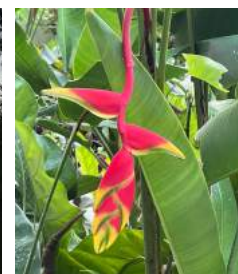
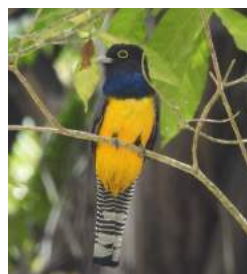
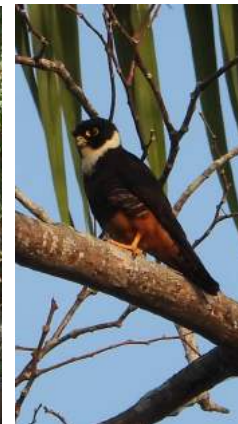


Best of Belize Birding & Nature

Mar. 20 – 28, 2024 | Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



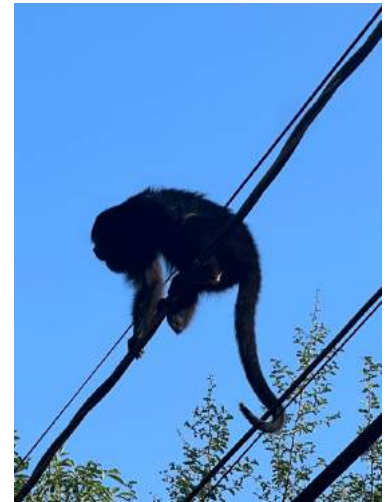
With host Rick Weiman, local guides Eduardo and Luis and participants Robert, Nancy, Vivian, Kay and Peter



Wed., Mar. 20

Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort

By mid-afternoon our group had arrived at the Black Orchid Resort, just a 15-minute drive from the Belize airport. After introductions and lunch, we enjoyed a visit from a family of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys and a short birding walk on the property gave us 30 species of birds including a Common Tody-Flycatcher, our first of many Red-lored Parrots and displaying Montezuma Oropendolas. After some of us had a swim in the pool, we took a late afternoon pontoon boat ride Rick had arranged on the Belize River with resort guide Rudolfo "Rudy" Ramirez. We had several exciting bird sightings such as a perched Bat Falcon, many Mangrove Swallows and a Ringed Kingfisher. We also glided by a Morelet's crocodile and some roosting proboscis bats under a bridge. We learned a lot from Rudy about Mayan history and the settlement of Belize by the Spanish and English until its independence from England in 1981. We then enjoyed dinner in the resort's restaurant, completed our first



checklist and soon after called it a night as tomorrow would be an early departure for our first big birding adventure.

Thurs., Mar. 21 Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary | New River | Lamanai

Our Lamanai Outpost driver and guide for the next few days, Eduardo Ruano, arrived bright and early and by 5:30 a.m. our luggage was loaded and we were on our way to Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary where we arrived at the Birdseye View Lodge. We had time for some much-needed coffee and fresh fruit and immediately started seeing new birds. On the grassy shoreline were several Least Sandpipers, and foraging just upriver were a Limpkin and several White Ibises. We soon met our boat captain, Lenny, and were on our way into the north lagoon section of the sanctuary for our three-hour tour – cue the Gilligan’s Island theme. As we cruised through the open water, and eventually Spanish Creek, we saw four species of Kingfisher, an abundance of Neotropical Cormorants, egrets, and Northern Jacanas, roosting Boat-billed Herons, a Jabiru gulping down an eel (!) and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron on a nest. One of the many highlights was an Agami Heron spotted hiding in a tangle of roots, a life bird for all of us. We enjoyed some hot breakfast burritos on the boat as we watched a pair of Prothonotary Warblers and a Squirrel Cuckoo.

After our tour, we drove a short distance to the Lamanai Eco Tours boat ramp area where we had lunch. We met Captain Eduardo as we boarded our second boat of the day, which took us down the New River to the Lamanai Outpost Lodge, our home for the next three nights. Along the way, we encountered a roosting Lesser Nighthawk, another Jabiru, several Ospreys and many of the birds spotted at Crooked Tree. After arriving at the lodge, we settled into our rooms and Eduardo offered to lead us on a late afternoon bird walk on the property. This turned out to be an excellent decision for those not too tired to join in as we found 43 species of birds in under an hour on the main trail including a pair of Barred Antshrikes, a rare-for-the-area Yucatan Vireo, five flycatcher species, and nine North American Warblers including Hooded, Magnolia, Yellow-throated and Black-throated Green. We then met at the restaurant and bar area for a cocktail and completed our checklist before enjoying a delicious dinner.

