

Southern Belize: Pristine & Wild With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

Feb. 22 – Mar. 1, 2019

With Crooked Tree

Extension Feb. 20 – 22

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Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Southern Belize: Pristine & Wild With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



Join us for a Southern Belize birding tour to explore an enchanting blend of Mayan ruins, exquisite coastline, and lush tropical forests that host jaguars, tapirs, and an exciting array of tropical birds. Belize is Central America's least populated country and logistics for travel here are simple — from US gateway cities it's only a two hour flight! The welcoming Belizean people speak English (often with Spanish and Mayan as second languages), have a strong tradition of caretaking their country's natural heritage, and enjoy sharing their knowledge of the region's biodiversity. Some of the very best wildlife and birding guides in Latin America live and work in Belize.

This is an incredible trip for biodiversity. Traverse several of Belize's distinctive ecoregions, focusing on the sub-montane Caribbean pine habitat that is lush with waterfalls in the rugged Maya Mountains, as well as lowland tropical pine forest, broad-leaved forest, and open savanna in the Cayo and Toledo Districts. We also spend a day visiting tropical riparian scrub, mangrove, and seagrass environments along the Monkey River north of Punta Gorda.

Enjoy seven nights at two outstanding lodges with time to settle in at each location, reducing the number of hours spent on the road. Hidden Valley Inn is situated in a remote private nature reserve in the Mountain Pine Ridge area and boasts an extensive trail system; the Lodge at Big Falls is strategically located in far southern Belize, along a languid river that hosts a number of bird species not encountered further north. Both lodges offer professional and knowledgeable staff, excellent cuisine, refreshing pools, and charming, comfortable, and quiet accommodations.

Opt for a two-night pre-tour extension at Crooked Tree Reserve, just an hour from Belize City, featuring some of the best wetland habitat in northern Central America and the opportunity to search for a wide array of tropical shorebirds, waders, and waterfowl from small boats.

We invite you to join us for this in-depth exploration of a less-visited region of Southern Belize. Emphasis is on natural history, birding, forest ecology, Mayan heritage, and simple, relaxing fun.

Tour Highlights

- Hike the Caribbean pine forests of central and southern Belize, one of the most unique and threatened habitats in Central America

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- Bird at Central America's highest waterfall
- Interact with conservationists at Hidden Valley Inn, with the chance to observe seldom seen species like Orange-breasted Falcon and Solitary Eagle
- Choose to canoe inside the spacious Barton Creek Cave system, replete with Mayan artifacts and home to the endemic Ridgway's Swallow
- Enjoy early morning bird walks at the Lodge at Big Falls, searching for rarities such as Bare-crowned Antbird and Black-and-White Owl
- Look for tropical woodpeckers and woodcreepers at Nim Li Punit, an under visited Mayan site with the largest collection of carved stelae in Belize
- Visit karst habitats of the San Felipe Hills, featuring broad-leaf tropical forest and reclusive understory species such as Nightingale Wren and Tody Motmot
- Cruise along the Monkey River and its estuary looking for Manatees, Neotropical River Otters, Howler Monkeys, and the reclusive Agami Heron



Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Southern Belize Nature Tour with Bob Meinke
\$3590 from Belize City, Belize
Airport is Philip S. W. Goldson International (BZE)

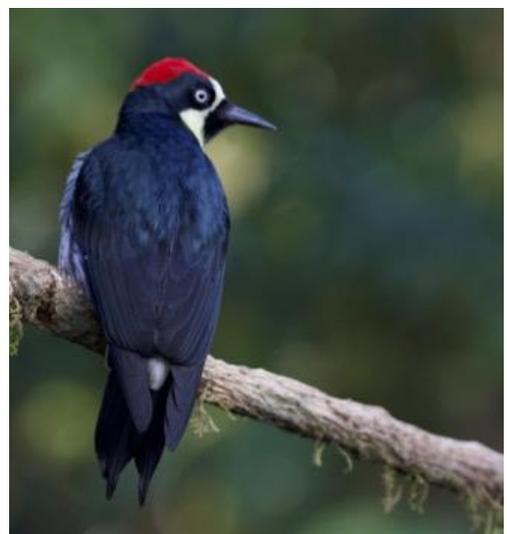
Itinerary

Fri., Feb. 22

Arrival in Belize | Transfer to Hidden Valley Inn

After arriving in Belize City by early afternoon, we join our drivers for a three-hour drive (via Belmopan) to the striking 2,000-foot escarpment of the Mountain Pine Ridge, a picturesque highland area of south-central Belize. We plan to check in at Hidden Valley Inn in time for late afternoon refreshments and an evening meal. You may wish to arrive early (for our Crooked Tree extension, or just for the night) to start your trip well-rested.

On the way, we keep our binoculars handy, scanning fencerows and utility lines for the first birds of the trip. Expect to see Tropical Kingbird, Vermilion and Social Flycatchers, Great Kiskadee, White-collared Seedeater, and Tropical Mockingbird, with Lesser Yellow-headed and Black Vultures soaring overhead. We also keep our eyes open for wading birds in the roadside wetlands and farm ponds as we move into the countryside, watching for Tricolored and Little Blue



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Hérons, Wood Stork, and possibly a Roseate Spoonbill.

