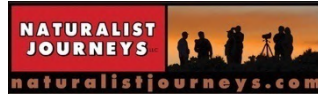
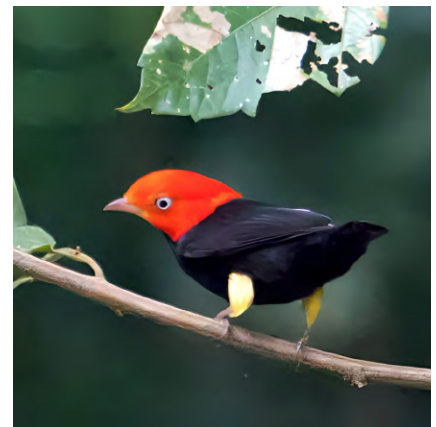


Best of Belize | Feb. 9-17, 2025

Trip Report by Chris Harbard



Chris Harbard with local guides Michael, Eduardo and Levy. Participants George, Janice, Jeff, Jennifer, Terri, Elissa, Eric and Christina.



Saturday February 8

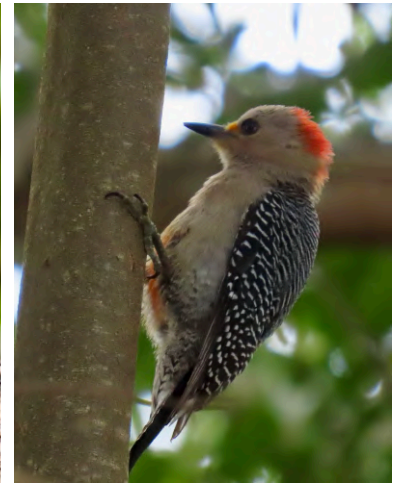
Black Orchid Resort

Guide Chris arrived in Belize a day early, and met with Jeff and Jennifer, who had also arrived early. We were taken to the Black Orchid Lodge situated on the Belize River. Once we had settled into our rooms there was time for a walk around the hotel grounds before dinner. In the trees were several wintering birds from North America including American Redstart and White-eyed Vireo as well as a delightful Common Tody-Flycatcher. Several Clay-colored Thrushes and a Tropical Mockingbird were feeding on the ground, along with a couple of Ruddy Ground-Doves, Parrots could be heard flying around, and two came close overhead showing their large yellow faces – these were Yellow-headed Parrots, a scarce species which is caught for the wildlife trade. Soon it was time for dinner and bed.

Sunday February 9

Black Orchid | Crooked Tree | Bird's Eye View Lodge

Another quick explore before breakfast at Black Orchid Lodge revealed noisy Brown Jays, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and a Mangrove Vireo. A local hotel groundsman pointed out some Proboscis Bats roosting on a



building plus several iguanas, and a Morelet's Crocodile across the river. After breakfast a last look around produced Morelet's Seedeater. A Magnolia Warbler and a loud, but invisible Bright-rumped Attila. Some Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys looked down on us as we boarded our transportation to Crooked Tree Island. The drive took us along the main Philip Goldson Highway through wetland with scattered vegetation and a few trees, Occasional egrets were seen, but little else. Then we turned onto Crooked Tree Road which led to a causeway across to Crooked Tree Island. A pool by the road contained a tiny Least Grebe which turned out to be the only grebe we saw all trip.

Our destination, the Bird's Eye Lodge, sits on the edge of the northern Lagoon, next to some wet pools, with areas of trees nearby. The three of us arrived in time to settle in and get some lunch but not before getting a look at a lovely Bare-throated Tiger-Heron which was waiting to greet us on a pool by the Lodge. After lunch, with the others not due for a couple of hours, we explored the area around the lodge. Perched on the lodge buildings were several Mangrove Swallows and Gray-breasted Martins, and some hummingbird feeders were attracting Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and Baltimore Oriole, the latter being winter visitors. The nearby pool had Least and Solitary Sandpipers feeding along its edge and a large group of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks which sat at the far side of the pool, became a regular sight, staying in that area for most of our stay. The other members of our group arrived from the airport and joined us for an afternoon walk around the hotel's campsite area. On the way, a look at the pool revealed Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, plus a couple of White Ibises and a close look at the vultures overhead eventually turned up a couple of Lesser Yellow-headed among the Turkey Vultures. Sightings around the campsite included Yucatan, Golden-fronted and Lineated Woodpeckers, with American Redstart, Black-and-White, Yellow-throated, Yellow-rumped and Yellow Warblers. A male Scrub Euphonia was seen by most, and several Social Flycatchers were vocal. Back at the hotel, it was possible to scope the far side of the lagoon, where several Snail Kites could be seen lazily flapping over the wet vegetation in search of their favorite Apple Snails. Soon it was time for our first species list, followed by a dinner with welcome cocktails. Outside the dining room, along the dark path, tiny dots were moving ... small toadlets, dozens of them which appeared as night fell, which we carefully avoided as we walked. Ironically these were toadlets from the Giant Toad, and they had a lot of growing to do. After dinner a few of us walked down the track to the hotel and found Common Pauraques sitting on the ground and hawking for insects. They could be heard calling later in the evening.

