

Christmas in Belize

with Naturalist Journeys

December 18 – 26, 2022

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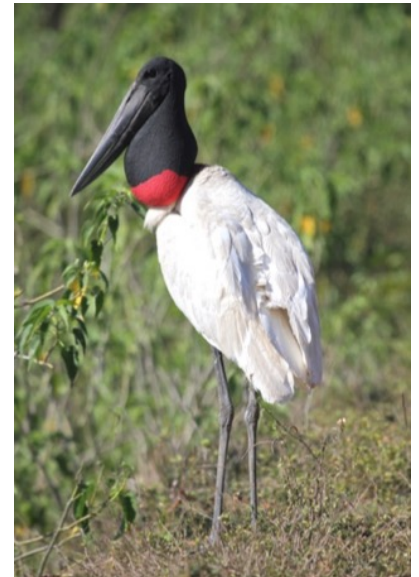
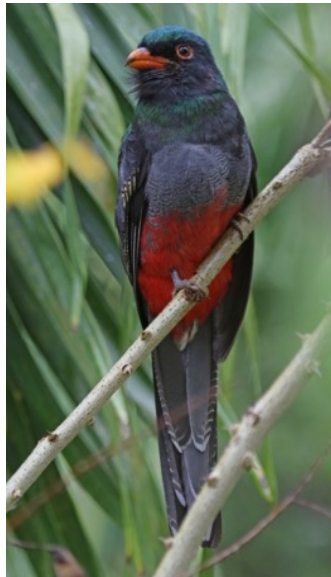
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Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Tour Summary

9-Day / 8-Night Belize Birding & Nature Tour
\$4890, from Belize City
Airport is Philip SW Goldson International
Airport (BZE)

Just a two-hour flight from Miami, Belize offers a rich blend of Maya ruins and lush forests, still wild enough to host Jaguars and a diversity of tropical birds, butterflies, and mammals. This nation's warm, hospitable people speak English and have a strong tradition of caring for their biological legacy.

Join us for a relaxed-pace Christmastime tour to explore Belize's biological treasures and cultural roots. We emphasize birding, but also examine natural history and Maya heritage while having some simple, relaxing fun. Colorful resident birds are joined by winter migrants, making birding each day extraordinary and fun!

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. Treat yourself this holiday season!

Tour Highlights

- Cruise through the famous Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, lush with waders and other wildlife
- Spend three fun nights at Lamanai Outpost Lodge, one of our favorite lodges in Belize
- Explore and bird through Lamanai's Maya ruins and along its beautiful waterways by boat
- Spend Christmas Day at The Lodge at Big Falls—relax by the pool, stroll the lodge's trail system, tube or kayak down the Rio Grande
- Bird at the Nim Li Punit Maya site and stop for a local farmer's chocolate demonstration

Itinerary

Sun., Dec. 18 Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort

Welcome to Belize! Your local guide meets you upon arrival today and transfers you to the beautiful Black Orchid Resort. Please plan to arrive by 2:00 PM today.

Our resort is on the Belize River and boasts a host of amenities including a pool, restaurant, and canoes. We can bird the lodge's grounds today before kicking off the trip with dinner at the resort's restaurant.

Accommodations at Black Orchid Resort (D)

Mon., Dec. 19 Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary | Lamanai Outpost Lodge

After an early breakfast and coffee we depart for Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary where we enjoy a morning boat trip. Barely an hour north of the airport, this refuge 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.

A labyrinth of waterways and small islands, the refuge covers 16,400+ acres of creeks, swamps, and hummocks, including adjoining lowland pine savannas and tropical broadleaf forests. Watch for Morelet's Crocodile and other reptiles, as well Yucatan Squirrel and possible Neotropical River Otter.

Inland lagoons support an astonishing array of bird life. Peregrine Falcon, Black-collared Hawk, Great Black Hawk, and Snail Kite are raptor highlights, while 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. We also carefully watch for Jabiru storks, the tallest flying bird in Central and South America. Yucatan endemics 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. We enjoy lunch in the village before we depart for Lamanai.

After lunch we depart on another boat trip, this time to transport us to Lamanai Outpost Lodge, our home for the next three nights. The transfer in to Lamanai is FUN. From the boat, we should see Mangrove Swallow, Limpkin, Northern Jacana, Swallow-tailed and Snail Kites, and, with luck, a Black-collared Hawk or a huge Jabiru. Be ready with a windbreaker, camera, and binoculars. We arrive in time for late-afternoon birding by the lodge, followed by dinner.

Accommodations at Lamanai Outpost Lodge (B,L,D)

Tues., Dec. 20 Lamanai Outpost Lodge

Lamanai (Mayan for “submerged crocodile”), is located at the edge of a 28-mile spring-fed lagoon and offers rainforest, Maya ruins, pine savannahs, freshwater marshes, and open water habitats, all within walking distance. Over 400 species have been counted here, including Thicket Tinamou, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Jabiru, King Vulture, Zone-tailed Hawk, Ruddy Crane, White-fronted Parrot, Squirrel Cuckoo, and Northern Bentbill. Otters, manatees, crocodiles, and the occasional Jaguar are also nearby.

Forest trails and Maya ruins are easily accessed at Lamanai; birds and butterflies always seem to be at arm’s length. Just a short stroll from the lodge stands the Temple of the Jaguar and the High Temple, two of about 700 Maya structures at Lamanai that were hidden under a blanket of earth and vegetation until their excavation began in 1974. These ruins date back two millennia. Climbing the temples requires a bit of effort, but the reward is great: a bird’s-eye view over the forest canopy.

