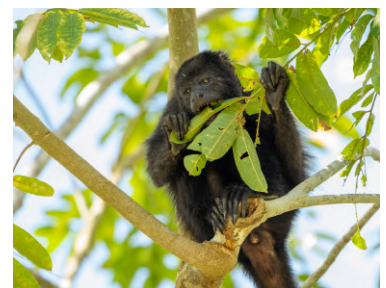
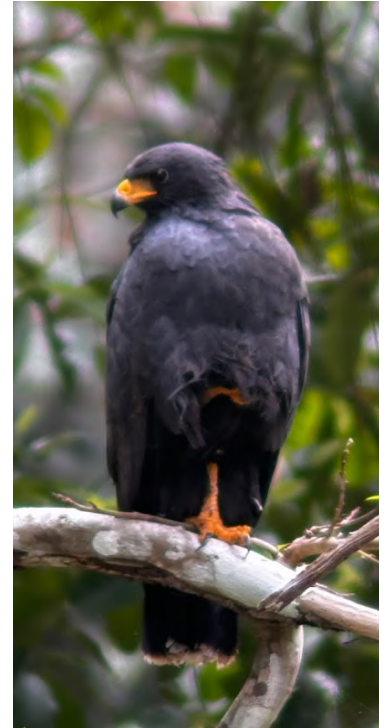


Belize: Three Great Lodges | Feb. 19-Mar. 1, 2025

Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guides Isaias from Black Rock Lodge, Roni from Bocawina Rainforest Resort, and Steve from Tanager Rainforest Lodge. Our awesome guests were; Jan & Dave, Denise & Bill, Lori & Woody, and Sara.



This tour was a phenomenal success, as much for the camaraderie of the group as for the birds and wildlife we saw along the way. Birding highlights not only included a Lovely Cotinga and the first Loggerhead Shrike ever to be seen in Belize, but was also outstanding for raptor sightings which included Gray-headed, Plumbeous and Swallow-tailed Kites and the rare Orange-breasted Falcon.



Wed., Feb 19th | Arrivals | Belize Zoo | Black Rock Lodge

We met for the first time as a group at the Black Orchid Resort on the banks of the Belize River. The guides from Black Rock Lodge arrived a little earlier than scheduled and by noon we were soon heading west along the George Price Highway on a delightfully warm tropical day. Belize Zoo, famed for its native exhibits, was literally on the way and we paused there for a couple of hours enjoying the tastefully landscaped surroundings hosting a selection of Belize's national treasures; Yucatan Black Howlers, Jaguars, Baird's Tapir, Coati and Ocelots, Jabiru, Ornate Hawk Eagle and even two Harpy Eagles were all on display! Founded by the late Sharon Matola, the grounds had been designed to closely resemble the natural habitat for many of these species. Coincidentally, the same habitat offered great looks at a whole range of naturally occurring bird species that would be tricky to find later in the tour including Yellow-backed Oriole, Grace's Warbler, Hepatic Tanager and Thick-billed Seedfinch. By mid-afternoon it was getting hot and we pressed on west skirting around the capitol city Belmopan and passing through the bustling towns of Santa Elena and San Ygnacio before hitting the six miles of white dirt roads to reach Black Rock Lodge. We passed through avenues of flowering Madre de Cacao retaining much of their pink blossom and snaked through citrus groves and orchards along the banks of the Macal River. Eventually we reached the magical Black Rock Lodge deep inside the rainforest and, after a warm reception, welcome drinks, and a brief orientation, we were escorted to our delightful individual cabins tastefully situated in the forest. The main lodge building was the venue for a fabulous evening meal where we got know each other a little around the dinner table.

Thu, Feb 20th | |Black Rock Lodge| Belize Botanic Gardens | Night Drive on Black Rock Road

The day began at 6:00 a.m. as we gathered for freshly brewed coffee and tea at the lodge balcony overlooking the Macal River. Isaias, our appointed guide from the lodge, was already in full birding mode as he scoped a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle on a nest while an Olivaceous Woodcreeper and several Collared Aracaries showed closer to the balcony near the tray feeders below. Isaias was keen to keep things moving and soon moved off towards the staff quarters where some newly erected feeders attracted Yellow-winged Tanagers, Red-throated Anttanagers and several Clay-colored Thrushes. A non-descript dove feeding below the feeders turned out to be a juvenile Ruddy Quail-Dove, a seldom seen ground-dwelling forest species getting things were off to an auspicious start!



We continued the walk towards the lodge's organic farm (Black Rock serves a lot of its own produce to guests) as Isaias managed to scope an Orange-breasted Falcon high against the cliff face on the opposite side of the river. While distant, the views were certainly acceptable and thankfully this rare falcon maintains a stronghold in Belize where it's fully protected. Rufous-naped Wood-Rail, Greenish Eleania, Wedge-tailed Saberwing and a delightful male Hooded Warbler were further highlights from the walk where we also had the opportunity to watch vocalizing Couch's Kingbirds, a useful learner in separating them from the more frequent Tropical Kingbird.

