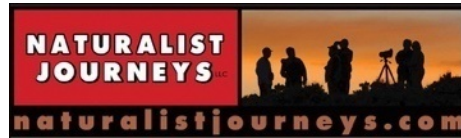


# Belize: Three Great Lodges

## February 1-11, 2024 | Trip Report

### Written by James P. Smith



**With local guides Isaías and Jeffry from Black Rock Lodge, Mario and Mike from Jade Jungle Resort, and Steve Choco from Tanager Rainforest Lodge. Our awesome participants were; Merle & Roger, Gwen & Garry, Robin & Bob, Freya & Kathy, Kevin, Eileen and Bobbie.**



#### **Thurs., Feb. 1 Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort | Black Rock Lodge**

Warm tropical air greeted Naturalist Journeys as our tour participants began to gather for a great three lodge adventure in central and southern Belize. For those coming from northern climes the warm air and blue sky was a welcome tonic. The guides from Black Rock Lodge divided forces with Isaías picking up early arrivals from the Black Orchid Resort, and Jeffry meeting Bobbie, Kathy and Freya at the Philip Goldson International Airport later in the afternoon. A Fork-tailed Flycatcher was a nice find on the airport fence before our early party began the journey west along the George Price Highway toward San Ygnacio. A few wading birds were seen along the way including Little Blue Heron, and Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets, while overhead soaring Black and Turkey Vultures were pretty much a constant feature.



Amigos Restaurant near Monkey Bay provided a welcoming venue for lunch and the first of many delicious Belizean meals. Open-air dining offered beautiful views of the Maya Mountains to the west and it was here that the birding started in earnest with a light morph Short-tailed Hawk soaring overhead with Black and Turkey Vultures. The west bound journey continued with a welcome pit-stop at the Orange Gallery near Georgeville where Masked Tityras and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers enlivened the stop. We passed through the bustling town of San Ygnacio before arriving at Maya Flats and traveled on the first of several miles of white dirt roads. The birding really picked up here leaving us no choice but to make several stops along the way. Gwen spotted a Little Blue Heron and a Northern Jacana on a small pond by the road, and we had exceptional views of a remarkably bold Amazon Kingfisher! Vermilion Flycatchers and Eastern Meadowlarks perched on the fence posts in the fields and Morelet's Seedeaters 'exploded' from the weedy fields in abundance. A little farther up the road we found a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat and a perched Laughing Falcon - we were off to a fabulous start!

On arrival the exceptionally well-drilled Black Rock staff offered welcome drinks and a brief orientation before escorting us to our well-appointed, spacious cabanas. It was impossible to ignore the magnificent view across the valley as the Macal River raged below and, for those not in a rush, eight Collared Aracaris and a male White-necked Jacobin put on a nice show at the balcony feeders.

We met up with Bobbie, Kate and Freya for dinner and enjoyed a delightful evening meal with cauliflower soup and a choice of barbeque spareribs or veggie lasagna for the main course. We got to know each other a little around the dinner table before retiring to our cozy cabanas for a good night's rest.

## **Fri., Feb. 2    Black Rock Lodge | Belize Botanic Gardens | Night Drive on Black Rock Road**

Coffee was being served on the restaurant balcony from 6am as we gathered overlooking the fast-flowing Macal River. Isaias was anxious to get things underway and found a Bare-throated Tiger-heron just as the first feeder birds started to appear including several Olive-backed Euphonias and Collared Aracaris. Derek (from the wait staff) spotted a roosting King Vulture on the far side of the valley which was duly scoped from the balcony. Isaias was full of energy and moved off towards the staff quarters where wintering migrants such as Wilson's, Hooded





and Magnolia Warblers, Gray Catbird and Wood Thrush all appeared and Short-billed Pigeons gave great views as they perched and called from the Cecropias. Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, Red-throated Ant-tanagers and a Central American Agouti all showed up before we

moved off toward the lodge's organic farm and ponds. Some great birding here included Russet-naped Woodrail, an American Pygmy Kingfisher, Black Phoebe and a couple of stunning male Red-capped Manakins. For identification enthusiasts a pair of calling Couch's Kingbirds was especially instructive when compared to the more abundant, vocalizing Tropical Kingbirds. Breakfast brought us back to the lodge where the classic 'Belizean breakfast' proved to be a popular choice.

