

Belize: Birds & Beaches

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

November 6 – 13, 2021

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Naturalist Journeys, LLC





Embark on an exciting and birding late fall Belize trip. Timed to witness raptor migration, we've tweaked our tried and true southern route to add some beach time at the start before moving on to the Lodge at Big Falls.

This Belize birding tour is one that just can't be missed. Enjoy a leisurely and laid-back start with three nights at Muy 'Ono Hopkins Bay Resort, scheduled to give you afternoons free to enjoy the beach, or simply a hammock and a siesta. Field trips to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and to Red Bank to see Scarlet Macaw at dawn complement beach time.

Then, make your way south for four lovely nights at The Lodge at Big Falls on this Belize nature tour, where we soak in incredible birding right from the lodge, enjoy optional kayak time on the Rio Grande River, right on site, and embark on field trips within short driving distance of the lodge, including the chance to witness fall raptor migration at the Punta Gorda Hawk Watch Project.

This is a lovely, fall Belize birding trip that is perfectly timed as a warm weather escape before the holidays—treat yourself!

Tour Highlights

- Soak in beach time at the start of the trip—we plan for free afternoons at the first lodge
- Visit Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary to see Great Curassow, Crested Guan, Keel-billed Motmot, Lovely Cotinga, and Barred Forest Falcon
- Rise early to witness Scarlet Macaw at Red Bank as they depart their roost ... imagine!
- Watch for Gartered Trogon, Yellow-billed Cacique, and Golden-hooded Tanagers right from your casita door at The Lodge at Big Falls
- Bird mature forests for Lesson's Motmot, Collared Trogon, Red-capped Manakin, Collared Aracari, and Rufous-tailed Jacamar
- Spend a morning at Punta Gorda's Hawk Watch Project looking for Broad-winged Hawks, Swallow-tailed Kites, Mississippi Kites, and Hook-billed Kites
- Bird the Maya site of Nim Li Punit, just six miles from The Lodge at Big Falls

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Belize Birding Tour with Bob Meinke & Steve Choco

\$3890, from Belize City

Airport is Philip Goldson International (BZE)

Itinerary

Sat., Nov. 6 Arrivals

Welcome to Belize! The group arrives today at Philip Goldson International Airport in Belize City where you are met at customs by our driver for our scenic transfer (about 3 hours) to the Hopkins Bay; keep your binoculars at the ready!



At dinner we meet our expert guide Steven Choco from the Lodge at Big Falls who guides the group for the duration of the trip. Steven was the Belize Tour Guide of the Year in 2017. He gives us a briefing at the end of dinner for the next day's activity and an overview of the days ahead.

Accommodations at the Muy 'Ono Hopkins Bay Belize Resort (D)

Sun., Nov. 7 Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary

We rise early and leave the resort by 5:30 AM in order to arrive at Cockscomb Basin by 6:00 AM. We bird some of the more open areas on the edge of the reserve before having breakfast at a restaurant in Maya Centre village at the entrance to the park then continue into the preserve, starting at the visitor center for the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. Some of the key species we look for include Great Curassow, Crested Guan, Great and Slaty-breasted Tinamou, Keel-billed Motmot, Lovely Cotinga, Barred Forest Falcon, and Nightingale Wren. 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. Overhead we watch for Black Hawk Eagle and other soaring raptors.

We arrive back at Hopkins Bay for lunch. This afternoon is free; relax, siesta, or sunbathe. Around 4:30 this afternoon we visit the lagoon that lies behind the village and bird there until dark. Species we may encounter



include Jabiru Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, White and Glossy Ibis, Red-winged Blackbird, Stilt Sandpiper, and Least Bittern, as well as other herons and egrets. There may be smaller waders and shorebirds and a chance for the secretive Clapper Rail.

