

# Honduras: Stellar Birding & Maya Ruins | Feb. 2-10, 2025 | Trip Report | by Robert Gallardo



**Guide Robert J. Gallardo, with our clients Patricia, Christopher, Pamela, Teofilo, Merlinda, Marilyn, Robert, Gary, Vincent, and Steven.**



Nestled amidst the seven countries of Central American is Honduras. To this day, it remains one of the hidden gems in the world of nature tourism. Although known primarily as a diving destination, it has been shown that Honduras' mainland is rich in flora and fauna. It harbors over 800 species of birds, 1,300 butterflies, 10,000 vascular plants, and abundant endemic reptiles and amphibians. Add to the fact that parks and reserves receive very few tourists, and a visitor often has an entire mountain to oneself. The great pine-oak forests of North America terminate as large swaths across the Honduran landscape where countless numbers of migrants spend the winter. During the trip we focused visits in areas around the species-rich Lake Yojoa region and then travelled to the far west to revel in the ancient Mayan culture. We would record nearly 180 species of birds, a few mammals, and some colorful butterflies.

## **Sun., Feb. 2 Arrivals    Travel to Lake Yojoa**



Today the adventure began for ten participants. After picking up those who arrived early, we continued to the airport and met all those who came in on various flights. We headed southward in our spacious Coaster bus. The flat Sula Valley filled with agricultural fields and villages slowly gave way to foothills with forested slopes as we made the climb toward the lake basin. We stopped at a large fruit stand along the way where some participants were happy to try some fresh coconut water as well as see the wide variety of bananas and other fruits. Robert took a pair of breadfruit which we would try in a few days. We reached Lake Yojoa and began our ascent up to Cerro Azul Meambar National Park. Ahead of us were some towering mountains cloaked in rainforest, and the lodge there would be ‘home’ for the next four nights. We reached the visitor center/reception, gathered the keys, and got settled in to our rooms. We had our welcome dinner and did a trip orientation, as well as getting to know each other a bit more.

### **Mon., Feb. 3      Cerro Azul Meambar National Park-all day**

Lake Yojoa bordered by two large national parks; Santa Barbara on the west and Meambar on the east. Both have different geologic origins and corresponding flora and fauna. The evergreen broadleaf forest at Meambar remains humid, and green, for most of the year.

We got an early start today with some dawn bird watching. At first it was quiet, but the activity started to pick up as we found some boisterous Plain Chachalacas and a Crested Guan feeding in a large, fruiting fig tree. We saw the first, of many, of the colorful Lesson’s Motmot. Honduras boasts more motmots than any other country and we would see several species during the trip. We had breakfast then headed up to the nearby canopy tower. From far below called a Mayan Antthrush, a skulker of the dark forest understory. A high-pitched whistle caught our attention and soon it came into view. It was the tiny Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet; a rare sighting for that part of the country. Not seeing much atop the tower, we descended and starting heading off in a different direction. We then heard the nasal call of the Keel-billed Motmot originating from the direction we came from. Yikes! We backtracked and climbed up a few levels of the tower hoping to see it. It remained hidden high in the subcanopy, but we would catch up to it later on.

We spotted numerous Keel-billed Toucans, some of which were also feeding on figs. A small flock of Red-throated Ant-Tanagers was also foraging in a nearby thicket. We also saw our first Squirrel Cuckoo and Masked Tityra; both being common, but beautiful, species in Honduras. A couple flocks of Brown-hooded Parrots, White-crowned Parrots, and Olive-throated Parakeets flew past. We walked down the entrance road a bit and found a



very cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl tooting away. During the morning we also observed both the white and dark morphs of the Short-tailed Hawk.

We continued our morning walk by hiking down to a small waterfall inside the forest. The deep forest is often quiet, but we did see a female Collared Trogon and Sepia-capped Flycatcher by the waterfall. We returned to the lodge for lunch and enjoyed a small selection of hummingbirds at the feeders. This included the Long-billed Hermit, Violet Sabrewing, White-bellied Emerald, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. We dined outside on the deck to enjoy the view of the lake in the distance. A lone Swallow-tailed Kite soared past. We didn't realize it, but several Collared Aracaris were just out of view, feeding on *Piper* inflorescences, until they decided to depart. We did get good views of a pair that perched not far away.