We soon arrive at Hidden Valley and our lodgings for the next three nights. The lodge is nestled in a private, impressive 7,200-acre nature reserve featuring open Caribbean pine habitat with scattered pockets of tropical broadleaf forest. Yellow-backed and Yellow-tailed Orioles often form the welcoming committee, with Acorn and Golden-olive Woodpeckers foraging in the nearby pines. The lovely gardens of the property support Melodious Blackbird, Green Jay, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, Masked Tityra, Slaty-tailed Trogon, and Plain Chachalaca, as well as several hummingbirds, including Azure-crowned and White-necked Jacobin. Neo-tropical migrants overwinter here, too (including Arizona “Sky Island Specialties” such as Greater Pewee, Grace’s Warbler, and Hepatic Tanager), and some or all of these should still be active when we arrive.

Each of the inn’s luxurious cottages feature a fireplace and handmade mahogany and leather furniture, with full bath (including shower), comfortable bed, writing desk, screened windows, and Wi-Fi. We settle in, check out the swimming pool, and then meet at the main lodge for a delicious welcome dinner with our guides and traveling companions. We look forward to drifting off to the nocturnal sounds of the forest.

Accommodations at Hidden Valley Inn (D)

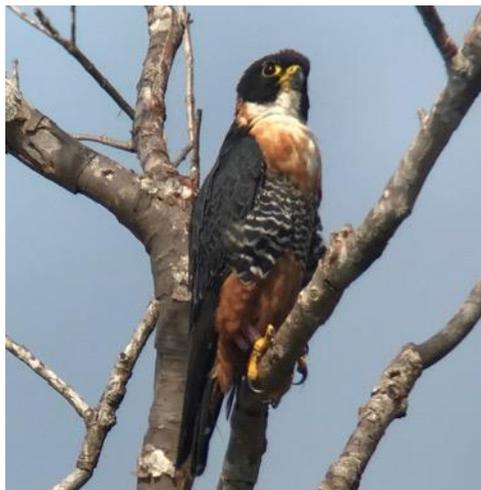


Sat., Feb. 23 Mountain Pine Ridge

While enjoying our first sunrise coffee of the trip, Brown and Green Jays, orioles, and raucous Plain Chachalaca may put on an energetic show at the feeding stations outside the lodge’s dining room area, often competing with less aggressive species such as Ruddy Ground Dove, Gray-headed Pigeon, and Clay-colored Thrush for the seeds and fruit placed out each morning by the staff.

We head out after breakfast and take our bearings, initially exploring areas close to home on Hidden Valley’s trails and nearby jeep tracks, keeping an eye out overhead for raptors such as Plumbeous and Swallow-tailed Kites as the morning warms. Moving away from the lodge grounds, the open pine and scrub vegetation likely has plenty of activity, and we scour the area for Rufous-capped Warbler, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, and Dusky-capped Flycatcher. A nearby pond has had pairs of Least Grebes in past years. Venturing into the hardwood forest below the inn is also often productive, and may reveal a range of resident tropical species, such as Collared and Black-headed Trogons, Pale-vented and Scaled Pigeons, various woodcreepers, or Lesser Greenlet.

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After lunch we take a short, leisurely drive to Thousand-foot Falls, Central America's highest waterfall. Rusty Sparrow and Black-headed Siskin are typically among the first birds seen when we arrive, and the rarely encountered Solitary Eagle (related to the Black Hawk) and Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle are recorded here each year. From the viewing platform we search the dense broadleaf forest cloaking the canyon for Orange-breasted Falcon, a species thought to have only 30 pairs remaining in this area of Central America. The Orange-breasted may be the most sparsely distributed falcon world-wide, yet its actual abundance and distribution is potentially obscured by confusion with the more common and similar-appearing Bat Falcon (a species we may see later). Hidden Valley Inn provides critical logistical support for conservation research being conducted on the Orange-breasted Falcon.

If time allows, we may also visit nearby King Vulture Falls. As the name suggests, this is a roosting area for the imposing King Vulture, second only to the Condors among New World vultures in overall mass and wingspan. We hope to get good looks as they return from soaring on the thermals along the escarpment. After another enjoyable dinner, we listen for Stygian Owls, one of the rarest owls in Central America.

Accommodations at Hidden Valley Inn (B,L,D)

Sun., Feb. 24 Barton Creek Cave Reserve or Caracol Mayan Ceremonial Center

Participants have their choice of two activities today. We will confirm which you prefer before departure.

