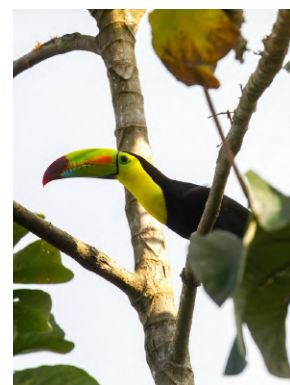


Best of Belize | Trip Report | March 2-10, 2025 | by James P. Smith



With local guides Lenny from Birds Eye View, Abdul from Lamanai and Luis from Chan Chich. Our wonderful participants were; Barbara, Leah, Melissa, Ursula & John, Judy & Sam, and Dominic.



Sunday March 2nd | Arrivals | Birds Eye View Lodge

Most of the group arrived in Belize a day or so ahead of the main tour with Melissa and Dominic flying into Philip Goldson International airport on the start date of the trip. We gathered as a group for the first time on the delightful patio of the Birds Eye View Lodge dining area where the kitchen staff had been kind enough to accommodate us with a late lunch. A wonderfully refreshing breeze drifted across Crooked Tree Lagoon and the scene seemed idyllic as Neotropic Cormorants, Mangrove Swallows and Yellow-throated Warblers could be watched while dining.

As other birding guests around the site snoozed in hammocks and enjoyed a beer, the atmosphere was peaceful and relaxed. Sitting there, it was hard to imagine that the whole of the kitchen, dining room and bar area had



been underwater during the catastrophic flooding of the previous November. The lodge staff worked incredibly hard to have their doors again by late January after what must have been the most monumental clean up!

We were all assigned balcony or patio rooms overlooking Crooked Tree Lagoon, the layout tastefully designed to catch those cooling breezes coming off the water. Around 4pm we ventured out for the first birding walk of the tour. A nearby flooded field hosted over 20 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and offered close studies of several Least and Solitary Sandpipers, and a couple of Tricolored Herons. Stunning Vermillion Flycatchers perched along the fences and the 'ricochet' calls of Tropical Kingbirds could be heard from the wires above helping to clinch their identification from the extremely similar and closely related Couch's Kingbird.

North American warblers clearly found the climate favorable, eagerly consuming insects to fatten up for the long journey north. Impressive *ficus* trees within the lodge grounds attracted American Redstarts, Black-and-white, Magnolia and Yellow Warblers, while several Northern Waterthrushes and Common Yellowthroats foraged along a lovely wet ditch. Green Herons rose up from the marshes and Cattle Egrets quite naturally spent time around the cows with larger flights heading east across the lagoon to roost. Handsome Northern Jacanas and a family of Russet-naped Wood rails with several black, downy young could be seen on the receding water levels, and year-round residents such as Tropical Mockingbird, Common Tody-Flycatcher and Mangrove Vireo all put on a fabulous show, much to the delight of our photographers. Towards the evening, Little Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets flew east across the lagoon to join the Cattle Egrets heading to roost, and a (wild) Muscovy Duck flew towards Crooked Tree Village while Snail Kites hunted and perched around the fringe of the lagoon...

A delightful first afternoon came to a triumphant close as a delicious buffet supper was served at the lodge; chicken, stew-beef, honey-glazed carrots, and potato salad, followed by pineapple cake for dessert! Afterwards, we went through the first daily tally simultaneously serenaded by a calling Common Pauraque!

Monday March 3rd | Birds Eye View Lodge | Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary



The dawn air was crisp and cool, perfect for the first boat excursion of the tour. Lenny was to be our captain and local guide and as we pulled out from the dock, Gray-breasted Martins and Mangrove Swallows sortied around the lodge building and would soon to become familiar everyday species in the first half of the tour. As we cruised along the western shore of the lagoon, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and a surprise Fulvous Whistling Duck flew by, Neotropic Cormorants appeared to be prolific and we had the first of many encounters with Ringed and Belted Kingfishers. The peculiar *'twangy'* song of Mangrove Vireo was common place in the waterside thickets, and eventually we secured views of several. The herons came into their own in this habitat with Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Limpkins, plenty of wintering Great Blue Herons and there was even a Bare-throated Tiger-heron on a nest! Snail Kites appeared to be more abundant than usual, actively hunting and feeding apple snails to their nestlings and fully fledged youngsters. While much of the morning belonged to the birding, non-avian sightings included lots of giant Green Iguanas though they were actually more orange-brown in color than green.