We returned to the lodge for breakfast, most of the group opting for a classic Belizean breakfast, after which we headed down Black Rock Road and then on towards the internationally renowned Belize Botanic Gardens, a 45 acre site nestled in the foothills of the Maya Mountains. Harry, one of the head gardeners at the property gave a wonderful tour sharing his knowledge of native plants, trees, and orchids including close-ups of the national flower of Belize, the Black Orchid. Being surrounded by native plants, the gardens quite naturally attracted a lot of birds and we had plenty of distractions along the way! Plain Chachalacas were present and vocal, and we had great views of Wedge-billed and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, Rose-throated Becards, Red-legged Honeycreepers and remarkable looks at two Lesson's Motmots showing off their long racket-shaped tail feathers. A Tody Motmot was calling too but, alas, couldn't be teased out of the forest for views.

Returning to the lodge was hot and dusty though was not without good birds as we spotted Fork-tailed Flycatchers, Gray-breasted Martins, and a pair of Blue Buntings near Maya Flats airfield. On reaching the lodge cold drinks and a variety of lunch choices were most welcome; sopas, quesadillas, and burritos were all on the menu before we elected for a little downtime. "Downtime" was a fairly loose description as many good species were seen by the group including a couple of King Vultures, a Bat Falcon, a Black-crowned Tityra and best of all, a Black Hawk-Eagle soaring over the lodge with a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle! After an excellent early supper we climbed back into the vehicle for a short night safari along Black Rock Road where things got off to a terrific start with close views of a Paca, a large striped rodent known locally as '*Gibnut*'. The species is hunted in Belize so it was understandably shy. Farther down the road, after some effort, Isaias managed to find a couple of Northern Potoos, a large member of the nightjar family (*Caprimulgae*), one of which was close enough to the road for reasonable scope views.



Fri., Feb 21st | Black Rock Lodge and entrance road | Spanish Lookout | Mennonite Community

An early breakfast saw the group leave Black Rock Lodge around 7 AM a.m. Our destination was the fields of the Mennonite Community of Spanish Lookout. A fairly long drive to get there was broken up by some terrific birding about three miles along the Black Rock Road itself. After overnight rain there was a good deal of activity including some of the very special birds of the region. Olive-throated Parakeets perched up nicely in the roadside trees and we found a couple of regional endemics, their vocalizations helping to confirm the identification including a Yucatán Flycatcher and a couple of furtive Gray-throated Chats. We also heard the peculiar ‘twangy’ song of a Mangrove Vireo and had wonderful views of Masked Tityra, Boat-billed Flycatchers and a couple of Barred Antshrikes.

After crossing the Belize River, we paused briefly on the outskirts of Spanish Lookout at Rocking J Ranch to view a flock of newly arrived Purple Martins, perhaps as many as 25 with Gray-breasted Martins close by for comparison. With paperwork in hand, we entered the gated fields of Spanish Lookout, a permit-only access site which overlaps with the Rio Bravo Conservation area, the single largest land-locked area of conservation land in Belize. A myriad of farm roads crisscrossing agricultural fields, wetlands, drainages and parcels of woodland, some of which Isaias referred to as “Yucatan Dry Forest”, was all ours to explore. Before long the fields turned into a raptor enthusiasts dream! The variety of species cruising around on the warm air thermals and quartering over the fields was something to behold. Over the course of the next hour we observed White-tailed Hawks being mobbed by an American Kestrel, Gray Hawk, Great Black Hawks and even a couple of locally rare Swainson’s Hawks which should have really been wintering somewhere in the grasslands of Argentina. A White-tailed Kite came into view as well and we had good scope views of a couple of perched Aplomado Falcons. The same fields were full of small finches and we had the great fortune to find a flock of around 40 Grassland Yellowfinches, not only a scarce species in Belize but also a difficult bird to observe in the field. With Dave’s sharp eyesight and a good deal of luck we managed to follow several of them in the in the plowed furrows close to the road. Indigo Buntings, Blue-black Grassquits, and Morelet’s Seed eaters were also found here. Shortly afterwards, Isaias drove us towards a large lake impoundment where a sizeable colony of Wood Storks was nesting, some of them clearly visible on large platform, stick nests. Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Yellow-crowned



Night-heron and a single Tri-colored Heron were also seen in the same area along with the only Purple Gallinule of the trip.

The weather had been perfect throughout the morning but as we approached midday the heat was becoming a factor so we headed into the heart of Spanish Lookout to Sisters Diner for a fabulous fajita lunch in the shade. As luck would have it, there was a Bare-throated Tiger Heron foraging just behind the diner! In fact, the birding behind the diner was quite good with Gray Catbird, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided and Yellow-throated Warblers and a sharp looking Common Tody-Flycatcher all on view.

