by a White-whiskered Puffbird found by Tim, a pair of Olive-backed Euphonias, and a couple of gorgeous Crimson-collared Tanagers. Also noted were a Swainson's Thrush hopping robin-like on the lawn, Summer Tanagers, Red-lored Parrots, and a Northern Parula among the usual Magnolias and American Redstarts. At 9:45, we departed in heavy overcast, headed for Belmopan and the Belize Zoo, arriving at 10:45, by which time it was sunny and warm.

The Belize Zoo, about 17 miles outside Belmopan, is not your average brick and mortar animal exhibit. Rather, it is a succession of habitats and cages that are connected by shaded pathways. The whole effect is that of being among animals in light woodland. Wild Agoutis and iguanas scurried across the pathways, and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Brown Jays, Clay-colored Thrushes, chachalacas, and a variety of orioles, tanagers, and warblers flitted through the vegetation. Birds were pretty much everywhere. A Yellow-backed Oriole popped up in the spider monkeys' enclosure, a stunning male American Pygmy Kingfisher hunted tiny prey in a crocodile's pond. A charming mixture of captives and wild birds. The zoo houses many rescue animals ranging from Baird's Tapirs to Jaguars, and a number of these are used as teaching aids when students visit the zoo. Of particular interest is the signage, as it details the names and stories of many of the zoo's inhabitants — how they were hurt or orphaned and made it to safety at the zoo.

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We departed the zoo at 1:00 PM and drove a short distance down the Western Highway to Cheers Restaurant, a large and popular open air venue. Cheers extensive menu provided us with a variety of dishes such as chicken tamales steamed in banana leaves, sandwiches, and soups, ending with a group visit to a freezer full of ice cream bars. Fortified for the drive, we climbed back in the vehicles for the hour and 10 minute drive to Orange Walk. There, we were checked in by Reuben, an accomplished birder who would be our boatman and bird guide for the next few days at Lamanai Outpost Lodge. The boat trip on the New River lasted about an hour and a half and was wildly productive. Birds we encountered included a group of shy Boat-billed Herons, a Sungrebe paddling in the open, a splendid Black-collared Hawk with a turtle in its talons, several Purple Gallinules, a roosting Lesser Nighthawk, both migrating Tree and resident Mangrove Swallows, Snail Kites, the trip's only White-winged Dove, various egrets, and several species of kingfishers. All that and sunny skies.

Lamanai is a favorite with birders, partly because of its good food, comfortable cabins, and accommodating staff, and partly because of its bird diversity — a reflection of its various habitats: the broad New River Lagoon, savanna, beautiful tropical forest, and a nearby village with clearings, shrubs, and fruit and ornamental trees that attract birds. At 6:30, staff member Karen presented a brief orientation to the lodge facilities and Ruben explained the activities that he and I had arranged for the next couple of days. Dinner was very good, as it became increasingly clear that nobody was going to starve on this tour.

Sunday, February 4

An optional 5:45 AM gathering found us in the restaurant for coffee, tea, and muffins. With birding light at 6:15, we took a short walk, just reaching the village near the lodge. Of interest to the participants from the Western U.S. was the presence of both male and female Ruby-throated Hummingbirds nectaring in the shrubbery — a bit of a hard sell for the Eastern birders. We had nice studies of various migrant orioles and resident Black-cowled Orioles, several species of wintering warblers, both Black-headed and Grayish Saltators, and a number of other species characteristic of open habitats. After breakfast, we departed from the dock for a short boat ride to the Lamanai ruins, the structures surrounded by fine forest. During the walk, we were rewarded with a floppy-crested Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, two (endemic) Yucatan Woodpeckers, a close and perched Brown-hooded Parrot, all four of Belize's trogons, and a number of other species of interest. After lunch, we took a two-hour break then had a short and rather quiet walk just beyond the nearby airstrip. Dinner at 5:30 PM was a bit early, as we had another excursion scheduled for the evening.

