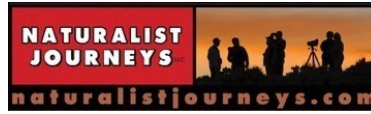


Christmas in Belize | Dec. 21 - 29, 2024

Trip Report | by Stephen Grace



Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Local Guide Steve Choco and Clients Susan, Anthony, Lee, Tuffy, Brendan, Julia and Bobbie



Fri., Dec 20 Early Arrival at Black Orchid Lodge

The day began with a sense of excitement for those of us who arrived early at Black Orchid Lodge, located along the Belize River. Surrounded by lush jungle, the lodge offered a stunning setting just outside Belize City. The river, swollen from recent rains, surged nearby, adding a dynamic backdrop to the vibrant greenery around us.

The lodge's namesake Black Orchids thrived among the foliage, lending an air of mystery and beauty to the grounds. As we explored, Green Iguanas sunned themselves and skirmished in the trees, occasionally plummeting through the canopy in a dramatic display.



Birdlife was abundant. Collared Aracaris perched in palms, a Black-headed Trogon offered us a fleeting glimpse, and the skies were alive with the calls of Red-lored Amazons and White-crowned Parrots. The humid forest air, rich with the sounds of nature, set the stage for the adventure ahead.

We also enjoyed our first taste of Belizean cuisine, savoring the fresh, vibrant flavors that define the region's dishes. Beyond the food, we were struck by the warmth and hospitality of the Belizean people. From the lodge staff to the locals we encountered, their genuine smiles and welcoming nature made us feel at home from the start.

That evening, our group gathered for dinner, and connections began to form. Birders and nature enthusiasts tend to find common ground easily, and it was wonderful to see the group bond so quickly. Two of the guests were familiar faces from previous trips, adding a sense of continuity, while five new friends brought fresh perspectives and enthusiasm to the table.

The group's diversity was one of its greatest strengths, spanning three decades of age and a range of birding experience—from curious newcomers to seasoned listers. Yet, the shared passion for exploring nature and connecting with the people of Belize bridged every gap. It was inspiring to witness such a dynamic mix of individuals united by their love of discovery.

Sat., Dec. 21 Black Orchid Resort | Flight to Punta Gorda | Tanager Rainforest Lodge

Our journey began with an exhilarating flight aboard a Cessna Grand Caravan, a 12-seater plane that offered stunning views of Belize's diverse landscapes. As Belize City faded from view, the scenery below transformed into a vibrant patchwork of rainforest, agricultural lands, and coastal beauty. Shrimp farms, citrus groves, and coconut plantations dotted the terrain, while the mangrove-lined shore met the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. Just offshore, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef—the world's second-largest barrier reef—stretched alongside its idyllic cays, low-lying islands surrounding the coral. Great Egrets soared over the wetlands, adding life to the breathtaking vistas.

Upon landing in Punta Gorda, we were warmly greeted by our local guide, Steve Choco—fondly known as Steve C to differentiate him from Steve Grace. With his Maya heritage and deep knowledge of the natural world, Steve



C brought an infectious enthusiasm to our adventure. His ready smile and skillful birding expertise set the tone for the day.

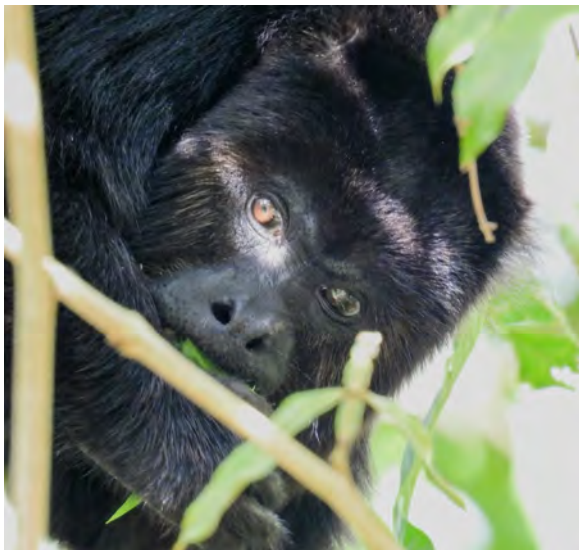
Our first birding stop along the coast was a feast for the senses. Mangrove Swallows darted over the water, their white rump patches flashing against their iridescent blue bodies. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, both adults and juveniles, posed beautifully for photographs, while Steve C impressed us with his digiscoping skills, capturing close-up images using our cameras. The highlight of the morning came with the sighting of a Morelet's Seedeater, a lifer for everyone in the group. Both males and females offered close, rewarding views. A Cinnamon Hummingbird, a regional specialty, added a touch of magic as it flitted among flowers, just after we marveled at a Common Black Hawk perched on a power pole.