Afterwards we met in the parking lot but before climbing into the vehicles Isaias noticed a distant 'shape' against the cliff face high above the lodge. It was an Orange-breasted Falcon, one of the rarest raptors in Central America though thankfully the Belize population is quite stable. With two scopes trained on the falcon, most of the group had decent views before it dropped away and out of sight.

By the late morning, we reached the Belize Botanical Gardens to be greeted by Melodious Blackbirds and a Gartered trogon in the parking lot. Harry, one of the property's chief educators, gave a fantastic tour of the gardens including the orchid house and showed us the famous Black Orchids, the National flower of Belize. Harry displayed so much patience even while we were constantly distracted by the avian action including great looks at Lesson's Motmots, one of which had a damaged left eye and some nice feeding flocks including Red-legged Honeycreepers, Greenish Elaenia, Lesser Greenlet and a whole host of warblers including American Redstart, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Green Warblers. We also took the opportunity to visit the Maya House recognizing just how diminutive the early Maya people must have been.

A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was seen well in the botanic garden, as well as a calling Squirrel Cuckoo along with nice views of Black-headed Trogon, White-crowned Parrots, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper and several giant Blue Morpho butterflies, such a signature species of the tropics. It had been a magnificent morning but the heat of the day signaled it was time to head back to the cool comfort of Black Rock Lodge where a delicious lunch



awaited. Even there, our restless guide Isaias spotted a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle on the nest and a stunning soaring White Hawk from the balcony!



Fajitas (beef, shrimp or chicken) and a variety of other dishes were on the lunch menu after which we had the chance to relax and have after a little down time for the afternoon before we gathered for an early supper and then ventured out onto a night drive. Thanks to the efforts of Isaias and Jeffrey we found three or four Northern Potoos, one of which showed very well in the spotlight and then returned to the lodge amid the grumpy growls of Yucatan Black Howlers.

## **Sat., Feb. 3      Black Rock Lodge | Maya Flats | Spanish Lookout Mennonite Community**

The day dawned crisp and clear, and after an early breakfast we met in the parking lot to depart for a long day out. It was Kevin's birthday and no better way to start the day than with two Keel-billed Toucans in the parking lot, the National bird of Belize! There was some drama too as a Gray Hawk caught a White-crowned Parrot in flight and proceeded to carry it off in its talons screeching and squealing. The parrot created so much fuss that the Gray Hawk unexpectedly let it go, and it lived to fend off the marauding hawk for another day! As we descended to Maya Flats a short stop produced great views of Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-throated Warbler, lots of Eastern Meadowlarks, an American Kestrel, and a couple of the Vermilion Flycatchers.

Several more Keel-billed Toucans were seen along the drive toward the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout, our main focus for the day. Isaias used his connections to gain formal permission to enter the vast tracts of farmland, agricultural fields, and extensive wetlands. Even before we reached the main area a soaring Black Hawk-Eagle was seen right next to the road, and a field full of Fork-tailed Flycatchers along with one or two Scissor-tailed Flycatchers got things off to a sensational start! Yucatan Black Howlers could be heard growling from the nearby clumps of remaining native forest and the low-lying wetlands were full of Wood Storks, some on them resting on the ground in addition to good numbers soaring in the air. We found a pair of Aplomado Falcons and lots of spectacular wetland species such as Roseate Spoonbill, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Limpkin, Ringed Kingfisher, Common and Purple Gallinules. But if anything it was the raptors that stole the





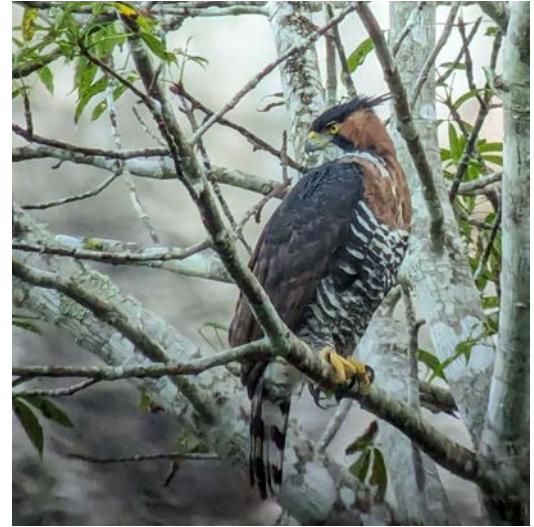
show as Black-collared and Zone-tailed Hawks flew over, several Ospreys, a Peregrine, another Aplomado Falcon, a pair of soaring White-tailed Hawks and a pair of Bat Falcons all came into view within a few minutes. It was a genuine raptor extravaganza!

