

Belize: Three Great Lodges | Jan. 10-20, 2025

Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Guide Bryan Calk with local guides Isaias, Roni, and Steve. Our guests included Phil, Ruth, Lynn, Howard, Jim, Paula, Betsy, Gene, Tom, Mike, and Terri



Friday, Jan. 10

Arrivals in Belize

While some of us chose to spend a day or two exploring wonderful spots like Black Orchid Resort and Caye Caulker, our tour officially began when our local guide from Black Rock Lodge, Isaias, picked us up late this morning. Our first stop was the Belize Zoo, where all the animals are native species that have been rescued or rehabilitated and deemed unable to be released back into the wild. It was a unique opportunity to see these elusive species up close, knowing they roam freely in the jungle around us. We also had our first taste of Belize birding, spotting Plain Chachalaca, Squirrel Cuckoo, and several other species flitting around the canopy.



After lunch at the zoo restaurant, we continued to the lodge, making a few stops for incidental birding and to stretch our legs. Upon arrival, we were welcomed with fresh iced fruit juice and a stunning display of birds from the deck. The hummingbird feeders buzzed with White-necked Jacobins, Long-billed Hermits, and Wedge-tailed Sabrewings, while a pair of Black-and-white Hawk-Eagles soared above the rushing Macal River. After settling into our rooms, we gathered for our first group dinner.

Saturday, Jan 11 Black Rock Lodge | Belize Botanical Gardens

We started our first morning with a walk around the lodge grounds, a highly productive habitat with abundant activity around the feeding stations and gardens. Before breakfast, we had already recorded 60 species! Highlights included Ruddy Quail-Dove, a Purple-crowned Fairy engaged in aerial combat, two White-whiskered Puffbirds, Black-faced Grosbeaks, and both Red-legged and Green Honeycreepers.

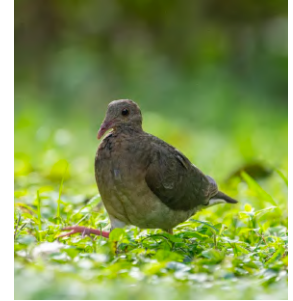
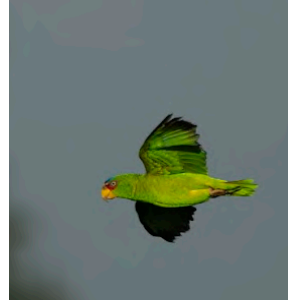
After a well-earned breakfast, we headed to the Belize Botanical Gardens, a privately run site where Marvin guided us through the grounds, teaching us about native and cultivated plants. Of course, birding remained a priority, and we spotted Black Hawk-Eagles, Band-backed Wrens, Lesson's Motmot, a variety of flycatchers and warblers, and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers.

Following lunch, we enjoyed an afternoon of downtime—some napped, while others explored the lodge trails leading to Vaca Falls along the river. In the evening, we celebrated Lynn and Howard's 50th wedding anniversary at dinner before heading out with Isaias on a night drive in search of nocturnal birds. We had excellent luck, spotting a Tayra high in the trees, as well as great scope views of Yucatán Poorwill and Northern Potoo.

Sunday, Jan 12 Caracol

The morning started with an early breakfast at the lodge to get on the road as soon as possible. Our journey to Caracol included several opportunistic roadside birding stops, where we spotted White Hawk, a variety of wading birds, Rusty Sparrow, and Thick-billed Seedfinch.

After climbing in elevation and crossing several streams, we arrived at Caracol, a Mayan city last occupied in 950 CE. The scale of this archaeological site rivals the famed cities of Chichén Itzá and Tikal, yet on the trails and around the temples, it felt as though we had the place to ourselves. We learned about Mayan brilliance in



architecture and astronomy, their complex social order, and the rise and eventual decline of their civilization. As we explored the grounds, we spotted many exciting birds, including the rare Russet Antshrike and Keel-billed Motmot. Other highlights included Scaly-throated Leaf-tosser, Dot-winged Antwren, and several large mixed flocks of warblers, flycatchers, and tanagers. We also admired multicolored fungi, towering ceiba trees, and a swarm of army ants.

For lunch, we enjoyed a traditional Belizean meal of salads, fried plantains, rice and beans, fresh grilled chicken, and cold lemonade.

The return journey to the lodge included a few more birding stops, where we found Cinnamon Becard and Crimson-collared Tanager. Back at Black Rock, we freshened up before enjoying another lovely dinner and our daily checklist review.