Option One: Barton Creek Cave Reserve

After another satisfying breakfast at Hidden Valley, we head out for Barton Creek Cave Reserve. We take the

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opportunity to bird on the way, with over 300 species having been recorded from the foothills between Hidden Valley Inn and our destination. Our local guides at Hidden Valley determine our birding itinerary this morning, steering us to local hotspots based on recent sightings. On a sunny day, 50 species or more can easily be seen along our route. Highlights may include Blue-gray and Yellow-winged Tanagers, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Blue Ground Dove, Roadside Hawk, Olive-throated Parakeet, Red-lore Parrot, Blue Bunting, Barred Forest-Falcon, Rose-throated Becard, Squirrel Cuckoo, and Black-cowled Oriole (just to name a few!).

Situated not far from the Mennonite community of Barton Creek are the cool, dark caverns of Barton Creek Cave. The Barton Creek Cave system extends over four miles, featuring impressive stalagmites and stalactites and a navigable underground stream. Recent studies at the cave have provided considerable information regarding the importance of caverns within Maya culture.

The cave entrance is one of the few places where Ridgeway's Rough-winged Swallow, a rare, cave-nesting subspecies of the more familiar Northern Rough-winged, is often observed. We also watch for flycatchers near vegetation along the emerging Barton Creek — Least, Ochre-bellied, Social, Yellow-olive, and Sepia-capped are all here — as well as Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds on the fences. Bright-rumped Atilla, Northern Bentbill, and the easily overlooked Eye-ringed Flatbill are also possible in the mid-canopy riparian understory. During our visit we glide through the cave in canoes to study this archeological wonder. Using hand-held spotlights provided by our guides we observe large and colorful rock formations and cultural artifacts that are centuries old. Barton Creek Cave has been identified by Mother Nature Network (MNN.com) as one of the nine "most beautiful and unusual caves" in the world, with its "domed chambers placing it alongside the world's best cave destinations."

After returning to Hidden Valley, the late afternoon is at our leisure, with happy hour and dinner to follow.
Accommodations at Hidden Valley Inn (B,L,D)

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Option Two: Caracol Mayan Ceremonial Center

After coffee and a quick bite this morning, we leave Hidden Valley early for the Vaca Plateau to reach Caracol during the cool of the day — the best time for birding and exploration of the site. En route we move from the well-drained granitic soils that favor pines to limestone substrates that give rise to broad-leaved forest, resulting in a significant change in avifauna. The birding on the drive is excellent, and we could have our first looks at Keel-billed Toucan, Ocelated Turkey, and possibly Laughing Falcon as we descend into the lower woodlands. At the river that divides the Mountain Pine Ridge from the rest of the Maya Mountains, we may even have a chance to glimpse the rare Scarlet Macaw (though we have a better chance for this later, during our stay at Big Falls).



Staying at Hidden Valley provides ready access to Caracol, a Mayan site within the remote Chiquibul National Park that rivals Guatemala's Tikal in size and scope. Although loggers discovered the site in 1938, only in the last three decades has it been renovated and opened to visitors. Walking the area today, we find a marvelous blend of nature and history, with lush broad-leaved forests intertwining and surrounding five plazas, numerous stelae, pyramids, hieroglyphics, and an astronomy observatory. Particularly stunning is the temple of Caana, or "Sky Palace;" at nearly 140 feet it is one of the tallest Mayan structures known. The Mayans of Caracol were at the peak of their influence during the latter part of the Classic Period, approximately 400 – 850 A.D. We explore both forest trails and Mayan ruins, learning about the latest discoveries at Caracol, quite likely the city from which Tikal in Guatemala was conquered in 562 A.D.

The birding at Caracol is extraordinary and we hope to see Montezuma Oropendula, several parrots (including White-crowned, Brown-headed, and Red-lored), all three species of Belizean motmots (Lesson's, Tody, and the rare Keel-billed), Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Collared Aracari, and the colorful Crimson-collared Tanager. In late winter Keel-billed Motmot are courting and can be quite vocal, so we have a fair chance to find this rare gem! The area also supports Great Curassow and Crested Guan. The exceedingly rare Lovely Cotinga, perhaps Belize's most colorful songbird, is occasionally observed here, and scarce raptors such as Ornate and Black Hawk-Eagles have also been reported from Caracol.



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Finding mammals like White-nosed Coatiundi, Kinkajou, Deppe's Squirrel, and Mexican Black Howler Monkey (considered by some to be the most endangered of the 15 known species of howler monkeys) is an important part of our tour.

After our picnic lunch we head back to the inn, stopping along the way at the Rio Frio Cave (well regarded by birders) with its quiet pools and impressive formations. The shaded forest trails leading to the cave offer the chance to observe seldom seen understory species such as Orange-billed Sparrow and White-throated Robin, as well as both Red-throated and Red-crowned Ant Tanagers (not often seen together) and possibly Plain Xenops, a tiny acrobatic species that gleans insects from the underside of leaves.

Upon our return to Hidden Valley we relax or stroll the lodge grounds for the rest of the afternoon, and then meet to review our bird list for the day before enjoying another excellent dinner.