Monday February 10 Boat trip | Flycatchers | Yucatan Jays

This morning we woke early for a pre-breakfast boat trip into the Northern Lagoon and just before dawn Common Pauraques could be heard calling in the darkness. Early coffee and fruit was very welcome and we soon met with our guide Michael and boarded the boat. The exploration began along the shore from the hotel. Lots of birds were active in the trees and bushes along the lagoon edge. A large brown bird flapped up – a



Limpkin, Northern Jacanas and Purple Gallinules were feeding among the wet grasses along the lagoon edge. In the bushes nearby there were several Snail Kites, their incredible curved bills designed for catching and scooping out snails. A large chestnut-colored raptor with a white head, was the magnificent, Black-collared Hawk, which gave us great views and we soon began to realize that the common Roadside Hawk should really be called 'Creeside' Hawk. Birds seen in the bushes included Black-cowled Orioles, Mangrove Vireos and Cinnamon-bellied Saltators.

Michael explained that the water is very high this winter as the 'rainy season' has been prolonged. This means that several bird species have been difficult to see, including the much sought-after Agami Heron and Sungrebe. He told us that the depth of the lagoon is about 12 feet and that the long brown pieces of grass floating at the edge come from grazing Manatees which eat the aquatic vegetation. High on a tree were two White-necked Puffbirds perched up there to look for their insect prey. Parrots were flying overhead regularly and Michael pointed out two Yellow-headed Amazons as well as a few White-fronted, plus the smaller Olive-throated Parakeets. A Morelet's Crocodile was found, with its head just out of the vegetation, looking like a submerged log, and several Brown Basilisks were seen, often known as the 'Jesus Christ lizard' because it can literally run across water for short distances. There were several Belted Kingfishers, and one huge Ringed Kingfisher seen, and when we turned into a narrow stream which entered the lagoon, we also found a couple of Green Kingfishers and a tiny male American Pygmy Kingfisher which gave us superb views. Herons seen included both Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, lots of Green Herons and a couple of Bare-throated Tiger-Herons. As we sped back towards breakfast, a Caspian Tern flew past, the only gull/tern we would see all trip.

After breakfast Chris led a walk down the road and along a trail which led back to the hotel via the campsite. As we set out the resident Russet-naped Wood-Rail was spotted at the edge of the pool, being chased by a Northern Jacana – this odd-looking bird could often be seen close to the hotel, twitching its tail nervously. Along the sides of the road, Morelet's Seed eaters flitted and also sang their whistling, trilling song. A flurry of birds resolved into some Ruddy Ground Doves, a Yellow-bellied Elaenia, a Brown-crested Flycatcher, and a brief glimpse of a Blue Bunting. This spot also produced our one mammal of the day - a Yucatan Squirrel. The trail from the road was well shaded and full of birds. A male Hooded Warbler and Northern Waterthrush were the first birds seen and Melodious Blackbirds were singing noisily. At a bend in the trail, an open area with some bushes could be seen and we stopped to scan. A fine male Vermilion Flycatcher was easily picked out, and on some branches nearby a group of small birds were actively flying back and forth to the grass. These were mainly Black and Blue Grassquits, with some Morelet's Seed eaters. Jeff picked out a male Painted Bunting in a bush, with a female nearby, and a couple of Blue-gray Tanagers were also seen, along with a Black-throated Green



Warbler. We continued along the trail a Barred Antshrike was glimpsed, a Greenish Elaenia was found feeding, and then Jennifer spotted a female Rose-throated Becard above us. By the gate into the campsite a pair of Scrub Euphonias were feeding, and a Northern Tropical Pewee was catching flies, and as we crossed the grass of the campsite, Clay-colored and Wood Thrushes were feeding. With nearly sixty species seen in two hours, we returned to the lodge for lunch feeling pretty pleased with ourselves.

After lunch we met with Michael who was taking us to a different habitat nearby – pine-tree savannah – and we excitedly boarded the minibus for a short drive to the area. We parked close to a couple of properties with large conifers and began to walk down the road. Immediately we saw Acorn Woodpeckers, who were actively hiding acorns in the ‘granary’ in which this species stores its food. A Rose-throated Becard was seen and then further down the road a rarer Gray-collared Becard, a nice male, was seen which perched out to give us scope views. Michael pointed to one of the common Tropical Kingbirds perched on a wire and told us it was actually the very similar Couch’s Kingbird because of its different call. He and Chris began to discuss how to distinguish them, so they didn’t hear Jeff, who repeated loudly “JABIRU” while pointing into the sky as this huge stork flew fast between some trees, giving us a brief but good view. We had seen some distant jays but soon we found some nearer. One was the scarce Green Jay, which perched out nicely for us, and Chris got his scope on a group of the local endemic, Yucatan Jays. With their bright blue back and black heads, they are unmistakable, and we later got good views of them. A Great Black Hawk sat out on a tree branch and as we were watching it a small bird popping out onto a nearer branch, which Michael announced was White-browed Gnatcatcher, a nice male with a black cap. While we watched it another bird started singing, and Michael called it out into view – a White bellied Wren. A Collared Forest-Falcon called from the trees but sadly we could not locate it, although we did find a group of at least 12 Baltimore Orioles perched together in one tree. Red-ored and White-fronted Amazons were noisily flying in to find roosting places and it was soon time to head back to the lodge. After the checklist and dinner, a small group of us went to find Common Pauraques which repeated their performance of the previous night.