Fri., Mar. 22 Lamanai | Indian Church | Night Owl Walk

We started today with a pre-breakfast walk in the jungle, and the bird life was very active. We found two species of saltator (Black-headed and Cinnamon-bellied) and completed our trifecta when a Buff-throated Saltator popped into view, a bird not often seen at Lamanai. A tiny Striped-throated Hermit zoomed by followed by a White-bellied Emerald. In under two hours we’d tallied an amazing 50 species including Plain Chachalaca, Collared Aracari, Masked Tityra and Boat-billed Flycatcher. We even saw a female Green-breasted Mango



feeding her two chicks in a well-hidden, lichen-covered nest. On the walk back to the lodge, a black spiny-tailed iguana peeked out of a hollow fence post and a striking male Blue Bunting fed in the roadside grass.

It was soon time to head back for breakfast, which was once again a delicious spread of local cuisine including fry jacks with eggs and refried beans. We then participated in a medicinal plant and village life tour, experiencing some of the history, culture and lifestyles of the people in this area. Eduardo showed us some of the native plants and cultivated varieties that serve as food, provide shelter and have medicinal purposes, and how both ancient and modern-day Belizeans still use them. As we walked towards the village, we ran across a mixed feeding flock with seven species of warblers including Kentucky, Hooded and Blue-winged, with a Yellow-breasted Chat and male Summer Tanager joining the party as well. It was a hot day so on the way to the village, Peter and Vivian got a ride in a lodge vehicle and those walking met at Eduardo's house where we met two-year-old Eddie Jr. and were given fresh coconuts to quench our thirst. We then walked to a close-by women's cooperative restaurant for a cooking demonstration where we observed how to grind corn into masa using a traditional mortar and pedestal made from volcanic basalt from Guatemala. Vivian gave it a try and then we all flattened and rounded the dough before it was cooked over an open fire into some fresh tortillas served with a chetal sauce as an appetizer. Finally, we learned how to pat out, fill and roll chicken tamales in banana leaves. Then we were served a delicious traditional chicken soup with garnachas, empanadas and fresh squeezed limeade. Rick watched one of the chefs preparing local fish and we were pleasantly surprised when a freshly fried whole fish was added to our lunch. On the walk back, we spotted two King Vultures soaring in the company of several Black and Turkey Vultures.

The afternoon was free so some of us swam from the dock in the river to beat the heat while others relaxed and napped. Rick led a late afternoon bird walk that turned up many of the species we'd observed that morning and added a pair of Red-legged Honeycreepers to our growing bird list.

After dinner and a delicious coconut cream pie for dessert, the group went on a night walk under a full moon and clear sky to search for owls and other nocturnal creatures. At a small pond near the restaurant, we saw our first frogs of the tour, a large Rio Grande leopard frog and a Mexican tree frog. Above us, high in a tree, Eduardo spotted a Green Vine Snake. We failed to see any owls, perhaps due to the bright moonlight, but a Mottled Owl did answer to playback.

Sat., Mar. 23

Lamanai | Mayan Ruins | Spotlight Safari

Rick, Robert and Kay started early with a quick, pre-breakfast walk around the lodge trails while the rest of the group slept. More warblers were observed including Black-and-white, Yellow and Tennessee, as well as a pair of



Blue Grosbeaks. A male Barred Antshrike put on a show perching close to us and singing his morning song. After eating a delicious Belizean-style breakfast, we took a short boat ride to the Lamanai Maya archaeological ruins where we toured the Jaguar and High Temples along with other structures. We visited the museum with its collection of pottery and other artifacts from these ancient people, learning about the Mayan history in this area and Spanish colonization. We birded as well. We counted at least 20 Neotropic Cormorants on the boat ride over and saw a Wood Stork and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. Walking around the ruins, we heard Gartered and Black-headed Trogons calling, which gave us great views of both species, and we saw a perched Double-toothed Kite, Roadside Hawk, Yellow-olive Flatbill and an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper.