We took a short break then headed down the road a ways in the bus. We ended up atop a small earthen dam that overlooked a small reservoir and spillway. Standing in plain view near the waters' edge was a stately adult Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. Patty spotted a Purple Gallinule as well. Not much else was stirring so we began to walk back and meet the bus down the hill. We took a little side road that meandered through the forest and opened up into agricultural fields. Within no time we encountered a male and female Barred Antshrike. The male climbed higher until coming into full view and rattled away. There was a lot more movement around and included a Golden-winged Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, male American Redstart, and Magnolia Warbler. A pair of Spot-breasted Wrens was duetting and sharing their song with us. After this show, we continued on down the hill. We ran into a Rusty Clearwing; a species of glasswing butterfly that is transparent. Steven spotted a female Gartered Trogon perched above the road. As we approached the bridge, a Green Kingfisher came zooming past and disappeared down the creek bed. Also appearing suddenly was an Amazon Kingfisher, but this large, emerald-green species perched on a low snag adjacent to the pond and allowed for great views. It was a great way to end the day.

We returned to the lodge for a bit of rest before doing our species list and dinner.

## **Tues., Feb. 4 Boat Ride on Lake Yojoa**

Our second full day at the lake started off with a bang. Another bird watching group was out and about and had spotted something good right in the parking lot. It was a Keel-billed Motmot that decided to come out of the forest and forage right at the edge. What luck! We all enjoyed seeing and photographing this prized bird. We drove down to the northwest corner of Lake Yojoa and boarded a pontoon boat. It was a bit overcast, but warm, and would be a wonderful day. We cruised along the canal and toward the end where it meets the lake



we saw many Morelet's Seedeaters. A lone Fulvous Whistling-Duck flew past and we began to see wild Muscovy Ducks. We also saw migratory Lesser Scaup and Blue-winged Teal. We explored the western shoreline where steep, forest-covered peaks met the waters' edge. This is one of the most scenic parts of the country. Giant Gumbo Limbo trees were covered in Spanish Moss. We saw Montezuma Oropendolas, Limpkins, Northern Jacanas, Osprey, and Purple Gallinules. Pied-billed Grebes were common, including many young with their striped head pattern. Also present in alarmingly small numbers were Snail Kites. Belted Kingfishers, however, were common. We reached a point where Robert and Olivia's properties almost reached the lake. They are slowly purchasing parcels of rainforest to create a corridor stretching from the lake to the paved highway. A few Groove-billed Anis were observed as well as a large colony of Proboscis Bats that were clinging to the rocks. We briefly saw a Laughing Falcon soaring away as we were turning around to explore another part of the shoreline. We reached a flat area and began to see other ducks such as American Wigeon and one Ring-necked. As Robert was scanning the edge of the emergent vegetation he spotted something small tucked up against the brushy shoreline. It was a female Masked Duck and would represent the rarest sighting of the whole trip. A perched handsome White-tailed Kite was also spotted and it wasn't long before it lifted up and began to hunt. Calling from deep within the dense marsh were Ruddy Crakes as well as a lone Gray-breasted Crake. In the distance we spotted a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture; the lake being the only inland location where it can be seen. Many species of herons and egrets were seen, including the handsome Tricolored Heron. As we were approaching the dock, a Gray Hawk soared overhead and concluded a wonderful boat ride. We had lunch at a nearby diner then made our way back to the lodge.

We made a stop along the way and found a Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Black-throated Green Warblers. We reached the lodge and concluded another fulfilling day at Lake Yojoa.

### **Wed., Feb. 5      Los Naranjos Archaeology Site | Chocolate Farm**

We rose again to a beautiful morning in the mountains. These sky-island national parks dot the countryside, and only a small handful actually have access where tourists can go. So, we feel privileged to be there to enjoy them. As we began to descend the mountain, we found a lone Spot-breasted Oriole perched along the road. We continued onward and once again made our way to a different destination. En route, we picked up Robert's wife, Olivia, who would come along and help spot birds. We reached the Los Naranjos archaeological site which was once inhabited by the Lenca people hundreds of years ago. This is a site rarely visited by tourists so we would have it all to ourselves once again.