Tuesday February 11 Jabiru and Laughing Falcon | Toucans and Trogons

Our last morning at Crooked Tree started with a walk with Chris around the campground area, then breakfast, and a final walk down the road. Highlights from these walks included a distant Laughing Falcon which gave good scope views, and an amazing Jabiru which flew by fairly close to us. A Gray Fox was also seen skulking along behind some buildings and was attracted out by some squeaking noises which it couldn’t help but investigate. We had an early lunch and our driver, Leonard, arrived promptly to drive us to where we would meet the boat which would take us to Lamanai. Although only about eight miles away as the Jabiru flies, we had to drive about



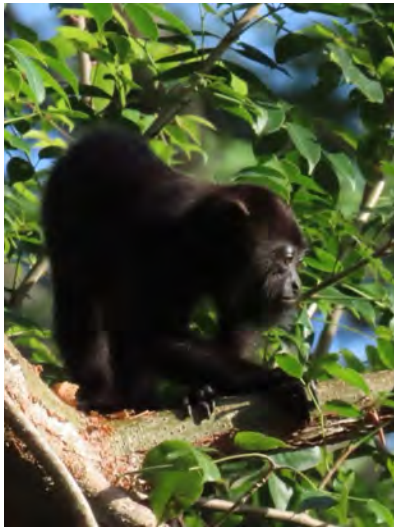
25 miles round to the jetty, followed by about 30 miles of river cruise. Along the river we saw several Ospreys, lots of Ringed Kingfishers, plus Belted and Green. We also passed some Mennonite settlements. Our guide explained that many of them are still traditional and shun modern inventions, others have embraced technology more.

We arrived at Lamanai Outpost lodge and were greeted by staff, who showed us all to our fabulous, air-conditioned cabanas. Soon after this we gathered up at the restaurant for an orientation briefing during which we learned about the Lodge and what would be happening during our stay. Our guide Eduardo explained the trips we would be taken on, as well as how we could explore on our own. During this briefing we were frequently distracted by birds – our first toucan (Keel-billed, which is Belize’s national bird), our first trogon (Black-headed) and a Yellow-Euphonia – all a taste of what was to come!

Eduardo took us on a walk from the Lodge towards Indian Church, the nearby village. A feeding platform with fruit had been erected near the dining room and we had close up views of Plain Chachalacas there. Suddenly Eduardo exclaimed “Green-backed Sparrow” and pointed out a small stripe-headed bird sitting on a branch low in the vegetation. This was a Yucatan endemic and proved to be the only one we saw well. As we walked down the trail Eduardo spotted lots of new birds including White-collared Manakin and Spot-breasted Wren. We returned to the Lodge and gathered before dinner for cocktails and to run through the species list, together with Eduardo who outlined tomorrow’s plans. After dinner we retired, excited by the possibilities of what we might see tomorrow.

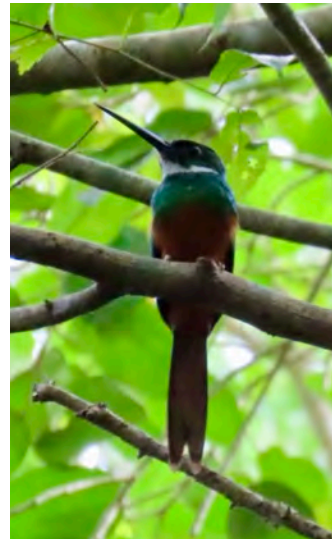
Wednesday February 12 Dawn walk | Little Eddie | Tinamou territory

Coffee and muffins were available from 6am and we all took advantage of this before we set out on a Jungle Dawn walk with Eduardo which took us further than yesterday, more into Indian Church village. In trees just by the Lodge we saw our first Yellow-winged Tanagers. As we explored the trail, one area seemed to have a small group of feeding birds, which included White-collared and Red-capped Manakins, as well as Black-headed Saltators. Green-breasted Mangos, which look like the common Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, were seen and most easily identified by their black beaks. A brightly-colored male Gartered Trogon was found by Eduardo, and it perched obligingly for photographs while in a tree nearby a Red-legged Honeycreeper perched, showing off its bright blue plumage. Several wintering warblers were seen in trees near the village with regulars like American Redstart, and Magnolia and Yellow-throated Warblers plus our first (and only) Tennessee Warbler. Some Lesser Goldfinches were feeding on seed by the road and Keel-billed Toucans were still a novelty. We headed back for a very welcome and delicious Belizean breakfast.



After breakfast we walked back to Indian Church village and found a couple of new birds on the way – a Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift tantalized us with distant views before coming closer and while staring at the skies we managed to spot a Wood Stork soaring high overhead. In the village we visited Eduardo's house and were introduced to his son, three-year old Eddie junior, who sported a pair of Vortex binoculars, demonstrated his amazing ability to identify birds at such a young age. Coconuts were hacked open with a machete so we could enjoy a drink of cool and refreshing coconut water. We said goodbye to Eddie, who clearly wanted to join us, and headed across the village to a women's co-operative restaurant where we had a cooking demonstration. We were shown how a mix of corn and lemon juice could be ground up to form dough, using a rounded stone which was pushed across a larger stone, a little like a pestle and mortar. We then were given the chance to make this ourselves which several of the group did. The group then took their own dough (or some made earlier) and shaped it into tortillas and these were then placed into an oven for a short time to cook. The resulting tortillas were then eaten with a local sauce. We were then shown how to prepare a tamale, taking some dough which was shaped on banana leaves and filled with a piece of chicken and more delicious sauce. We all made our own which would be cooked for us at dinner tonight. We then sat down to enjoy a wonderful local lunch of soup and garnachas, plus empanadas, with a vegetarian option for those that wanted it.