After lunch we returned to the fields, but to a different section where Isaias took great delight in showing us a small group of Mourning Doves, apparently quite a scare bird in Belize. The new nice fields held more interest as we enjoyed views of a couple of close Plain-breasted Ground-Doves, and several White-winged Doves as well as really nice looks at Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, the 16th species of raptor for the day! This was *the* place to observe birds perching on fences with up to a dozen handsome Fork-tailed Flycatchers. And, we relocated the Loggerhead Shrike initially found by Isaias and a Naturalist Journeys group way back in the previous November. Remarkably, this particular bird was the first Loggerhead Shrike to be recorded in Central America! Eastern Meadowlarks appeared to everywhere and it was fun watching a Roadside Hawk drying its wings as it perched openly on a fence post just after a shower.

Somehow the day had flown and by late afternoon it was time to head back to Black Rock via the hustle and bustle of San Ygnacio. An absolutely brilliant day in the field came to a close with another delicious supper served by the ever-courteous Black Rock staff, followed by the checklist review and a tally of over 100 species for the day!

Sat, Feb 22nd | Black Rock Lodge | Mountain Pine Ridge | Chiquibul National Forest | Caracol

We awoke to rain, mist and low cloud. As atmospheric as these conditions were, it was hardly ideal for the long day that lay ahead some of which would include driving for long stretches on dirt roads. However, Isaias was confident he could make it work and around 7:15 am, after an early breakfast, we set off for the lengthy drive to Caracol National Monument, perhaps the largest and most famous of the Maya Ceremonial sites in Belize.



Woody and Denise chose to skip this particular adventure and opted for an easy day around the lodge, indeed it's a wonderful place to spend the day walking the trails, mixing with the locals, and simply enjoying the place itself.

A good deal of the outbound journey to Caracol took place in rainfall but as we entered Mountain Pine Ridge (colloquially known as MPR) the clouds began to disperse, pockets of blue sky appeared, and the weather progressively improved as we headed west towards Caracol. The first notable birds on the drive were Acorn Woodpeckers favoring the wooden telegraph poles lining the roadside and by the time we reached the Macal River at the edge of the Chiquibul National Forest the birding had started in earnest. We paused on the Guacamole Bridge finding Spotted Sandpipers, Black Phoebe and a couple of Green kingfishers along the river. On entering the forest, the habitat changed dramatically to mature rainforest and it wasn't too long before we were fairly deep inside the Chiquibul National Forest. A vocal White hawk called from the roadside and was so approachable it encouraged us to stop. Then, of course, one thing led to another and we ended up having an hour at this spot with some very lively birding; Wedge-tailed Saberwing, White-bellied Emerald and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird were among the hummingbird species working the flowering Quamwood Trees. Overhead, Short-tailed and Broad-winged Hawks could be seen soaring as well as a Bat Falcon. More fortune came our way as we found a number of species closely tied to rainforest habitat including a few with intriguing names; Northern Schiffornis, Fawn-throated Foliage-gleaner, Cinnamon Becard and Rufous Mourner! A little further up the road two Crested Guans were feeding high in the Quamwoods with a Squirrel Cuckoo close by.

Despite the roadside distractions we still managed to reach Caracol National Monument around 10:30 AM. Once Isaías checked in and acquired our yellow wristbands, now obligatory for all visitors entering the national parks and historical sites in Belize, we began a fruitful birding and historical walk. Isaías seamlessly switched from birding guide to archaeological guide in the blink of an eye. Things got off to a racing start in the forest where one, then two, then half-a-dozen Slaty-tailed Trogons started calling, some of them coming into view above the trail. Gartered Trogons were present too and a little further down the trail there was plenty of excitement as Isaías detected a number of species following an ant swarm. The birds were led by a female Black-throated Strike-Tanager with Tawny-winged, Ivory-billed, Wedge-billed and Olivaceous Woodcreepers all in tow, as well as a Northern Plain Xenops. Further along the trail soaring Swallow-tailed Kites were etched against pockets of blue sky as we tried to spot a male Black-throated Shrike-tanager and a Sepia-capped Flycatcher in the canopy.



A little break from the birding was in order as Isaias described some of the history behind the impressive Sky Palace (or Caana), one of the largest man-made structures in Belize, and Bill and Sara fearlessly took the opportunity to scale it! First discovered in 1937 by a logger searching for mahogany, Caracol became recognized as one of the most important political and ceremonial centers in the Maya lowlands. At peak the area was thought to have supported a population of about 120,000 people and covered a larger surface area than modern day Belize City. The majority of the site remains unexcavated but includes five plazas, an astronomical observatory and over 35,000 buildings identified to date.

We continued our loop and walked over to view the pendant nests of Montezuma Oropendulas though only a couple of birds were actually present. A Giant Cowbird, a brood parasite to the oropendulas, was lurking in the area too. As we headed back, the rich calls of Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers provided a pleasant diversion and closer inspection showed three or four of these remarkable woodpeckers associating together. We dropped down into the woodland and had good views of the resident Golden-crowned Warblers to compliment the Worm-eating, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers already seen on this fabulous walk. Having enjoyed comfortable temperatures throughout the morning, it was actually pretty warm by the time we swung back around to the visitor center. Within minutes, or so it seemed, Isaias set up a tasty picnic lunch courtesy of Black Rock Lodge which we enjoyed under the shade of the shelter provided. Rice and beans, chicken, pasta, salad, and fruits, as well as a tangy lime beverage were all served in the field....and it was just lovely.