A brief roadside stop introduced us to the fresh flavors of Belize, where we purchased sun-ripened papayas bursting with color and promise. These tropical treats would accompany us into the days ahead.

When we arrived at Tanager Rainforest Lodge, our home for the next five nights, we were immediately struck by the charm of this ecotourism project that actively supports the local Maya community. Nestled within a lush jungle setting, the lodge offered cozy bungalows and a warm welcome from our hosts. Lunch was a highlight, featuring quiche, tortillas, fresh fish, local beef, and vibrant homemade salsa. The hospitality was as unforgettable as the meal.

The lodge grounds were alive with activity. Over the next several days, the feeders would attract an array of brilliant tanagers, including Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray, Yellow-winged, Golden-hooded, and Crimson-collared. Cardinal family members, such as the striking Red-throated Ant-Tanager and the vibrant Summer Tanager, also made frequent appearances, adding to the colorful spectacle. With each new arrival, we were treated to the dazzling variety of hues and calls that filled the air, a reminder of the incredible diversity of birdlife that Belize so generously offers.

The surrounding forest yielded even more delights: the Golden-fronted Woodpecker, though the Velasquez's subspecies here sports a red front; the dramatic Lineated Woodpecker, reminiscent of the Pileated Woodpecker; and the elusive Rufous-breasted Spinetail, which eventually rewarded our patience with clear views. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks kept us alert with their fleeting appearances in the forest canopy, while a Black-headed Trogon dazzled with its bold plumage. Male Blue-black Grassquits, affectionately called Johnny Jump-



ups, added charm with their courtship displays of energetic leaping. A giant Green Iguana, glowing orange in his breeding colors, lounged in the foliage, adding reptilian flair to the scene.

Dinner that evening was a feast of flavors prepared by Steve C's wife and her talented kitchen team. Crisp, flavorful conch fritters were a crowd favorite, and the perfectly seasoned pork and shrimp entrées earned universal praise. Glazed bananas paired with flan provided a sweet and memorable finish.

By day's end, Belize had already captured our hearts, minds, and taste buds. It was the perfect beginning to an adventure filled with discovery and delight.

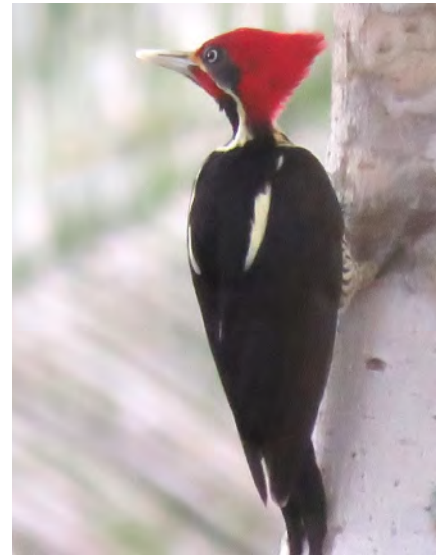
Sun., Dec. 22 Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Big Falls

The day began with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the lodge's common area. Belize is renowned for its exceptional coffee, and this morning's cup lived up to its reputation—a fitting start to a day of birding. With coffee in hand, we joined Steve C on the porch, where the sounds of the rainforest came alive.

The lodge grounds were buzzing with activity. A trifecta of Saltator species—Cinnamon-bellied, Black-headed, and Buff-throated—flitted through the trees, while Northern Tropical Pewees and Yellow-bellied Elaenias perched in the dappled sunlight. Hooded and Magnolia Warblers brightened the bushes alongside other New World warblers like American Redstart, Tropical Parula, and Chestnut-sided and Black-and-white Warblers. A Squirrel Cuckoo, a crowd favorite, bounded through the branches with squirrel-like agility, while a Masked Tityra perched atop a nearby tree. A Collared Aracari stole the show with its bold colors, and a dazzling male Baltimore Oriole added a vivid splash of orange and black against the greenery. Black-cowled Orioles, common at the feeders and throughout the grounds, also caught our attention with their gold and black color combination.

The haunting calls of a Bare-crowned Antbird teased us at close range, but true to its elusive nature, it remained hidden—a tantalizing reminder of the forest's mysteries.