Accommodations at the Muy 'Ono Hopkins Bay Belize Resort (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 8 Scarlet Macaws at Red Bank

This morning we have another early start in order to arrive at Red Bank Village with the dawn. The hills behind Red Bank are the most accessible area in Belize to reliably locate Scarlet Macaw. Conservation organizations, as well as the village of Red Bank, have been involved in a macaw monitoring program for well over a decade, gathering data on the movement and behavior of these charismatic birds that arrive in fall sometimes as early as September and depart by early spring. Early morning sightings of a flight of macaws gliding around the hillside with the sun catching their plumage is an unforgettable experience for any birder.

Breakfast is once again taken at a local restaurant run by a Maya family in Red Bank village. After breakfast we continue birding in the area among mature forest. We again watch for Scarlet Macaw, as well as Collared and Slaty-tailed Trogons, Lesson's Motmot, Green Honeycreeper, King Vulture, Ornate Hawk Eagle, Black-and-white Hawk Eagle, and White Hawk.

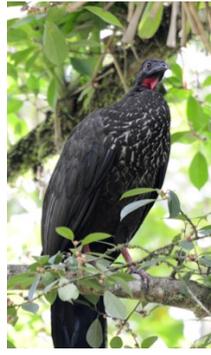
The afternoon follows the same pattern as the day before. We arrive back at Hopkins Bay for lunch with the afternoon free to swim, sunbathe, or do nothing at all—enjoy! Once again, by late afternoon we visit Hopkins lagoon and bird there until dark.

Accommodations at the Muy 'Ono Hopkins Bay Belize Resort (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 9 The Lodge at Big Falls

Today we enjoy the chance to lie in and have a leisurely breakfast at the resort before departing by mid-morning for the Lodge at Big Falls, 72 miles south. We take one last peek at the lagoon before getting on our way. We more or less drive directly to Big Falls, stopping if we see anything interesting along the way.

We arrive at the Lodge around 12:30 to check-in, settle in our rooms, and have lunch. The Lodge at Big Falls is located on the forested banks of the Rio Grande River (kayaks provided for leisure time). 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. Enjoy the afternoon strolling the grounds, relaxing by the pool, or taking the kayaks out.



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 Hummingbird at the feeders or pondering your bird list.

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. 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)

Wed., Nov. 10 Morning Lodge Birding | Afternoon Birding Excursion

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, Steven Choco, 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 stay with Steven Choco for some birding on the lodge grounds. In late morning we will head out with a packed lunch. All of the tours from the lodge are within a thirty-minute drive, meaning 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.

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

Thurs., Nov. 11 Punta Gorda's Hawk Watch Project | Dump Rice Fields

We rise early to leave for our birding among mature forest about two miles from the coast at Punta Gorda. The area is also home to a troop of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys that we have a good chance of seeing and hearing in the forest canopy. We see similar bird species as we have the past few days. We have breakfast at a restaurant in Punta Gorda town.

After breakfast we bird along the shore, expecting to find Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, and other egrets as well as roosting Yellow-crowned Night Heron before arriving at the site of the Belize Raptor Watch.



“The Belize Raptor Research Institute (BRRI), now the Belize Bird Conservancy, initiated a community-based Raptor Watch Program in 2013 in Punta Gorda, southern Belize. The target species is the enigmatic Hook-billed Kite, a potential indicator species of climate change. This annual fall migration count is conducted daily by local biologists assisted by the local community and international students. The data obtained will assist in the conservation of raptors from the Neotropical and temperate zones by informing the scientific community and management agencies of changes in raptor populations....

“This project will shed light on the species and number of individuals passing through Belize during fall (September through November) migration. The coast and topography of the region creates a natural funnel causing the birds to congregate over the Punta Gorda area of southern Belize in the Toledo District.... As a result large flocks of Broad-winged Hawks, Swallow-tailed Kites, Mississippi Kites, and Hook-billed Kites have been observed in Punta Gorda, Belize.” [Belize Bird Conservancy Hawk Watch Project](#)

We spend the rest of the morning with the guides and birders at the site. Here is a summary of results from the first season in 2013:

*“In 642 count hours during the first count season, a total of 8,457 raptors were observed, of which 2,897 (34%) were migrant individuals, representing 32 of the 46 diurnal raptor species (70%) that have been recorded in Belize. The mean number of raptors counted per hour was 13.2, which included non-migratory individuals. Count totals for the five most common migrant species were: Mississippi Kite, *Ictinia mississippiensis*, 817; Hook-billed Kite, *Chondrohierax uncinatus*, 744; Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, 434; Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*, 376; and Broad-winged Hawk, *Buteo platypterus*, 348.”*

—Ryan Phillips, Belize Bird Conservancy 2013.