Monday, Jan 13 Spanish Lookout

After another early breakfast served by the lovely lodge staff, we set off for the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. Along the way, we made several birding stops, spotting the Yucatán endemic Rose-throated Tanager, Amazon Kingfisher, White-fronted Parrots bathed in stunning morning light, Barred Antshrike, and Scrub Euphonia.

In the rice fields, we encountered classic open-country birds like Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Aplomado Falcons. The nearby lagoon, used for irrigation, attracted large congregations of wading birds, including hundreds of egrets, herons, and Wood Storks. However, the standout sighting was a trio of Jabiru, including a juvenile!

After lunch at a local café, we continued birding around Spanish Lookout Lagoon and the agricultural fields, where we found Morelet's Crocodiles lounging on the banks, Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, a nesting Black-collared Hawk, and the continuing first Central American record of a Loggerhead Shrike—a familiar species from home but an exciting rarity in Belize!

After a long but rewarding day, we returned to the lodge for dinner and our daily checklist review, tallying nearly twenty raptor species!



Tuesday, Jan 14 Slate Creek Overlook | Green Hills Butterfly Ranch | Bocawina

Our last morning at Black Rock Lodge included some last-minute birding, featuring seven hummingbird species at the feeders, the Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle on its nest, and a flurry of activity at the fruit feeders.

On our way out, an impromptu stop—thanks to Bryan for getting his bag—turned into a lucky sighting of a Tody Motmot and a Yellow-billed Cacique calling from the bamboo. Further along the road, Isaias spotted a flurry of bird activity following an army ant swarm. Barred Antshrikes posed for the cameras, while buntings, grosbeaks, and tanagers played hide-and-seek in the grassy hillside.

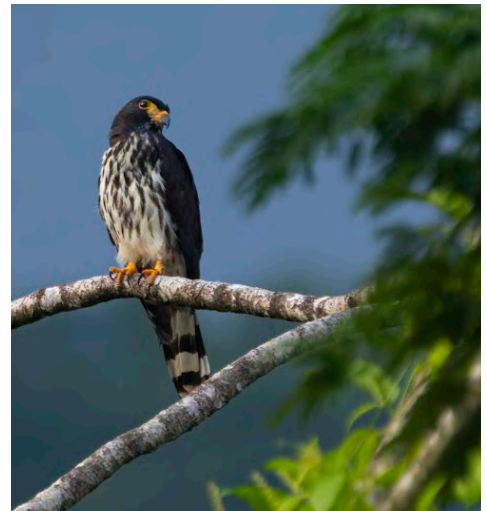
At the Slate Creek Lookout in the Mountain Pine Ridge Preserve, we enjoyed a dramatic valley view and spotted soaring White Hawks, King Vultures, and three species of swifts catching the thermals.

Next, we visited Green Hills Butterfly Ranch, a 250-acre ecological preserve with butterfly-rearing houses. Our guide walked us through the fascinating rearing process, where we observed fifteen butterfly species and caterpillars ranging from nearly invisible to massive creatures longer than our hands! A traditional Belizean lunch of rice and beans with stewed chicken was enjoyed while we watched the bustling hummingbird feeders, adding Violet Sabrewing to our species list.

Finally, we hit the road toward Bocawina. A brief evening rain shower awakened a chorus of frogs, and after dinner, we explored the grounds with flashlights, spotting Yellow Treefrogs and Red-eyed Treefrogs.

Wednesday, Jan 15 Bocawina | Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve

We left the lodge early this morning by bus, heading to the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve. This reserve was the site of some of the first major jaguar studies in the 1980s when it was protected by the Belize Audubon Society, and it continues to serve as an important refuge not only for jaguars but for all species that rely on these dense, intact jungles. As we hiked the trails, we saw prints of tapirs and smaller cats, along with many birds. Highlights included a Slaty-tailed Trogon munching on a large fruit, a trio of Pale-billed Woodpeckers,



Laughing Falcons, a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens, lekking White-collared Manakins, a very cooperative Long-billed Gnatwren, and Yellow-tailed Orioles. It was a very productive and beautiful morning walk.

On the way back to the lodge for lunch, a flat tire on the van gave us an unexpected chance to watch birds in the village of Silk Grass and witness the wonderful hospitality of the Belizean people. As our guide, Roni, was changing the tire, several locals stopped by to help, and it was swapped out in no time. The only thing better than Belize's nature is its people—and maybe the hot sauce!