Breakfast was a feast of flavors, featuring sopapillas with beans, fresh juices, tropical fruits, and traditional fare like bacon, eggs, and cereal. The lovely songs of Melodious Blackbirds provided a fitting soundtrack to the idyllic morning.



After breakfast, we explored the lodge property on foot, uncovering even more treasures. A tricky-to-see Yellow-olive Flatbill teased us with its movements, while an American Pygmy Kingfisher perched by a stream. The bird's diminutive size and vibrant plumage drew gasps of delight as it dove for a minnow in the trickling brook. A handsome male White-collared Manakin flitted through the understory, and a massive Green Iguana lounged lazily in the trees, its bright orange breeding colors a bold display of dominance. In the grass near the lodge, a Brown Basilisk—a species known for its ability to run across water—made an appearance.

Spot-breasted Wrens captivated us with their beautiful song and offered excellent views. Overhead, a flock of Wood Storks glided through windows of blue sky among the clouds—a breathtaking sight. Walking through the rainforest, home to the Maya for millennia, Steve C shared fascinating stories about local flora and fauna, including the sacred significance of the Ceiba tree, or “Tree of Life,” in Maya culture. Its roots, he explained, reach into the underworld, while its branches support the heavens. Anecdotes about his grandfather carving a canoe from a Ceiba tree, his family using machetes to cut Cohune Palm fronds for natural roofs and gutters, and locals gathering palm nuts for food offered a fascinating glimpse into the region's rich cultural heritage. These stories connected us to the traditions and ingenuity of the community, highlighting a deep connection to the land and its natural resources.

Later in the morning, a short drive brought us to kettles of Black and Turkey Vultures soaring on updrafts. While we scanned the skies for a King Vulture, Masked Tityras and Gray Hawks perched nearby, and Red-lored Amazons—parrots with autumnal red, orange, and gold plumage—brightened the treetops. A majestic Rain Tree stood sentinel, its sprawling canopy offering a moment of awe.

Walking along a rural roadside, we encountered a family of four riding motorbikes—a charming slice of local life. Birding highlights included a Boat-billed Flycatcher, a lookalike to the ubiquitous Great Kiskadee with a broader bill, and a furtive Blue-black Grosbeak, its gorgeous feathers mostly concealed among the shadows. A male Black-headed Trogon offered fantastic views of his shimmering blue-green plumage. An Orange-billed Sparrow posed for photos, while a flyby glimpse of a Keel-billed Toucan—Belize's national bird—felt like a fitting tribute to this beautiful country. It left us craving more satisfying views of this striking avian ambassador.

Lunch was at a restaurant in Big Falls run by Miss Pearleen, a delightful woman who served a delicious Belizean buffet. As we enjoyed our meal, we took in the beauty of the restaurant grounds, where Bamboo Orchids bloomed and Spot-breasted Orioles flitted through the trees, adding a lively touch to the serene atmosphere.



The afternoon offered a chance to relax and choose our own adventures. Some decided to kayak down the river along the Tanager Rainforest Lodge property to nearby hot springs, enjoying a refreshing rain shower in the rainforest as they paddled; others opted for a dip in the cool pool or a revitalizing nap. When we gathered on the lodge's spacious verandah in the evening to do our daily bird checklist, a Magnolia Warbler made an appearance, while Russet-naped Wood-Rails boldly strutted across the lawn.

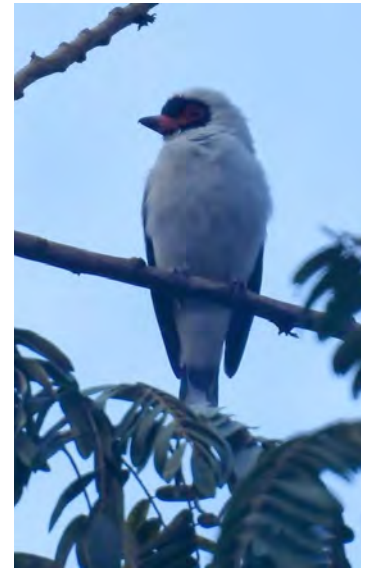
As the day wound down, the bartender served drinks adorned with fruit garnishes so intricately carved they were miniature works of art. Dinner was another culinary triumph, featuring flavorful fish cakes and savory chicken satay, each paired with delectable sauces. The warm hospitality and lively conversation made for a perfect end to another unforgettable day in Belize.