The return journey saw same two Crested Guans in the flowering Quamwoods, and a fabulous light-morph Hook-billed Kite soaring overhead, a new bird to the tour. We paused for about 30 minutes or so in the pine habitat at Douglas D'Silva camp, an abandoned forestry camp. Swallow-tailed Kites were busy cruising around, courting, displaying, and copulating, and we managed to track down a calling Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl which turned out to be much lower in the pines than expected. A small feeding flock included Yellow-throated, Grace's and Black-throated Green Warblers as well as two Hepatic Tanagers. But this stop was arguably highlighted by a Rusty Sparrow and a super flock of Black-headed Siskins dropping down from the pines to feed on the flowering plants by the roadside.

The day was almost coming to an end but as we descended from MPR Isaias spotted a perched Bat Falcon and an Olive-sided Flycatcher teed-up in the pines, these being the last notable birds of a fabulous day. We returned



to the lodge to meet up with Woody and Denise who'd had an equally rewarding day with, among other things; White Hawk, Black-crowned Tityra, Pale-billed Woodpecker and a White-necked Puffbird. The latter would turn out to be the only one of the tour. The last evening meal at the lodge was another triumph; vegetable soup served with garlic bread followed by a caesar salad, and options of rice with veggies, or grilled lamb with creamy mashed potatoes and sautéed vegetables, followed by Blackberry Cheesecake for dessert.

Sun., Feb 23rd | Black Rock Lodge | Slate Creek Lookout | Green Hills Butterfly Farm | Bocawina Rainforest Resort

Our time at Black Rock had flown and it was time to say goodbye to the wonderful staff and all the fabulous things that came with our stay. On the plus side, Isaias would be with us for most of the day as he and his co-driver, Sandro, would be dropping us off at Bocawina Rainforest Resort later in the afternoon.

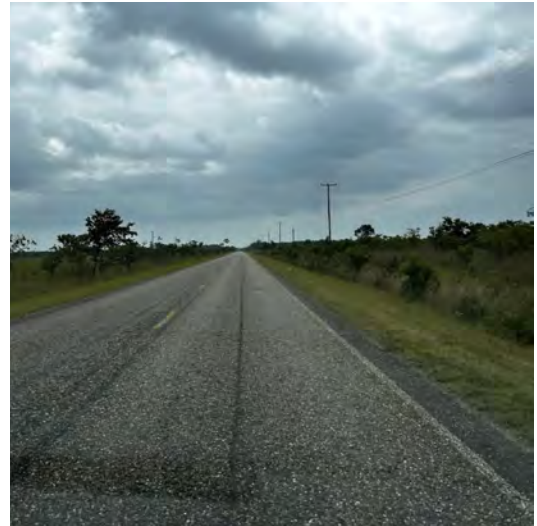
First though, we retraced our steps back towards Mountain Pine Ridge where the birding began in the most sensational manner at the entrance gate as we watched a displaying Gray-headed Kite overhead as well as a Swallow-tailed Kite with Brown-hooded and White-fronted Parrots flying by. From there it was a relatively short drive to a spot called Slate Creek, essentially involving a one mile hike down a forested track to reach a clear cut overlooking an expansive area of rainforest. It seemed relatively quiet on arrival but after a King Vulture began to rise on the thermals there was a steady sequence of thrilling raptor sightings; Swallow-tailed Kites, Black Hawk-Eagle and even a distant Ornate Hawk-Eagle were all playing the thermals above the forest. Multiple Double-toothed Kites appeared too, perhaps as many as five in all, and we had great views of Plumbeous Kite, White Hawk, Bat Falcon and a Peregrine. Constant scanning also produced a fairly large flock of White-collared Swifts, these being our first swifts of the tour. Towards the end of the visit Isaias disappeared for a few minutes we thought, perhaps, looking for some privacy until he started calling excitedly up the trail with an urgency in his voice that we hadn't heard before. We walked down a narrow trail to a viewpoint with limited spots for setting up scopes and Isaiah broke the news that he'd just seen a Lovely Cotinga, but acknowledged that it wasn't close. On the other hand, it was a male and therefore unmistakable! Not only is Lovely Cotinga a stunning species to look at but its limited world range makes it one of the most sought-after species in Belize. Despite the breathless excitement, a heart sinking ten minutes passed since Isaias's last sighting. He pointed out the distant fruiting trees where he'd last seen the bird as several other species landed in the exact same spot including a couple of



Keel-billed Toucans and a Masked Tityra but, alas, there was no sign of a turquoise male cotinga. The viewing here wasn't easy and often obscured by foliage but suddenly Dave's fixed gaze indicated that he'd got something good and, to his credit, he held his binoculars on the same spot for a while totally convinced he had the male cotinga in view! Seconds later we had three scopes mounted and set up on the bird and pandemonium ensued as we rotated every single group member through the scopes to view this magnificent creature. We watched for a while until a Masked Tityra came along and usurped it from its perch...and then it was gone. The hike back to the vehicles passed quickly as an air of euphoria descended upon the group. A special tour was in the works and more good fortune was destined to come our way.