A soaring juvenile Gray Hawk rising on hot air thermals over Spanish Lookout village indicated it was perhaps time to take a lunch break at the delightful Sisters Cafe. Fajitas (beef or shrimp) and quesadillas proved to be popular as did the view from the back of the cafe with American Redstart, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Summer Tanager keeping us entertained.

After lunch we returned to the fields passing by acres of rough pasture full of grazing Brahmin Cows. Isaias explained it was a hardy species far more capable of surviving the hot days of the dry season where trials with other cattle breeds had failed. We ventured to an area that Isaias simply called “the new rice fields” but was still within the greater area of Spanish Lookout. After pausing to observe Roadside Hawks, a Northern Harrier, and a Short-tailed Hawk, we left the comfort of the air-conditioned vehicles and wandered out into the fields. It was hot, really hot and pretty difficult to imagine it was still early February! Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures cruised by and teetered at close range offering excellent comparative views with nearby Turkey Vultures but it was really the wetland species that drew most attention with a flock of Wood Storks resting on the ground, some Northern Jacanas, a couple of Limpkins and the greatest prize of all, a mighty Jabiru standing sentinel like in the fields and the magnificent beast was duly scoped at a comfortable range without disturbing it. Flocks of Blue-winged Teal and Least Sandpipers foraged in the marshy shallows while Isaias simultaneously pointed out birds like Plain-breasted Ground-dove, Green-backed Sparrow, and Squirrel Cuckoo from the forested hillside to our west.

It was hot in late afternoon but Isaias had one last stop in mind, an area called the ‘Gravel Pit’. We first came across a roadside Grasshopper Sparrow and then moved on to a small copse of Caribbean Pine where we all enjoyed wonderful views of roosting Lesser Nighthawks as well as Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Northern Tropical Pewee and small numbers of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts overhead.

An extraordinary day was coming to a close but we weren’t quite finished as the magic of the Black Rock entrance road came into its own, even in the dying embers of the day. Isaias not only spotted an Orange-



breasted Falcon perched high upon the cliff face but also found a stunning adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle perched close to its nest right above the road! With only fifteen minutes of reasonable light left in the day the scopes were quickly set up on this stunning raptor. With its dark cap, crest plumes, dark moustacial stripe and heavily barred breast this species is not only visually impressive but also rare, though Belize just happens to be one of the best places in Central America to see it. We celebrated Black Rock style with a delicious supper at the lodge and Kevin's birthday festivities where the wonderful kitchen staff prepared a cake and sang their own rendition of Happy Birthday!

## **Sun., Feb. 4     Mountain Pine Ridge | Chiquibul Road | Caracol National Monument**

The day dawned with the most incredible chorus of Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds, Gartered Trogons, Lesson's Motmot, Wood Thrush, Northern Tropical Pewee and many other resident and wintering species found around Black Rock Lodge. Once again we had an early start with a 6:00 am breakfast and another long day ahead. We set out across Mountain Pine Ridge with the ultimate goal of reaching Caracol, the famous Maya ceremonial site. Just before reaching Mountain Pine Ridge some of us had the most incredible sighting of a Jaguarundi casually loping across the road, a small native feline with proportionately short legs and a relatively sleek, long-tailed appearance. This particular individual was a gray-brown morph. Not too long afterwards at Mountain Pine Ridge entrance, Gwen spotted a beautiful Azure-crowned Hummingbird!

The next major stop was the Douglas Da Silva forestry camp set amid beautiful stands of Caribbean Pine. We had our first Ferruginous Pygmy-owls here as well as a nice showing of Grace's Warblers, a couple of Black-throated Green Warblers and several Rusty Sparrows. We continued along the white dirt roads towards the fringe of the Chiquibul National Forest and slowed down to observe some raptors above the road, notably three soaring Double-toothed Kites. In addition we had our first really good views of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys much to the enjoyment of tourists passing by on their way to Caracol. As we approached Caracol there was more raptor action in the form of two Great Black Hawks soaring overhead...the day was going well!