We marveled as Lenny's ability to skillfully maneuver the boat through patches of choking weeds and squeeze the boat up the narrowest of creeks, and it was one such creek which gave the most spectacular views of the much sought-after American Pygmy Kingfisher. The same spot also hosted a family of Rufous-breasted Spinetails, a White-eyed Vireo and a Northern Parula! The matted, floating vegetation in the open lagoon provided ideal habitat for species such as Purple Gallinule, resplendent in full breeding plumage, and the ever-disgruntled Northern Jacanas, while a few folks were fortunate enough to see a couple of Yellow-breasted Crakes flush from right under the bow of the boat. Red-winged Blackbirds teed-up nicely singing in the open marshland but it was really the close range Fork-tailed Flycatchers that stole the show, surely one the most majestic members of the flycatcher family?!

The morning heat started to have an impact as several broad winged soaring birds including Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, Ospreys, and Snail Kites began to take advantage of the increasingly warm air thermals, and there was great excitement as Dominic suddenly spotted a magnificent Jabiru gliding with consummate ease above the lagoon and nearby forest. It was the perfect bird to round off a brilliant morning and Lenny brought us back to the lodge at a considerably faster pace than we went out!



After breakfast, another local guide named Robert gave the group a shuttle ride out to Beck's B&B in an area of pine savannah and, as such, a totally different habitat type to that surrounding Birds Eye View Lodge. It was late morning and already pretty hot. Correspondingly, bird activity was admittedly quiet but during a pleasant stroll back to Birds Eye View we encountered several species that made the walk worthwhile not least of which was a close view of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl! Multiple Acorn Woodpeckers showed fantastically well as they stashed acorns into the fence posts and wooden utility poles. A couple of Rufous-browed Pepper-Shrikes could be heard singing too, their monotonous warble carrying some distance through the oaks and pines, and there was a particularly intense feeding flock including Yellow-throated and Grace's Warblers seen close to each other offering fine comparisons of two closely related species. Black-and-white, Magnolia and Yellow Warblers, and American Redstarts all joined the same flock. Indigo Buntings, including a few gaudy males, and Morelet's Seed eaters were common place in some of the weedy yards, while Masked Tityra, Rose-throated Becard and Cinnamon-bellied Saltator all helped to provide welcome distraction from the heat. On returning, Yellow-throated Warblers entertained us around the dining area during an enjoyable lunch as those lovely cooling breezes drifted across Crooked Tree Lagoon.

In the afternoon we boarded the boat for the second scheduled watery adventure of the day with the goal of exploring some areas that we hadn't reached during the morning. While the overall species profile was naturally similar, this particular journey was highlighted by an abundance of Northern Jacanas, an amazing chorus of trilling Ruddy Crakes, and two Black-collared Hawks as Lenny did incredibly well to get close to them....a photographers delight! Indeed, Lenny was on great form and pointed out a calling Yellow-billed Cacique, and a feeding flock of orioles fairly evenly divided between Black-cowled and Yellow-tailed with a couple of Baltimore Orioles thrown in for good measure. An awesome afternoon trip was further highlighted by a gigantic Morelet's Crocodile basking in the shallows, plus a handsome Brown Basilisk resting in the waterside vegetation.

After a hot day, cold beverages and another fine meal were both welcome before going through the daily bird review. Common Pauras could be heard once again, one of which could be watched feeding in the ambient might falling on the lawn right behind the main lodge building.



Tuesday March 4th | Birds Eye View Lodge | Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary | Lamanai Outpost Lodge

Barbara, Leah, Melissa and Dominic all showed up for optional pre-breakfast birding, meeting Robert outside reception at 6am. The destination was again the pine-savannah surrounding Beck's B&B and this time the earlier morning start worked like a charm. No sooner had Robert dropped us off than we began to see Yucatan Jays.....lots of them! A large, loose flock filtered through the pines with some of the bolder individuals perching openly on roadside wires. This striking looking species with iridescent blue and black plumage, and bright yellow legs is endemic to the region. While the flock was large they weren't always easy to follow and had the knack the disappearing only to reappear again way off in the distance! But, the early morning gamble had paid off and we spent the next hour just enjoying the ambience of the place and the excellent birds of the savannah. A great morning for parrots included White-fronted Parrots checking out nest cavities, at least half-a-dozen Olive-throated Parakeets and Melissa photographed a rare Yellow-headed Amazon as it flew over. We also had 'unheard of' scope views of a singing Rufous-browed Peppershrike! We returned to meet the rest of the group for a delicious Birds Eye View breakfast (fry beans, fry bacon, eggs, flour tortillas and sautéed chia) and then had a little down time with a mix of casual birding (highlighted by a stunning Great Black Hawk), photography and packing in preparation for the next stage of the journey.