The day was still relatively young as we headed downslope towards Green Hills Butterfly Ranch where we had a fabulous tour of the butterfly life cycle with a delightful guide by the name of Yensi. From inside the butterfly enclosure she shared her knowledge with great enthusiasm, and promoted the work and conservation efforts performed by the ranch itself. Isaias once again organized a lovely picnic lunch provided by Black Rock with more than enough to go around; rice and beans, chicken, pasta, salad and fruits. And, the activity around the strategically placed hummingbird feeders was something to behold. One could observe some of the most exciting species in the country at arm's length including the spectacular Violet Saberwing plus an absolute proliferation of White-necked Jacobins, many of them males, and really good looks at difficult species such as Green-breasted Mango, White-bellied Emerald, Wedge-tailed Saberwing, and the highly sought-after Scaly-breasted Hummingbird.

The mood was relaxed after such an exciting morning and in early afternoon we set off towards the coast passing through the capitol Belmopan and then heading east along the Hummingbird Highway. Roadside Hawks and Eastern Meadowlarks were plentiful along the drive but we only paused once, believe it or not, for a small group of House Sparrows foraging along a chain link fence outside a citrus packing factory in Pomona! Isaias knew House Sparrow was not especially easy to see in Belize and wanted to make sure we had them for the trip! A little further south we entered the long the dirt entrance road to Bocawina Rainforest Resort. After a brief stop at the kiosk to pay the national forest entrance fee we had a fine male Tayra run down the road in front of the vehicle for prolonged views. Known locally as "*Bushdog*" this large weasel was of the blonde-headed form unique to Belize and the Yucatan.



We received a warm reception at Bocawina where it was finally time to say goodbye to Isaías. As usual he'd given 100% during his guiding and was thoroughly deserving of the accolades he received. We settled into our new quarters, a little different to those at Black Rock Lodge with a row of terraced cabins rather than the secluded, individual cabins we'd been used to. However, it was clear from the outset that we were surrounded by some very good birds being so deep inside the rainforest. Supper was a delight with Pico de Gallo and Ceviche for appetizers followed by choices of honey glazed ribs, or garlic fish (grouper) served with Spanish rice, creamy mashed potatoes, roasted veggies and grilled zucchini. For those inclined there was a decadent chocolate cake for dessert too. By way of an impromptu treat, Roni Martínez who was having dinner with a guest at the neighboring table, took us for a quick tour of the water features behind the dining area spotlighting a Yellow Tree Frog and a Red-eyed Tree Frog, two scarce amphibians that might otherwise have been missed. A truly spectacular day was coming to a close as we toasted the cotinga and settled down for the daily checklist review.

Mon., Feb 24th | Bocawina Rainforest Resort | Cockscomb Basin | Maya Center

The local Common Pauraxes were busy overnight offering bursts of song just before midnight and again around 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. On the plus side, these were the only noisy neighbors in our new surroundings! After a typically excellent Belizean breakfast we met up with our new guide for the day, a young man named Roni and were soon on the way to Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve. A Gray Hawk was seen on the journey south and as we drove the dirt entrance road to the preserve everyday species such as Black-cowled Oriole, Tropical Kingbird, and Social Flycatcher appeared along the roadside wires and a diminutive Stripe-throated Hermit even tried to get inside the bus! Black-headed Saltators, Orchard Orioles, and even a Hooded Oriole were all seen at the next stop and there was a surprise down the road when a large *gallinaceous* bird suddenly took flight and bolted into the forest. The views were brief but the collective opinion left little doubt it was a Great Tinamou. On reaching the visitor center we were greeted by yet another calling and displaying Gray-headed Kite in what was proving to be an exceptional tour for seeing the species. Several Crested Guans were on view, great news for Denise and Woody who'd missed this giant member of the *Cracidae* family on the way to Caracol. In fact, the parking lot area was full of good birds including plenty of Yellow-winged Tanagers.



A fairly comfortable hike into the forest followed and the thickets next to the trail had several treats in store with a male Great Antshrike, a couple of Dot-winged Antwrens, excellent views of an Orange-billed Sparrow plus a couple of Rufous-tailed Jacamars right above the trail. Roni pointed out a number of fresh tracks in the mud some of which were left by a Baird's Tapir, locally known as "*Mountain Cow*", the national mammal of Belize. Even more intriguing, Roni found the tracks of a large feline which could only have been made by a Jaguar or a Puma, and they were fresh enough to stir some excitement! We continued to walk towards the river, down towards the tube launch area where several good birds could be seen including Red-legged Honeycreepers and a huge Amazon Kingfisher flying downstream. It was getting hot and the beautifully clear waters of the river sure looked tempting but it was time to head back. On reaching the parking lot we ultimately had some of the best birding of the whole visit. Sara spotted a Golden-hooded Tanager giving beautiful views, and there was a bright male Green Honeycreeper, a new bird for the trip, as well as a male Red-capped Manakin! The Yellow winged Tanagers were still on view, and both Great and Little Tinamous could be heard calling in the background.