Mon., Dec. 23 Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Nim Li Punit | Dump Rice Fields | Blue Creek

The morning began with our now-familiar ritual of savoring rich, aromatic coffee and freshly baked goods—a delightful prelude to our short drive from the lodge to Nim Li Punit, an ancient Maya site steeped in history and brimming with birding wonders. The name “Nim Li Punit,” meaning “Big Hat” in the Q’eqchi’ Maya language, refers to a carved stele depicting a ruler adorned with an elaborate feathered headdress. This fascinating site, once a thriving center of Maya civilization, is renowned for its collection of intricately carved stelae—one of the most impressive in Belize.

As we strolled through the ruins, the combination of archeological significance and vibrant wildlife captivated us. Crimson-collared Tanagers, with their dazzling crimson and black plumage, grabbed our full attention. Nearby, Barred Antshrikes put on a show: the bold male posed confidently while the female remained elusive in the shadows. Their distinctive duet song, like a series of maniacal laughs, echoed through the air, adding an auditory layer to the experience. A tiny Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet flitted among the foliage, charming us with its kinglet-like antics and bold white eyebrows.

Towering Ceiba trees stood sentinel over the site, their branches reaching for the heavens. These trees added an ethereal air to the surroundings and provided a haven for avian activity. Among the highlights, we observed a Worm-eating Warbler methodically probing leaves near the ground and a White-eyed Vireo singing from a tangle of vines. Two species of trogon awed us with their presence: a Black-headed Trogon, with its shimmering blue-green plumage, and the dazzling Gartered Trogon, its vibrant colors flashing in the morning sunlight. A



Lesson's Motmot, its pendulum-like tail swinging hypnotically, perched among the ruins, captivating everyone, while a couple of group members were treated to a look at a Keel-billed Toucan moving among the towering trees.

After this fantastic start, we returned to the lodge for a hearty breakfast, fueling up for the adventures ahead with Belizean staples like fry jacks, beans, and tropical fruit juices.

Our next destination was a birding hotspot known as "The Dump," named after a nearby village. The surrounding rice fields teemed with life, providing a feast for the eyes. Overhead, a Short-tailed Hawk soared and then dropped from the sky in pursuit of prey. A gathering of Crested Caracaras—tropical falcons with striking black-and-white plumage and hawklike beaks and talons—quickly became crowd favorites. Northern Jacanas, known for their comically long toes, tiptoed elegantly across the water lilies, their movements as amusing as they were mesmerizing.

The drive to Blue Creek continued to deliver surprises. A Gray Hawk perched low in a tree, offering excellent views, while a Double-toothed Kite, usually a more elusive raptor, sat obligingly for extended observation. In the distance, a Laughing Falcon perched amid rugged hills blanketed with rainforest.

At Blue Creek, the stream brimmed with activity. Both Amazon and Green Kingfishers demonstrated their hunting prowess, diving into the water with knifelike precision. We hiked along a lush jungle trail beside the creek. The landscape, with its limestone rocks adorned with mosses, ferns, and vines, was a perfect backdrop for spotting more bird species. A Slaty-tailed Trogon perched quietly in the canopy, its deep-red belly catching the light. A Whiskered Puffbird, endearing with its fluffy feathers and subtle demeanor, became an instant favorite. Overhead, White-crowned Parrots gave us unobstructed views, their distinctive crowns highlighted as they perched in the open.

A stop in the local village offered a taste of traditional Maya cuisine. We savored caldo, a hearty soup featuring chicken and local herbs, served with coconut rice. Homemade banana bread and tortillas with fresh salsa rounded out the meal, leaving everyone satisfied.



Back at the lodge, the evening unfolded with another exceptional dinner. Appetizers like conch ceviche whetted our appetites, followed by flavorful entrées of pork or grilled shrimp, each paired with savory sauces. Dessert was a triumph—delicate papaya crepes that left everyone raving.

As the group relaxed and reflected on the day’s adventures, we marveled at the richness of Belize’s landscapes, birds, and culture—a perfect blend of natural beauty and human stories. Nim Li Punit had given us not just a glimpse into the grandeur of the ancient Maya, but also a deep connection to the flourishing Maya culture and abundant wildlife that thrives in this region today.

Tues., Dec. 24 Tanager Rainforest Lodge | The Dump | Tunich Ha Reserve and Ecological Center | Punta Gorda | San Felipe Hills

The Christmas Eve morning began peacefully with coffee and birding at the lodge, where resident Central American Agoutis scurried about, adding a charming start to the day. After breakfast, we set off on a short drive to The Dump, where a charismatic Collared Aracari—a “rasta bird” with its vibrant, colorful plumage—kicked off our birding adventure. A Green-backed Sparrow, a species of humid tropical lowlands restricted to the Yucatán Peninsula and surrounding Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala, delighted us, while a male Baltimore Oriole, its orange feathers glowing in the mist-softened light, added a striking touch to the morning’s sightings.