After a delicious lunch at the lodge, we took some downtime before meeting Roni for a short walk around the lodge grounds to see what birds might be nearby. We encountered several mixed flocks, many of which included wintering warblers, a dark morph juvenile Gray-headed Kite, Golden-hooded Tanagers, and a pair of Keel-billed Toucans soaking up the sun during the golden hour. After tallying our checklist and enjoying dinner, a few of us took a stroll around the grounds at night to listen for owls and spotlight the canopies. We were fortunate to spot a kinkajou feeding on fruit, giving us exceptional views!

Thursday, Jan 16

Hopkins Village | Tanager Rainforest Lodge

We enjoyed a leisurely morning at the lodge grounds, with some people birdwatching and photographing, while others took the opportunity to sleep in a bit. After breakfast, we packed up and said goodbye to Bocawina as we continued our journey south. On the way, we made a pit stop at Hopkins Wetlands and Hopkins Village, a small beach town nearby. Here, we added several new species to our trip list, as it was our first visit to the ocean. We saw terns, pelicans, and frigatebirds, which were fresh and exciting. And of course, it was a fun chance to see the crystal-clear blue waters of Belize's coast.

Eventually, we arrived at Tanager Rainforest Lodge, where we were immediately impressed by the property and the staff's hospitality. After enjoying a welcome drink and lunch, we took a siesta during the heat of the day before meeting our exceptional local guide, Steve Choco. He immediately started pointing out new birds, including Black-crowned Tityras, and helped us get great views of some elusive species, such as the Rufous-breasted Spinetail. We could already tell we were in for three more days of amazing birding. After another checklist and a delicious dinner cooked just for us by the lodge, we felt like we had the whole place to ourselves!

Friday, Jan 17

Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Esperanza Rd. | Dump

We met for coffee and treats just as it was light enough to see, before spending most of the morning birding around the lodge grounds. The towering trees at the forest edge, the small stream and Rio Grande (not that



one), the narrow trail through dense jungle, and the popular fruit feeders kept us busy, tallying over 80 species in just a couple of hours, with breakfast in between. One exciting moment occurred when Diego, our supplementary guide and second driver, rescued a Stripe-throated Hermit that had gotten stuck inside the lodge and was exhausted. After some inspection and a drink of sugar water, the little bird flew away. A trio of Green Kingfishers, a Smoky-brown Woodpecker, a Slate-crowned Tody-Flycatcher, and eleven species of warblers were just some of the highlights.

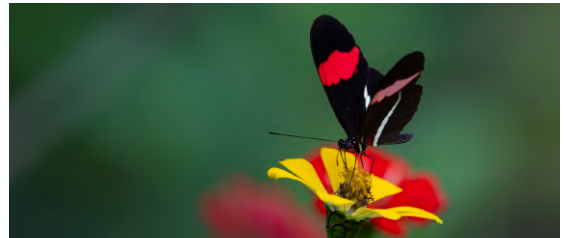
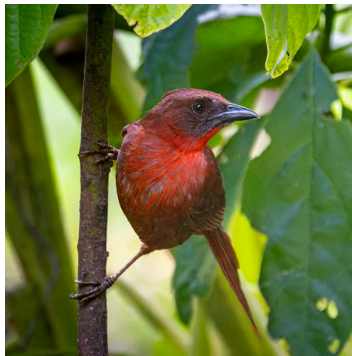
We then drove a short distance to Esperanza Road, where we explored another section of forest. Here, the elusive Northern Bentbill made a very cooperative appearance, and we also spotted Ivory-billed Woodcreepers and Blue-black Grosbeaks.

For lunch, we enjoyed a hot buffet at a local favorite called Pauleen’s, where the fare included traditional Belizean dishes like rice and beans (or beans and rice, if you know, you know!), along with a variety of stewed meats and greens. After lunch, we had some downtime, with some people going inner tubing on the river or swimming in the pool. After our break, we ventured out again to an area known as The Dump. Once a dump site, this area is now mostly rice fields, a small lake, and ditches filled with shallow water. This open space provided excellent views of several raptors, Ruddy Crakes calling all around, and the star of the show—a stunning American Pygmy Kingfisher catching and eating its fish dinner. As the sun set beautifully, we headed back to the lodge for our checklist and dinner.

Saturday, Jan 18 Nim Li Punit Maya Ruins | Blue Creek

We started the morning with muffins and coffee just as dawn broke, watching the grounds come to life and listening to the distant call of a Collared Forest Falcon. We then headed to the van for a morning walk around the Mayan ruins of Nim Li Punit. This Maya site is unique because it is constructed from sandstone, rather than limestone like other sites in Belize. We birded along the entrance roads and trails, hearing Great and Barred Antshrikes calling from the thickets, spotting a Lesson’s Motmot snagging a bug off the ruins, and watching a Montezuma Oropendola sing and display with the Maya Mountains in the background of a beautiful misty sunrise. Afterward, we returned to the lodge for a hot buffet breakfast and to prepare for the rest of the morning and lunch in the field at Blue Creek.