Back at Lamanai Outpost, we joined Eduardo at the dock to take a boat to the entrance of Lamanai Archaeological Reserve. The plan was to follow the Sugar Mill Trail which would eventually take us back to the Lodge. Entrance fees were paid and armed with yellow wristbands we began our walk. It was the latter part of the afternoon, and birds were starting to become active again. This felt like a real piece of rainforest with dense vegetation on either side and some trees towering high above us. Occasional song could be heard and Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys were howling. A small dove was glimpsed by some as it whizzed across the path, a Blue Ground Dove. Two huge, Pale-billed Woodpeckers were watched climbing a tree and a smaller Golden-olive Woodpecker was also seen. A Worm-eating Warbler was seen by a lucky few, as was a White-breasted Wood-Wren. Both Red-crowned and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers were also active by the path but proved tricky to get a good view of. A distant song could be heard which Eduardo picked out as belonging to a Mayan Antthrush, a local endemic – he tried to lure it closer with a recording but it would not play ball. An Ivory-billed Woodcreeper was more obliging and a small Plain Xenops was also seen. When a Keel-billed Toucan flew past and nobody really looked, Eduardo exclaimed that we were already 'toucaned out'. We reached the old Sugar Mill, built in the late 1830s by a British company, it did not run until 1860 and then only lasted about 15 years. The brick and iron which remains is strewn around the site and Greater Sac-winged Bats are roosting in the buildings. A Blue Ground Dove called from a tantalizingly close location but could not be seen. We saw a Central American Agouti run across the trail. This large rodent is also known locally as the 'Belizean rabbit' and has five toes on its front



feet, with only three on the hind feet. The trail continued and opened out into a clearing with a mound in the centre. Nearby Mayan Antthrushes called and we had another try to bring them out. A Thicket Tinamou also called, and after a short while Eduardo decided to try and entice it to appear. We all stood back and watched. Eduardo flashed his laser pointer at the edge of the clearing and whispered “There!” A brown chicken-like bird was walking around near the edge the clearing with only its head and upper back showing. It would appear and disappear behind vegetation and proved difficult to see. Eventually when it reached the far side of the mound, and so was not visible, it stopped moving and then vanished. Tinamous are related to the flightless ratites, like Ostrich and kiwis, but can fly. It was getting late and we were supposed to leave the Reserve by 5pm so we walked the last part of the trail swiftly, emerging by a road which passed a couple of old ruined Spanish churches from the 1600s. As usual we met for cocktails and we celebrated Elissa’s birthday with a toast, followed by the species list before a dinner, which was so large that most of us could not finish (or even start) the tamales we made earlier.

Thursday February 13 Mayan ruins | Sunset drinks | Night birds

Some opted for an early coffee and a chance to watch wildlife from the restaurant’s balcony, while others arrived for another great breakfast a little later. We all met at 8am down by the dock for another trip to Lamanai, this time to visit the Mayan ruins. On the path to the information center we encountered a troop of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys, adults and young, high up in the trees. We started at the museum which was worth spending time at as it contained a wealth of information about the Mayan civilization which would help to put everything we saw into context.

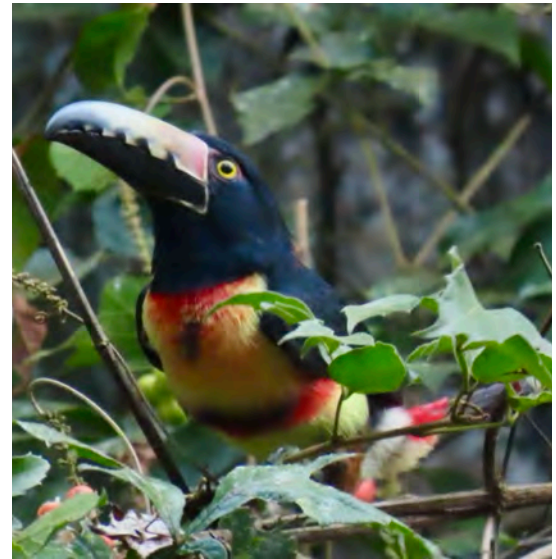
The trail we walked took us to the Mask Temple, stopping on the way at a map of the site so Eduardo could tell us some extra information and while he did this, above our heads a Lesser Greenlet was calling. The Mask Temple, like all of these Mayan Ruins, is now deep in the jungle and was excavated from the vegetation which had completely buried it. At one time the area would have been cleared of trees and the temples would have been clearly visible from the river nearby. Birds were calling from all around us. Eduardo suddenly heard something and beckoned us over. “Rufous-tailed Jacamar” he exclaimed and pointed into the vegetation. His laser pointer indicated where the bird was, slightly obscured and in the shadows. We moved closer and soon had good views of this long-billed, long-tailed, bright green bird. Another joined it and we briefly saw the female pass some food to the male. It was so birdy that we explored the edges of the clearing. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was feed from a tree, and a Roadside Hawk dropped to the ground to grab something. Some of the group explored up the Mask Temple with its large carved mask, climbing to the top where they saw a pair of Masked Tityras while down at the edge of the trail a male Blue Bunting was feeding.



As we started to walk along the trail to the High Temple Eduardo suddenly said “Motmot”. This was a bird we were hoping to see, and it could be heard calling back in the forest. Eduardo played a call, hoping to bring it closer. Instead of coming close it simply moved and we glimpsed it flying up into a tree. For the next 15 minutes we suffered ‘Motmot neck’ as we craned upwards, eventually seeing it high above us. Two more were calling nearby but were not visible. As we started to walk onwards, another bird call was heard, identified by Eduardo as a Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, a species which acts as leader to a mixed flock. It became apparent that there were dozens of birds in the trees above us and we struggled to see them through the dense foliage. Names were called out - Yellow-throated Warbler, Plain Xenops, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Black-throated Green Warbler, Red-legged Honeycreeper ... the list went on. At least fifteen species were identified and others almost certainly missed.