Sadly it was already time to say adios to Crooked Tree Sanctuary. We drove across the Crooked Tree causeway heading for Bats Landing, just north of Carmelita on the New River. Lenny dropped us at the dock in good time where we were greeted by Ruben, one of the senior guides from Lamanai, and Manuel his assistant. Three Wood Storks soared overhead, perhaps a sign of good things to come! Melissa spotted a handsome Gray Cracker resting on a tree trunk, and photographed a Peten Dancer before we boarded the boat for the 22 mile southbound journey along the New River to Lamanai Outpost Lodge. Notably good birds along the way included a perched Bat Falcon, a surprise Collared Forest Falcon, very good looks at a Yucatan Woodpecker and plenty of Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers, the latter often flying low alongside the boat offering terrific views. Throughout the journey, concentrations of Northern Rough-winged Swallows flickered above the water or perched on riverside snags in what appeared to be a pre-migration build up. The river eventually widened into New River Lagoon as we approached the Lamanai dock and Marvie, one of our on-site hosts, was there to greet us. After settling in to extremely cozy cabanas, Marvie gave a brief orientation and offered us all a welcome drink from the bar!



The day had been long but a short afternoon walk along the entrance road and outskirts of Indian Church proved quite productive as crisp, clear afternoon light fell beautifully on a light morph Short-tailed Hawk quartering overhead, and following the hawk led to the spotting of two Anhingas soaring even higher! Boat-billed Flycatchers and Couch's Kingbirds were vocalizing, both advertising their presence with diagnostic calls, and we spent some time looking at a Black-headed Trogon with peculiar, aberrant white tips and fringes to the wing coverts. To cap things off, a Keel-billed Toucan appeared in the *cercropias* just above the road, finishing the day with the National bird of Belize!

After beverages and the daily bird list at the bar, the first of several delicious Lamanai dinners was served; Potato soup with fresh bread rolls, Outpost Tamales, and Pineapple Crème Brule for dessert. After a long day, those cozy cabanas were quickly occupied...

Wednesday March 5th | Lamanai Outpost Lodge | Lamanai Archeological Reserve | New River Night Safari

At first light the trumpeting calls of Limpkins could be heard drifting across New River Lagoon and noisy flocks of Red-lored Amazons squawked overhead at they left roosts bound for daytime feeding spots. Most of the group elected for an optional guided walk with Abdul, our local guide for the next three days. Tea, coffee and muffins were served in the dining area before a short walk roughly retraced our steps from the previous evening. Large flocks of White-winged Doves passed over the lodge as did a group of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, and Plain Chachalacas and Black-headed Saltators raided the newly erected tray feeders just below the dining room. The morning was full of color as we found more Keel-billed Toucans as well as its smaller cousin, the Collared Aracari, and White-fronted Parrots, Yellow-throated Euphonias and Black-cowled Orioles were all on show. On returning to the lodge for a delicious Belizean breakfast we learned, with some envy, that John had photographed a male Tayra right by the feeders! This large, blonde-headed omnivorous member of the weasel family is known locally as "Bushdog" and an absolutely treat to see as John's pictures showed.

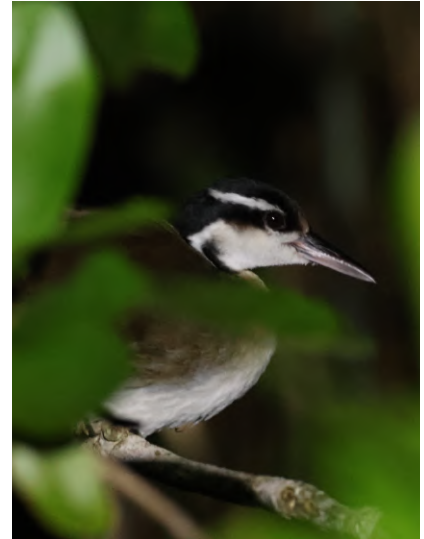
After breakfast we boarded the boat for the five minute ride downriver to Lamanai Archeological Reserve, first checking-in at the museum to acquire yellow wrist bands, a new requirement for all visitants to national parks



and archeological sites in Belize. The Lamanai site covers an area of about two square miles with six temples excavated to date but apparently a further 727 temples remain unseen below the ground. Historically, the area was thought to cover some ten square miles supporting a civilization of 40,000 – 50, 000 people with its presence in the lowlands evidence of a complex trade system between Belize, Guatemala and Mexico. Abdul explained that records show some occupation of the Lamanai site over the last 3500 years. A few in the group took the opportunity to climb the Mask Temple, the top of which is high enough to look over the forest and view across New River lagoon.