After a wonderful morning, we returned to the lodge for lunch, followed by some downtime and river swimming. We had a scheduled jungle walk at 3:00 back at the Mayan ruins site, so another short boat ride later we were walking in the secondary forest in search of some new birds. This time the woodpeckers stole the show as four species were seen including Pale-billed, Chestnut-colored, Golden-fronted and a pair of tiny, Smoky-browns. Other new birds included a Bright-rumped Attila, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and a Green-backed Sparrow.

As we had done on previous nights, we met before dinner for cocktails and our checklist. After another nice dinner at the lodge restaurant and mango cheesecake for dessert, it was time for our night spotlight safari boat ride. With a full moon out our guide, Eduardo, expertly piloted the boat without lights and soon we witnessed a large fishing bat flying past the boat. These bats can detect faint ripples in the water. They then dangle their claws near the surface to catch small fish. We saw several more along with multiple nightjars that Eduardo spotted by their eye-shine. These included Common Pauraques, a Yucatan Nightjar and a Northern Potoo. But we weren't done yet. Pulling the boat into a narrow cove, Eduardo found the bird Vivian had requested: an American Pygmy Kingfisher. This was a life bird for her, and we were all excited to view it roosting at eye level. Our request for an owl was also answered when a Mottled Owl flew in and called. As we watched it, two Kinkajous traversed the tree branches past it. We concluded by shutting off the motor and sitting under the full moon and stars listening to the symphony of nocturnal animals calling all around us.

Sun., Mar. 24 Lamanai | Savanna Dawn | Chan Chich

Our last morning at Lamanai started early. We gathered at the dock at 5:45 a.m. and set off toward Dawson Creek, a tributary of the New River, to bird some savanna habitat. On the way we spotted our second Agami Heron of the tour and at least a dozen Yellow-crowned Night-Herons flying in front of the boat. We also saw a Purple Gallinule and more Northern Jacanas. Eduardo amazingly imitated the call of a Great Black Hawk and one



responded, flying in and perching as it called back to him. Once off the boat, the savanna was a very different environment from the broadleaf evergreen forests we'd been in up to this point. We were now birding amongst scattered pines and oaks dotting a wide, shrubby grassland. Here we found a few Yucatán peninsula endemics like Botteri's Sparrow, Yucatan Amazon Parrot and a flushed flock of Black-throated Bobwhite. We had great looks at a perched Aplomado Falcon and then another as the pair flew past us tumbling and chasing each other in the sky. A Collared Forest-Falcon flew directly over us, and nearby was a hovering White-tailed Kite. Between the creek and the savanna, we tallied 54 species of birds, quite a morning!

It was hard to leave such exciting birding, but we had to return for breakfast and to pack up. After an early lunch at the lodge, we said our goodbyes to Eduardo and the wonderful staff at Lamanai, and then loaded into the van with our driver, Jerry, who took us to our new accommodations at Chan Chich Lodge. The ride over some rough country roads was long as we had to drive slowly, and we made frequent stops for birds including a Gray Hawk on a post eating a rodent, an American Kestrel, a male Vermillion Flycatcher and several Fork-tailed Flycatchers. We knew we were getting close to Chan Chich Lodge when we saw our first male Ocellated Turkey along the road, then another and another, until we lost count around 10. These large and colorful birds are endangered throughout Belize but protected in this part of the country. We had a little downtime after we arrived, so Peter, Rick and Kay took a dip in the pool, while some of us enjoyed cocktails in the bar before reviewing our checklist. Dinner was outdoors under the full moon with Common Pauraques calling nearby. Rick and Kay took a short evening walk in search of a local Ocelot, no luck, but we did observe several bats and spotted a few Common Pauraques.

Mon., Mar. 25 **Chan Chich Trail Birding**

We woke up this morning in beautiful Chan Chich for coffee and hot pastries, then met our guide, Luis, who had 30 years of experience as a guide there and would be with us for our entire stay. We started with a walk towards the lodge staff homes, stopping for a Central American spider monkey who stared at us with a quizzical look. Soon we saw a Crested Guan, normally found high in the canopy, but we were fortunate to see it on the forest floor where it posed with its red throat shining in the sunlight. We spotted our first Black-cheeked Woodpecker and soon after three Squirrel Cuckoos made quite a racket as they chased each other through the canopy. We added Brown-hooded and Mealy Parrots to our list, along with the abundant Red-lore Parrots. A singing Blue-black Grosbeak proved difficult to find, but both Louisiana and Northern Waterthrushes were easily observed as was a Red-crowned Ant-Tanager and many others.