We arrived at Caracol in late morning to be greeted by Slaty- tailed Trogons calling and a couple of King Vultures soaring overhead. Caracol is the largest and perhaps most famous Maya site in Belize and lies within the Chiquibul National Forest only a few miles away from the border with Guatemala. The Sky Palace (or Caana) is most impressive and one of the largest man-made structures in Belize. Isaias and Jeffrey gave a fantastic introduction to the site and skillfully combined birding with an excellent cultural and historical tour. It was magical walking around the ruins first discovered in 1937 by a logger searching for mahogany, though it subsequently became recognized as one of the most important political centers in the Mayan lowlands! At peak the area supported and hosted a population of about 120,000 people and covered a larger area than modern day Belize City. The majority of the site remains unexcavated but includes five plazas, an astronomical observatory and over 35,000 buildings identified to date. After the walking tour Isaias and Jeffrey laid out the most wonderful buffet lunch courtesy of Black Rock Lodge.

Aside from the amazing historical tour, the woodlands around Caracol had been incredibly productive for some of the trickier rainforest species. Notably we heard (but didn't see) a Keel-billed Motmot calling for about 10 minutes with a Lesson's Motmot simultaneously calling nearby. Even better, we came across a number of species congregating around an ant swarm, one of the more exciting avian events to be encountered in the forest. A striking black and yellow male Black-headed Strike-tanager called and attracted a whole range of woodcreepers including Tawny-winged, Olivaceous, Wedge-billed, and Northern-barred. And, a Worm-eating Warbler was seen on the trail as well.

The long drive back along Mountain Pine Ridge was highlighted by several Acorn Woodpeckers utilizing the telegraph poles while Isaias quite brilliantly spotted and identified an Olive-sided Flycatcher perched up for all the group to see. The same area produced a nice flight of six or seven King Vultures presumably heading off to some unknown roosting site. Some of the last birds of the day included a beautiful male Canivet's Emerald at the Pine Ridge entrance gate, and Snowy Egrets and a Tricolored Heron at the Macal River crossing in San Ignacio. A long but rewarding day was rounded off with another glorious dinner at Black Rock Lodge as we caught up and compared notes with group members who'd decided to stay and relax at the lodge for the day.

## **Mon., Feb. 5      Black Rock Lodge | Mountain Pine Ridge and Slate Creek Lookout | Green Hills Butterfly Farm | Jade Jungle Resort**

Sadly it was time to leave Black Rock Lodge and move onto Jade Jungle Resort (formerly Pook's Hills Lodge) as we said our goodbyes to the superb staff who'd been so helpful and courteous during our time there. On the plus side we still had Isaias and Jeffrey with us until late afternoon. The drive would take us to the higher elevations of Mountain Pine Ridge with the goal of reaching the spectacular Slate Creek lookout.

On reaching the entrance to Slate Creek the roadside parking area was nestled amid the pines, but we actually descended gradually through temperate rainforest and a very interesting mix of habitats. Isaias got very animated early in the walk when he spotted a Tropical Parula in the canopy. It was with a small feeding flock and, unfortunately, no one in our group managed to see it but the search did deliver some success with three or four White-browed Gnatcatchers, a pair of Hepatic Tanagers and great views of two Rose-throated Becards! There was more to come as Isaias noticed some motion right by the track recognizing that several birds were feeding around a swarm of army ants! Multiple rainforest species moved in to feast on the bugs attempting to flee from the dense swarms of ants and we had fantastic views of as many as five Ruddy Woodcreepers, two Tawny-winged Woodcreepers and really excellent looks at three Gray-headed Tanagers, another species with a reputation for following ant swarms. Just a few hundred yards later, having cleanly stepped over the ants, we were rewarded with great views of the forest and ravines from Slate Creek lookout. Warm air rose above the forest and several raptors could be seen riding the thermals over the next half hour or so. Two Great Black Hawks, three Double-toothed Kites, two King Vultures, a beautiful White Hawk, two Ornate Hawk-Eagles, and a high flying Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle were amongst the species seen. We were having the most incredible tour for raptors!



We retraced our steps back to the vehicles and drove back down into the lowlands pausing only for cold drinks at a village store before reaching Green Hills Butterfly Ranch. Once again Isaias and Jeffrey laid out another wonderful buffet lunch courtesy of Black Rock Lodge; rice and beans, grilled chicken, salad, and juices. We enjoyed a wonderful tour of the Butterfly House with a local guide and learned about the butterfly life cycle and the conservation efforts inspired by Green Hills Butterfly Ranch. Afterwards most of the group settled down to watch the incredible display of hummingbirds at the feeders some of which were at arm's length! The most abundant species was the White-necked Jacobin, many of them being males flaring their pure white tails but there was also a good showing of several species new to the trip including Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Violet



Sabrewing, and White-bellied Emerald plus it was a great opportunity to catch up with other hummingbirds that hadn't been seen particularly well to date including Green-breasted Mango and Scaly-breasted Hummingbird.



