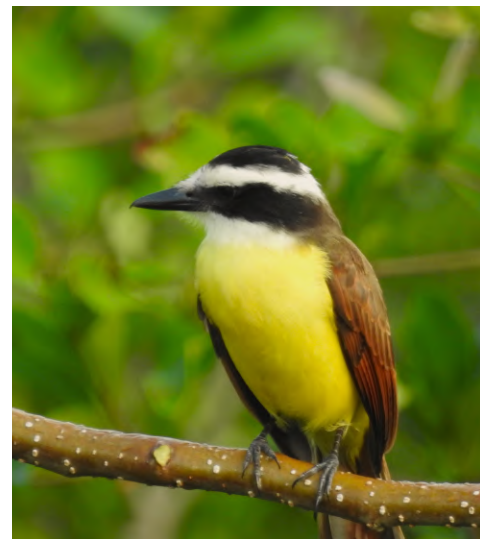


# Belize: Three Great Lodges | Trip Report

## March 6-16, 2024 | by James P. Smith



**With local guides Isaias and Jeffry from Black Rock Lodge, Mario from Jade Jungle Resort, and Steve Choco from Tanager Rainforest Lodge. Our wonderful participants were; Alan & Susan, Mike & Nancy, Beth, Jeffery, Carol, Judy, Sharon and Shirley.**



**Wed., Mar. 6**

**Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort | Black Rock Lodge**

Clear blue skies greeted Naturalist Journeys as we gathered for an epic adventure in central and southern Belize. Guides from Black Rock Lodge divided forces with Isaias picking up early arrivals from the Black Orchid Resort (Judy, Beth, Alan and Susan) and Hob meeting Jeffery, Carol, Sharon, Shirley, Mike and Nancy at Philip Goldson International Airport later in the afternoon.



Our early arrivals enjoyed a casual drive west along the George Price Highway pausing for a leisurely lunch at Amigos Restaurant near Monkey Bay. The ambience was pleasant with open-air dining offering views toward the Maya Mountains in the far west. The birding started in earnest here as a nearby cluster of pines produced a surprising number of species to get things off to a flying start including Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Yellow-rumped, Yellow-throated and Grace's Warblers, and a pair of Hepatic Tanagers. The latter two species are generally associated with higher elevation pine forest so to find them on the first afternoon of the trip was quite special.

Lunch was good too, the first of many delicious Belizean meals with Shrimp Ceviche, Rice & Beans, and Beef Quesadillas being popular choices. We continued westbound with a traditional pit-stop at the Orange Gallery near Georgeville where Olive-throated Parakeets, Black-cowled and Orchard Orioles were found in the flowering Madre de Cacao trees.

Just before passing through the bustling town of Santa Elena we stopped by a small wetland where Cattle Egrets, Black-necked Stilts, Northern Jacanas and a surprise Peregrine overhead were noted. Beyond San Ygnacio we drove along several miles of white dirt roads lined for much of the way by flowering Madre de Cacao. The area was rich in birdlife including Vermilion Flycatchers, Yellow-bellied Eleanias and several Scrub Euphonias while deeper into the drive we found a small drainage close to the road harboring no less than two Bare-throated Tiger-herons and a Limpkin.

Arrival at Black Rock was greeted with traditional warmth as we were served welcome drinks and given a brief orientation before being escorted to our cozy, well-appointed cabanas. The magnificent view from the restaurant balcony was impossible to ignore as the Macal River audibly raged below. Hob arrived with the remainder of the group a little later and we settled down to enjoy a delightful three course meal while getting to know each other around the dinner table. The tour was off to a fabulous start!



## **Thurs., Mar. 7                      Black Rock Lodge | Belize Botanical Gardens | Night Drive on Black Rock Road**

There's nothing quite like waking up to the sounds of nature in a brand new place, especially if that place happens to be Black Rock Lodge! Yucatan Black Howlers, Common Pauragues and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds could all be heard before sunrise. Coffee was served on the restaurant balcony from 6am and we gathered in keen anticipation of the day to come while gazing toward the Macal River below. Straight away Isaias found a Bare-throated Tiger-heron wonderfully camouflaged against the rocks in the river, and Ringed and Green Kingfishers flew by. The first feeder birds started to appear with great looks at Olive-backed Euphonias and Collared Aracaris much to the delight of our photographers. The hummingbirds put on a grand show too with White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, and Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits all vying for attention. Isaias and Jeffry escorted us on a pre-breakfast walk around the grounds and the lodge's organic farm. Highlights were many including perched Short-billed Pigeons, a pair of Pale-billed Woodpeckers, plenty of Masked Tityras, great views of a singing Green-backed Sparrow, a nectar-gleaning Purple-crowned Fairy plus a fly catching Black Phoebe by the compost piles. Our route took us towards the river where the Bare-throated Tiger-heron was still hanging out on the rocks and proved to be something of a local celebrity! Mangrove Swallows hawked for insects above the river, and we managed to scope a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle at the nest. The day was off to the most wonderful start as we headed for a classic Belizean breakfast served Black Rock style.