Our next stop was the Tunich Ha Reserve and Ecological Education Center, where Nick and his wife Jessica shared their inspiring work educating youth about the importance of Belize’s ecosystems. Situated at the ecotone between rainforest and coastal mangroves, the center provided an ideal backdrop for understanding conservation and community connections. From the second-story veranda, we enjoyed sweeping views of the lush surroundings while waiting out a rainforest downpour. Despite the deluge, birding didn’t stop—Rufous-tailed hummingbirds and Long-billed Hermits darted among the drops, and we worked to identify a Chestnut-sided Warbler, likely an immature or female. Toucans briefly perched before taking flight, offering unforgettable glimpses of their beauty, and deepening our quest to see them well.

In Punta Gorda, where we wandered through bustling markets to purchase local handcrafts and marvel at the colorful culture, the shoreline revealed a Spotted Sandpiper foraging with its characteristic tail-bobbing movements. On a rainforest walk near town, an elusive Black-crowned Antshrike teased us with its calls while remaining hidden, but we managed to spot a nearby Variable Seedeater, a welcome addition to our list.



Butterfly activity was abundant, with Variable Crackers entertaining us with their camouflage and prompting us to discuss their strange wing-cracking sounds used for mating. Dazzling Blue Morphos and intricate Tiger Longwings fluttered through the scene, adding bursts of color as they nectared on wildflowers. Overhead, a troop of Yucatán Black Howlers, led by an alpha male, filled the air with deep, resonant calls.

The afternoon led us to IXCACAO Maya Belizean Chocolate, a family-run enterprise in the village of San Felipe. Our guide, Henry, son of the owners, skillfully walked us through the cacao process, from pod to chocolate. The enticing aromas and delectable samples encouraged us to stock up on chocolate for the road, while a flavorful chocolate chicken dish made lunch unforgettable. Birding highlights added to the experience, with a majestic King Vulture soaring over jungle-clad hills and a swift Merlin glimpsed on the hunt.

On our return to the lodge, we stopped at Pedra Lagoon, where we marveled at the eerie and fascinating Boat-billed Herons. With their oversized eyes, perfect for nighttime hunting, and broad, prehistoric-looking bills, they drew comparisons to Africa's Shoebill Stork—earning them the nickname “North America's Shoebill Stork.”

The day concluded with a wonderful dinner of chicken or shrimp entrées, followed by a memorable night owling excursion. The sky cleared, revealing constellations like Orion, along with Jupiter, its four moons visible through binoculars. Bats flitted through the night, drawn by moths lured to our lights. A “bat detector,” a device connected to a smartphone, analyzed their biosonar to identify several species, including Sinaloan Mastiff Bat and Wagner's Mustached Bat. The nocturnal magic was capped by the haunting calls of two Mottled Owls, their stereo duets echoing through the night. One owl posed perfectly for photos, a fitting end to an enchanting evening.

As the sounds of Christmas fireworks and pop music filled the air, we were reminded of the universal joy of the holiday season. Though Belizean traditions differ from our own, the shared focus on community, family, and feasting transcended cultural boundaries, leaving us with a warm sense of connection and celebration.



Wed., Dec. 25 Christmas at Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Lubaantun Maya Site | The Dump

The holiday spirit was in full swing as we began Christmas morning at Tanager Rainforest Lodge. Gifts from Lee—beautiful New Mexico scarves—added a festive touch to the day.

We started with coffee and a walk around the lodge grounds, where birding highlights included the Great Antshrike with its bold plumage and striking red eyes, and a gorgeous male Golden-collared Tanager. Though we heard elusive species like the Mayan Antthrush and Bare-crowned Antbird, their secretive habits kept them hidden from view.

While we were hoping to spot a Yellow-throated Euphonia that Steve C. had heard, a Ringed Kingfisher stole the show. It made a dramatic entrance, swooping over the river before flying off, only to return and wing its way overhead. The largest of the five kingfisher species we'd seen, its commanding presence earned it the nickname "The Pterodactyl of Kingfishers."