It was another typically humid and warm morning which brings its own problems, which led Eduardo, with his typical humor, to ask “Chris, are you leaking, or is it the heat?” While we walked along to the next temple, Eric’s keen eyes picked out a movement ... a snake, with a blue head. It was a Speckled Racer, a beautifully patterned, slim snake which showed itself nicely as it rustled through the tree roots and leaves on the ground. The High Temple is an imposing structure dating back about 2000 years, and rising to a height of more than 100 feet. Opposite the temple is a small ball court, with a large stone marker, and past this is the Stela Temple where a carved stela is standing. We continued through to the final Jaguar Temple, looking down on it from a slope opposite. It was permitted to climb this temple to its 96 foot-high top, and Eric rose to the challenge, reaching the top with a celebratory jump! As we walked back towards the entrance and several gift shops, Eduardo who always wore sandals suddenly exclaimed that he was in pain due to excessive ‘formication’, which was his way of telling us that he was being bitten by ants! After a short break to allow us to check out the gift shops, we boarded the boat back to Lamanai outpost Lodge for lunch.

We had a late afternoon start at 4pm, and so a few of us went for a walk after lunch, down along the road which led to the Archaeological reserve, where highlights were White-necked Puffbird and a tiny Olivaceous Woodcreeper. We met at the dock at 4pm to embark on a Sunset Cocktail Cruise. We headed across to the far side of the New River and slowly sailed along. On top of nearby bushes were Pale-vented Pigeons, the occasional Tropical Kingbird, and one or two parrots. Several ospreys were seen and a distant raptor turned out to be a Short-tailed Hawk while another was a Bat Falcon. Parties of Turkey Vultures were flying over, on their way to roosting places, then suddenly there were two larger white birds with them, King Vultures!! Large groups of Western Cattle Egrets were flying down the river. Eduardo gestured for the boat to turn in towards the bank and we nudged its nose into the vegetation and stopped. With a curious smile on his face he set up his scope,



pointing towards the far side of the river, signaling silence as he asked us all to come and look, one by one. What we saw was a large bird, sitting on a huge nest – a Jabiru, and although distant, it was great to be able to see such a rare sight. The sun was going down and Eduardo played a bird call, getting a reply from the bankside vegetation ... it was a White-throated Flycatcher which sadly remained hidden. Rum punches and fruit juices were offered round as the sun finally set and we headed back across the river.

Dinner was at 6pm sharp because afterwards we would be journeying into the night on a Spotlight Safari by boat. After an early species list, we ate and then went down to the dock, making our way there with flashlights. We headed down river towards the Lamanai Archaeological Reserve jetty where we could just make out a couple of Common Pauras, sitting on the ground. Eduardo pointed out some roosting Mangrove Swallows and a Mexican Tree Frog, sitting on the jetty. We continued and a Limpkin flew up from the riverside vegetation. As the New River lagoon narrowed, we took a turn down a creek and on a nearby tree trunk several Proboscis Bats were perched their tiny eyes sparkling in the spotlight. As we continued on, Eduardo shone the light high into tree and illuminated several large birds – Great Curassows, large members of the cracid family which often remain hidden in the forest but which were clearly visible here. The bright spotlight washed over the bushes and trees as we floated along. Suddenly a tiny bird was caught in the light, perched on a low branch. It was an American Pygmy Kingfisher, and further along a couple of huge Ringed Kingfishers were also seen roosting. High on a dead tree snag was a grey shape which turned out to be a Northern Potoo which occasionally flew up to catch a passing insect, returning each time to the same perch. We went back onto the main river and Eduardo picked out a bird sitting on a high tree in front of us, its white tail clearly visible. This was a Yucatan Nightjar, a local endemic, the male of which shows a bright white undertail. We felt celebratory as Eduardo said we should head back ... but just one more bird, he said, smiling. The spotlight picked out a shape in a branch overhanging the river. It was a Sungrebe!! We had thought we would not see one of these because of the high water levels ... how on earth did he find it?? That is his secret. As we watched it slipped off its perch into the water and swam into the undergrowth at the edge of the river. What a fabulous excursion well worth staying up late for and we went to bed feeling very happy.

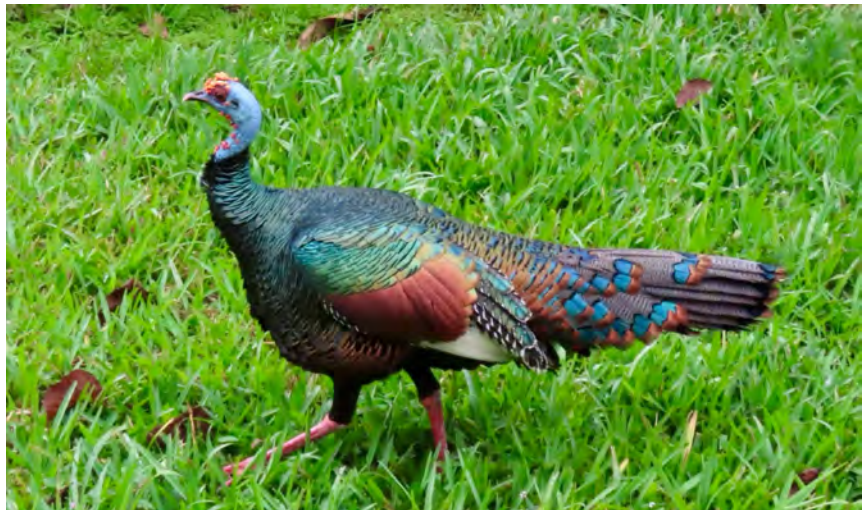
Friday February 14 Valentine's Day | Rain | Hawk-Eagle