Accommodations at Hidden Valley Inn (B,L,D)

Mon., Feb. 25 Hidden Valley Inn | The Lodge at Big Falls

We depart Hidden Valley fairly early, after breakfast, making our way down the Hummingbird and Southern Highways to The Lodge at Big Falls. This is our longest drive of the trip — a bit over 5 hours of road time — so expect a full day with stops. But this gives you a chance to see the fascinating geography of the country. We plan on lunch and birding along the way as we head further south.

After 90 minutes, our first stop is St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park, a picturesque location in the mountains featuring quiet trails and a tranquil forested pool. Birding here offers chances for colorful Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias, Orange-billed Sparrow, Spot-breasted Wren, Black-faced Grosbeak, Crested Guan, and Barred Antshrike. The park is also home to the Nightingale Wren (a seldom seen species whose ethereal song may enrich our walk through this verdant forest), and White Hawks are commonly seen here. We enjoy a picnic lunch here before resuming our drive south.



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Shortly after connecting with the Southern Highway near Dangriga (another 90 minutes down the road), if we are making good time, we take the opportunity to stretch our legs at the visitor center for the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. Even a short visit to Cockscomb can be very productive for birds, with the chance to see forest and scrub species such as Short-billed Pigeon, Red-capped and White-collared Manakins, Lesser Greenlet, and possibly even Green Honeycreeper (among many others). Open areas around the visitor center may yield views of Boat-billed Flycatcher, Ovenbird, Groove-billed Ani, Variable Seedeater, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. We expect to reach Big Falls by late-afternoon.

The Lodge at Big Falls is located on the forested banks of the Rio Grande River (kayaks provided for leisure time). As with our previous stay, this is one of the very best birding lodges in Belize, with attractive grounds, a beautiful swimming pool, and excellent accommodations that include hardwood interiors, sparkling bathrooms, comfortable furnishings, and fully screened windows.

Before dinner, we may spot Russet-naped Wood-Rails and scampering agoutis on the open lawns fronting the main lodge building, which has a breezy, covered porch, Wi-Fi access, and comfortable seating — perfect for relaxing with an afternoon drink or morning coffee, while watching Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds at the feeders or pondering your bird list.

Also similar to Hidden Valley, The Lodge at Big Falls offers the advantage of outstanding birding right on site, and it's possible to spot species such as Gartered Trogon, Yellow-billed Cacique, Gray-headed and Golden-hooded Tanagers, Grayish Saltator, and Red-throated Ant-Tanager literally steps from your cabin door. Specialties like the shy Bare-crowned Antbird and Rufous-breasted Spinetail (the latter the most northerly species of this largely South American group) are regularly recorded within earshot of the main lodge, while the immediately adjacent Rio Grande River provides habitat for four of Belize's five kingfisher species (i.e., Green, Amazon, Belted, and Ringed), which can be seen without leaving the property.

This evening we discuss activities for the coming days, go over our species list, and listen to the eerie calls of the Common Pauraque as the sun sets before dinner. It's been a full day and many of us retire early in preparation for tomorrow's activities. Over the next three days we have the chance to bird and explore in a range of habitats, from savanna grasslands and coastal forests and mangroves, to interior forests and swamps.

Accommodations at The Lodge at Big Falls (B,L,D)

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Tues., Feb. 26 Local Toledo District Birding

With such excellent birding right on our doorsteps, it's hard to resist getting up at the crack of dawn to head right out. Coffee is ready ahead of breakfast, and a walk around the compound is sure to be productive. Our guide, Steve Chaco (Belize's 2017 Birding Tour Guide of the Year), takes us on two early morning bird walks. This morning we plan to bird around the lodge property. The lodge sits on thirty acres within a long meander of the Rio Grande and includes riparian, secondary growth forest, disused agricultural land, orchard, and meadow habitats. Species we search for include Black-faced Antthrush, Barred Antshrike, Great Antshrike, Bare-crowned Antbird, Black-and-white Owl, Crimson-collared Tanager, Golden-hooded Tanager, Black-crowned Tityra, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Lineated Woodpecker, and Stub-tailed Spadebill.

After an excellent breakfast, we head out with Steve Chaco again for some birding off the lodge grounds. Considering our long day on the road yesterday, we plan for shorter trips today, with less time in vehicles and more time outdoors. Depending on what's being seen at the time of our visit, we may head to Blue Creek Village or a similar site (Forest Home), both featuring mature broadleaf and gallery tropical forests with riparian understory habitats.

Birding at both sites can be excellent, with important species in field and forest edge habitats including Striped Cuckoo, Bronzed and Giant Cowbirds, Plain-breasted Ground Dove, Blue-black Grassquit, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and Scrub Euphonia. The gorgeous Crimson-collared Tanager and closely related Passerini's Tanager (the latter a specialty for southern Belize) are also both found along the road into Blue Creek (as well as on the lodge grounds at Big Falls). Less common raptors such as Gray-headed and Double-toothed Kites are also sometimes seen here, together with the common Roadside Hawk.