Afterwards we drove out onto the Black Rock Road pausing for a few minutes near the nest of an Ornate Hawk-Eagle. While the bird was certainly present it was sitting so tightly on the nest that only the tail and parts of the crest could be seen...we decided to save it and try again later. Further down the road, the flowering Madre de Cacao continued to add color to the white dirt roads and we paused again at the marshy patch where Bare-throated Tiger-heron, Limpkin, Snowy Egret and Little Blue Heron were feeding, this time joined by a wild Muscovy Duck hanging out on the opposite side of the road. Groove-billed Anis and Orchard Orioles perched on the fence posts as we drove along and as we crested a small rise in the road Isaias had a special stop in mind and pulled over. It wasn't long before we heard the weirdly haunting tremolo song of a Pheasant Cuckoo coming



from the woodland. Despite being a pretty large species it was far from easy to see and there was great excitement when it flew across the road and eventually settled for long enough to be scoped. It was a really smart bird with creamy underparts, speckled brown upperparts, a short brown crest and a dramatic, broad, white tipped tail – what a beauty! Moreover, this uncommon brood parasite arrives in Belize only for the breeding season and the timing of our tour couldn't have been better.

We reached the Belize Botanical Gardens in late morning to be met and greeted by Harry, one of the property's chief educators. He gave a fantastic tour of the gardens and spent quite some time in the orchid house where we enjoyed, among others, the beautiful Black Orchid, the National flower of Belize. Isaias was in fine form and continued to turn up great birds as Harry showed remarkable patience as we were constantly distracted by the avian action all around. We had great views of Lesson's Motmots and Band-backed Wrens as well as some busy feeding flocks including Black-cowled Orioles, Masked Tityras, Red-legged Honeycreepers, Greenish Elaenia, and a bevy of wintering warblers; Northern Parula, American Redstart, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green and Worm-eating Warblers. And, there was a White-bellied Wren and a small gathering of Black-headed Trogons by the Maya House just before the heat of early afternoon signaled it was time to head back to the vehicles for cold drinks, and then onto the lodge for lunch.

Fajitas in various forms proved popular at lunch before we settled for a little downtime in mid-afternoon. For those not wanting to rest, or bathe in the spring-fed pool, the balcony feeders were alive with dazzling visitors such as Collared Aracaris, Yellow-winged Tanagers and flocks of male Red-legged Honeycreepers lighting up the trees like fairy lights. Sharon was treated to a fine male Canivet's Emerald below the balcony and Alan, Mike and all the photographers were in their element!

After an early supper we headed out for a night drive along Black Rock Road where our guides used their spotlighting skills to find a couple of Common Pauraques along with great views of a Northern Potoo, and there was even a Yellow-crowned Night-heron foraging in the rough pasture. A Striped Hog-nosed Skunk jogged through a citrus grove along with a brief Virginia Opossum. On the way back Isaias paused to show us the bizarre pendulant nest of a pair of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts hanging from a cave right beside the road. The swifts



were in residence but we managed to view them without too much disturbance as a fabulous first full day drew to a close.

**Fri., Mar. 8**                      **Black Rock Lodge | Maya Flats | Spanish Lookout  
Mennonite Community**

After an early breakfast we headed for a long day out in the Mennonite farming community of Spanish Lookout. The skies were clear though a clammy, damp mist hung over the fields and forest. As we reached the George Price Highway, a pair of Keel-billed Toucans put on a fantastic show as they perched in a large Ceiba tree close the road flaring their bright red undertail coverts. Could there be any better way to start the day than with great looks at the National bird of Belize? We found more Keel-billed Toucans after passing through Santa Elena and then crossed the Belize River where fans and supporters of 'La Ruta' lined the river bank awaiting the racers of Belikin La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge, a grueling multi-day canoe race across Belize.

Isaias was required to stop and show a group permit at the Mennonite town hall in order to enter the vast tracts of farmland, agricultural areas, and wetlands that was to be our main focus for most of the day. After close encounters with Black-necked Stilts and Wood Storks, the warm air thermals rising above the fields brought on a flurry of raptors including Crested Caracara, Ospreys, Zone-tailed Hawks, Peregrine and a stunning pair of Aplomado Falcons, all of them appearing against crisp blue skies. We visited a lagoon with nesting Wood Storks and Yellow-crowned Night-herons and watched a Snail Kite hunting close by, yet another species for our ever-growing raptor list.

Around noon, the heat of the day directed us towards refreshment and lunch and we headed for Sisters Café in Spanish Lookout. After lunch (always an interesting experience at Sisters!) Isaias took us to the 'West Rice fields', an inspired decision on his part despite the heat. A couple of Collared Peccaries were wandering about in the fields, quite out of character as they're hunted in Belize and normally keep well hidden. Overhead, a Peregrine flushed a flock of shorebirds that flew around in panic and never really settled. At distance the shorebirds looked like a flock of a dozen Least Sandpipers with four larger sandpipers among them, perhaps Pectorals? Isaias was quick with his camera and subsequent study of the images showed the smaller shore birds to be



Pectoral Sandpipers and the four larger birds, American Golden Plovers! It was a fine example of field photos being extremely useful for identification purposes. There was more to come as Isaias pointed to the skies and screamed “JABIRU!!”, and there was the magnificent beast cruising and gliding around on the warm air thermals with a couple of Wood Storks for comparison. On the walk back to the vehicles we enjoyed good views of the colorful head pattern of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, and a particularly approachable Roadside Hawk.