Valentine's Day started early for us meeting at the dock with guides Eduardo and Lucio at 6:15 for a Savannah Stroll which involved a pre-breakfast boat trip to Dawson Creek and then a walk across the savannah there. We sailed across the river and turned down Dawson Creek, travelling a couple of miles downstream. We saw several Green and one Ringed Kingfisher, several Green Herons, and a couple of Limpkins. We arrived at a point on the



riverbank where a trail started and disembarked. It was very overcast, and we had all made sure to bring wet weather gear just in case. Almost immediately Eduardo spotted a Yucatan Woodpecker, looking rather like a diminutive Golden-fronted Woodpecker, with a small beak. Nearby a Ladder-backed Woodpecker called but remained hidden, as did a Carolina Wren. Up ahead an eastern meadowlark was singing and some shapes on the path ahead of us ran into the grass – Black-throated Bobwhites, another Yucatan endemic. After brief views of them Eduardo offered to walk into the grass and try to move them back into the open and nearly succeeded but instead flushed them out past us and away. Some Plain-breasted Ground Doves flew up ahead and in a distant tree a Bat Falcon was perched. Before we could walk on, Eduardo heard a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, and we were soon watching a several of them and this is when it began to rain. Out came rain jackets and umbrellas, but it soon stopped, only to start again a few minutes later. We stopped by some trees where a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet was calling but it was tricky to see. A Northern Tropical Pewee perched out for us, and a little further along Botteri's Sparrow perched up and sang. Parrots were flying about constantly, but most were White-fronted Amazons, with a few Red-lored and a couple of Yellow-headed. As we neared our mooring place, ready to head back, Eduardo spotted a couple of Yellow-lored Parrots, yet another Yucatan endemic which had eluded us so far. As we sailed back, Chris spotted some Purple Martins, another new bird for the trip. By the time we got back to Lamanai Outpost lodge we were ready for our last breakfast, as we were being picked up at 1pm to head for Chan Chich Lodge. All of the ladies on our trip were presented with a lovely red rose for Valentines. The rest of the morning was spent packing and dodging the rain, which became torrential confined several of us to the dining room for more than an hour. On his way back to his cabana Chris saw the tail end of a Boa Constrictor vanishing into the vegetation by the path.

Lunch was at noon and our transport from Chan Chich arrived promptly and was quickly loaded up. We said our goodbyes to the Lodge staff and to Eduardo and boarded the minibus which was driven by Levy our new guide at Chan Chich. Along the road through agricultural areas we spotted a Laughing Falcon, several American Kestrels (new for the trip) and Eurasian Collared Doves (also new). After just over an hour we left the agricultural landscape behind as we entered the Rio Bravo Conservation Area, a nature reserve covering more than 110,000 acres, the largest land-based conservation area in Belize. As we drove along, three dark birds on the grass by the road caught our attention. They looked a bit like ... turkeys! And they were ... our first Ocellated Turkeys, the only other turkey species in existence and another Yucatan endemic we were all looking forward to seeing. Sporting blue heads with orange caruncles, their brightly multi-colored, iridescent plumage looked very exotic. Many more were seen along the drive, as well as many White-tailed Deer which soon became a common sight on all of our drives. We slowed and stopped along the way and Levy told us he had something interesting to show us, so we all got out. "You see that tree?", he said. "Well there is an Ornate Hawk-Eagle nesting in it." This was more than interesting, and Eric already had his scope out and set-up. Through the scope you could just



make out the shape of a nest and what seemed to be something sitting on it ... then it moved and you could just see a crest and orange neck. Levy told us it was the female and that the male was a rare sight. A hummingbird briefly hovered near us. “Oh look,” exclaimed Levy “A Wedge-tailed Sabrewing.” Another new bird, and we hadn’t even reached Chan Chich. WE moved on and very soon Levy screeched to a halt again. This time it was a White Hawk, perched in a tree. This spectacular raptor is all white with black only on its wing tips and end of the tail. Again the scope enabled us to get good looks. As we climbed into the van, Levy said “Listen ... that is a Gray-throated Chat. Let me try and call it out”. He tried, and immediately out it popped, and then vanished again. Only a couple of us saw it but rather than wait we decided to get to the Lodge ... it had been a long day of travel. We arrived at Chan Chich Reception and walked to the main Lodge building where we were told our luggage would be taken to our rooms. Everything here was made of local wood and looked sumptuous! We would have a briefing in a few minutes, then could go to our cabanas. As we waited a hummingbird flew up to a feeder – a Long-billed Hermit, the logo of Chan Chich! Others saw a White-necked Jacobin, definitely a good omen for our stay there. Dinner would be in about an hour, giving us time to unpack and meet for a drink before going through the species list in the bar! We enjoyed a wonderful dinner, and looked forward to tomorrow morning when Levy would take us on a pre-breakfast walk.