Birding mature forests in these areas can yield a number of intriguing mid-canopy and understory species, including Lesson's Motmot, Little and Great Tinamou, Collared Trogon, White-breasted Wood Wren, Strong-billed Woodcreeper, Red-capped Manakin, Black-crowned Antshrike, and the seldom seen Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher. Along the forest margins we look for Collared Aracari, as well as White-whiskered Puffbird and Rufous-tailed Jacamar, the latter species typically sitting motionless for extended periods as they wait for large insect prey.



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We head back to Big Falls for lunch, scanning roadside ditches on the way for Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. Lunch is at the lodge, or possibly at Coleman's Café in Big Falls village, with excellent Belizean cuisine and a largely local clientele. This afternoon we relax, with staff available for kayaking on the Rio Grande adjacent to the lodge. Before sunset we have the option to visit what is known as the "Dump Rice Field," an expanse of rice paddies and swamps located a short drive from the lodge. The road passing through sits on an elevated causeway, with side tracks leading into the marshy areas.

Key species here include Sora, Ruddy and Uniform Crake, Purple Gallinule, White-throated Flycatcher, Least Bittern, Short-tailed Hawk, Limpkin, and Common Tody-Flycatcher. Dinner this evening is at the lodge.

Accommodations at The Lodge at Big Falls (B,L,D)

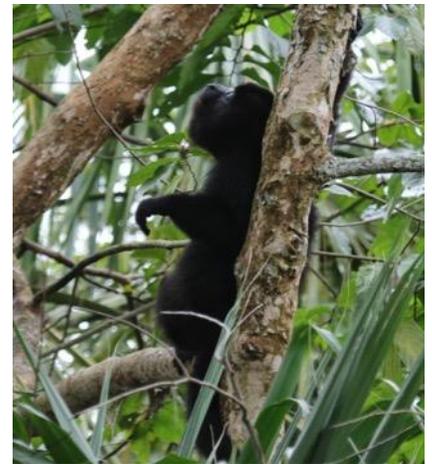
Wed., Feb. 27 Nim Li Punit & San Felipe Hills

After grabbing coffee, juice, and a roll, our early morning birding outing today with Steve Chaco focuses on the Nim Li Punit Mayan site, located just six miles from the lodge. Nim Li Punit, which is Kekchi Maya for "Big Hat," dates from the Mayan Classic Period that flourished from the 5th through the 8th Century AD, and consists of three distinct plazas and several step-pyramids. In 2015, the second largest carved jade artifact in Belize was discovered here. The site itself is set high in mature forest with fantastic views east across the coastal plain to the cayes in the Gulf of Honduras.

The area offers some very good birding, including several woodpeckers (Lineated, Pale-billed, Smokey-brown, and potentially Chestnut-colored) and woodcreepers (Streak-headed, Wedge-billed, and Ivory-billed), as well as various migrant warblers and vireos. Other possible highlights include White-crowned Parrot, Keel-billed Toucan, White-throated Thrush, Hook-billed Kite, Red-legged and Green Honeycreeper, Bat Falcon, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Blue Grosbeak, Montezuma Oropendola, and Rose-throated Becard.

We return for breakfast, and then head out for the San Felipe Hills, a karst landscape about 12 miles from the lodge. Our goal is to bird across an orange grove (Belizean orchards are not the manicured settings we're used to at home, and can actually be great for birding), and eventually arrive at the karst limestone foothills of San Felipe that rise to a height of around four hundred feet. As the ground slopes upwards we enter a broadleaf forest. We look for some of the most difficult to locate species in Belize, including Tody Motmot, Rufous Piha, Rufous Mourner, Northern Schiffornis, Nightingale Wren, Scaly-throated Leaftosser, White-winged Becard, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, and Northern Barred Woodcreeper. As the day heats up we return to the lodge for a break — swimming or kayaking, or perhaps a good book and a shady spot are all possibilities!

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We gather on the lodge porch this evening to update bird lists and review the day, and after dusk we may get lucky and hear (or even see) one or more of the resident Black-and-white Owls, which previously nested on the lodge grounds (and were recorded here in 2017 and 2018). We should also see Common Nighthawk and Lesser Nighthawk flitting across the dusky sky before we head inside. Dinners at Big Falls are excellent, often featuring fresh seafood and Belizean beef, with local fruits and vegetables — a perfect end to the day.

Accommodations at The Lodge at Big Falls (B,L,D)

Thurs., Feb. 28 Monkey River: Howler Monkeys, Manatees & Birds

Our last full day of the trip is already here, and it's a good one. We can rise early if we wish, grab coffee ahead of our sit-down breakfast, and bird the lodge grounds.

After eating, we bundle into the vans and leave for our trip to the coast. We drive to Mango Creek, where our skiff meets us, and then cruise south along the shoreline through the shallow waters and turtle grasses where the manatees graze. On clear days they are visible below the water, but if overcast, we have to watch the surface for signs of their presence — typically a protruding bristly snout. This is also our chance to pick up some birds that characterize the Belizean coastline and estuarine habitats, such as Anhinga, Tricolored Heron, Neotropic Cormorant, and Roseate Spoonbill, as well as maritime species such as Royal and Sandwich Terns, Magnificent Frigatebird, Brown Pelican, Laughing Gull, and possibly even a passing Brown Booby.