Overlooking the edge of the large New River Lagoon, Lamanai offers a different mix of birds from The Lodge at Big Falls, our second lodge. Some birds at the water’s edge are familiar: Neotropic Cormorant, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and Purple Gallinule. Others, like White-collared Seedeater, Mangrove Vireo, Ruddy Crane, or the delightful American Pygmy Kingfisher remind you that you have left the United States. Open-air dining lets you be immersed in nature; local foods and tropical fruits abound!

During our stay we take several boat trips. Canoe excursions offer relaxing and intimate wildlife views, and can be arranged for both day and night paddles. Such trips frequently produce an endangered Morelet’s Crocodile, iguanas, and basilisk lizards, up to five species of kingfishers, Boat-billed Heron, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, and occasionally a rarity like an Agami Heron. At night, with the aid of spotlights, we look for several species of bats, Yucatan Nightjar, Yucatan Poorwill, and Northern Potoo.

We also make sure to have time to see the impressive Lamanai Maya Ruins, and to explore the open savanna habitat, which affords us a good mix of species including Yucatan Woodpecker, Yellow-lored Parrot, the Petén race of Botteri’s Sparrow, and occasionally Aplomado Falcon.

Accommodations at Lamanai Outpost Lodge (B,L,D)

Wed., Dec. 21 Lamanai Outpost Lodge

Whether you're well-traveled in Central America or visiting for the first time, there is much to hold your attention at Lamanai. Birds and monkeys busy themselves around the cabins; nearly 200 species of butterflies flit through the area, colorful dragonflies and damselflies buzz by, lizards ranging in size from tiny geckoes to five-foot-long iguanas lounge around, and of course, numerous herbs, shrubs, and trees attract wild tropical wonder.

We're mindful of some of the regional endemics, including Black Catbird, Rose-throated Tanager, Yucatan Jay, and Gray-throated Chat. One of the most interesting phenomena, and one we are likely to encounter at Lamanai is an army ant march. Birds of many families attend these marches, eating the insects, frogs, lizards, and other organisms flushed by the foraging ants. Standing quietly at the margin of an ant swarm, we get close looks at faithful ant followers, including Gray-headed Tanager, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, and a number of woodcreepers, including Tawny-winged and Northern Barred. Other possibilities are White-whiskered Puffbird, several flycatchers, migrant warblers, and perhaps a Great Tinamou. Even birds of prey like the dainty Barred Forest-Falcon follow ant swarms—all so absorbed in the sea of insect life that they ignore our fascinated observation.

Accommodations at Lamanai Outpost Lodge (B,L,D)

Thurs., Dec. 22 Depart Lamanai Outpost Lodge | The Lodge at Big Falls

We enjoy a last morning of birding and breakfast at Lamanai Outpost Lodge before departing for The Lodge at Big Falls. This is largely a travel day, with a flight to our next lodge right from the Lamanai air strip. This is a short domestic flight and allows us to have plenty of time to bird once we arrive at Big Falls.

The Lodge at Big Falls is located on the forested banks of the Rio Grande River (with kayaks provided for leisure time). Enjoy 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-Rail and scampering agouti on the open lawns fronting the main lodge. This building 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 (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.

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

Fri., Dec. 23 Nim li Punit | San Felipe Hills

After grabbing a light snack, our early morning birding outing today 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 Centuries 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 cays 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 Honeycreepers, Bat Falcon, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Blue Grosbeak, Montezuma Oropendola, and Rose-throated Becard.

We return for breakfast, and then head out to 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 upward, 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 take refuge at a local chocolatier’s farm, where we learn about the process of making chocolate and enjoy a wonderful lunch. Then, it’s back to the lodge where we can enjoy some quiet time to take on some swimming or tubing, and then enjoy late afternoon birding walks on trails at the lodge. We conclude by tallying up our list, and having another delicious dinner at the lodge. Night birding is an option tonight if we have not yet encountered the several species that frequent the property.

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

Sat., Dec. 24 Blue Creek | Lodge Birding

Enjoy another delicious lodge breakfast, and then we make our way to Blue Creek Village or Forest Home, a similar site. Both feature 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 Scarlet-rumped Tanager are also both found along the road into Blue Creek. Less common raptors such as Gray-headed and Double-toothed Kites are occasionally 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 Tinamous, Collared Trogon, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Strong-billed Woodcreeper, Red-capped Manakin, Black-crowned Antshrike (here at the northern end of its range), 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.

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 hope to have the option to visit 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 Crakes, Purple Gallinule, White-throated Flycatcher, Least Bittern, Short-tailed Hawk, Limpkin, and Common Tody-Flycatcher.

Tonight we enjoy a celebratory dinner, going over our final bird list and reminiscing about our journey.
Accommodations at The Lodge at Big Falls (B,L,D)

Sun., Dec. 25 Christmas in Belize | Lodge & Local Birding

Merry Christmas! Today is gentle, with lodge and possibly local birding opportunities, as well as time to just relax in nature. With such excellent birding right on our doorsteps, it's hard to resist getting up at the crack of dawn, soaking in all the morning bird song with coffee or tea in hand. 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 could see this morning as we stroll 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 and Lineated Woodpecker, and Stub-tailed Spadebill.

Off-site excursions may be available, but we leave today loose to keep things relaxed and enjoy the holiday. Tonight enjoy a special dinner at the lodge and hear about plans for tomorrow's adventures.
Accommodations at The Lodge at Big Falls (B,L,D)

Mon., Dec. 26 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 1:00 PM. (B)

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.

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 or before December 18. Plan to depart on after 1:00 PM flights homeward on December 26.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main tour is **\$4890 DBL / \$5490 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; both domestic flights; 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; Black Howler Monkey, PA; Roseate Spoonbills, Betty Andres (BA); Striated Heron, Narca Moore-Craig (NMC); Fork-tailed Flycatcher, PA.