Nestled within prime rainforest and jungle, the morning at the Lamanai site was neatly balanced between birding and history, and it wasn't too long before we were watching some of the real denizens of the Central American rainforest. A Chestnut-colored Woodpecker offered breathtaking views as it peeled back the bark of a Royal Palm right next to the trail and a Northern Schiffornis showed ridiculously well for such a shy, retiring species. We saw the first Lesson's Motmot of the tour, and Melissa photographed a mercurial White-bellied Emerald. Yucatan Black Howlers groaned and 'howled' from the giant Guanacaste trees laden with Devil's Guts Cactus and Strangler Figs. And, Abdul first heard and then Dominic saw, a gaudy male Black-throated Shrike-tanager. The boat ride back to the lodge was hot and breezy, and the Lamanai dining area provided a welcome spot to relax and top up on fluids (Hibiscus juice and/or Iced Water), followed by a fine lunch of chicken quesadillas, and bread pudding for dessert.

In the heat of the afternoon a little downtime was in order before taking an early dinner and then grabbing headlamps, long sleeves and bug spray to meet Abdul down at the dock for a scheduled night safari on New River Lagoon. Abdul showed off his masterful skills and harmoniously balanced spotlight duties while simultaneously maneuvering the boat through narrow, overgrown tributaries. Like all true professionals Abdul made the job of bird finding at night look easy and, one by one, we racked up a stellar cast of birds roosting in the riverside vegetation; Rufous-naped Wood-Rail, American Pygmy-Kingfisher, Yucatan Nightjar (regionally endemic), Sungrebe (!) and, most stunning of all, an adult Agami Heron in total beauty and glory. We drifted for a while as an air of stunned silence fell over the boat...what had we just witnessed?! The Agami Heron brought emotions to the fore for some, and there was cause for celebration as the Sungrebe just happened to be

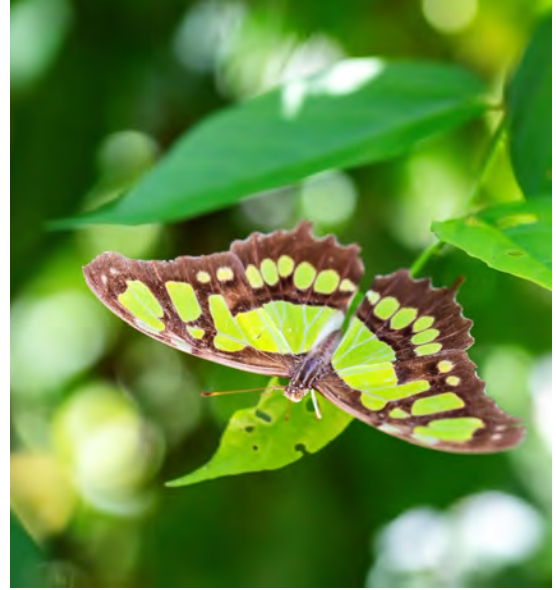


Melissa's 1000th bird!! Amid the euphoria, Abdul reached for his laser pointer and directed us to some of the most visible constellations in the crystal clear night sky; Orion, Canis Major, Gemini, Taurus, Bela and Karina all adding a most fitting finale to an exceptional evening on the water....

Thursday March 6th | Lamanai Outpost Lodge | Indian Church | Sunset Cocktail Cruise to Nico's Creek

Another beautiful morning at Lamanai began in the dining area before Abdul led a walk along the airport road through relatively open "jungle" and into an area of early-successional habitat. Fortune came our way once more as we enjoyed fine views of Red-billed Pigeon, Black-headed Trogon and a White-necked Puffbird perched high in a *cercropia* in perfect morning light. The bouncing song of a Green-backed Sparrow was heard frequently along the trail, and a little further along on we played hide-and-seek with a pair of Slate-headed Tody-Flycatchers. White-eyed Vireos and Blue Buntings flitted around the trails and sang from the scrub, and we were privileged indeed to watch a Morelet's Seedeater building a nest only meters from the track.