On the drive out we had more mammalian interest with a White-nosed Coati, and prolonged views of a Red Brocket, a small, peculiar 'antelope' with disproportionately small feet and a species seldom seen in the day. An extremely successful morning was neatly wrapped up with a traditional Mayan lunch of Caldo de Pollo at Maya Center, all arranged by our local guide Roni, before settling for some down time in the heat of the day.

A late afternoon bird walk in the forested surroundings of Bocawina found Mayan Antthrushes to be extremely vocal but, despite a solid effort, we just couldn't secure views of any of them! We did enjoy some of the other local birds including Pale-vented Pigeons, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-bellied and Least Flycatchers, a fine male Indigo Bunting, and several Boat-billed Flycatchers as Yucatan Black Howlers growled in the distance.

Dinner was impressive yet again with split pea soup or cabbage salad for appetizers, followed by choices of citrus-grilled pork chops with creamy mashed potatoes and steamed veggies, or coconut curry shrimp, and there was a moist zucchini cake for dessert. We rounded off the day with the traditional checklist and headed back to the cozy Mayan quarters to be greeted by several Common Pauraques on the trail right in front of the building. They weren't shy and could easily be viewed with a modest flashlight.



Wed., Feb 25th | Bocawina Rainforest Resort | Bella Vitsa | Tanager Rainforest Lodge

The day began early with a cacophony of sound including Slaty-tailed Trogons, Red-lored Amazons, and lots of orioles, warblers and hummingbirds. An optional pre-breakfast walk would take us along the main entrance road down towards Dog Creek. Mayan Anthrushes were again vocal but couldn't be teased out from their favorite forest habitat but there was a nice woodpecker show with Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers making an appearance along with Golden-fronted, Chestnut-colored and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, most of those appearing around the main reception. Further down the road we had some success with a Black-headed Trogon and Bright-rumped Attila. Having seen numerous Northern Waterthrushes walking around on the lawns it was wonderful (and timely) to have a perfect study of a Louisiana Waterthrush in its preferred riverine habitat by Dog Creek. This smart bird showed off its peach-buff undertail coverts, thin flank streaking and flared supercilium for all to see. On returning, Yellow-throated Euphonias, Yellow-winged and Golden-hooded Tanagers greeted us outside reception.

After another hearty Belizean breakfast served by incredibly friendly staff, it was time to load up and head out along the Southern Highway to Big Falls. The journey was relatively straightforward with a brief stop in Bella Vista although we paused at Medina Bank to view a kettle of vultures that included three King Vultures close to the road. We arrived at Tanager Rainforest Lodge in good time for an early lunch and received a warm reception from our good friends Steve and Cathy, along with welcome cocktails prepared by Sarah. Adrian gave a brief orientation before we were escorted to our newly furnished cabins complete with air conditioning and Wi-Fi!

In mid-afternoon we met up with Steve for some relaxed afternoon birding and walked the grounds of this beautifully landscaped lodge on the banks of the Rio Grande. In just a couple of hours before supper we recorded over 60 species including Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, Buff-throated, Black-headed and Cinnamon-bellied Saltators! Central American Agoutis walked across the manicured lawns, and it was barely getting dark before the first Common Pauraque appeared in front of the lodge while Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts 'twittered' overhead as dusk approached. Drinks at the bar, the daily checklist, and the first of Cordelia's delicious meals rounded off the day.



Thu, Feb 26th | Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Esperanza Road | Big Falls | Dump Rice Fields

Coffee, tea and muffins were available at the lodge from 6 AM and from that moment on it was pretty much nonstop birding action for the next five hours. Steve began on the veranda and guided us around the property that he'd essentially landscaped himself, cutting out trails and building feeders with obvious pride in his work. During the morning a thorough exploration of the property yielded over 100 species (including allowing time for breakfast!) Highlights included a Gray-chested Dove walking around on the lawn under the feeders, multiple appearances of a Stripe-throated hermit around the veranda, a couple of Russet-naped Wood-rails strutting about the property, and a calling Black Hawk-Eagle overhead. Dusky Antbird and Great Antshrike required a little more effort to tease out, though we did find a whole host of wintering warblers in the process including a fine male Hooded, and a male Blackburnian Warbler, a bird so scarce in southern Belize it required ratification at e-bird level.

In late morning, we set off in the lodge's new Nissan touring van for an exploration of some of the quieter roads and lanes around Big Falls, Steve's home town. In the heat of the day things were a little quiet, but we had close views of a couple of Black-headed Trogons followed by ridiculously good looks at a Northern Bentbill which sat in the open for the longest time. More Orange-billed Sparrows were seen along with Blue-black Grassquit, Thick-billed Seedfinch and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Steve treated us to a visit to Miss Pearleen's for lunch, a fine buffet of Indian and Caribbean influenced dishes served with ice cold orange or watermelon juice. Miss Pearleen had watched Steve grow up and it was heartwarming to see her taking such a strong interest in our group. After lunch it was a short drive back to the lodge with quiet time choices of the swimming pool, floating downstream on a tube (!), or simply taking time chill in those lovely air-conditioned cabanas.