Our next stop was the Lubaantun Maya Site, with birding along the way. A Gray Hawk, now a familiar roadside raptor, made an appearance, followed by two perched Bat Falcons and Vaux's Swifts flying among the clouds overhead. At Lubaantun, the distinctive stone structures—crafted without mortar and featuring rounded corners—set it apart from other Maya ruins. The site's ties to Maya achievements in astronomy, mathematics, written language, agriculture, and engineering during their Classic Period—a cultural peak lasting three times as long as the Golden Age of Rome before their great cities were abandoned and reclaimed by the jungle for centuries—made it all the more fascinating. Adding to the mystique were the enigmatic tales surrounding a crystal skull purportedly linked to the site. A towering Ceiba Tree provided a scenic backdrop for a group photo, its roots entwined with the ruins to create a striking blend of history and nature. The site also offered birding delights, including Collared Aracaris, Black-headed Trogons, a soaring Hook-billed Kite, and a darting Scaly-breasted Hummingbird.

Our journey continued with a stop at the ever-reliable Dump. While we hoped for a Jabiru, we instead witnessed spectacular raptor activity: a White-tailed Hawk perched regally in a palm tree, and a White-tailed Kite engaging in aerial acrobatics with a Northern Harrier as they competed for prey. A flock of White-collared Swifts and



soaring Wood Storks added to the excitement. One stork lingered in a roadside swamp, its stately presence unforgettable. Accompanying the scene was a chorus of frogs and the melodic song of the Morelet's Seedeater.

Back at the lodge, we enjoyed a relaxing lunch before some of the group embarked on a river kayaking and tubing adventure. As we drifted through this enchanting landscape, kingfishers appeared near a towering Ceiba Tree that leaned over the river, its massive trunk and limbs covered in green gardens of epiphytes.

The day concluded with a Christmas feast, complete with turkey, mashed potatoes, grilled vegetables, apple pie, and house-made ice cream. After dinner, Steve C. shared heartfelt reflections on his Maya heritage, describing the deep sense of community within Maya culture, where neighbors bond over shared feasts and support one another in building homes without monetary exchange. His passion for preserving and sharing his culture left a lasting impression, making this Christmas Day profoundly meaningful.

As the day came to a close, we reflected with gratitude on the rich experiences, remarkable birds, and inspiring people that made this holiday truly unforgettable.

Thurs., Dec. 26 Tanager Rainforest Lodge | BFREE Reserve | Azure del Mar, Maya Beach

As dawn broke at Tanager Rainforest Lodge, the haunting owl-like calls of a Collared Forest-Falcon echoed through the darkness, only to fade with the morning light. Other birding moments included a Russet-naped Wood-Rail striding confidently through the grass on its lipstick-red legs, and a Blue-gray Tanager perched on a branch, adding a touch of subtle elegance against the tropical backdrop. A glimpse of a male American Redstart, flitting through the trees like a falling leaf, enhanced the scene as we listened to the soundtrack of Melodious Blackbirds and prepared for the journey ahead.

The transition from rainforest to beach was anything but ordinary, with ample birding opportunities along the way. In a dry mountain forest, we found a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, a charming resident warbler, non-migratory and full of character as it posed for photos on the branches of a Caribbean Pine.

The highlight of the day unfolded in a dramatic clash above a vast savannah: a White-tailed Kite executed a daring heist, dive-bombing a Laughing Falcon until the falcon dropped its snake prey into the grass. In one fluid



motion, the kite snatched up the snake and carried it to a nearby tree, where it engaged in a tense battle with its serpentine prize—longer than its own body. After several minutes of writhing and wrestling, the kite finally subdued the snake and swallowed it.

Meanwhile, the Laughing Falcon, its black mask giving it the appearance of a thwarted bandit, perched on a nearby power pole. Snake-less and visibly annoyed, it seemed to contemplate its next move, a somber end to an encounter that showcased the ruthless dynamics of kleptoparasitism—a behavior in which one animal steals food, resources, or prey that another animal has acquired, rather than hunting or foraging for it themselves.

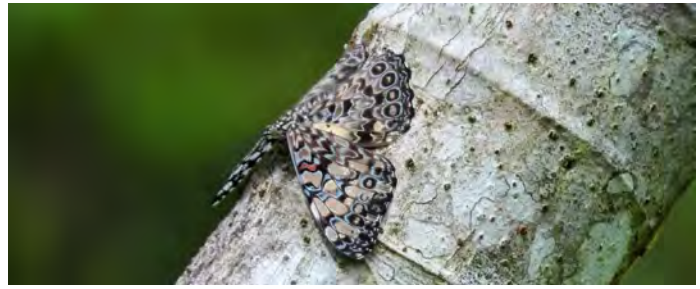
By afternoon, we arrived at Azure del Mar, our coastal retreat at the edge of the sea on the Placencia Peninsula. With its white sand beaches, swaying palms, and clear turquoise waters, it was a slice of tropical paradise. Hammocks swung invitingly between the trees, and the cabanas provided a cozy haven complete with picnic tables and sea views. The lodge offered complimentary paddleboards, kayaks, bikes, and snorkeling gear, making it the perfect base for exploring both land and sea.