In an hour or so we reach Monkey River Village, located at the mouth of the river on the Gulf of Honduras. North American migrants may still be present in town — we watch for Yellow-throated, Chestnut-sided, Kentucky, and

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Palm Warblers (typically on the cayes, but they've been seen here) as we stop for a restroom break. We then head upriver to the Black Howler Monkey sanctuary that is managed by the local tour guide association. On the way, we glide past heavy tropical forest and mangrove habitats, both full of birds. We watch for Bare-faced Tiger-and Green Herons, Egrets, Wood Stork, Black Hawks, Black Hawk-Eagle, and White Ibis, and keep our eyes out for Agami Heron, as well. The Agami, rarest and most colorful of the herons, and very secretive, is typically nocturnal or crepuscular (but is occasionally seen skulking in heavy vegetation during daylight hours).

We disembark for a short hike through the howler habitat, potentially having heard the distinctive, thunderous roar of the males long before we arrived (howler monkeys as a group are generally considered to be the loudest of all mammals, and their bellows can be heard clearly for three miles or more). The forest is dense and there are bamboo thickets here; we watch for elusive species such as Crane Hawk, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Tawny-winged Woodcreeper, and Dot-winged Antwren. Also located along the trail is a Long-billed Hermit lek, often with multiple males displaying and vocalizing. We also watch for Army Ants, which are common here.

After experiencing the deafening roar of the male howlers, we return downriver and dig into a village lunch at a small café (actually the only café!) in Monkey River. We should arrive back at Big Falls by mid-afternoon, in time for a last dip in the pool, and possibly some final afternoon birding along the Rio Grande River. We enjoy a final dinner this evening before heading home tomorrow.

Accommodations at The Lodge at Big Falls (B,L,D)

Fri., Mar. 1 Departures

Our adventure comes to an end today. This morning we drive the 30 minutes to Punta Gorda and board a Tropic Air, Mayan Air, or similar carrier for our flight back to Belize City. To ensure a smooth connection, please plan your international flight to depart after noon.

Pre-Tour Extension: Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary



Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, barely an hour north of the international airport outside Belize City, is one of the premier birding destinations for aquatic birds in Central America, and is designated as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. Even a brief visit to Crooked Tree offers the chance to bird habitats (and observe numerous species) we won't see otherwise on the trip.

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Comprising a labyrinth of waterways and small islands, the refuge covers over 16,400 acres of creeks, swamps, and hummocks, including adjoining lowland pine savannas and tropical broadleaf forests. Birds and other wildlife are the star attractions here, and late February is an excellent time to visit, as water levels begin to subside and waders and other aquatic species congregate along the shores and in the shallows. During Belize's early dry season, both resident and migratory birds find refuge in the sanctuary's lagoons. Crooked Tree harbors several endangered species, including the Central American River Turtle and Black Howler Monkey, as well as the Yellow-headed Parrot.



Yucatan endemics that can be seen here include Red-vented (or Yucatan) Woodpecker, Yucatan Flycatcher, Yellow-lored Parrot, the raucous Yucatan Jay, and possibly even Black Catbird. Nearby Crooked Tree Village, established around 1750, is possibly the earliest inland European settlement in Belize. Surrounded by Crooked Tree Lagoon, it is known for its locally grown and processed cashews. Stewed cashews, wines, jams, cookies, cake, fudge, and of course roasted cashew nuts are all available during the village's Cashew Festival each May (and although we miss this festival, there should be plenty of opportunity to sample the local cashew nuts).



Our lodgings are at the highly-rated Crooked Tree Lodge, a small family-run establishment on 11 acres set among Coconut Palm and Bullet trees, on the edge of the lagoon in the heart of the wildlife sanctuary. Quiet, relaxed, and friendly, the lodge is comprised of six individual cabanas and offers three meals a day and a well-stocked bar, featuring a mix of authentic home-cooked Belizean and European food. The main lodge building has Wi-Fi and includes a large front porch, perfect for relaxing with a cold drink and spotting wildlife after a day of birding, or watching an amazing sunrise with a cup of Belizean coffee.



Wed., Feb. 20

Arrival at Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary

We plan to meet our driver and depart Philip Goldson International Airport early to mid-afternoon for Crooked Tree, depending on when we all arrive in Belize. Some of us will have just deplaned and cleared customs, while others may have arrived the day before and stayed locally on their own (if so, please rendezvous with the group at the airport



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in time to head out).

The drive to Crooked Tree is relatively short (an hour, or a bit less, depending on road conditions at the time), and we see new birds as soon as we leave the city, including Tropical Mockingbird, Social Flycatcher, and Bronzed Cowbird. We drive northwest on the newly improved Northern Highway towards the city of Orange Walk, then turn west toward Crooked Tree Village after 30 to 40 minutes. The drive then crosses the eastern causeway, and we get our first look at the swamps and lagoon surrounding the village.