Saturday February 15 Trogons | Royalty | Toucanet

Early coffee and pastries were available at 6am, and we all met with Levy at 6:30, ready for our walk around some trails, for about a mile and a half. One of the first birds we saw, right by the main building, was a Crested Guan, high in a tree. We followed a trail down towards the pool and past it into a clearing by some buildings with a fruiting tree that was attracting quite a few birds. One of the first we saw was a male Red-capped Manakin, followed by another, then another ... at least half a dozen were there. Then some larger birds flew in - m Collared Aracaris, a bird we had missed at Lamanai. These large-billed birds were adept at grabbing tiny fruits with the tips of their beaks and then swallowing them with a quick gulp. High in a tree overhead a couple of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers were calling, and another group of birds caught our attention – Black faced Grosbeaks. An Ochre-bellied Flycatcher was seen by some, along with the usual Tropical Kingbird and Social Flycatchers. We continued into a patch of forest where we encountered Black-headed and Gartered Trogons. As we came out again, there was a small pond with a Louisiana Waterthrush, and then an open area, seemingly covered by Ocellated Turkeys. A small bird flew into a tree by us, a small woodpecker ... a Smoky-brown Woodpecker! This was a good bird, often difficult to find, and it perched beautifully for us. Several birds were perched up high in a tree nearby and the scope showed these to be a Black-cowled Oriole and a few Red-legged Honeycreepers. Now it was time to head back for breakfast, and as ever the tables outside gave a perfect view



of the hummingbird feeders where we were treated to views of several species, including a Purple-crowned Fairy, which was actually feeding on flowers nearby.

After breakfast it began to rain, quite heavily, so our next trail walk was a little delayed. We set out towards the Upper Plaza, and in the first bush by the path Jeff spotted a bird which turned out to be an Olive-backed Euphonia ... a very good start. As soon as we entered the forest we started to see birds. First was down a slope and spotted by Levy. "Collared Trogon" he whispered. "Don't move a muscle". Worried that his laser pointer might scare it, he pointed down the slope and we all peered through the foliage. Suddenly there it was, with a bright red belly, unlike the two yellow-bellied species we saw before breakfast. It came closer and we hardly dared to breathe. Its white breast band contrasted brightly with the green head and red belly ... what a bird! A little further down the trail another trogon appeared, even bigger, also with a red belly – A Slaty-tailed Trogon, giving us the full set of four trogons that morning! Further along a couple of White-throated Thrushes popped out, and we heard a Black-throated Shrike-Tanager. Various calls were heard and Levy decided to try and call something out – it was a Tawny-winged Woodcreeper. Then another call was heard and he was again successful in enticing out a Stub-tailed Spadebill, a tiny Flycatcher, which proved quite elusive as it was always moving. An Ornate Hawk-Eagle called invisibly from overhead.

After lunch we went for a drive. Not just any drive but a safari drive in a purpose-built vehicle which seated all nine of us comfortably. We explored the roadways around the Gallon Jug Estate, where Chan Chich is based. The roads are wide with grass verges which enable some of the wildlife to be easily seen. There were Ocellated Turkeys everywhere, and then something different, a group of Great Curassows which rapidly ran to hide. A couple of Crested Guans were more obliging, with one staying right out in the open. After a mile or two the trees vanished and open countryside took over. Fences were worth checking with several Fork-tailed Flycatchers seen while Flowering African Tulip trees were checked for hummingbirds. A pair of White-tailed Kites were seen, with one carrying a long-tailed rodent ... probably some kind of rat. Over the fields a large number of Vaux's Swifts were flying. In the distance a dark bird was perched in a tree – a Montezuma Oropendola, a large relative of the orioles. We headed towards it and were soon watching several in a tree. On the other side of the road a smaller rufous-tailed bird was seen by Levy who casually announced "Royal Flycatcher". This was a bird we all wanted to see, especially Chris who clambered unceremoniously out of the Safari vehicle. For a while it played hard to get but eventually revealed its laid-back crest (sadly not fanned out) and long rufous tail. Back amongst the trees again, we encountered a small flock of birds which included a couple of Dot-winged Antwrens and a heard-but-not-seen Dusky Antbird. There was one last treat on the way back – a fruiting tree by the road which had been attracting a range of birds. We stopped where we could see most of the tree and watched. A Black-



headed Trogon was immediately obvious, then a Keel-billed Toucan, and a Clay-colored Thrush or two. Then Levy said “Look – a toucanet!!” There in the tree was a bird, mostly hidden, with green feathers and a long stout bill ... it was, as Levy said, a Northern Emerald-Toucanet, a scarce and difficult to see species. We watched it for about five minutes before it disappeared. What a fabulous end to a great afternoon!!

Sunday February 16 Motmot | Cotinga! | Owls

Our last day, and another early start for a day with Levy taking us on four different trips. Just before sunrise a Common Pauraque was calling. The pre-breakfast walk started like the previous morning but today Levy was determined to find a certain species which he had failed to locate yesterday. We walked to the fruiting tree just past the pool, and then took a trail down into the forest. There Levy played the call of the Tody Motmot ... and got a response further down the trail. We followed the sound and crept quietly along a small side trail until Levy held up his hand a gestured for silence. He quietly tried to describe where the bird was calling from as the laser pointer would scare it. It was sitting to the left of a tree, quite close, but with many trees to choose from it was tricky to see in the shaded light. All but a couple of us got to see it before it moved off. Levy took the two who had missed it further down the small trail and managed to relocate it for them. These smallest of motmots are skittish and difficult to see so we did well to all get a look at it. As we continued along the trail, Levy heard a hummingbird and pointed to a tiny bird perched up on a branch. “Scaly-breasted Hummingbird”, he told us. Scopes gave us a back-lit view, but we managed to move round and get a better angle to see it quite well. As we neared the Lodge a couple of birds in a tree caught our attention, and Levy quickly ID’d them as Golden-hooded Tanagers – a few of us got fair views before they flew off.