We walked slowly along a gravel pathway which led into the forest. We quickly heard the rhythmic calls of several Gartered Trogons calling from the subcanopy and we spotted one before it flew off. Lesson's Motmots, Gray Catbirds, and Clay-colored Thrushes were quite common. Chris spotted our first Yellow-throated Vireo of the trip and we also saw a female Yellow-throated Euphonia. Numerous Hooded Warblers and Tennessee Warblers were also seen. This wet, forested habitat provided a seemingly endless supply of food for insect-feeding birds. We got a good look at a Streak-headed Woodcreeper that foraged low on branches. A small mixed flock in the subcanopy caught our attention and amidst all the wood-warblers was an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and Yellow-olive Flatbill. We arrived at the elevated boardwalk and walked quietly along to see what was stirring. A metallic chatter caught our attention. It belonged to the resident Tropical Parula, but we had to find it amidst a large flock of wood-warblers. Bingo, there it was! What a stunning species. Further along the boardwalk we heard and saw many of the migrant Common Yellowthroats which seemed to call from everywhere in the tall, wet grass. The boisterous Rufous-backed Wren was also common there, and we got to see several individuals. Toward the beginning of the walk we heard a pair of Rufous-and-white Wrens but they kept themselves well hidden in the dark understory. We did see one their nests, built atop a large paper wasp hive. Toward the end, however, one popped into plain view and perched atop a nearby horizontal branch. What a great view of this lovely wren. We made our way to a suspension bridge that crossed the same canal where we boated yesterday. Our bus was waiting for us and in no time we arrived at a new lunch spot at a local artisanal brewery.

An addition to this year's trip was a visit to a chocolate producing facility. Honduras is quickly becoming known for its high-quality chocolate and now produces its very own gourmet bars. We arrived at the Red Barn Chocolate Factory and were received by Elmer Pineda, the owner. Outside, he showed us some vanilla orchid plants and a cinnamon tree. Inside the main building, we received a thorough walk-through on how chocolate is produced and proceeded to a taste test. We got to savor some eleven different bars, some of which had won international prizes. At the end of the tasting frenzy, everyone stocked up on their personal supply of bars. We said 'good-bye' and 'thanks' to Elmer and were on our way.

En route back to Meambar we made another stop along the upper road. In some far off fruiting trees we saw some more Masked Tityras, but amidst there were also two male Black-crowned Tityras. Eventually, they flew to leafless tree close to the road and we got great views of this uncommon bird. We returned to the lodge for a little downtime then did our checklist and dinner. Afterwards, we did a short night walk in search of owls. It was getting ready to rain and we saw no owls, but did find a lone Kinkajou which was a real treat and a great way to end the day.



## Thurs., Feb. 6 A.M. Bird Watching | Travel to Copan

Today would be mostly a travel day, but we would get to do some bird watching before getting on the road. Right before breakfast we received a farewell by several Collared Trogons chasing each other around, including two beautiful males. We boarded the bus and said 'good-bye' to Meambar National Park. We stopped along the entrance road to explore a side road we visited the day before, but this being morning we were expecting more bird activity. And there was. We came across a field that was full of Blue-black Grassquits, but amidst them was also a female Thick-billed Seed-Finch which is a rare sighting for that area. A lone Altamira Oriole was also a good sighting for that particular habitat. We noticed a lot of activity against a vegetated slope and spotted a beauty; a male Scarlet-rumped Tanager. It popped out numerous times to feed on some tall, orange-colored *Canna* flowers. Several of the less colorful females were there as well. Just as we were about to leave, a pair of the handsome Crimson-collared Tanagers were spotted in two *Cecropia* trees. It was great to see two black-and-red tanagers.