Then we headed back for breakfast and a short break. Around 10:45 several of us went with Luis to explore the Logging Trail, finding Dot-winged Antwrens, an Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Rufous Mourner and a Sepia-capped Flycatcher. The heat was building after the hike, so it was time for another dip in the pool or a shower and a short rest. Lunch consisted of fresh fruit salad and fried chicken topped off with some homemade ice cream for dessert.

We had the afternoon free until 4:00 when we headed back out for an early evening walk on the Sac Be Trail to a pool along Chan Chich Creek. We sat quietly on a long log as birds came to the pool to bathe before roosting for the night. Not one but TWO Kentucky Warblers showed up and were joined by a male Hooded Warbler and a Worm-eating Warbler. A trio of Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, a Northern Schiffornis and an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher soon joined the pool party. But the highlight was a stunningly beautiful, male Purple-crowned Fairy that bathed right in front of us. A life bird for all, it hovered elegantly, dipping into the pool repeatedly and shortly thereafter came back for a second dip. Fittingly, the cherry on top was a male Red-capped Manakin that gave us all great looks, including Vivian who had missed one days earlier. On the way back up the road, Vivian and Kay were a bit faster than the rest of us and saw a Baird's Tapir cross the road in front of them. We made it back to the lodge and did our checklist in the bar while videos of Jaguars, Pumas, Ocelots and other jungle creatures caught on the lodge's trail cams played on the TV. We enjoyed another fine meal with all ingredients fresh from the property's gardens and farm. A lime souffle was our dessert, capping off another action-packed day.

Tues., Mar. 26 Chan Chich | Escarpment | Night Safari

Most of the group chose to sleep in, but Rick and Kay took a short 6:30 a.m. walk down to the staff housing area right around the lodge. There were not many new birds, but it was nice hearing the calls of Red-lored Parrots and Black-headed Saltators and having good views of the birds as well. Male Ocellated Turkeys were practicing their displays to seemingly uninterested females, fun to watch. As we waited for breakfast, the previously elusive Blue-black Grosbeak showed up to feed on heliconia seeds 10 feet from our table. Afterwards we loaded into the jungle safari vehicle for a ride up to the escarpment, the highest point on the property. Along the way, we stopped by some fields for views of singing Eastern Meadowlarks and a pair of perched Fork-tailed Flycatchers. Past the coffee farm, Luis stopped the vehicle when he spotted a beautiful Gray Fox in the road staring back at us before it disappeared into the jungle.

Up at the summit overlooking the mountains and valley below, two soaring King Vultures greeted us. They were soon followed by a White Hawk that streamed by and a Bat Falcon stooping after dragonflies. On the way back to the lodge, we birded from the vehicle adding Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Keel-billed Toucans and a Great



Curassow to our list. On the drive back, we passed two perched Great Black Hawks and a roosting Northern Potoo.

Back at the lodge we had lunch and enjoyed a little down time, where some of us again swam in the large lanai-enclosed pool. Around 4:00 the group drove back down to the Sac Be Trail to the busy bathing pool along Chan Chich Creek. As we sat on the log, a Wood Thrush and Swainson's Thrush showed up for their bath soon followed by Kentucky, Worm-eating and Hooded Warblers. New bathing birds seen were a pair of American Redstarts, a Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher and a Stripe-throated Hermit. As we were getting ready to leave, the golden tail of a Tropical Royal Flycatcher flashed by, leaving us wanting a better look.

After dinner we went on a night jungle safari with Luis. We had a driver this time so Luis could sit in the front with a spotlight as we drove the jungle roads looking for the creatures of the night. At our first stop down by the village housing area, Luis spotted an Ocelot at the jungle's edge. We only glimpsed its spots but then, incredibly, a few minutes later another was spotted. This one was more in the open and with some type of prey in its mouth. We all had clear looks before it retreated into the dark jungle behind the houses. We could've quit right then, but there was more to see including a Barn Owl, first spotted on a fence post and then seen hunting over a field. A Southern opossum, a Mexican red-rump tarantula, and many nightjars including at least 15 Common Pauraques, three Yucatan Poorwills and a Northern Potoo. We ended the eventful night drive with a wonderfully close view of a perched Middle American Screech-Owl on the main road near the lodge.