A boat trip, which had us on the New River and several side channels from about 7:00 – 8:30 PM, was a roaring success that began with a locally uncommon White-throated Flycatcher perched in marsh grasses near the river's edge. As the evening progressed, a marvelous canopy of stars was revealed — reason enough to be out on the water and away from ambient light. Plying his spotlight through the vegetation, Ruben spotted a roosting Common Pauraque, a Yucatan Nightjar (a long-awaited lifer for yours truly), a beautiful Agami Heron roosting in the same tree as a Russet-naped Wood-Rail (!), a sleeping American Pygmy Kingfisher, a bizarre Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupine, its purple nose visible in the spotlight, and two or three endangered Morelet's Crocodiles. It was a terrific ending for a long but rewarding day.

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Monday, February 5

Once again, we met at 5:45 AM for coffee and muffins for an optional pre-breakfast walk. This time, we walked into and through the village. The stroll produced a number of birds including Yellow-bellied and Least flycatchers, Yellow-breasted Chat, and the tour's only Green-breasted Mango, a couple of chatty Barred Antshrikes, a wintering Great Crested Flycatcher, Olive-throated Parakeets, and a locally common Lesser Goldfinch.

After breakfast, we met at the dock where a male Magnificent Frigatebird, rather far from the ocean, soared over and a pair of Bat Falcons made a couple of passes in front of us. We then boarded a boat for the quick shuttle to the ruins complex. We first visited the museum to view artifacts and accompanying interpretive signage that discussed the Mayans and their culture. Afterward, we walked a forest trail back to the lodge via the sugar mill ruins and the old Spanish church. The walk was productive; birds included Hooded, Blue-winged, and Golden-winged Warblers, Masked Tityra, Gray-headed Tanager, Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, a poor look at a Tody Motmot, excellent looks at Bright-rumped Attila, Yellow-billed Caciques, and a light morph Short-tailed Hawk.

Upon returning, we went directly to lunch (having somehow walked off the generous breakfast), then took a bit of an afternoon break. At 4:00 PM, we boarded the lodge's pontoon boat for the cocktail cruise — a combination of birds, *piña coladas* (with or without rum) or soft drinks, and a tropical sunset. As the afternoon progressed, Limpkins started calling, small flocks of Red-billed Pigeons passed us on the way to their roost, a somewhat distant Bicolored Hawk flew by, as did Short-tailed Hawk, Osprey, and Northern Harrier, and we saw a Jabiru, the tallest bird in the New World, standing on its huge nest in a riverside tree. Before retreating for dinner, we sat for a while in the middle of the New River Lagoon just taking in the sunset.

Tuesday, February 6

As had become our routine, we met at 5:45 AM for coffee and muffins and were at the dock at 6:00 AM. Crossing the New River Lagoon, we motored up a channel that led to an open savanna and a different set of birds. Here, we departed the boat for a walk through the grassland dotted with Caribbean Pine and small oaks. Immediately after getting on dry land, Ruben heard a couple of Yucatan Jays. These large and colorful birds came in but provided us with not much more than quick views. Shortly thereafter, we spied a male Aplomado Falcon, a target bird for several of the tour participants. This particular bird, sitting atop a tree, was remarkably confiding and we had great looks at it then and again, later in the walk. Other birds we encountered were Yellow-headed and (endemic) Yellow-lored Parrots, Yucatan Woodpecker, Botteri's and Grasshopper Sparrows, both of which were studied at close range, and our only Yucatan Flycatcher and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Tamara spotted a roosting Buff-bellied Hummingbird and we enjoyed nice looks in the 'scope. Returning to the channel for our trip back to the lodge and a well-earned breakfast, we lured in several Mangrove Vireos, which showed well, and tried for a calling Ruddy Crake, which showed not at all.

After breakfast, we took a bit of a break so that people could organize their luggage. Lunch was at noon and at 1:10 we boarded two vans for the 2 ½ hour drive to Chan Chich Lodge. Just after leaving Lamanai, a Gray Fox strolled onto the road, pausing long enough for members of both vans to see it. The first part of the drive was through farm and ranchland, and there were many herds of good-looking cattle. Birds were Vermilion Flycatchers, Eastern Meadowlarks, White-collared Seedeaters, Roadside Hawks, various

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blackbirds, and other species characteristic of open country. The latter part of the drive was through extensive forest, part of the Rio Bravo Conservation Area. Here, we saw many British soldiers who were involved in jungle training exercises. As we passed through the ranchland surrounding the settlement of Gallon Jug, we encountered a couple of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and paused for a while to watch them feed.