Walking along the Rio Grande was absolutely beautiful. The limestone rocks filter the stream, creating crystalline waters that the locals still use to bathe and do laundry, as they have for generations. The path we took narrowed and followed the stream, with rocks covered in mosses, ferns, and even trees that appeared like



natural bonsais growing out of them. Along the trail, we encountered a Tropical Royal Flycatcher, Red-capped Manakins, and a cooperative Slaty-tailed Trogon. We then had lunch at Yona’s Mayan Restaurant, where Yona herself served us a traditional chicken caldo with recado, curried hearts of palm, and other delicious Mayan dishes. After lunch, a couple of us stuck our feet in the cool water and explored Yona’s cacao processing operation. We then headed back to the lodge for some downtime.

Late in the afternoon, some of us gathered for more birding around the grounds, where we found a pair of Great Antshrikes playing hide and seek. After a delicious dinner—which included the option to try iguana stew, hunted the previous evening by one of the servers at the lodge—we loaded back into the van for a brief outing to search for owls. Steve searched up and down, and after much effort, we were rewarded with incredible views of a Striped Owl perched right out in the open! These owls are beautifully patterned and have a somewhat patchy distribution, so seeing one so clearly was a treat for everyone.

Sunday, Jan 19 **Tunich Ha Reserve and Ecological Center**
Punta Gorda | The Chocolate Queen of San Felipe

We headed out before sunrise this morning, traveling southeast toward the coast. Our first stop was in Tunich Ha, where we visited the property of Nick and Jessica Requena, located in the transition zone between broadleaf jungle and red mangrove forest. The biodiversity here was incredible, and we had amazing views of typically shy and secretive birds like Stub-tailed Spadebills, Black-crowned Antshrikes, and Long-billed Gnatwrens. But what truly made the biggest impression were Nick and Jessica themselves. They served us homegrown vegetables, homemade tortillas, and fresh cacao with our breakfast, while sharing their story of grassroots conservation and youth and adult outdoor education. It’s hard to overstate how outstanding the people of Belize are.

Next, we drove up the road to the community of San Felipe, where we visited a chocolate factory run by “The Chocolate Queen.” Here, we enjoyed another home-cooked meal, which included fresh bird pepper sauce and fried breadfruit. The Queen’s son, Henry, gave us an educational presentation on the chocolate production process and the history of their facility. We sampled chocolate at every stage, from the fresh fruit that tasted like sour apple to the various forms of the finished product. On the way back, we stopped by a Mayan women’s cooperative to pick up hand-crafted art and souvenirs.



Back at the lodge, we took a break during the hottest part of the day. Some brave souls headed out for a late afternoon walk in search of secretive antbirds. Along the path, and after much effort, we caught glimpses of Mayan Antthrush and Bare-crowned Antbird—two particularly elusive species. We reconvened for dinner and shared our favorite moments from the trip during a roundtable discussion on our last night together as a group.

Monday, Jan 20 Gorda

Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Departures from Punta

We woke up early for coffee and one last walk around the lodge grounds with Steve. Russet-naped Wood-Rails were poking around the edge of the woods, giving us fantastic views, while a Mottled Owl called from deep in the woods off the deck. We also finally got decent views of the skulking Green-backed Sparrow. Afterward, we met back for one final Belizean breakfast before saying our goodbyes to Tanager. We flew out of nearby Punta Gorda to Belize City and then went our separate ways home.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Black-headed Trogon (BC), Keel-billed Toucan (BC), Barred Antshrike (BC), Wood Thrush (BC), Black-faced Grosbeak (BC), Keel-billed Motmot (BC), Cinnamon Becard (BC), Ruddy Quail-Dove (BC), White-fronted Parrot (BC), Lesser Nighthawk (BC), Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture (BC), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (BC), White-necked Jacobin (BC), Slaty-tailed Trogon (BC), White-necked Puffbird (BC), Gray-headed Kite (BC), Yellow Treefrog (BC), Ovenbird (BC), Lesson's Motmot (BC), Striped Owl (BC), Stub-tailed Spadebill (BC), Erato heliconian (BC), Red-throated Ant-Tanager (BC), Central American Agouti (BC), Plain Chachalaca (BC)