Arriving late in the day, we check in at the lodge and get settled, have some refreshments, and then stretch our legs around the grounds. Although mornings are generally best for birding, late afternoons here can also be productive, and we concentrate on the open fields and nearby broadleaf trees and scrub. We look for orioles (Altamira, Hooded, Black-Cowled, and Orchard), kingbirds (Tropical and Couch's), various flycatchers (Vermilion, Yellow-olive, Boat-billed, and Least), and Brown Jay. The fencerows and hedges may have flocks of Groove-billed Ani and Melodious Blackbird, and we might see a Striped Cuckoo or Scrub Euphonia in the brush. Ruddy Ground-dove and White-collared Seedeater both frequent the weedy fields and road margins. We also scan the canopies of nearby trees for migrant warblers (Magnolia, Black-and-white, and Yellow-throated are among the most common), as well as resident species such as Rufous-browed Peppershrike, and Pale-vented and Red-billed Pigeons. Overhead we expect to see Gray-breasted Martin and Mangrove Swallow.

Once the sun sets we listen for the whistles of the Common Pauraque and the Yucatan Poorwill (the latter species another of the local endemics here), and we may hear a Northern Potoo. We enjoy dinner at Crooked Tree Lodge, either in the dining room or at outside tables, and discuss the plans for the following day.

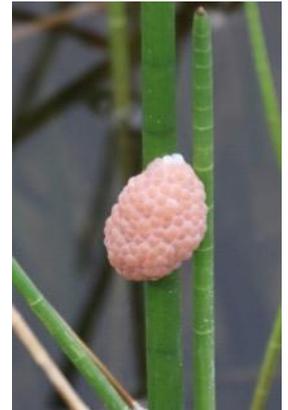
Accommodations at Crooked Tree Lodge (D)

Thurs., Feb. 21 Crooked Tree Lagoon

We are up early for coffee and breakfast before heading out by boat no later than 6:30 AM to bird the open water, islands, and tributaries that characterize the Crooked Tree reserve. Our guide takes us on a four-hour circuit around the lagoon, which should be brimming with water lilies and other emergent vegetation. Both American and Morelet's Crocodiles occur in Belize, and here at Crooked Tree we're more likely to see the latter species (which can occasionally grow to 10 feet in length), although both are reportedly present. Other large reptiles to watch for include Spiny-tailed and Green Iguanas, which are often seen basking on tree limbs or clambering over waterside vegetation. Watch for Yucatan Squirrel in the trees, and possible Neotropical River Otter by the boat.

Inland lagoon environments such as those at Crooked Tree support an astonishing array of bird life, including waterfowl, waders and shorebirds, and predators. Of the latter, Peregrine Falcon is present here, using its speed

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and stealth to take prey as large as coots and small ducks.

The colorful and much larger Black-collared Hawk goes after fish, reptiles, and amphibians, with the striking Great Black Hawk seeking similar prey. Perhaps the most interesting of the raptors we should see at Crooked Tree is the Snail Kite, an impressive species with a long, hooked beak adapted for extracting Apple Snails from their shells. And that's all the Snail Kite eats. One marvels at how a lineage of such agile, avian predators (the kites), most with varied diets, could give rise to a species whose nutrition is entirely restricted to one type of snail. A real testament to natural selection.



As we move out across the lagoon, we look for long-toed Northern Jacana and Common Gallinule among the lily pads, with Black-bellied Whistling and Muscovy Ducks nearby. Overhead we may see Caspian and Gull-billed Terns, while the vegetation along the banks supports populations of Anhinga, Tricolored Heron, and Limpkin. Additional heron species may include Little Blue, Green, both night herons (Black- and Yellow-crowned), and possibly Agami. Crooked Tree is also known for its Boat-billed Heron rookeries, which can be noisy, with birds vocalizing and bill-clacking. We also watch for Amazon, Green, Belted, Ringed, and even American Pygmy Kingfishers (the latter as small as a sparrow) perched above the water.

One of the key species we look for on the water is the Sungrebe, an easily missed bird that's not a grebe at all but a member of the Finfoot family (*Heliornithidae*), which includes just two other species (one in Africa, the other India). Typically solitary and hard to locate in nature, Sungrebe frequent quiet water under bankside vegetation. An unusual trait of this bird is the ability for males to carry the chicks within skin pouches underneath the wings, an adaptation unknown in any other bird species. We also carefully watch for Jabiru storks, the tallest flying bird in Central and South



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America (large males can exceed five feet), with a wingspan second only to the Andean Condor. The Crooked Tree Lagoon is the best place in Belize to find Jabiru — there is a breeding population here, and we look for feeding individuals as well as birds on their nests.