By mid-afternoon we were heading east towards the delightfully named village of 'Teakettle' where we turned off the George Price Highway headed south on a rather bumpy dirt road until we reached Jade Jungle Resort. Keren was there to greet us with refreshing welcome drinks while Mario, our main guide for the following two days, suddenly appeared and we received a very warm welcome all round. It was also time to say goodbye to Isaías and Jeffrey who'd been exceptional guides and given us a brilliant introduction to Belize. They were going to be missed.

After settling in to our beautiful thatched casitas we met with Mario for a late afternoon walk down to the 'meadow', actually a beautifully manicured open area set amid the rainforest by Roaring Brook. We had a very productive hour with highlights including a calling Central American Pygmy-Owl, a flight of over 40 Montezuma Oropendulas, noisy flocks of Olive-throated Parakeets and Red-lored Parrots, and a perched Bat Falcon, all before returning to the lodge to freshen up. Dinner was an absolute triumph, a sensational four course meal; peanut slaw, pumpkin and almond soup, veggie curry with rice, and pineapple-coconut cake for dessert. Tanya, the chief cook and her sister outdid themselves! With the day's bird list completed we headed off to our cozy casitas for a good night's rest.

## **Tues., Feb. 6      Jade Jungle Resort and Forest Reserve**

Jade Jungle Resort nestles within a 300 acre private reserve and, as guests of the lodge, we had a wealth of trails to explore through pristine woodland habitat. A 'human-powered day' was instore and would be most welcome after the bumpy transfer the previous day.

A major cold front pushed through overnight and temperatures at dawn were a relatively chilly 60 degrees. We met up with Mario for a pre-breakfast birding walk and it was lively as soon as we set off. Lineated Woodpecker, Master Tityra, and really great views of some spectacular Keel-billed Toucans in the tall cecropia trees around the main lodge building as well as Spot-breasted Wren, Black-headed and Buff-throated Saltators, White-collared Manakin, Short-billed Pigeons and Red-legged Honeycreepers along the entrance road. After an hour or so of exciting birding, along with a visit to the newly developed hydroponic vegetable garden, we headed

down to the dining room for a delicious breakfast (choices of granola with almond milk, homemade toast, eggs, salsa, bean dip, and a tasty fruit plate).



Beautiful crisp, clear conditions continued to brighten the day as we gathered outside the lodge after breakfast with perfect timing as a really interesting raptor drifted overhead and soared for a little while. There was some understandable confusion over the identification until the photographs revealed it was actually a Crane Hawk....yet another new raptor species for the tour! Soon afterwards we set off for a long walk with our first proper look at the magnificent trail system through the forest, and a second local guide by the name of Mike in attendance. Band-backed Wrens and their chattering calls were very vocal in the meadow and we all had great views of Rufous-tailed Jacamar and some of the forest skulkers such as Dusky Antbird and Barred Antshrike. A tiny forest flycatcher, the Stub-tailed Spadebill, was well heard off the trails but difficult to see though Eileen and Kevin scored a major victory in gleaning great views of this true denizen of the rainforest...they were thrilled to put it mildly! Towards the end the loop we found a Pale-billed Woodpecker at a nest hole with a pair Black-cheeked Woodpeckers nesting in the same tree! And, thanks to Mario's efforts, we had exquisite looks at a pair of Rufous-breasted Spinetails skulking low down in the reeds by the trail.

After lunch almost all of the group joined Mario for an archaeological walk around the Maya plaza on which the lodge is built. Being Maya himself, Mario shared his intimate knowledge with enthusiasm and humor, and his talk was regarded as one of the highlights of the trip. The afternoon bird walk was special too. We hadn't gone too far up the road before we found a White-colored Manakin and a Red-capped Manakin, both of them males, feeding at close range in a fruiting Firebush (aka Polly Redhead). A migrant Swainson's Thrush was feeding on the same red berries and a Mealy Parrot was heard calling as it flew over. Farther up the entrance road we were back into wooded habitat and had nice views of more rainforest species including Northern Schiffornis, and Long-billed Gnatwren. Another spectacular day came to a close with a calling Collared Forest-falcon at dusk, and several Common Pauriques. We gathered for happy hour reflecting on the day, and then settled down for another delicious supper prepared by Tanya.