Arriving at Chan Chich at 2:40 PM, we had a welcome drink and were introduced to the new manager Ahmed, who, until recently, had been employed at tiger reserves in India. Staff member Diana gave us a bit of an orientation talk and we met the new chef Kareem, who proved his worth over and over during the next several days. We took a very short break and, as our bird guide Luis was handy, we walked out the main entrance road as far as the suspension bridge. Near the cabins, we enjoyed nice looks at a Crested Guan feeding on fruit, and, at the bridge, a Cinnamon Becard, Social Flycatchers, and a few other species. Dinner was at 6:00 PM. Having been to Chan Chich a number of times, I was curious to see if the new chef was up to the task. Happily, the salads, appetizers, entrees, and desserts were all attractive and tasty, no small task in a rather isolated kitchen.

Wednesday, February 7

At 6:00 AM we met for coffee and banana bread, then climbed up to the benches in the lodge's safari-style open truck. A drive through the forest took us to an abandoned cacao plantation. The morning was variously misty and drizzly and bird activity was subdued. Nonetheless, we enjoyed 'scope looks at both Red-capped and White-collared Manakins as they fed on small, red roadside fruits, Keel-billed Toucans, Golden-olive Woodpecker, a male Giant Cowbird that was keeping tabs on several Montezuma Oropendolas, a trio of Boat-billed Flycatchers, and a pair of Dusky Antbirds that showed well as they briefly emerged from the dense undergrowth. We were back for breakfast at 9:15, sharing the meal with a White-eyed Vireo and a couple of noisy Yellow-bellied Elaenias that fed in fruiting shrubs a few feet from our tables. After breakfast, we took a stroll from 10:20 AM until noon, passing through the staff residence area and part of the King's Tomb trail. Birding was slow because of the weather; nonetheless, we were able to see a soaring King Vulture, a couple of Tropical Pewees, Slaty-tailed and Black-headed Trogons, Red-crowned and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, perched Long-billed Hermits, and several other species.

After our 12:30 lunch, we took a short break, then set off in the light drizzle at 3:00 PM. Birding in the rain is difficult enough, but looking up in the rain amplified the problem, as did the bit of mud on the trails. Soldiering on, we quickly encountered a Band-backed Wren. This large Cactus Wren relative, an inhabitant of the forest canopy, is a fairly new arrival at Chan Chich. A mixed flock provided us with our only Olivaceous Woodcreeper, feeding with Golden-hooded Tanagers, Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, several warblers, and a Black-cheeked Woodpecker.

After another fine dinner, we boarded the open truck for a spotlight night drive under a clear sky. Although there are five species of cats in Chan Chich's forests, one has to be exceptionally fortunate to see one. There are, however, a number of other possibilities including birds and smaller mammals. The forested portion of the drive was not productive, but when we got to the open ranchland and woodland edge near the settlement of Gallon Jug, our luck changed. First, Luis spotted a Northern Potoo on a distant fence post, its eyeshine visible in the beam of the spotlight. Amazingly, the potoo took flight, came right toward us, and flew over the truck, giving all of us better looks than we could have hoped

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for. Continuing along the road and surrounded by dozens of snoozing White-tailed Deer, we had prolonged views of another perched potoo, a fine Mottled Owl, and its close cousin, a beautiful Black-and-white Owl (one of my favorites) perched in a roadside Cecropia tree. As we began the return leg of the drive, our luck changed once again, as the previously clear sky suddenly began to produce a prodigious amount of rain. Fortunately, there was a large tarp in the cab of the truck and within a few moments it was spread over us, each thankful person clinging to its edges and disappearing from view in the cave-like darkness it created. Since I have taken these drives a number of times, occasionally seeing little more than a tarantula and a couple of pauraques, I deemed the drive a success.

Thursday, February 8

After we returned from our night drive, the rain continued pretty much nonstop through the night. I'd scheduled coffee at 6:15 AM to give folks an extra half hour of sleep after the night drive. Nonetheless, only Tim and Tamara showed up for the pre-breakfast walk. First, we checked out a male Blue-black Grosbeak that was singing by the cabins near the restaurant. Next, Luis took us to the staff residence area where we encountered a pair of Smoky-brown Woodpeckers and had better views of Pale-billed Woodpeckers. Ducking into the woods near the River Trail, we saw a Rufous-tailed Jacamar and heard another, then we had reasonable looks at a calling Tody Motmot. We then met the group at breakfast.