We return to the lodge by 11:00 AM or so to rest up or bird the grounds before lunch. After lunch, we hope to depart no later than 1:00 PM for the 45-minute drive to Altun Ha, a noteworthy Mayan site featuring two large central plazas surrounded by mid-sized pyramids. We have a chance to drop by the small visitor center and museum, walk the grounds, and also bird the surrounding forest and plaza areas. The broadleaf tropical forest here has a number of interesting species, including woodcreepers (Ivory-billed and Streak-headed), Olive-throated Parakeet, White-fronted Parrot, Lesser Greenlet, Rose-throated Becard, Mangrove Vireo, and Olive Sparrow.

We plan to return to the lodge by 4:30 PM in time to freshen up, sit on the porch, and review our bird list for the day or check the hummingbird feeders — watch for Canivet's Emerald. We have dinner once again at the lodge.
Accommodations at Crooked Tree Lodge (B,L,D)

Fri., Feb. 22 Morning Birding at Crooked Tree | Return to Belize City

We have early coffee and breakfast before a casual guided bird walk starting between 6:30 and 7:00 AM. We focus on terrestrial habitats today, watching for antbirds, orioles, and warblers, and possibly taking a few minute drive to a reed marsh west of Crooked Tree Village, an area known for Pinnated Bittern and Bare-throated Tiger Heron.

We plan to be back to the lodge by 10:00 AM to get packed and organized, have a quick lunch, and then depart for the airport, where we meet up with the rest of the group to start the main tour.

Guide Bob Meinke

Bob Meinke started birding in earnest while an undergraduate in plant science at Humboldt State University in northern California. After graduate school he went on to join the botany faculty at Oregon State University (OSU), where he's led the state's Native Plant Conservation Biology Program, in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, for over 25 years. Bob and his graduate students conducted research on the conservation and recovery of threatened and endangered plants in the western U.S., focusing on life history and re-introduction studies, and have also discovered and named a number of plant species new to science. When not botanizing, Bob enjoys travel with his wife Kelly (also a botanist). Never having lost their early interest in birding, Bob and Kelly have traveled extensively over the years, searching for birds and other wildlife in areas as diverse as Papua New Guinea, southern India, Fiji and Tonga, Australia, Iceland, Brazil, and southwest Africa. They share a particular interest in the avifauna of Central America. Bob and Kelly reside with their cats in an historic neighborhood in Corvallis, Oregon, a few blocks from the OSU campus.



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Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main tour is \$3590 DBL / \$3995 SGL per person, based on double occupancy, from Belize City. Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation within Belize; domestic flight at the end of the journey; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; lodge tips; and miscellaneous program expenses. Tour price does not include: roundtrip airfare to and from Belize City or items of a personal nature such as laundry, portage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages. Gratuities for your local lodge guides in Belize are not included, these are at your discretion, but highly appreciated and recommended. Cost of the Crooked Tree pre-tour extension is \$555 DBL / \$695 SGL, per person, based on double occupancy — limited availability.

Travel Information

Please plan to make air travel plans only after the minimum group size has been reached. Please arrive in Belize City at the Philip SW Goldson International Airport no later than 2:00 PM on February 20 or February 22, depending on if you are participating in the pre-tour extension. We always recommend checking your flight details with our office before finalizing.

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Photo Credits

Golden-hooded Tanager, Peg Abbott (PA); Slaty-tailed Trogon (F), PA; Jabiru, Barry Ulman (BU); Birding Belize, PA; Black Howler Monkey, PA; Roseate Spoonbills, Betty Andres (BA); Striated Heron, Narca Moore-Craig (NMC); Fork-tailed Flycatcher, PA; Violet Saberwing, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Slaty-tailed Trogon with Fruit, PA; Great Kiskadee, Bud Ferguson; Acorn Woodpecker, Greg Smith; Masked Tityra, PA; Green Jays, Bob Behrstock; Orange-breasted Falcon, Pat Lueders; King Vulture, Doug Greenberg (DG); Barton Creek Cave, MNC; Stygian Owl, DG; Squirrel Cuckoo, SS; Black-cowled Oriole, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Blue-gray Tanager, PA; Birding Caracol, NMC; Keel-billed Toucan, DG; Great Curassow, SS; Tody Motmot, PA; Olive-backed Euphonia, SS; Black-faced Grosbeak, SS; Crested Guan, SS; The Lodge at Big Fall, courtesy thelodgeatbigfalls.com; Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, SS; Ringed Kingfisher, BU; Birding Big Falls, Bob Meinke (BM); Blue-black Grassquit, SS; Roadside Hawk, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Tom Dove (TD); Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, SS; Agami Heron, Lori Conrad; Magnificent Frigatebirds, NJS; Black Howler Monkeys x3, PA; Crooked Tree Lodge, courtesy crookedtreelodgebelize.com; Great Black Hawk, BU; Dock at Crooked Tree Lodge, courtesy crookedtreelodgebelize.com; Amazon Kingfisher, BU; Tropical Mockingbird, NJS; Altamira Oriole, TD; Black-collared Hawk, BU; Roseate Spoonbill, BA; Snail Kite, PA; Apple Snail Eggs, PA; Boat-billed Herons, TD; Great Egret and Woodstork, PA; Bob Meinke, courtesy Bob Meinke.