The rest of the afternoon was punctuated by a steady series of wonderful sightings. We found more Aplomado Falcons, a weedy field full of feeding White-winged Doves, a flock of over 20 Killdeer, and a lucky few in our party saw a flock of endemic Yucatan Jays fly across the road and into the ‘Yucatan Dry Forest’. We rounded off the day at a small stand of Caribbean Pines watching roosting Lesser Nighthawks before heading back to Black Rock Lodge for another delicious supper, the bird list and retired to those cozy cabanas.

**Sat., Mar. 9                      Mountain Pine Ridge | Mystic River Road | Douglas D’  
Silva Forest Camp | Chiquibul Forest Road | Caracol  
National Monument**

Once again we had an early start with a 6:00 am breakfast. Slaty-tailed and Black-headed Trogons offered major distractions around the cabins but we still managed to depart at a reasonable hour. For those arriving at the vehicles early, Isaias pointed out a couple of calling Northern Emerald Toucanets as they flew over, another species newly arrived to the area for the breeding season.

Once on the road we paused by a scrubby hillside on the outskirts of San Antonio where Isaias successfully found a pair of Cabanis’s Wrens and was especially excited to see his first Piratic Flycatcher of the spring!

We set out across Mountain Pine Ridge pausing briefly at the entrance gate where a lovely Plumbeous Kite perched and a Grace’s Warbler was foraging in the pines. The much improved road allowed for a quick drive to the edge of Chiquibul National Forest though we did stop to enjoy Acorn Woodpeckers on the utility poles and



marveled at a stunning Great Black Hawk along the way. A pair of White Hawks soared majestically over the Macal River Valley, and an Amazon Kingfisher showed especially well as we crossed the Guacomallo Bridge.

Thanks to the improved road conditions and an early start we arrived at Caracol National Monument in mid-morning. Perhaps the most famous Maya site in Belize, the majority of Caracol remains unexcavated but includes five plazas, an astronomical observatory and over 35,000 buildings identified to date. The whole area lies within the Chiquibul National Forest just a handful of miles from the Guatemalan border. The Sky Palace (or Caana) is among the most impressive and one of the largest man-made structures in Belize. Isaias and Jeffrey gave a fantastic introduction to the site and skillfully managed to combine birding with an excellent cultural and historical tour...we were clearly in very good hands.

Aside from the amazing historical element, Caracol just happens to be set in pristine rainforest habitat and was incredibly productive for some tricky forest species. Isaias did well to purse out some of these on a steady two mile walk around the site. We heard (but did not see) a Keel-billed Motmot calling for a solid 10 minutes with a Lesson's Motmot calling nearby though the Keel-billed flatly refused to come any closer. For those standing close to Isaias, they had the great fortune to see a pair of Ruddy Ground-doves, definitely one of the more difficult forest species to see well. As we moved out into an open area a Short-tailed Hawk and a Plumbeous Kite soared overhead and we had the most amazing sequence of woodpecker sightings beginning with a pair of Black-cheeked at the nest, followed by Golden-olive, Golden-fronted, Lineated and Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers. Furtive forest residents such as Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Yellow-olive Flatbill and Golden-crowned Warbler, and nesting Montezuma Oropendulas graced the forest too until the trail finally brought us back to a shaded picnic area and lunch. We'd already had a magical morning and there was more to come as our tireless guides laid out the most wonderful buffet lunch courtesy of Black Rock Lodge. Even better, we had two Mexican Red-rumped Tarantulas for company which Isaias proceed to pick up and demonstrate just how friendly and harmless they really are!

We left Caracol with enough time to include a short visit to the Douglas Da Silva forestry camp beautifully set amid stands of Caribbean Pine. We heard and then saw our first Ferruginous Pygmy-owl here as well as a great showing of warblers; Rufous-capped, Grace's, Black -throated Green and Black-and-white Warblers. The real



icing on the cake though was the wonderful display of Swallow-tailed Kites as they called, courted and perched amid the pines. Some were seen carrying nest material and the breeding cycle was evidently in full swing. To be surrounded by half a dozen of these majestic raptors was certainly one of the highlights of the day.