The day had indeed flown by but it wasn't quite over for some in the group as Mario offered an after dinner night walk with Bobbie, Kevin, Roger and Merle somehow finding the energy to join him! "Fortune favors the bold" as they say, and our intrepid travelers returned with tales of a Kinkajou and an Ocelot spotlighted by Mario at the edge of the meadow. Ocelot is only rarely encountered on night walks and Mario, apparently, was beside himself with excitement!



## **Wed., Feb. 7    Jade Jungle Resort | Blue Hole National Park | Hopkins Bay Resort | Tanager Rainforest Lodge**

A long day of travel lay ahead beginning in Cayo district, with lunch in Stann Creek district and ultimately reaching our final destination (Tanager Rainforest Lodge) in Toledo district.



It was another clear, slightly chilly start to the day with temperatures around 58 degrees at first light. A Spectacled Owl (identified by sound recordings) had been heard calling in the pre-dawn hours and appeared to have worked a circuit around the cabins. The morning light was beautiful as we met Mario for another pre-breakfast walk and straight away had stunning views of Keel-billed Toucans and Collared Aracaris! Woodpeckers were keen to show themselves too with Golden-fronted, Pale-billed, Lineated and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers all on view. And, there was drama in the air as we witnessed one of a pair of Bat Falcons catch and kill a songbird in flight. The falcon perched with its prey and the spotting scopes revealed the songbird to be an Olive-sided Flycatcher! The morning also allowed us to catch up with really good views of Band-backed Wrens along with wonderful looks at Black-faced Grosbeaks by the hydroponic station. Another glorious breakfast sent us on our way as we said our goodbyes to Tanya and Keren who'd been so friendly and welcoming during our visit. Mario and Mike would be with us for a little while longer as we drove through Belmopan, the national capitol, and then along the Hummingbird Highway towards the Caribbean Sea. We had time to stop at St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park, first walking the trail to St. Herman's Cave itself which just happened to be very birdy (we had great views of White-breasted Wood-wren, Hooded Warbler, Great Antshrike...wow!) and then onto 'the blue hole' where Bobbie, Freya and Kate took the opportunity to cool off in the crystal clear turquoise waters.

Afterwards we pressed on along the Hummingbird Highway heading towards the coast through rolling countryside while enjoying views of the Sleeping Giant Mountains eventually arriving at Hopkins Bay Resort for a welcome lunch in the shade. Brown Pelicans, Royal Terns and a Laughing Gull could be seen along beach front as we waited for lunch while Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised on the ocean breezes overhead. Lunch was also the time to meet up with Steve Choco, our guide for the next four days, and time to bid farewell to Mario and Mike who'd been wonderful guides and field companions for the last two days.

After lunch we headed towards Steve's hometown of Big Falls, the journey being enlivened by a few birds in the pine-savannah along the way including Roadside Hawks, American Kestrels, Cattle Egrets and Red-lored Parrots, along with a short pit stop for bananas in Bella Vista.



Arrival at Tanager Rainforest Lodge was greeted with a warm welcome from new site manager Cathy and after a quick orientation and refreshing welcome drinks we were shown to our new quarters and gathered in the cozy, family run atmosphere of the lodge. There was just enough daylight left to spot our first Orange-billed Sparrows from the verandah as a Collared Forest-falcon called at dusk! Dinner was a delight, with choices of sautéed chicken or fish cakes and house made tortillas prepared on site by Steve's wife Cordelia. Afterwards Steve generously offered a night walk where Kinkajou and Mottled Owl proved to be among the highlights. Meanwhile, Kate and Freya wrestled with the wildlife in their own cabin in the form of a beautiful Black Scorpion!

## **Thurs., Feb. 8      Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Big Falls | Dump Rice Fields**

The day began from the lodge verandah, coffee and muffins in hand. We were set for a beautiful day at Big Falls and the birds responded accordingly with a wonderful pre-dawn chorus of Mottled Owl, Little Tinamou and two calling Collared Forest-Falcons!