We continued down the road a bit and made another stop. A pair of Pale-vented Pigeons and a lone female Giant Cowbird flew past. A few of the tiny Vaux's Swifts also foraged high above. Steve spotted a Yellow-bellied Elaenia; one we searched for the other day. A male Montezuma Oropendola foraged in a nearby Gumbo Limbo tree and did his acrobatic song-and-dance routine every now and then. A Yellow-winged Tanager was also spotted in the same tree. Just up the road a bit we spotted a Keel-billed Toucan that flew low across the road and landed on a nearby branch. It was colorful, and delightful, way to end the bird walk.

We got on the main highway and started to make our way to Copan Ruins. It didn't take long when we came upon a long line of vehicles backed up due to road work. It took a long time to get through and we eventually made our lunch stop in the town of Sula. A couple of Zone-tailed Hawks were seen along the way. We reached the town of La Entrada and made the final stretch to our destination. Everyone got checked in to the luxurious Hotel Marina Copan and had a bit of downtime before having dinner.

## Fri., Feb. 7 Principal Mayan Ruins Site 7 | Free Time

Today we would begin to indulge ourselves in the cultural components of the trip. We were in the land of the ancient Maya civilization. After breakfast, we headed to the nearby principal archaeological site of Copan Ruins. There, we met our local expert guide, Yobani, and began the guided tour. Just beyond the main gate we got another close up view of a Lesson's Motmot. We started seeing some of the captive bred Scarlet Macaws whose vivid colors always light up the landscape. It was a species revered by the Mayans and appears on glyphs



throughout the site. They were extirpated long ago, but were brought back by the relentless efforts of an American. Yobani gave a thorough tour of the ruins as we kept an eye out for birds. Chris spotted a Common Black-Hawk that soared by overhead. A flock of Red-throated Parakeets also went zooming past. We passed by numerous towering pyramids and carved stelae; all having significant meaning. We reached the famous hieroglyphic stairway and the ball court adored with Scarlet Macaw heads. We ended the tour in the main plaza then everyone got to enjoy more macaws that had come in to feed. Before entering the sculpture museum we got some good views of a pair of Streak-backed Orioles that were foraging amidst some small bromeliads. Chris also spotted a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker to top off the morning list.

After the museum, we had lunch at the local cafeteria then had the remainder of the afternoon to explore the shops and other things to see in town.

## **Sat., Feb. 8      Las Sepulturas Archaeology Site | Ancestral Hotel Forest**

Right after breakfast we loaded the bus and went to the nearby archaeological site of Las Sepulturas. This is where the nobility and elite lived in Mayan times and was connected to the main site by a paved road. We reached the parking lot and checked out an adjacent agricultural field. We found one Hammond's Flycatcher, migrant Common Yellowthroats, and a perched Gray Hawk. Many migrant Violet-green Swallows were circling above. It didn't take long to find our first Rufous-browed Peppershrike which is common at this site. The entire morning we could hear them calling everywhere. In a mixed flock of wood-warblers we spotted a Warbling Vireo. Also calling all around were Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, and we finally got to see one up close. We reached a spot where numerous Mayan structures had been reconstructed. We hung around there a bit to see what was stirring. A pair of Northern Tropical Pewees were sallying out for insects. We also found another very cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and got great looks at it. A hummer was zipping about and had us fooled for awhile. Turned out to be a female Ruby-throated Hummingbird. LOL. Amidst the many species of migrant wood-warblers seen there, included one resident species. We heard several pair of the handsome Chestnut-capped Warblers and got to see some up close. Someone spotted some activity in a nearby tree and it turned out to be two female Rose-throated Becards; one of which was starting to build a nest. Also spotted was another Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and a Yellow-olive Flatbill. As we wandered down the trail a high-pitched whistle caught our attention. It was the diminutive Northern Beardless Tyrannulet and we got great looks at it. Toward the end of the walk we encountered a pair of Cabanis's Wren in some thickets and were very shy. We returned to town and had a tasty lunch at a fancy café. Two brothers owned it and are famous for their homemade cheeses and other delicacies. We had a little downtime before the afternoon's activity.