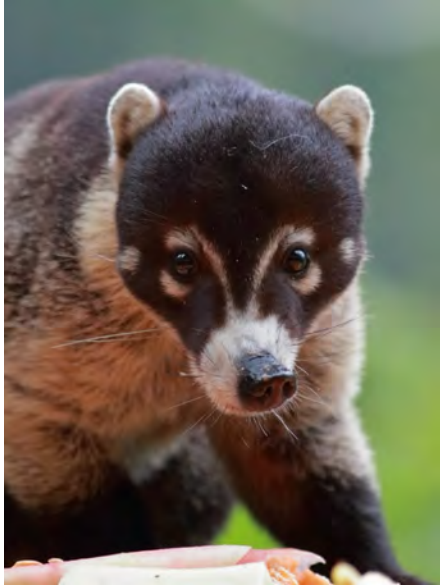
A long but rewarding day was drawing to a close as we passed through San Ygnacio looking forward to showers and dinner at Black Rock Lodge. We weren't quite finished, however, we weren't quite finished as Isaias made one last check of the Ornate Hawk-Eagle nest along Black Rock Road and, as luck would have it, the bird was home and standing on top of the nest in total beauty and glory. The scope views were incredible and the bird so cooperative that everyone had time to take phone-scope images and treasure the memory. It was a special moment for everyone but especially Nancy who'd traveled to Central America multiple times and 'penciled-in' Ornate Hawk-Eagle as one of her most desired species. What a day we had! We celebrated in true Black Rock style with a fine supper at the lodge and a quick, euphoric run through the bird list.

## **Sun., Mar 10                      Black Rock Lodge | Mountain Pine Ridge and Slate Creek Lookout | Green Hills Butterfly Ranch | Jade Jungle Resort**

The opening days of the tour had flown by and sadly it was already time to leave Black Rock Lodge and move onto our next destination at Jade Jungle Resort (formerly Pook's Hill Lodge). We bid farewell to the wonderful Black Rock staff who'd been so helpful and courteous but on the plus side we still had Isaias and Jeffrey with us until late afternoon. The drive out along Black Rock Road was riddled with really good birds beginning with a pair Collared Trogons, usually the most difficult of the four trogon species in Belize. A little farther down the road we enjoyed a singing Cinnamon-bellied Saltator while the area that earlier produced a Pheasant Cuckoo this time came up with a Gray-headed Kite, an uncommon bird in Belize and another raptor to add to our ever-growing list!

The drive continued through San Antonio towards the higher elevations of Mountain Pine Ridge. Isaias quite remarkably spotted a flock of finches close to the road and they turned out Black-headed Siskins, 32 of them! The day was going incredibly well as we parked up and then walked the trail to the spectacular Slate Creek





lookout. Warm air thermals rose over the forest and ravines, and we enjoyed a wonderful display of raptors over the next 45 minutes or so. Swallow-tailed and Plumbeous Kites, King Vultures, a pair of White Hawks, a perched Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle, an Ornate Hawk-Eagle and a couple of Bat Falcons all came into view while Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts could be seen cruising overhead.

We retraced our steps back down to the lowlands pausing for three White-nosed Coatis as they crossed the road and then arrived at Green Hills Butterfly Ranch. Isaias and Jeffrey laid out another wonderful buffet lunch; beans and rice, pasta, grilled chicken, fruit, salad, and fruit juice. Afterwards a local guide gave a wonderful tour of the butterfly house and shared his deep knowledge of the butterfly life cycle as well as the conservation efforts inspired by Green Hills Butterfly Ranch. There were interesting tidbits too...who would have guessed that the local butterflies are very fond of Gatorade due to its balanced mix of sugars and salts?

After the tour we settled down to the most electrifying display of hummingbirds at the public viewing area, many of them coming to feeders at arm's length! Stunning male White-necked Jacobins were prolific, flaring their pure white tails in a mesmerizing display. And, several species new to the trip were on view including Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Violet Sabrewing, and White-bellied Emerald with very good looks at Green-breasted Mangos and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds that had only been seen briefly to date.

It was a hot traffic free Sunday afternoon as we headed east along the George Price Highway before turning off south at the delightfully named village 'Teakettle', and then picked up a rather bumpy dirt road all the way to Jade Jungle Resort. A Least Grebe on a tiny cattle pond by the road provided a nice distraction and on arrival Keren was there to greet us with refreshing welcome drinks and a beaming smile. Mario soon appeared and introduced himself as he was to be our main guide for the following two days. Alas, the time had come to say goodbye to Isaias and Jeffrey, the father and son team who'd been exceptional guides and given us the best possible introduction to Belize. They would surely be missed.



Once settled into our cozy thatched casitas there was just enough daylight for a short walk down into the meadow below the lodge where we enjoyed nice views of a Lesson's Motmot, flights of Red-lored Parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets, Louisiana Waterthrushes strutting about on the grass and high flying Vaux's Swifts catching one last feed before sunset.

We gathered for happy hour at the honor bar and then headed downstairs for a sensational supper, a four course meal prepared and hosted by Tanya, the chief cook and head of kitchen; peanut slaw (delicious!), pumpkin & squash soup, curry chicken & rice, and almond slice or fruit plate for dessert were all consumed with gusto. In early evening it was quiet enough to hear a few owls around the lodge and Mario later confirmed both Spectacled and Mottled Owls were vocalizing after dinner.

## **Mon., Mar. 11                      Jade Jungle Resort and Forest Reserve**

With 300 acres of private forest reserve to explore we planned to focus on the myriad of trails in the surrounding pristine rainforest. A 'human-powered' day lay ahead and was most welcome after the bumpy transfer the previous day.