In late afternoon, we met for a short field excursion where we first we called into a heavily vegetated, secluded pond called Piedra Lagoon. After some scanning we found a perched Anhinga, a couple of Black-crowned Night-herons and the key bird for the visit, Boat-billed Heron and not just one individual, but three of them! It was something of a triumph since we don't always see Boat-billed Heron on this itinerary.



We finished off the afternoon at the dump rice fields, a far more attractive spot than its name implies. Conditions were favorable after a lot of rainfall earlier in the winter. One small pool hosted around 140 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and throughout the visit we could hear the calls of Soras and Ruddy Crakes, and we found Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Little Blue and Green Herons too. Raptors were represented by Roadside Hawk, Gray Hawk, and a female Northern Harrier quartering over the meadows.

As the sun began to set over the distant Maya Mountains there was a lot of activity close to the road. Large numbers of Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks formed pre-roost gatherings, perhaps providing easy pickings for the lone Merlin present, our first of the trip. There was also exceptional looks at a female Barred Antshrike that just simply sat up as if it wanted to be seen! Then it was back to the lodge to freshen up, drinks at the bar, the daily checklist and another delicious dinner prepared by Cordelia.

Fri, Feb 27th | Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Nim Li Punit | Blue Creek | Dump Rice Fields

Plain Chachalacas were in good voice early this morning which, according to Steve, was a clear indication of a hot day ahead. After coffee, tea and pleasantries on the veranda, we drove a mere 10 minutes north to the Maya archaeological site of Nim Li Punit. Being of local descent, Steve has unique access to the site, but before entering we birded along the entrance road to the continued chorus of Plain Chachalacas as well as finding a Squirrel Cuckoo, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and several species of tanager including Golden-hooded. Mayan Anthrushes were vocal by the entrance but the real highlight was a Plumbeous Kite collecting sticks for building a nest which was just about visible from the parking lot. Steve led a fascinating walk around this compact archaeological site first discovered relatively recently by a prospecting oil worker. Nim Li Punit means 'Big Hat' in Kekchi Maya and was estimated to host as many as 5000 - 7000 residents at peak between 5 AD and 8 AD. Although relatively small, the site consists of three plazas, several step-pyramids, and a number of large carved stelae depicting the ancient city's rulers.

The woodland habitat around the plazas produced good birds too including Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Dusky Antbird, Keel-billed Toucan and Collared Aracari. And, there was a baffling cacophony of Brown Jays with at least 25 of them working through the site 'screeching' as they passed by. They were clearly unhappy about something and Steve thought they might have been pursuing a Collared Forest-Falcon. By the time we returned to the



visitor center the museum was open and most of the group enjoyed some time with the exhibits. Sara, on the other hand, heard a singing Mayan Antthrush close-by and waited patiently for the bird to come into view...and so it did!

From Nim Li Punit we headed west towards the Maya Mountains pausing briefly by the dump which offered good views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk, several Blue Grosbeaks, and plenty of calling Soras and Ruddy Crakes. After a lengthy drive on a bumpy dirt road we arrived at Yona's Restaurant in Blue Creek, our venue for lunch. Double-toothed Kites were soaring overhead and one of the first birds heard vocalizing was a Piratic Flycatcher, the first of the year and a true harbinger of the dry season. The day was comfortably cool and crisp, and fortune was with us once again. We hadn't walked too far up the trail before we came across a remarkable concentration of trogons including eight or nine Black-headed, several Gartered and a pair of Collared Trogons, the first of the trip. Slaty-tailed Trogons could be heard calling up the valley too, a rare moment indeed to find all four possible Belizean trogon species close together in the same place! Keel-billed Toucans were also found here along with a couple of White-whiskered Puffbirds, and the song of Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds was a constant in the background. Blue Creek itself looked so inviting with clear, turquoise waters. A Common Black Hawk chose to perch in a visible spot on a branch overhanging the river and was probably hunting amphibians while Kingfishers were represented by Ringed, Belted and Green, and noted at various spots along the river. Soaring high on the thermals above the creek were several King Vultures with both adults and immatures on view to compare with the soaring Black and Turkey Vultures.

After a delightful morning walk we headed back for a traditional Belizean lunch at Yona's right along the water's edge at Blue Creek.

A soothing tubing session downriver was the favored option upon returning to the lodge where a Little Blue Heron was seen on the banks of the Rio Grande, among other things. After the traditional daily checklist and drinks at the bar, a fabulous supper of pork tenderloin was served by Miriam before we headed out for an optional night birding session. We first began at the lodge where a pair of Common Pauragues was flying around and courting but after spending some time driving around Big Falls (without success) we headed towards the



dump area hoping to see a Striped Owl, a scarce species in Belize mostly found in the southern portion of the country. Although we did hear the muffled calls of a couple of owls responding to playback although Steve thought they were most likely Mottled Owls. We did get eyes on a couple of roosting Limpkins and, as we left the area, an American Barn Owl flew across the road illuminated in the headlights. Unhappily though, it happened so quickly it wasn't seen by everyone in the bus and subsequent spotlight scanning couldn't relocate it. Still, Steve's effort was commendable and night birding will always be a tricky business.