This was Steve's domain, a man who'd grown up in Big Falls and been the lead guide at the lodge for many years so we were in very good hands! Steve escorted us on a couple of easy paced walks around the lodge, pre-breakfast and post-breakfast. The birds came thick and fast highlighted by a pair of White-winged Becards above the casitas as well as Scarlet-rumped and Golden-hooded Tanagers over the pool, Cinnamon-bellied, Buff-throated and Black-throated Saltators, Black-cowled, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles at the feeders, and a whole host of wintering warblers including American Redstart, Hooded, Chestnut-sided and Kentucky Warblers, as well as Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes on the lawns offering great side-by-side comparisons. There was even a high-flying Muscovy Duck to add to the list, and a noisy chorus of Plain Chachalacas. A family group of Smoky-brown Woodpeckers put on a nice show and we had a wonderful Golden-olive Woodpecker, one of the more difficult woodpeckers to see well. Meanwhile back at the lodge, a Stripe-throated Hermit found its way inside the dining area at breakfast and Steve gently ushered the tiny little sprite back in to the outdoors! For mammal enthusiasts, Central American Agoutis were quite easy to see on the lawns and we enjoyed watching Deppe's Squirrels feasting on cohune nuts, while later in the day Eileen had great views of a Neotropical River Otter from her riverside hammock!



A well-timed lunch break at Miss Perleen's in Big Falls was a real treat with a buffet of Indian and Caribbean influenced dishes followed by some 'downtime' in the heat of the day, although several in our group did accept Steve's invitation to go tubing down the Rio Grande River running right through the lodge property.



Around 3:30pm we drove to the Dump Rice Fields to feast on wonderful views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures in perfect light, and found our first Merlin and Ruby-throated Hummingbird of the trip. A pair White-tailed Kites showed well and Steve worked incredibly hard to get the whole group on to a couple of Ruddy Crakes foraging and 'trilling' in a roadside ditch just as the sun set behind the Maya Mountains.

**Fri., Feb. 9      Tanager  
Rainforest Lodge | Nim Li  
Punit | Blue Creek | Dump**

## **Rice Fields**

Mottled Owl and Bright-rumped Attila could be heard calling just before dawn and, as we gathered for coffee and muffins at 6:15 am, Hooded and Magnolia Warblers, and Blue-gray Tanager were noted off the verandah. Around 06:30 am we made the short journey north to the Maya Archeological site at Nim Li Punit. Steve had enough local connections to gain entry before official opening hours and his close friend Nate joined us and delivered a brilliant commentary on this recently discovered yet fascinating site. Nim Li Punit means 'Big Hat' in Kekchi Maya and was estimated to host as many as 7000 residents at peak between 5 AD and 8 AD.

The birding was electrifying and the folks in the second vehicle were treated to amazing views of a Bare-throated Tiger-heron as it casually strolled across the Southern Highway! We had fine views of Montezuma Oropendula, a pair each of Pale-billed and Linneated Woodpeckers, Wood Thrush, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, Wedge-billed Woodcreepers, and Brown-crested and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers. The richest prize of all though, perhaps the 'Holy Grail' of Belizean rainforest birds, was wonderful views of a couple of Bare-crowned Antbirds, the male resplendent with black body, white wing bars and bizarre bright blue facial skin. Almost everyone in the group had great looks and Steve was beside himself that such fortune had come our way!

Our morning was far from over as we headed south-west through Big Falls to the beautiful wooded valley of Blue Creek. We'd barely stepped out of the vehicles when one the most exciting moments of the tour materialized overhead - a stunning Ornate Hawk-Eagle soaring right above us! As if that wasn't enough, a calling Black Hawk-Eagle flew in to join the party and Gwen spotted a Double-toothed Kite! The walk along the Blue Creek trail was a delight and the shade from the sun-dappled forest most welcome. The attractive river waters drew in Amazon, Green and Ringed Kingfishers and we had a couple of the more discrete rainforest flycatchers

including Ochre-bellied and Ruddy-tailed. Lesson's and Tody Motmots were both heard calling, and the Lesson's offered up nice views and Steve worked especially hard to coax in the Tody Motmot but the feisty little devil was having none of it! Meanwhile, Steve and his seamless professionalism had organized a wonderful lunch at Yona's riverside restaurant which awaited us as we returned from the hike. For those wanting to cool off there was dip in the waters of blue creek after lunch, and our bathers were watched intently by an Amazon Kingfisher on the opposite side of the river!