The pre-dawn air was alive with crepuscular species; Common Pauraque, Great Tinamou, Collared Forest-falcon and Central American Pygmy-Owl all being heard before meeting for morning coffee around 06:15am. The day began gray and overcast with light drizzle and we elected to keep pre-breakfast birding close to the lodge just in case it started to rain heavily. Black-cheeked Woodpeckers put on a nice show close to the lodge building, there was an impressive flock of 15 White-crowned Parrots, a Bright-rumped Attila was constantly singing and Black-headed Trogon, several Keel-billed Toucans, a White-whiskered Puffbird, and a Buff-throated Saltator plus a Pheasant Cuckoo calling in the distance... were all noted before breakfast!

After breakfast we tackled some the forest trails just as the morning began to brighten up. The resonant 'cooing' song of Blue Ground-Doves could be heard as well as the 'tooting' calls of a Central American Pygmy-Owl that was seen all too briefly just before it flew. Collared Aracaris showed well around the meadow and it was great to



watch a pair of Plumbeous Kites engaged in nest building behavior...spring was certainly in the air. The forest birding was a little more challenging but with perseverance we eventually had good views of Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Dusky Antbird, Barred Antshrike and that tiny member of the flycatcher family, the Northern Bentbill. Roaring Brook, the main river running through the property, hosted both Green and Amazon Kingfishers and as we walked towards the lodge through the open scrub habitat we had incredibly close views of a pair of Rufous Spinetails.

After lunch just about all of the group joined Mario for his archaeological walking tour around the Maya plaza on which the lodge is built. Mario, being of Maya descent, shared his knowledge with intimacy and humor, and his tour was one of the highlights of the trip. Moreover, his walk was neatly rounded off with a Gray-headed Kite flying over in wonderful afternoon light!

The group thinned out a little for the afternoon bird walk and quite a few folks elected to rest. But the walk along the entrance road ended up being rather special with several difficult rainforest species being heard including Scaly-breasted Tinamou, Gray-chested Dove, Scaled Pigeon and Northern Schiffornis. Of those species, we had excellent scope views of Scaled Pigeon, a species heard far more frequently than seen.

Another spectacular day came to a close as we gathered at the lodge for happy hour and another delicious supper (Greek salad and Chicken Picante) prepared by Tanya. The day had already been long but Mario generously offered a night walk with Carol and Sharon joining him. While night birds were apparently quite thinly spread, Mottled Owl, Middle American Screech-Owl and Common Pauraque were all heard but it was the other fauna that really came to the fore with Derby's Woolley Opossum, Green-headed Tree-snake and a Yucatan Banded Gecko all being spotlighted by Mario...Wow!

## **Tues., Mar. 12                      Jade Jungle Resort | St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park | Hopkins Bay Resort | Tanager Rainforest Lodge**

This morning we had time for another pre-breakfast walk and it was pretty sensational with lots of activity not least of which was three species of trogon including fabulous views of a pair Slaty-tailed. A Bright-rumped Attila



was seen well along with Olive-throated Parakeets and a White-fronted Parrot, the latter being new to the trip. Great Kiskadees performed throughout the morning as did as their much smaller cousin the Social Flycatcher offering great comparisons between the two. A Tennessee Warbler was new to the trip and we enjoyed the antics of a pair of Band-backed Wrens seen only briefly the day before. We finished off watching a remarkable gathering of no less than 12 Keel-billed Toucans, an uncommon spectacle to see that number together.

A long day of travel lay ahead and after another glorious breakfast we said our goodbyes to Tanya and Keren who'd been so friendly and welcoming during our visit. Mario would be with us for a little while longer. As we departed along the access road we again found the Least Grebe residing on the cattle pond by the road, this time joined by three Blue-winged Teals and a juvenile Little Blue Heron, and a couple of stunning Fork-tailed Flycatchers in the adjacent meadow.

We passed through Belmopan, the capitol of Belize, and then drove along the Hummingbird Highway towards the Caribbean with a perfectly timed stop at St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park. It was a fine opportunity to cool off in the shade by the crystal clear turquoise waters, Sharon and Shirley being bold enough to join the other bathers on site and go for a paddle. In the meantime we noticed a troop of Yucatan Black Howlers right above the swimming hole. They were quite passive at first but there was something about the frolicking tourists below that they didn't appreciate and they began dropping sticks, branches and eventually fecal matter into the water. Needless to say we didn't see too many folks getting into the water after that. The birding at the Blue Hole, however, was most exciting and the surrounding woodland hosted some wonderful rainforest species. A Royal Flycatcher was only heard but we had much more success with a pair Sulphur-rumped Flycatchers that appeared to be building a nest. Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers were new to the trip and we had yet more success with a pair of Collared Trogons and Mario got pretty excited about those. Black-faced and Blue-black Grosbeaks were seen too and we amassed an impressive list of warblers including Blue-winged, Worm-eating, Kentucky and Hooded.