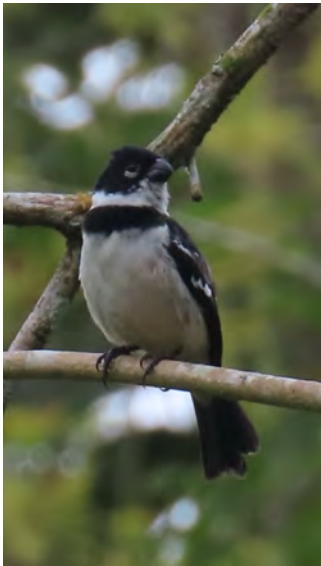
After another scrumptious Belizean breakfast we set off for a walking tour of "Village Life" beginning inside the lodge itself learning about the abundance and surprisingly enterprising uses of native and cultivated plants, including local building materials and medicine. Abdul escorted us around to the village to get a sense of how the locals live day to day, including a stop at the village store for cold drinks and shade. From there we moved onto another aspect of village life and even got to try our hand at the grinding of masa for tortillas and tamales under the expert guidance the local women's co-op at Las Orquideas restaurant, our venue for lunch (chicken and onion soup, garnachas, and empanadas). During lunch Abdul explained that many of the 250 or so residents of Indian Church were of Guatemalan origin, refugees that settled the area during the Guatemalan Civil war from the 1950s to the early nineties.



A little downtime was welcome after lunch, although Melissa with her penchant for heat and bugs had been out and photographed a Teapen Rosebelly Lizard, another Gray Cracker, a Glorious Blue Skipper, and a Crab Spider! Around 4pm we met at the dock for the sunset cocktail cruise across New River Lagoon and drifted into Nico's Creek, a new venue for all of us. The atmosphere was mellow with beverages of choice including Belikin Beer, Piña Coladas, Margaritas and a range of soft drinks. As the heat of the day began to wane, the breeze off the water further cooled things down as we gently edged into Nico's Creek. Water levels remained high after the November floods but attracted many waterbirds to what would otherwise have been dry savannah. Large flocks of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks appeared and landed in the trees, flights of White Ibis came into view and a Roseate Spoonbill lifted out of the marshes and passed right over the boat! Snail Kites and Fork-tailed Flycatchers featured as they had done at Crooked Tree and, as we came out onto the open lagoon, a surprise flock of 25 migrant Lesser Scaup rested on the water. Our guides, Abdul and Edy, had timed the visit to perfection as we watched the sun go down over the lodge, providing a stunning finale to our last evening at Lamanai.

Friday March 7th | Lamanai Savannah and Dawson Creek | Lamanai to Chan Chich Lodge via Blue Creek

A scheduled adventure crossing New River Lagoon and into Dawson Creek began with a slightly earlier start than usual and we docked at the access ramp to Lamanai Savannah around 6am, early enough to hear a Thicket Tinamou vocalizing from the scrub though there was little chance of viewing such an aloof ground-dweller. Narrow trails led us into the savannah through tall grasses and palmettos on sandy, acidic soil and soon there was plenty to see! Parrots were both visible and vocal as noisy groups of Red-lored Amazons flew over and we found a feeding flock of White-fronted Parrots with several rather similar Yellow-lored (Yucatan) Amazons creating a few identification challenges. Dominic's keen eyes spotted an all-dark swallow flying just above the tree line which turned out to be a male Purple Martin migrating north. Closer to the track, the tall tussock grass and palmettos harbored sparrows and some of them were singing including the familiar 'bouncing ball' song of a



Botteri's Sparrow, and a couple of perched Grasshopper Sparrows, both species sitting up nicely for views. Deeper inside the pine-oak scrub an Olive Sparrow was heard and seen too and in fact, the pine-oak area hosted a fantastic woodpecker show with Acorn, Yucatan, Golden-fronted, and Ladder-backed Woodpecker all being seen and heard relatively close together. A perched Bat Falcon offered lovely views too, and two small flycatchers replete with lengthy names made all-too-brief appearances – Northern Tropical Pewee and Northern Beardless Tyrannulet. Gray-crowned Yellowthroat was another hoped-for species here and they didn't disappoint with good views of this significantly larger cousin to the more familiar Common Yellowthroat.

After a super morning we headed back to the lodge for another hearty Belizean breakfast though, sadly, it was time to pack and prepare for the long drive across to Chan Chich Lodge. In the meantime, the feeders below the dining area continued to entertain with Brown Jays, Yellow-throated Euphonias and Blue-gray Tanagers, and Melissa returned from another hot walk with fine photos of Peach-fronted Threadtail and a Malachite.