Our journey had transitioned from jungle adventures to seaside repose, with the rhythms of the waves providing a tranquil soundtrack to our evening.

Fri., Dec. 27 Azure del Mar, Maya Beach | Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary | Hopkins

The day began with a glorious sunrise viewed from the dock at Azure del Mar. As the first light of dawn illuminated the horizon, Ruddy Turnstones picked their way along the shoreline of Maya Beach, hinting at the abundance of birds awaiting us during a day of exploration.

Brown Pelicans patrolled the skies over the Caribbean Sea in tight squadrons, diving purposefully into the tranquil waters. Overhead, Ospreys hovered with intense focus before plunging into the sea to seize unsuspecting fish. Above them all, Magnificent Frigatebirds soared majestically, their forked tails and angular wings cutting striking figures against the blue expanse of sky. One male, perched in a pine tree, fluttered his red gular pouch in what seemed a bid for attention, as a circling female harried him for reasons left to our imagination.



Beneath the sea, barracudas glided through the shallows, their sleek forms casting shadows over the seafloor, while stingrays stirred the sand with their winglike fins. Silvery schools of forage fish swirled through the clear waters, and vibrant blue parrotfish played their vital role in maintaining the health of the ecosystem by munching algae that could otherwise smother the coral.

Our journey took us from the dynamic coastline to the depths of the rainforest, visiting the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary—a jaguar preserve celebrated for its rich biodiversity. As we ventured inland, the interconnectedness of Belize’s ecosystems became evident. Nutrients carried from the rainforest by rivers nourish the sea, creating a dynamic exchange that sustains life across the region. The rainforest itself owes its lush vibrancy to rains driven by ocean currents, weaving an intricate web of life.

In the sanctuary, a Rufous-tailed Jacamar shimmered in the sunlight, its metallic plumage gleaming like a jewel against the lush greenery. Near a stream, the alarm calls of Brown Jays led us to a dramatic scene: Keel-billed Toucans and Collared Aracaris, their dazzling colors illuminated by the light, raiding hidden nests in the dense foliage. We finally achieved our goal of enjoying long, satisfying views of the Keel-billed Toucan, the national bird of Belize. Spotting a Tropical Royal Flycatcher among the forest shadows added to the excitement. Though it kept its regal hammerhead crest tucked away, a hint of vibrant red plumage peeked through, offering a surprising pop of color.

We stopped for lunch in the seaside town of Hopkins, where we visited a market. Vibrantly hued fabrics created a visual spectacle, reflecting the Maya’s deep cultural connection to color. The eye-catching displays seemed to mirror the multicolored avian life we had encountered throughout our tour.

From the bustling coastal waters teeming with marine life to the rainforest canopy alive with bird calls, today’s explorations unveiled Belize’s natural world as a living tapestry, as vivid and intricate as Maya fabrics. These interconnected habitats, brimming with biodiversity, serve as a powerful reminder of the vital need to preserve such extraordinary ecosystems.

Sat., Dec. 28 Azure del Mar, Maya Beach | Red Bank Village

Our final full day in Belize offered an extraordinary immersion in the dazzling world of the Scarlet Macaw. Our journey took us to Red Bank, a small Maya village nestled in the Stann Creek District, celebrated as a seasonal



haven for these iconic parrots. Between December and March, Scarlet Macaws migrate to the lowland forests here, drawn by the ripe fruits of Polewood Trees. For bird enthusiasts, this natural phenomenon is unparalleled—and we were privileged to witness it firsthand.

Flocks of Scarlet Macaws flew against a backdrop of jungle-covered mountains, their vivid red, yellow, and blue plumage shimmering against the emerald canopy. The sight was breathtaking, a living canvas of color and motion. Their raucous calls—an unmistakable sound—filled the rainforest as they fed, socialized, and displayed their lively personalities high in the treetops.