Sat., Feb 28th | Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Tunich Ha Ecological Center | Punta Gorda | Ixcacao Maya Chocolate Farm

The last full day of the tour began in traditional manner with coffee, tea, cinnamon rolls and fruits on the lodge veranda. Bird activity was centered around the swimming pool with many species seemingly attracted to the blooming Mayflower including a Yellow-breasted Chat, Magnolia Warbler and a male White-collared Manakin. Orange-billed Sparrows, Buff-throated and Black-throated Saltators were seen around the tray feeders though we didn't have much time to linger and had plans to be much further south. We made a quick and successful stop to search for Spot-breasted Orioles near Miss Pearlean's finding two individuals before leaving the village although we seemed to set off all the neighborhood dogs in the process!

We arrived at Tunich Ha Reserve & Ecological Center around 7:30 AM and found it very birdy from the outset. A Yellow-olive Flatbill was one of the first birds seen and Steve's sharp hearing picked out the calls of a Chestnut-headed Oropendula. We had a brief chat with Nick, the owner and proprietor of the property and enjoyed the delicious buffet breakfast prepared by his wife Jessica. Afterward we ventured out to bird the grounds eventually securing some views of the Chestnut-headed Oropendula, not only new to the trip but a species only rarely encountered on this itinerary. A Northern Schiffornis was calling from the forest and Steve spent a lot of time trying to draw out some Ruddy Crakes, eventually having views of two of them. Close-by a male and female Black-crowned Antshrike showed well in the thickets, a fairly difficult species to see in Belize and generally only found in southern Toledo District. Yet another male White-collared Manakin put on a delightful show for the photographers and we also enjoyed Tawny-crowned and Lesser Greenlets as well as a good selection of North American warblers, including a nice male Wilson's warbler.

We thanked Nick and Jessica for their hospitality and headed south to the coastal town of Punta Gorda. Being Friday, the place was buzzing with activity as the markets were open. Looking across the azure waters of the



Gulf of Honduras we found a few inshore species including Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds, and a handful of Sandwich Terns, Yellow-crowned Night-herons and Neotropic Cormorants. There was even a wandering Tri-colored Heron in a drainage ditch. Despite the hustle, bustle, and puzzlement from the locals we spent some time along a street watching hummingbirds come into a flowering red trumpet vine with numerous Rufous-tailed, a couple of Green-breasted Mangos, and our first Cinnamon Hummingbirds of the trip.

Punta Gorda had been rewarding and we headed north, and then west under the shadow of the Maya Mountains to Ixcocoa Chocolate Farm. We first had a lunch of local cuisine including the house specialty, 'chocolate chicken' and house-made pickles, followed by a fantastic demo of the ancient chocolate making process. Henry, our host, was not only superb at explaining the traditional process of growing cacao, but also had a clear understanding of the science behind making chocolate, and the history of his family's business in San Felipe. Of course, varieties of chocolate samples and drinks were tasted and consumed, and souvenirs eagerly snapped up from the gift shop before leaving.

Steve offered one final afternoon bird walk around the lodge which was surprisingly well attended given the length of our trip and the heat of the afternoon. Smoky-brown Woodpeckers, a species that had previously eluded us put on a pretty good show, a Mayan Anthrush strutted through the leaf litter on the forest floor, and we finally had good views of a couple of White-winged Becards, the latter something of a specialty at Tanager Rainforest Lodge.

After freshening up we celebrated with another delightful meal prepared by Cordelia and the team. Dave and Woody somehow found a guitar and led a jam serenading the lodge and the tour with an impressive repertoire of songs from Bob Dylan, The Beatles and more, with Jan, Lori, Bill, Denise and Sara on backing vocals!

Sun, Mar 1st | Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Departures from Punta Gorda

After breakfast we gathered for traditional group photos on the lodge verandah and thanked Steve, Cathy, Cordelia, Sarah and all the staff for such a wonderful time before heading south to Punta Gorda airport for our respective journeys home. The tour had been a wonderful adventure packed with truly memorable wildlife experiences, fantastic humor and group camaraderie!

Group (James P. Smith - JPS), Common Black Hawk (JPS), Keel-billed Toucan (Bryan Calk - BC), Common Tody-Flycatcher (JPS), Scenic (JPS), Black Howler Monkey (BC), Red-legged Honeycreeper (BC), Group Birding (JPS), Roadside Hawk (JPS), Loggerhead Shrike (JPS), Scenic (JPS), Violet Sabrewing (BC), The trailhead at Cockscomb Basin (JPS), Red-eyed Treefrog (BC), Tanager Rainforest Lodge (JPS), Rose-throated Becard (JPS), Rufous-breasted Spinetail (JPS), Bronzed Cowbird (JPS), Black Hawk Eagle (JPS), Ivory-billed Woodcreeper (JPS), Northern Bentbill (JPS), Boat-billed Heron (JPS), Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (JPS), Barred Antshrike (JPS), Blue Creek (JPS), Final Dinner (JPS), View from the plane (JPS)