After lunch it was time to say our goodbyes to the lovely staff at Lamanai, particularly Abdul who'd been a knowledgeable and enthusiastic local guide over the previous three days. The journey time to Chan Chich Lodge was roughly three hours and, as we drove along in a 12 seater Chevy passenger van, we noted several species that were either new to the trip, or that we'd seen very few of including several American Kestrels and the first Eurasian Collared Doves around the village of San Felipe. After passing very close to the Mexican border we stopped briefly at the Mennonite community of Blue Creek and then pressed on to the Rio Bravo Conservation Area. At well over 200,000 acres, it's the largest land-based conservation area in Belize, and the last sign on paved road ominously reads "Chan Chich Lodge 36 miles"! The condition of the white dirt road had suffered deterioration after the floods of the previous November so we drove with some caution, passing through a couple of checkpoints to reach the heart of the conservation area and the Gallon Jug estate. We did pause briefly by a large platform nest in a giant Ceiba Tree which our driver told us was home to an Ornate Hawk-Eagle. Despite much scanning and 15 minutes or so of waiting, the nest must have been unoccupied in those moments so we pressed on. Further into the journey there was some excitement as several dark shapes on the grassy shoulder morphed into Ocellated Turkeys! We marveled at a single bird right at the side of the road but couldn't have known at that point that these beautiful *Galliformes* would be commonplace all around the lodge



itself! As the forest opened up into the meadows of the Gallon Jug estate, Roadside Hawks perched along the fences and seemingly abundant White-tailed Deer appeared to be everywhere.

On arrival at the new reception area at Chan Chich staff members offered refreshing towels, and a delicious spicy beverage. After a brief orientation from the new assistant manager we had time to settle into beautiful thatched cabanas before heading over to the lodge for drinks, the checklist review, and an impressive Chan Chich dinner. We were also introduced to Emil, not only head of the wait staff but a man with genuine expertise on the local mammals and wildlife which he shared with infectious enthusiasm.

Saturday March 8th | Chan Chich Lodge | Chan Chich Lodge | Gallon Jug fields | Sylvester Village Road | Logger's Trail | Night Safari

An optional early morning bird walk with Luis, our designated Chan Chich local guide, began at 6:30am and most of the group showed up ready to explore this magical area on foot. Though privately owned the lodge itself is set within an ancient Maya plaza dating back to 250-800 AD and surrounded by well over 200,000 acres of conservation land. It feels remote and many of the best bird and wildlife sightings take place within the lodge grounds itself. This morning was no exception. In the predawn hours the calls of Common Pauras and the subtle 'toots' of a Central American Pygmy Owl had been heard and at first light the day began with Crested Guans, Ocellated Turkeys and lots of Red-lored Amazons! Ivory-billed Woodcreepers and a family group of Pale-billed Woodpeckers were found near the entrance as Slaty-tailed and Gartered Trogons called from the forest. Walking downslope towards the staff quarters, fruiting Gumbo Limbo and Custard Apple trees attracted a whole host of species and captivated our interest for some time. The Custard Apple fruits in particular looked especially ripe oozing with such beauties as Green Honeycreeper, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Bright-rumped Attila, Yellow-winged Tanager, Black-cowled Oriole and Olive-backed Euphonia, all of them enjoying the sugary feast. Ocellated Turkeys strutted with some arrogance around the staff village seemingly oblivious to our presence though it was a fine opportunity to view the large, 'eye-like' metallic-blue and orange spots at the tip of each tail feather, 'ocellated' meaning eye-like and derived from the Latin. A few species stayed high in the canopy including Red-legged Honeycreepers and the first good looks at Mealy Parrots, the largest *Amazona* in



Central America, and more Crested Guans. As we entered a heavily forested area a troop of Central American Spider Monkeys entertained for a little while, and the pond below offered really nice looks at a wintering Louisiana Waterthrush. Luis then drew our attention to the repeated '*kaah-kaah-kaah*' calls of a forest falcon. Initially he thought it may have been the Collared species but the bird was evidently closer than we first thought and, by pure chance, swooped out of the canopy and landed on an open, spindly tree limb only a few meters away. It was a Barred Forest Falcon, replete with steely gray head, bright yellow lores and legs, and finely barred breast. Luis was visibly stunned as the species is often heard but only very seldom seen, and it put on quite the show for our group.

The day was off to a fantastic start and we headed back to the lodge for breakfast Chan Chich style with open air dining on the porch while watching the abundance of avian action right off the deck; White-necked Jacobins (mostly males), fast moving Long-billed Hermits and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds all graced the hummingbird feeders, while ever-impressive stunners such as Purple-crowned Fairy and Stripe-throated Hermit seemed happier working the flowering plants in the beautifully manicured grounds.