At mid-afternoon we met up Yobani who took us to a new bird watching site. A hotel that closed during Covid reopened and has access into the forested foothills behind it. It is private property and the forest is well protected. Late afternoon activity is often slow, but we did find an Azure-crowned Hummingbird feeding on a blooming shrub. There were more migrant wood-warblers, motmots, and Masked Tityras. Soaring low above was a pair of both the white and black Short-tailed Hawks. This was such a superb sighting. We returned to town and had a bit of downtime before going out to have another tasty dinner at a local restaurant.

## **Sun., Feb. 9      Hacienda San Lucas | Travel to San Pedro Sula and overnight**

We packed our bags early and headed over to the nearby Hacienda San Lucas to explore the forest reserve there. We spotted a lone Spotted Sandpiper along the river en route to our destination. We got off the bus before the gate to see what was stirring. We got a good look at a Brown-crested Flycatcher; a species we only heard yesterday. White-throated Magpie-Jays started to appear and were usual visitors to the fruit feeders. Some macaws squawked in the distance. In the parking lot we spotted another Red-billed Pigeon that was sunning itself atop a giant Spanish Cedar. We continued down a trail that led to a small archaeological site within the forest. We were searching for the Elegant Trogon, but none were to be found this year. We found more Chestnut-capped Warblers and a lone Ovenbird. A large flock of Red-throated Ant-Tanagers in the thick understory caught our attention. Two males were battling on the ground and had their feet locked. We reached the site where it is believed Mayans gave birth atop carved, flat rocks that looked like toads. We made our back to the hacienda and hung out a bit. While we waited for lunch, we spotted a Cinnamon Hummingbird feeding on a large Bougainvillea bush. Both the Spot-breasted and Altamira Orioles were seen in a large tree. A delicious gourmet lunch was served and was a great way to say 'good-bye' to Copan.

We hit the road and began the return trip to San Pedro Sula. While we were still up in the highlands, Robert spotted something atop a dead snag close to the road. Alas, it was a Laughing Falcon! We turned around to get a good view of this cool bird. It was even calling as we pulled up. It remained there, with its keen eyes peering downward, looking for snakes. What a great way to end the trip. We reached San Pedro Sula and checked in to the Hyatt. Later on, we would do our final checklist and picked our favorite birds and other trip highlights.





## Mon., Feb. 10 Short Transfer to San Pedro Sula airport for Departures

### Trip Highlights:

Larry-Appreciated Robert's dedication, humor, and knowledge. Really liked all the motmots and the boat ride on Lake Yojoa.

Steven-Turquoise-browed Motmot. Liked the Chocolate Factory and boat ride.

Patty-Masked Duck, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Chestnut-capped Warbler. Loved all aspects of Copan. It was just as good or better than all Mayan sites she had visited. LOVED the Chocolate Factory.

Lynne-Red-throated Ant-Tanagers and Magpie-Jays at San Lucas.

Teo-Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Little Blue Heron that caught a frog, and Scarlet Macaws. Boat ride was fantastic. Had fun taking a lot of photos.

Merlinda-Scarlet Macaws and all orioles.

Vince-Rufous-browed Peppershrike and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. Liked Las Sepulturas site because it combined archaeology with bird watching.

Pam-Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl sightings.

Chris-Chestnut-capped Warbler. Visit to Copan was great.

Gary-Laughing Falcon on the return drive.

Robert-Masked Duck.

*Photos: Group (Robert Gallardo - RG), Scarlet Macaw (RG), Laughing Falcon (RG), Keel-billed Motmot (RG), Waterfall (Steven McMasters - SM), Collared Aracari (RG), Boat Trip (SM), Amazon Kingfisher (RG), Masked Duck (RG), Black-crowned Tityra (RG), Keel-billed Toucan (RG), Montezuma Oropendola (RG), Lesson's Motmot (RG), Scarlet Macaw (SM), Streak-backed Oriole (RG), Group Birding (SM), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (RG), Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (RG), Azure-crowned Hummingbird (RG), White-throated Magpie-Jay (RG), Orange Cracker butterfly (RG), Little Blue Heron (RG)*