We pressed on along the Hummingbird Highway towards the coast where we had a lunch appointment at Hopkins Bay Resort. The drive was interrupted in the most dramatic fashion by a male Great Currawong flying



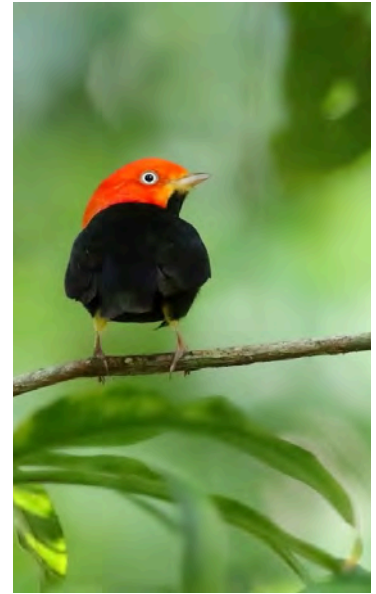
across the road just south of Six Mile Junction. This impressive terrestrial *cracid* is only rarely encountered away from major conservations areas in Belize and those in the lead vehicle were fortunate indeed to see one on this tour especially with a Laughing Falcon seen at the same spot!

Brown Pelicans, Royal and Sandwich Terns, and a Laughing Gull could be seen along beach front as we ordered and waited for lunch at the resort. Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised on the ocean breezes and Sanderlings, Spotted Sandpipers and a Willet could be watched foraging along the white sandy shore. A couple of brutish Black Spiny-tailed Iguanas were hanging out near the restaurant too, a new reptile for the trip. Lunch was also our appointed time to meet Steve Choco, our new guide for the next four days, and time to bid farewell to Mario who'd been a wonderful leader and field companion during our time at Jade Jungle Resort. Steve soon got things off to racing start when he found a Cinnamon Humminbird on a nest in the gardens at Hopkins Bay Resort.....for sure we were going to be in very good hands!

The southward journey towards Steve's hometown of Big Falls was peppered with great raptor sightings. A Short-tailed Hawk (light morph), a Plumbeous Kite and a Crested Caracara as well as numerous Roadside Hawks and American Kestrels certainly enlivened the journey. On arrival at Tanager Rainforest Lodge we received a genuinely warm welcome from site manager Cathy Choco and after a brief orientation, and very refreshing welcome drinks we were escorted to our beautiful new quarters. There was just enough light left in the day to spot our first Orange-billed Sparrows before we gathered for happy hour in the lovely family run atmosphere of the lodge, and reflected on a day that saw us travel through Cayo, Stann Creek and Toledo Districts!

### **Wed., Mar. 13                      Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Blue Creek Village and trails | Dump Rice Fields**

The day began with a raucous dawn chorus of Plain Chachalacas that could be heard from all corners of the lodge and beyond! Steve said the chachalacas became especially vocal when there was a hot day in the works! At 06:15am it already felt quite warm and it certainly seemed like Steve was going to be correct. The birding from the verandah, coffee and muffins in hand, was simply outstanding. Steve had strategically placed feeders



around the lodge grounds and the birds responded accordingly. The Orange-billed Sparrows favored the shaded feeder near the swimming pool as did the Buff-throated Saltator while the tanagers ‘wowed’ us as they came to the feeder in the middle of the lawn; Blue-gray, Scarlet-rumped, Crimson-collared, Golden-hooded, Yellow-winged and Summer Tanagers all showing up and thrilling us before breakfast! We enjoyed dazzling Black-cowled and Baltimore Orioles as well as a fine male Hooded Warbler around the deck, and Northern and Louisiana Waterthrush strutted about on the lawns. Judy spotted a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper as we made a short loop around the grounds and the process of searching for it turned up a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Tropical Pewee, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet and a Gartered Trogon. Spring was very much in the air with Yellow-green Vireo and Piratic Flycatcher newly arrived for the breeding season, both of which were singing and Steve’s first of the year.

After a delicious buffet breakfast we headed south-west through Big Falls to the beautiful wooded valley and village of Blue Creek. The day had really warmed up and the shade was most welcome as we walked through the sun-dappled forest. The turquoise waters of the river attracted Amazon and Green Kingfishers, and a perched Common Black Hawk totally focused on searching for prey, probably amphibians. The walk itself was incredibly productive for some of the more ‘difficult-to-see’ rainforest residents such as White-breasted Wood-Wren, Rufous Mourner and, for the third time on this tour, a pair of Collared trogons. Lesson’s and Tody Motmots were both heard calling and Steve miraculously found the Tody Motmot perched in mid-canopy and scoped it for all to see. As if that wasn’t enough, a stunning Royal Flycatcher came in to view at the same time as a Gray-chested Dove and a Bright-rumped Attila. The walk back down the creek was enlivened by more Black-headed and Gartered Trogons, and a clear ‘wave’ of migrants as the flowering Quamwood Trees filled up with Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, and Black-and-white Warblers seemed to be everywhere, all of them bound for North America for the breeding season.

Steven, true to form, organized a wonderful lunch at Yona’s riverside restaurant just as we returned from the hike. It was hot and the refreshment well received and, for those wanting to cool off, we had the optional bonus of a dip in the waters of blue creek straight after lunch.