After breakfast we boarded 'the bird mobile', a high clearance, safari type vehicle with excellent all round visibility. Passing through Gallon Jug fields we encountered a couple photogenic Roadside Hawks and Fork-tailed Flycatchers as well as lots of Eastern Meadowlarks and had super views of a White-tailed Kite, out first of the trip. The ongoing drive through Sylvester Village (the staff housing for Gallon Jug employees) brought us to a narrow forested track where we spent some time on foot finding an awesome Tropical Royal Flycatcher, and both Black-headed and Gartered Trogons but with temperatures approaching 95 degrees, it was clearly time to head back to the lodge and take a little quiet time during the heat of the day.

A small group reconvened at 3:30pm for a casual afternoon walk along the Kings Tomb and Logger's Trails with Luis. During the break during Leah had photographed a Black-cowled Oriole, and Melissa had some nice shots of a perched White Hawk to share. The trail took us straight into primary rainforest and we'd only walked in a few paces when a very obliging White-whiskered Puffbird came into view and remained settled for a while. A busy family of Dot-winged Antwrens foraged in the vine tangles as did a Long-billed Gnatwren, and a pair of Red-



crowned Ant-tanagers. Luis pointed out the distinctive calls of a Strong-billed Woodcreeper, the largest and scarcest of the woodcreepers in Belize but, alas, it remained well hidden.

After a delicious supper with choices of beef curry or eggplant 'meat balls' most of the group ventured out in the bird mobile for the second night safari of the tour. Acting on a tip from head-waiter Emil, we first swung by the staff housing area finding a couple of Common Pauragues and our first mammal of the evening...an Ocelot! It wasn't just a fleeting glimpse either but this beautiful animal gave prolonged views as it nervously moved back and forth across the track before disappearing around the back of one of the staff cottages. An Ocelot at the start of a night drive was simply off the charts!

As we drove out towards the Gallon Jug fields, Common Pauragues appeared on the road and at the roadside with quite some frequency and by the time we reached the fields we must have spotlighted a dozen or more. But one nightjar at Gallon Jug behaved a little differently and sat openly on a fence post rather than on the ground. Luis thought it might have been a female pauraque but it just didn't 'feel' right and subsequent study of the images revealed it was a Chuck-wills-widow, quite rare in Belize with the identification confirmed by David Sibley!

The track itself held some interest with an enormous Marine Toad refusing to budge, and we had nice looks at a Mexican Red-rumped Tarantula. Luis again excelled again when he spotlighted the back and ears of a Puma moving through the pasture. It was probably stalking the abundant White-tailed Deer in the meadows and Luis somehow managed to track it for an extended period. We had less luck with a Yucatan Poorwill that Luis spotted at the edge of the forest which, unfortunately, retreated before most of the group had the chance to see it. It was getting late and even a little chilly, and we headed back to the lodge noting the odd Gray Fox along the way, along with a couple of brief Mottled Owls and more pauragues.

Sunday March 9th| Chan Chich Lodge| Rio Bravo Escarpment via Sylvester Village | Sac Be Trail and hummingbird pools

An earlier breakfast was in order with our destination being the escarpment, a high view point overlooking extensive areas of rainforest with Guatemala to the west, Mexico to the north and the Gallon Jug fields in the



foreground. Known as the Rio Bravo escarpment, Luis actually prefers to call it “La Lucia escarpment”. The outbound journey was punctuated by a number of wonderful wildlife experiences; a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars guarding a nest site, the mournful tremolo calls of a Slaty-breasted Tinamou, a large herd of White-lipped Peccaries, and incredible views of a Northern Potoo perched on a horizontal beam right above the road. Ironically, the latter was one member of the nightjar family that we’d missed during both night safaris.

We reached the wonderful open vista of the escarpment in mid-morning. At an elevation of almost 900 feet above sea level, a newly constructed thatched shelter and picnic table provided ample shade and Luis broke out the cooler for welcome drinks. Aside from being rewarded by awesome views cross the forest it wasn’t too long before the first raptors appeared, most of them using the updrafts generated by the escarpment itself. Leah spotted a magnificent King Vulture high overhead, and a pair of Bat Falcons sparred around us, as did a wonderfully close pair of Great Black Hawks. Luis found a distant pair of White Hawks initially perched and then soaring over the forest. Scope views came in handy as the birds were admittedly distant but thankfully their distinctive white plumage allowed for easy identification, even at range. Overhead, high flying Double-toothed Kites vied for attention and there was a fine adult light-morph Short-tailed Hawk cruising around too. Songbirds were few around the clearing but White-eyed Vireos could be seen and heard singing from the scrub and the monotonous ‘*chew-chew-chew-chew*’ song of arboreal Green Shrike-Vireos was a constant from the mature forest and sure sign that the dry season was well on its way.