After breakfast, we walked out the main road to the suspension bridge. Just a short distance from the lodge, we encountered a single Northern Emerald Toucanet, completing our list of Belize's toucans. A Louisiana Waterthrush hopping in the road provided a nice comparison with the more numerous Northern. At the suspension bridge, we had a Scaly-breasted Hummingbird and several warblers and tanagers feeding in the yellow flowering vines. Beyond the bridge, we walked a short distance along the Trish's Hill Trail. There, a very cooperative Barred Forest-Falcon flew in and perched for quite a while, allowing everyone to appreciate this small, nicely marked, and not especially common raptor. Happy to have dodged the rain and added a few new birds to our list of sightings, we returned for lunch and a short break.

At 2:00 PM, we mounted the open truck once again, hoping the rain gods would provide us with a dry afternoon. The day remained cool and cloudy, really quite comfortable for birding. The plan was to drive through the forest and through Gallon Jug, eventually reaching a lake known as Laguna Verde. En route, we took a short detour through the forest, which provided us with looks at three Collared Peccaries. As we passed through Gallon Jug, we encountered a White-tailed Kite that was hovering and soaring next to the road — another new raptor for the trip. En route to Laguna Verde, we took a road that passed by woodland edge. Here, our guide Ruben had seen an Ornate Hawk-Eagle on a kill the previous day. Approaching the area of the kill, we saw the remains of a Great Curassow, and perched in a roadside tree, a splendid adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle, its crop distended from its recent meal. The hawk-eagle had no intention of moving, despite the presence of the truck, and several people were able to get some nice photos. Many of the participants considered the hawk-eagle the "Bird of the Trip." Elated by the sighting, we continued a short distance to the lake. The habitat here seemed manicured; indeed, a mower nearby was trimming the gently sloping grassy hillsides above the lake. With two spotting 'scopes available, we found a few interesting birds including the trip's second Black-collared Hawk sitting at the water's edge, a male Purple Martin roosting in a tall leafless tree, and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron perched in a bare tree across the lake. Surprisingly, the lake didn't yield any grebes or ducks but people seemed pleased with what we did encounter. On the return, we stopped again for the hawk-

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eagle, as well as a couple of Fork-tailed Flycatchers. Dinner was good and ended with a slice of a somewhat sinful chocolate-covered cheesecake.

Friday, February 9

The day began with a tease — bird song and a howler monkey chorus that suggested a nice, sunny morning. However, by 6:35 AM, the rain began, continuing lightly through our 7:00 AM breakfast. While we were sitting down to eat, a Purple-crowned Fairy made two visits to the hummingbird feeders. Where had that bird been for the last two days? While we were eating, we had our last looks at Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Magnolia Warbler, White-eyed Vireo, and the three hummingbirds we'd become especially familiar with: Rufous-tailed, White-necked Jacobin, and Long-billed Hermit. Although we had seen these birds many times, I think they might have been appreciated just a bit more today, as half the tour participants were returning home to deep snow and bitter cold. Bill, who had elected to spend an additional day at Chan Chich, returned from a morning drive with his guide, having revisited the hawk-eagle and photographed it consuming the final bits of the curassow.

At 10:00 AM, Ginger, Tamara, Mary Ellen, Jody, and Diane boarded a van for the first shuttle to the airstrip in Gallon Jug. The rest of us were picked up at 11:30, but the birding wasn't quite yet over. As we passed a mowed clearing that flanked a stream, I spotted a female Great Curassow on the grass. As everyone got on it, it flew up to a branch at the forest edge, providing us with an eleventh hour look at this iconic forest bird. Whew.

It was pouring at the airstrip, causing us to leave about 10 minutes late, but once airborne the flight was calm and surprisingly cool. We arrived at 12:32 PM, and said our good-byes on the airstrip as Neal returned to Belize City for an additional night and the rest of us queued up at our respective airlines for the flights back to the U.S.

Photo Credits

Vermilion Flycatcher, Peg Abbott (PA); Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Bill Fraser (BF); King Vulture, BF; Keel-billed Toucan, PA; Red-capped Manakin, Bob Behrstock; Lamanai Ruins, Carlos Sanchez; Barred Forest Falcon, Narca Moore-Craig.