A Gray Hawk was noted on the drive back to the lodge and after a little downtime some of the group gathered for an afternoon bird walk with Steve while others chose to relax and make full use of the property's beautiful swimming pool. Bird activity was admittedly quite limited in the heat but after a while we had great success with extraordinary views of a Long-billed Gnatwren, a 'rusty' female Barred Antshrike, several Yellow-billed Caciques and a challenging yet rewarding experience with a Bare-crowned Antbird. As we walked back the lodge, Central American Agoutis foraged around the edge of the lawn and Common Pauragues began their evening vocal ritual nice and early.

Steve's wife Cordelia prepared a delicious three course meal after which we retired to our cozy casitas, or at least most of us did...Steve and Sharon heard a Mottled Owl calling by the parking area and went over to investigate, ultimately being rewarded with breathtaking views of the owl in the spotlight!

## **Thurs., Mar. 14                      Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Tunich Ha Ecological Center | Punta Gorda | Ixcacao Maya Chocolate Farm**

An early start saw us heading south for our next adventure. Tunich Ha Nature Reserve and Ecological Center situated on the outskirts of Punta Gorda would be our destination where Nick and Jessica, two of Steve's close friends, run the reserve and in season host participants of the Belize Hawk Watch program at their guest house.

On reaching Tunich Ha a few interesting seed-eaters were seen along the entrance road including Blue Grosbeak, Blue-black Grassquit, Thick-billed Seedfinch and several Variable and Morelet's Seedeaters. The flycatchers generated plenty of attention too with great comparative views of Great Kiskadee and Social Flycatcher, and the remarkable 'squeaky toy' song of a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher newly arrived for the spring.

The birding proved to be out of this world inside the reserve with a constant stream of species served up by Steve; Olive-throated Parakeets, Slaty-tailed and Gartered Trogons, Greenish Elaenia, White-collared Mankin, a small group of White-collared Swifts flying over and a giant Blue Morpho butterfly, all within minutes of stepping out of the vehicles. Jessica prepared a fine buffet breakfast after which we birded from center's second floor balcony with fantastic results. Hummingbirds were very much to the fore with Rufous-tailed Hummingbird,



Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits, White-bellied Emerald and a stunningly beautiful Purple-crowned Fairy feeding on the flowering Blue Trumpet Vines. A Yellow-olive Flatbill, yet another member of the flycatcher family, showed nicely from the balcony too. We spent some time walking the reserve's trails and had fine views of Tawny-crowned Greenlets by the river, extraordinary looks at males of Red-capped and White-collared Manakins, a pair of regionally rare Mistletoe Tyrannulets engaged in nesting behavior, and a daytime Common Pauraque roosting on the forest floor.

By late morning it was getting hot and time to head a little further south to the charming coastal town of Punta Gorda. Magnificent Frigatebirds drifted overhead and a seafront jetty harbored a number of roosting terns including Royal, Sandwich and Forster's Terns, the latter being new to the trip. After a brief stop by Cattle Landing where we saw Mangrove Swallows, we drove north and then west along a bumpy dirt road to our lunch spot at Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate Farm. Henry, our host, was a superb guide deeply immersed in the process of growing cacao, the science and history behind making chocolate, and fiercely proud of his family's chocolate business in San Felipe. His mom prepared a delicious Belizean lunch including the signature chocolate chicken dish along with veggies and homemade hot pickle! During the tour numerous varieties of chocolate samples and drinks were prepared and consumed, and souvenirs eagerly snapped up from the gift shop afterwards.

Later, almost all the group elected for some downtime back at the lodge and even the locals mentioned it was an unusually early start to the dry season. Cordelia prepared another fabulous three course dinner after which we clambered into the vehicles for a night drive. After trying some spots around the village, Steve drove out to the peace and quiet of the dump. Eventually we found a calling Striped Owl in a palm plantation quite close to the road and the bird gave the most wonderful show in the spotlight with exceptional views through the scope. The day had drawn to a close in the most spectacular fashion - Striped Owl is both uncommon and local in Belize.





**Fri., Mar. 15                      Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Red Bank Village | Roseville |  
Big Falls | The Dump**

After coffee and cinnamon rolls on the verandah we headed north along the Southern Highway towards the settlement of Red Bank. Amazingly, Steve noticed some quail by the road at Blaydon Reserve and after pulling over he managed to coax them into view as they pushed nervously through the grasses....they were Black-throated Bobwhites, also known as Yucatan Bobwhite, and a regional endemic. As luck would have it, a pair of Mangrove Vireos called at the same spot and we had excellent views of those as well as a couple of beautiful Fork-tailed Flycatchers. The day was off to an excellent start!

A little later we drove the dirt roads towards Red Bank passing through pine savannah habitat where Steve spotted a couple of exquisite Aplomado Falcons perched up for scope views. A Piratic Flycatcher was very vocal at the Scarlet Macaw B & B, our breakfast spot and namesake of one of the major targets of the morning. In the meantime, Jeffery showed off his field skills when he whistled in some very conversational domestic turkeys in the backyard. Breakfast was interesting and tasty with breadnut fruits, chicken, black bean dip, and wonderful homemade tortillas.