Lunch was the usual excellent variety; Soup de Jour, Tostadas, Belizean Stew Chicken, Fish and Chips, and/or Tortilla Wraps (Shrimp, Chicken or Veggie), and the ice cold pineapple juice was especially welcome on such a hot day. Bird-wise the water feature just off the balcony attracted some exciting visitation including Bright-rumped Attila, Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow-winged Tanager and a female Blue-black Grosbeak.

Most of the group opted for some downtime in the middle of the afternoon but, true to form, Melissa went out in the heat of the day and came back with some exceptional sightings and photos, not only Black Orchids (the national flower of Belize) but also Fiery-eyed Dancer, Yellow-angled Sulphur and the brilliantly named Five-striped Kite-swallowtail!!



The final afternoon of the tour saw a reduced group join Luis for a stroll along the entrance road towards Chan Chich Creek and the suspension bridge. From there we followed the Sac Be Trail down to a wide point in the river colloquially known as “Barry’s Bend” after Barry Zimmer, bird tour leader and regular visitor to Chan Chich. A Louisiana Waterthrush flew downriver and, as we waited patiently and quietly, more species came into view, many of them eager take one last drink and bathe before nightfall. A dazzling, Purple-crowned Fairy put on a show as it dipped in the shallows, a male Red-capped Manakin suddenly appeared at the water’s edge and a subtly toned Ochre-bellied Flycatcher remained on view for an unusually long time. Hooded and Magnolia Warblers, as well as American Redstarts, showed at the water’s edge with multiple Wood Thrushes and Kentucky Warblers all bathing at the same time. It was a sight to behold, that’s until the pesky mosquitoes chased us out of the forest! We cruised back along the entrance road in the warm tropical atmosphere as numerous parrots flew to roost and Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers and a Yellow-olive Flatbill were among the last birds noted.

One last delicious supper with choices of Pork Chops, Tarragon Chicken and Veggie Enchiladas was served by Emil who’d been our knowledgeable, well-humored waiter from day one. His generosity and willingness to share wildlife sightings during meal times had added a wonderful and unexpected compliment to the trip.

Monday March 10th | Chan Chich Lodge | Departures from Gallon Jug

Our time at Chan Chich had been all too short but alas had to come to an end. Aside from Leah who’d opted for a drive transfer to her overnight lodgings near the airport, we all had plans to fly back to Belize City with international departures variously scheduled for that afternoon. We boarded the bird mobile one last time for a safari style drive and departure from Gallon Jug airfield. Ironically, the drive there included a male Great Curassow crossing the track, a species that had been so aloof during our time at Chan Chich. White-tailed Deer grazed around the Gallon Jug taxiway and we had a few final, enjoyable looks at Roadside Hawks, Fork-tailed Flycatchers and Mangrove Swallows around the airfield.

The tour had been especially memorable for some truly outstanding wildlife sightings. Gracious thanks go to all our participants to helping to make this trip so enjoyable. Special thanks go to Dominic Mitchell for his tireless commitment to the many ebird lists that appear within the trip report, and to Melissa McMasters for sharing her

photos and expertise on all things non-avian as well as an excellent series of ebird reports to go with the overall trip report.

James P. Smith
Northfield, MA.

Photos: Group (Melissa McMasters - MM), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (MM), Keel-billed Toucan (MM), Sun down over Crooked Tree lagoon (James P. Smith - JPS), Common Tody-Flycatcher (MM), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (David Moffatt - DM), Birds Eye View Lodge (JPS), Yellow-throated Warbler (DM), Vermilion Flycatcher (DM), Yucatan Jay (MM), Black-headed Trogon (DM), White peacock (MM), Boat ride (MM), Mask Temple, Lamanai Archeological site (JPS), Yellow-throated Euphonia (DM), Sunset over Wilco's Creek (JPS), Malachite (MM), Ocellated Turkey (DM), Sungrebe (JPS), Morelets Seedeater (DM), Blue Grosbeak (DM), Common Pauraque (DM), Ocelot (JPS), Scenic (MM), Last supper at Chan Chich Lodge (JPS), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (DM), Agami Heron (MM)