After breakfast we had planned another drive to a slightly different part of Gallon Jug, and as we drove along through the forest. Near the small airstrip we stopped to look at some flowering African Tulips where Brown Jays and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were feeding, hoping for hummingbirds, and finding Green-breasted Mango. Overhead a King Vulture was spotted. As we drove on some American Kestrels were seen sitting on fence posts, then suddenly we saw a larger bird perched in a tree – a Laughing Falcon, which allowed us to get quite close. Watching the fence posts was quite productive and as well as several Fork-tailed Flycatchers, we found Eastern Meadowlarks and Ruddy Ground Doves. Soon we arrived by a lake where we stopped for refreshments. There were no birds on the water, but Mangrove Swallows were flying around. In trees nearby we saw a Northern Parula. We headed back into the forest and decided to take another look at the fruiting tree where we had seen the toucanet yesterday. We pulled up close to it and watched. Today there were several Short-billed Pigeons feeding there, and several Clay-colored Thrushes, and a few Red-capped Manakins. Then Levy said something almost unimaginable ... “Lovely Cotinga – female”. Slightly hidden by foliage was a gray-



brown bird with a pale spotted breast and a large eye. She hopped up, more into the open. Levy explained just how rare this was – he had not seen one for more than two years. Another vehicle from Chan Chich drove and stopped close to us. “Lovely Cotinga!” Levy told the driver and female passenger, who looked interested until she realized it was a bird. “I thought you said Cortina” she exclaimed. Cortina is a make of British car. We watched this wonderful bird until it disappeared behind the tree, and while we were excited to see her, we all secretly wished there had been a male as well. Time for lunch!

We had decided that after lunch we would drive some more and try to find another mixed flock, rather than walk into the forest on a warm afternoon. This plan worked surprisingly well, as not far down the road we encountered a Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, that well-known harbinger of a mixed flock. We piled out of the Safari vehicle and started to call out what we could see. One of the first birds was perched on a branch in front of us – a Tropical Royal Flycatcher. Then movements to the side revealed a Rose-throated Becard, while on the other side a Yellow-throated Vireo popped up. Jennifer called out “Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher” at the same time as Levy said “Green Shrike-Vireo”. His laser pointer beamed high up above us and some of us managed to get views of this beautiful bird, and George even got a photo. There were Yellow-bellied Tyrannulets, a Rufous Mourner, Black-throated Green warbler and Red-legged Honeycreeper, as well as many more birds which ‘got away’. Onwards until we reached another spot with birds calling. This time we had views of both Dot-winged Antwren and Dusky Antbird, right by the vehicle. Then a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper flew in, so much smaller than its Ivory-billed relative. Up in a tree next to us a woodpecker flew in – a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker a medium-sized woodpecker with a bright chestnut back with black spots, and blond crest and this male had a bright red face. A final stop at the ‘Cotinga tree’ (just in case there was a male) produced White-collared and Red-capped Manakins, and a White-throated Thrush. Back at the Lodge we prepared for dinner, meeting before to go through the species list.

After dinner was one last treat – a night-time safari! We boarded the vehicle and drove out along the dark road, with a bright spotlight illuminating everything ahead of us. We saw lots of White-tailed Deer eyes, flashing back at us as we drove along. At one point our heart raced as a Gray Fox looked back at us. Out of the forest we drove seeing some Common Pauras and scrutinizing the many fences that lined the road, slowing down and stopping and the beam of light picked out a brown shape – a Mottled Owl. Eventually some squeaking noises from Levy made in turn to look at us and we had a nice view of this secretive bird. Further along another shape on a post turned into a Northern Potoo, which looked out with its large yellow eyes. One last nocturnal treat was seen perched on the branch of a tree as we drove back – a Middle American Screech Owl, a rufous morph with glaring yellow eyes. Back at the Lodge we confirmed that we would be ready early in the morning with our bags out ready for collection by 6:30.

Monday February 17 Farewell | Final falcon | Airport

It was with great sadness that we said farewell to Chan Chich Lodge and boarded the minivan for our long drive to the airport. Levy was to be our driver, so we said goodbye to the other staff and collected our boxed breakfasts. We drove through the forest and past the checkpoints which ensure that the area remains protected and free from poachers and loggers. Along the way we saw the usual Ocellated Turkeys and a nice group of Great Curassows, mainly females, which posed for a short while. Soon we left the forest and were out into the agricultural area known as Spanish Lookout. And we were on the lookout, as Levy had alerted us to look out for falcons. We saw several American kestrels, and then a larger bird was perched near the road – an Aplomado Falcon, our last new bird of the trip! A little further on a group of parrots contained Red-lored Amazons, plus a Mealy Amazon, which we had only heard previously. We stopped at a supermarket for a rest break, and a chance to purchase last minute snacks. It was not long before we reached the airport, with most of us on different flights. With a final total of 242 bird species plus several mammals, reptiles and amphibians, not to mention all of the amazing plants and insects, it had been an amazing adventure!

Photos: Group (Chris Harbard - CH), Keel-billed Toucan (George Lauterbach - GL), Red-capped Manakin (GL), Lamanai (CH), Jabiru (CH), Lizard (Terri Barczak - TB), Yucatan Woodpecker (CH), American Pygmy Kingfisher (CH), Purple Gallinule (CH), Green Iguana (TB), Gartered Trogon (CH), Pale Owl-Butterfly (CB), Yucatan Black Howler Monkey (CH), Lamanai (CH), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (CH), Northern Potoo (CH), Collared Aracari (CH), White-necked Jacobin (CH), Ocellated Turkey (CH), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (CH), Red-lored Amazon (TB), Northern Emerald Toucanet (CH), Yellow-olive Flycatcher (CH), Laughing Falcon (CH)