This encounter was more than a visual feast; it underscored the critical conservation efforts in the region. Red Bank serves not only as a sanctuary for these magnificent birds but also as a hub for community-led initiatives to protect their feeding grounds. Programs with local farmers in collaboration with conservation organizations work tirelessly to combat habitat loss and poaching while promoting ecotourism as a sustainable alternative. Witnessing these efforts deepened our appreciation for the Scarlet Macaws and the dedicated people ensuring their survival.

The Maya cultural connection to these birds added another dimension to our experience. In Maya cosmology, colors hold profound significance, often symbolizing cardinal directions and natural forces. Red, associated with the east, represents renewal and the rising sun—a fitting metaphor for the Scarlet Macaw, a creature of resilience and brilliance in the natural world, a species rising from the brink of local extinction.

In addition to the unforgettable spectacle of the Scarlet Macaw, our birding journey on the final day was filled with other memorable sightings. Among the highlights were the Red-legged Honeycreeper, with its striking blue and black plumage and namesake red legs. The Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, a new species for us, also made an appearance. We were thrilled to spot other new species, including the Green Honeycreeper, another breathtaking bird with its vivid green feathers, and the Yellow-faced Grassquit, a small but eye-catching species that added a pop of color to the green foliage. Dozens of Gray-breasted Martins, yet another new species for us, perched on branches, adding to the diversity of the day's sightings. These birding moments, each one a treasure in its own right, enriched our experience and deepened our connection to the incredible biodiversity of Belize.

Reflecting on the day's events, it felt like the perfect culmination of our journey through Belize's breathtaking landscapes and vibrant cultural heritage. The Scarlet Macaw, with its dazzling red plumage and enduring presence, stood as a powerful symbol of resilience and renewal. Witnessing the dedicated efforts to protect this



iconic species left an indelible mark on all of us. This awe-inspiring encounter was a fitting finale, encapsulating the beauty, wonder, and significance of everything we had experienced in Belize.

Sun., Dec. 29 Azure Del Mar | Belize City

Our final morning began with a heartfelt breakfast conversation. Steve C. shared stories of birding with his daughters, a cherished family tradition, and spoke passionately about the bird club he's starting at a school in his Maya village. With the guidance of young mentors he's working with, Steve is fostering a deep connection to nature in the next generation, inspiring conservation and a love for birding within his community.

After breakfast, we boarded a small Cessna for our flight back to Belize City. From above, the landscape unfolded like a painting, with the Placencia Lagoon on one side and the Caribbean Sea and its cayes on the other. As we flew low near Belize City, we spotted Great Egrets in the wetlands below—a reminder of the bird habitats preserved across the country. Just beyond the city's edge lies a remarkable expanse of protected wilderness. With 40 percent of its land safeguarded, Belize is a shining example of biodiversity conservation, seamlessly blending its natural and cultural heritage into a national identity worth celebrating.

As our journey came to an end, we celebrated the unforgettable experiences and connections we had made. Belize's beauty lies not only in its landscapes and wildlife but also in its people—their passion for their heritage and their commitment to sharing it with the world. With gratitude and full hearts, we said goodbye to Steve Choco and this extraordinary country, carrying with us memories, lessons, and inspiration to cherish and protect the wonders of nature.

Photos: Group (Stephen Grace - SG), Black-headed Trogon (SG), White-collared Manakin (SG), Black Spiny-tailed Iguana (SG), Yellow-throated Warbler (SG), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (SG), Squirrel Cuckoo (SG), Green Iguana (SG), Morelet's Seedeater (SG), Yucatán Black Howler (SG), Groove-billed Ani (SG), Olive-throated Parakeet (SG), Belize River (SG), Lineated Woodpecker (SG), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (SG), Tanager Rainforest Lodge (SG), Tiger Longwing Butterfly (SG), Masked Tityra (SG), Central American Agouti (SG), Paddling on the river at Tanager Rainforest Lodge (SG), Red-lored Amazon (SG), Green Iguana (SG), Tanager Rainforest Lodge (SG), Brown Basilisk (SG), Group photo with Ceiba Tree (SG), Local Guide Steve Choco (SG), Bamboo Orchid (SG), Barred Antshrike (SG), Slaty-tailed Trogon (SG), Blue Creek (SG), Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (SG), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (SG), Variable Cracker Butterfly (SG), Mottled Owl (SG), Summer Tanager (SG), Black-cowled Oriole (SG), Blue-gray Tanager (SG), Keel-billed Toucan (SG), Collared Aracari (SG), Lubaantun Maya Site (SG), Laughing Falcon (SG), Statue (Lee Carn), Magnificent Frigatebird (SG), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (SG)