Wed., Mar. 27 Chan Chich | Coffee Plantation Birding | Laguna Verde

Instead of a morning bird walk, we decided it was best to drive with Luis in the jungle safari vehicle after breakfast as there was an unexpected heat wave hitting Belize and driving seemed the better (cooler) option. We mentioned to Luis that we hadn't seen a motmot, so we drove down a trail near the main road of the lodge in search of the diminutive Tody Motmot. One responded almost immediately to our recording and was soon in view for all to see. It even flew closer, continuing to call very near to us. We then heard a racket in the trees that sounded like mixed flock mobbing behavior, then heard the calls of a Central American Pygmy-Owl. It was soon located in a dead tree, sticking its head out of its nest hole and calling. While we watched through the scope and binoculars, its partner arrived with breakfast and flew into the nest hole. Pretty cool stuff and it was also a new nest that Luis was not aware of. We then rode out to the agricultural areas we had passed yesterday around Gallon Jug. Here they produce almost all the food that they serve for their meals including vegetables, fruits, coffee and livestock. In this wide-open field habitat, we found more Fork-tailed Flycatchers and many Western Cattle Egrets. White-tailed deer were plentiful here, which could help explain the healthy population of jaguars



we had witnessed on the trail cam videos. We added Lineated Woodpecker to the list as well as Rose-throated Becard, Eye-ringed Flatbill and Golden-crowned Warbler.

Then we headed back to the main lodge for lunch. During lunch, and at most of our meals on the outdoor deck, we watched Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits buzzing around the hummingbird feeders as well as White-necked Jacobins and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds. Yellow-winged and Golden-hooded Tanagers were present too, eating berries next to a bush by the deck. Most of us swam in the pool after lunch and were soon refreshed and ready for our afternoon safari. Returning to the same area we visited in the morning, we explored some new jungle trails where we had better looks at a Tropical Royal Flycatcher and added White-collared Manakins, Slaty-tailed Trogon and Scaled Pigeon to our list. Several Great Curassows crossed the road in front of us, as did a Crested Guan with a chick in tow. Our final stop was at Laguna Verde, a beautiful body of freshwater that was uncharacteristically quiet except for 50+ Purple Martins hawking insects over the lake and a lone Osprey. We made it back in time for dinner and our final checklist (237 species either seen or heard!). We went around the table and listed our favorite birds and memories from the tour. Jabiru was the unanimous winner for favorite bird, with Purple-crowned Fairy coming in a close second. All of us loved the night boat ride with Eduardo at Lamanai and the night jungle safari trip with Luis, and all the river excursions. It was a wonderful, memorable tour, and we went to bed feeling fortunate for all of our new experiences.

Thurs., Mar. 28 Chan Chich | Gallon Jug Departures

On our departure day, we did an early bird walk with Reuben, but we didn't venture too far. Right off the restaurant porch, in a large tree, we added our last new bird of the trip, a pair of Cinnamon Becards. Several Black-headed Saltators, Golden-hooded Tanagers and Red-legged Honeycreepers were fun to watch one last time as well. We then had breakfast, packed up our bags and headed over to Gallon Jug in the safari vehicle for our short charter flight back to Belize City. Once in the air in our single propeller plane, we settled in at an altitude of about 1,000 feet and had wonderful views of the expansive protected habitat of hundreds of thousands of acres surrounding the lodge. We passed a river and our pilot, Abner, pointed out the shapes of several West Indian manatees floating near the surface for our last mammal species of the tour.

We landed 20 minutes later and said our goodbyes to our fun traveling companions at the Belize Airport, hoping we might travel together soon.

Photos: Jabiru (Rick Weiman - RW), Black-headed Trogon (RW), Groove-billed Ani (RW), Scenic (Nancy Boyce - NB), Howler Monkey (NB), Palms (NB), Boat Ride (Kay Rhoads - KR), Green Heron (Vivian Gray - VG), Vermilion Flycatcher (RW), Plain Chachalaca (NB), Snail Kite (RW), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (RW), Lamanai (NB), Pale-billed Woodpecker (RW), Ocellated Turkey (NB), Central American Spider Monkey (RW), White-necked Jacobin (VG), Brown Basilisk (RW), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (VG), Boat ride (RW), Group at Lamanai Outpost (RW), Kentucky Warbler (RW), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (RW), Yellow-winged Tanager (RW), Ocellated Turkey feathers (RW), Tody Motmot (RW), Middle American Screech-Owl (RW), Keel-billed Toucan (RW), Red-lored Parrot (RW), Birding in the savannah (RW)