The drive back to Big Falls was interrupted by several Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and a Wood Stork in flight over the Dump rice fields after which we settled for some downtime and an early supper as Steve had plans for night birding! After checking several of his regular spots, Steve drove us all the way out to the Dump where he managed to find a calling Striped Owl in a palm plantation close to the road. The owl put on the most remarkable show and the whole group had wonderful spotlight views through the scope. Striped Owl is a scarce bird in Belize although Big Falls appears to be an especially good area for them. The evening was a wonderful success and we rounded it off with several Common Pauragues resting on the dirt roads as we headed back to the lodge for a solid night's rest.

## **Sat., Feb. 10      Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Tunich Ha Ecological Center | Punta Gorda | Ixcacao Maya Chocolate Farm**

Coffee and cinnamon rolls at the lodge at 6:15 am got the morning off to a fine start before heading off south for our adventure to Tunich Ha Nature Reserve and Ecological Center on the outskirts of Punta Gorda. Two of Steve's closest friends, Nick and Jessica, run the reserve and also host birders in their guest house. A few interesting seed-eaters were seen along the entrance road to the reserve including a Thick-billed Seedfinch, several Morelet's Seedeaters, and Kevin had the great fortune to spot a female Painted Bunting resplendent in brilliant green and yellow plumage. Inside the reserve the birding was just out of this world with a torrent of species served up by Steve who somehow managed to keep on top of it all! Olive-throated Parakeets, Slaty-tailed and Black-headed Trogons, Greenish Elaenia, Red-capped and White-collared Mankins, Pale-vented and Short-billed Pigeons, Lesser Greenlets, and a small group of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts flying over were all on view within minutes of stepping out of the vehicles.



Jessica prepared a fine buffet breakfast after which we birded from center's second floor balcony before walking around the reserve's grounds. We had fine views of Tawny-crowned Greenlets by the river and heard the locally rare Black-crowned Antshrike while a bigger surprise was a singing Chestnut-headed Oropendula which we managed to scope for the whole group. The same trail was pretty good for smaller passerines and we had some of our best views of Long-billed Gnatwren, Northern Bentbill and Worm-eating Warbler. As the day warmed up, hot air thermals induced an increase in raptor activity with Common Black and Roadside Hawks soaring over Tunich Ha.

By late morning it was time to head further south to the pleasant coastal town of Punta Gorda. Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised overhead and one or two Yellow-crowned Night-herons roosted in the beach side mangroves as we gazed across the bay towards neighboring Honduras. Steve stopped by the playing fields at Cattle Landing and managed to rustle up excellent views of a couple of Mangrove Vireos, out first of the tour! Pleased with success we headed north enjoying a close group of Yucatan Black Howlers right by the road and then drove west along a bumpy dirt road for lunch at Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate Farm. Henry, our host, was a superb guide not only explaining the whole process of growing cacao, but also the science behind chocolate and the history of his family's business in San Felipe. He was a young man totally within the comfort zone of his chosen subject and it was lovely to witness. Moreover, his mom prepared a delicious Belizean lunch including the in-house famous chocolate chicken along home-made hot pickle! Naturally, numerous varieties of chocolate samples and drinks were prepared and consumed, and souvenirs snapped up from the gift shop for the folks back home.

True to form, Steve offered one last afternoon in the jungle back at the lodge. The hour was late and about half the group elected to opt out but with Golden-hooded Tanager, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Slate-headed Tody-flycatcher and multiple Great Antshrikes calling, the venture was well worth it.

Cordelia's farewell dinner was every bit as delicious as the previous evening meals and duly applauded. And then, sadly, it was time to head back to our cabanas for final packing and one last night at the lodge.

## **Sun., Feb. 11     Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Departures from Punta Gorda**

After breakfast we gathered for traditional group photos on the verandah and thanked Steve, Cathy, Cordelia, Sarah and all the staff for such a wonderful time before heading south to Punta Gorda airport for our respective journeys home. The tour had been a wonderful adventure laced with truly memorable wildlife experiences, great humor and group camaraderie!

James P. Smith  
Northfield, MA.

*Photos: Group (James P. Smith - JPS), Group Birding (JPS), American Pygmy Kingfisher (JPS), Northern Potoo (JPS), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (JPS), Ornate Hawk-Eagle (Kevin Parsons), Ruddy Woodcreeper (JPS), Caracol (JPS), Rufous-breasted Spinetail (JPS), Red-capped Manakin (JPS), Keel-billed Toucan (JPS), White-winged Becard (JPS), Worm-eating Warbler (JPS), Central American Agouti (JPS)*