We will return to Big Falls for lunch at Pearleen’s restaurant.

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)

Fri., Nov. 12 Nim Li Punit | San Felipe Hills

After grabbing coffee, juice, and a roll, our early morning birding outing today with Steven Choco focuses on the Nim Li Punit Maya site, located just six miles from the lodge. Nim Li Punit, which is Kekchi Mayan for “Big Hat,”



dates from the Maya 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 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 Leaf-tosser, White-winged Becard, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, and Northern Barred Woodcreeper.

As the day heats up, we head to Ixcacao Mayan Belizean Chocolate a small twenty-year old business run by Juan and Abelina Cho. We have lunch there with a chocolate themed main course and a selection of beautiful vegetable dishes from their own gardens. We also have a chance to try a variety of chocolate flavors such as chocolate with salt, chili, cardamom, ginger, and coconut and learn about the chocolate making process. We return to the lodge for a break—swimming or kayaking, or perhaps a good book and a hammock on your verandah.

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 Pauraque 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)

Sat., Nov. 13 Departures

Our adventure comes to an end today. This morning we drive the 30 minutes to Punta Gorda and board a Tropic Air flight back to Belize City. To ensure a smooth connection, please plan your international flight to depart after 1:00 PM today. (B)

Guides Bob Meinke & Steve Choco



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, and reside with their cats in an historic neighborhood in Corvallis, Oregon, a few blocks from the OSU campus.



Raised in the local Kek'chi Maya community, Steve Choco is one of the top local guides in Belize, and a great resource for visitors exploring on this Southern Belize nature tour. Steve developed his love of nature and his early fascination with wildlife during camping trips with his grandfather in the Belizean bush. Recognized today for his unparalleled birding skills, Steve was the 2017 recipient of the prestigious National Tour Guide of the Year award, given annually by the Belize Tourism Board. Naturalist Journeys relies on Steve and other experts to ensure high quality birding (and cultural) experiences for travellers.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

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

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 November 6. Please plan departures after 1:00 PM on November 13.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main tour is **\$3890 DBL / \$4490 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.

Photo Credits

Golden-hooded Tanager, Peg Abbott (PA); Slaty-tailed Trogon (F), PA; Jabiru, Barry Ulman (BU); Birding Belize, PA; Yucatan Black Howler Monkey, PA; Cabana, courtesy of the Lodge at Big Falls; Common Tody-Flycatcher, Terry Peterson (TP); Pool, courtesy of the Lodge at Big Falls Fork-tailed Flycatcher, PA; Acorn Woodpecker, Greg Smith; Great Kiskadee, Bud Ferguson; Slaty-tailed Trogon with fruit, PA; Muy 'Ono Hopkins Bay x3 courtesy of hopkinsbaybelize.com; Lesson's Motmot, PA; Red-capped Manakin, Bob Behrstock (BB); Barred Forest Falcon, Narca Moore-Craig; Tody Motmot, PA; Black-cowled Oriole, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Crested Guan, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Olive-backed Euphonia, SS; Cabana, courtesy of the Lodge at Big Falls; The Lodge at Big Fall, courtesy thelodgeatbigfalls.com; Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, SS; Ringed Kingfisher, BU; Great Tinamou, TP; Yellow-billed Cacique, PA; Birding Big Falls, Bob Meinke (BM); Blue-black Grassquit, SS; Roadside Hawk, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Tom Dove.