We left the pine savannah behind and ascended into the rolling hills, essentially a mix of rainforest and Mennonite farmland. A pleasant walk along through the Florentine property along the Swazey River provided shade and some great birding with exceptionally good looks at a pair of Rufous-breasted Spinetails engaged in courtship behavior, a pair of nest building Golden-hooded Tanagers and a curiously patterned Dusky-capped Flycatcher showing aberrant whitish-lemon patches on its crown. It was paired with a perfectly normal Dusky-capped Flycatcher, both birds collecting nest material. The breeding cycle for many of these tropical species was very much in the air. Suddenly and without warning we heard the unmistakable deep screech of macaws and there, cruising high above the hillside in what seemed like slow motion, a pair of stunning Scarlet Macaws flying across the horizon. While they never landed the views were pretty good, and this is a rare bird in Belize with perhaps less than 150 individuals at large throughout the country. Soon afterwards we were crossing the Swazey River via a slightly precarious ford and into the rural agricultural belt of Roseville. Steve had a viewpoint in mind



where he'd seen macaws earlier in the season but on this visit it wasn't to be. On the other hand, a partially drained and overgrown settling pond made the visit totally worthwhile as we had unprecedented views of two or three Ruddy Crakes feeding out in the open. The same spot hosted a small flock of Blue-winged Teal, a couple of Solitary Sandpipers, a Bare-throated Tiger-heron and a Green Kingfisher!

It was proving difficult to leave Red Bank with a pair of White-necked Puffbirds as we paused at the Scarlet Macaw B&B for restrooms, and great looks at a perched Laughing Falcon along Red Bank Road. Eventually we headed back south and as we pulled into our lunch spot at Miss Perleen's in Big Falls, Nancy spotted a brightly colored oriole that disappeared rather quickly into the local backyards. Her description of 'bright orange and black' sounded very much like a Spot-breasted Oriole, a rare bird in Belize restricted to the south. Lunch at Miss Perleen's was a delightful mix of Indian and Caribbean influenced dishes served buffet style. No sooner had we settled down to enjoy the food then the oriole appeared in the parking lot aggressively displaying to its own reflection in the wing mirror of our truck. It was indeed a Spot-breasted Oriole and kudos to Nancy for such a great find, and especially thanks to the oriole for coming back for the whole group to see!

The afternoon back at the lodge was complicated by a power outage that shut everything down, not so easy to deal with in 90 degree heat and humidity. Some folks headed for the pool while Steve offered one last outing to the Dump Rice Fields, dump rice fields where the evening light was crisp and immaculate. We enjoyed close views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, our first Merlin, and Beth spotted our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird of the trip. A pair White-tailed Kites put on a nice show and a couple of Ruddy Crakes could be heard 'trilling' from a roadside ditch. As the sun set behind the Maya Mountains, a haunting chorus of singing Striped Cuckoos could be heard from across the field and marshes. The rank grasses at the dump provided a safe roosting place for seedeaters of various types including Blue Grosbeaks, Blue-black and Yellow-faced Grassquits, and good numbers of migrating Indigo Buntings and Dickcissels on their way to the grasslands of North America. It was a brilliant end to another brilliant day in Belize. We returned to the lodge to find the power back on with happy hour in full swing. The bird list followed and finished off with another of Cordelia's delightful meals. Her efforts, along with Sarah and all the wait staff, were duly acknowledged at supper and applauded.

**Sat., Mar. 16**

**Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Departures from Punta Gorda**

After breakfast we gathered for traditional group photos on the verandah and had the chance to thank Steve, Cathy, Cordelia, Sarah and all the staff who'd been so welcoming during our stay. Our wonderful 'dry season' adventure had drawn to a close and had been a joy to be a part of. We all boarded the same Tropic Air flight from Punta Gorda back to Belize City and on to our respective journeys home.

*Photos: Group (James P. Smith - JPS), Yucatan Black Howler (JPS), Great Kiskadee (Judy Buckham - JB), Collared Aracari (Michael Samuel - MS), White-necked Jacobin (MS), Caracol Ruins (Jeffrey Lyons - JL), Olive-backed Euphonia (JPS), Red-legged Honeycreeper (Alan Hull - AH), Keel-billed Toucan (Carol Beam - CB), Lesser Nighthawk (MS), Great Black Hawk (JPS), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (AH), Brahmas (JB), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (MS), Caracol Ruins (JPS), Birding Caracol (JPS), Black-cheeked Woodpecker (JPS), Ornate Hawk-Eagle (JPS), White-nosed Coati (MS), Black-headed Siskins (JPS), Long-billed Hermit (MS), Lesson's Motmot (JPS), Black-headed Trogon (JB), Group Birding (JPS), Jade Resort (JB), Masked Tityra (MS), Rufous Mourner (JPS), Tody Motmot (JPS), Red-capped Manakin (JPS), White-collared Manakin (JPS), Striped Basilisk (JPS), Group Birding (JPS), Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture (JPS), Clay-colored thrush (CB), View from Plane (JB)*