

Belize: Three Great Lodges | Nov. 2 – 12, 2025 Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guides Isaias and Jeffry Morataya (Black Rock Lodge), Mike Iko (Jade Jungle Resort) and Steve Choco (Tanager Rainforest Lodge). Our wonderful participants were; Lisa, Daryl, Vicky, John, Jim, Marie and Judy.



Day 1, November 2nd – Arrivals | Black Rock Lodge

Blue skies and warm, tropical sunshine greeted our Naturalist Journeys group as guides from Black Rock Lodge divided forces to pick up Lisa, Daryl, Vicky and John from The Black Orchid Resort while Jeffry, another guide from Black Rock Lodge, picked up Jim arriving at the Phillip Goldson International Airport in early afternoon. White cumulus clouds and one or two darker shower clouds deposited brief but intense rainstorms across the landscape as we sped west along the George Price Highway. In the distance, the Maya mountains loomed up to our southwest, a mountain range that would soon become a familiar feature throughout the tour.



Birds were not particularly abundant as we drove west although small groups of Black and Turkey Vultures rose on the thermals and the occasional Roadside Hawk perched on roadside wires. The mood was relaxed as we headed towards lunch but we were hardly prepared for what was about to happen next. Two extremely large white birds with dark head and neck, and crimson collar could be seen in the emergent vegetation in one of the many roadside marshes – it was a pair of Jabiru! Even before the tour was in full flow, we'd found one of the most desired species of any trip to Belize. Moreover, the birds were in immaculate condition, evidently getting ready for the breeding season. Isaias pulled the vehicle over to a safe place just as they majestically rose up on pure white wings and soared away over the George Price Highway and then, just a few miles up the road, we stopped for lunch at the delightful Amigos Restaurant where soursop juice and a range of quesadillas (beef, chicken and shrimp) proved popular choices. We even kept the birding going finding Green Herons and Great Kiskadees around the parking lot.

After lunch the steady drive west on the much improved George Price Highway passed through the major settlements of Belmopan (The Capitol), Santa Elana, and San Ygnacio before entering seven miles of white dirt roads to get to Black Rock Lodge. Isaias paused at a small farm pond on Black Rock Road that hosted a Least Grebe and then found an adult Gray Hawk perched right by the road, and as we drove along, scores of Blue-black Grassquits and Ruddy Ground-doves flew up from the roadside. Once at Black Rock we received a warm welcome and a brief orientation before being escorted to our beautiful individual cabanas. A short birding session before supper found a pair of Bat Falcons perched high above the cliffs, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds flitting aggressively around the feeders and Vicky spotted a Louisiana Waterthrush on the fast flowing Macal River down below.

Marie was on a later flight but still arrived in good time to join us for supper, a delightful four course meal with tortilla soup, garden salad, chicken and fish dishes plus a vegetarian option, along with banana bread pudding for dessert! We retired to our cozy cabanas looking forward to the day that lay ahead and settled into the rhythm of Black Rock Lodge in all its magnificence.

Day 2, November 3rd – Black Rock Lodge | Belize Botanic Garden | Night Birding



There's nothing quite like waking up in the tropics and listening to a whole new wall of sound emanating from the forest. Some were decidedly exotic like the Melodious Blackbirds and Northern Schiffornis while others were oddly familiar such as Wood Thrush and Kentucky Warbler, both being North American breeders finding a winter home at Black Rock Lodge. The restaurant was the place to be with fresh brewed coffee served from 6:00 a.m., and where we could enjoy viewing from the balcony under the enthusiastic guidance of Isaias and Jeffry. A Bat Falcon was perched high above the cliffs and Masked Tityras foraged in the cecropias while the feeders were visited by Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and fast moving Long-billed Hermits. Isaias was keen to keep things moving as we walked up to the staff housing area finding several wintering migrants including American Redstart and a Wilson's Warbler. As we descended towards the river there delightful views of a Gartered Trogon were on offer whilst high up along the forested ridgeline we had our first looks at Keel-billed Toucans, a couple of which flew high over the valley. How cool it was to find the national bird of the Belize on the first morning of the tour!

The loop brought us close to the banks of the Macal River where we first heard and then saw a Louisiana Waterthrush and found a number of winter migrants including Hooded, Magnolia and Chestnut-sided Warblers, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher while resident flycatchers included Yellow-olive Flatbill and Northern Tropical Pewee. Scope views of Mangrove Swallows sitting directly alongside a Northern Rough-winged Swallow offered a fine comparison between the two species down by the river and, just before breakfast, a stunning male White-collared Manakin entertained at close range showing off his black cap, bright white chest and yellow belly. Breakfast was both tasty and welcome, many opting for the Belizean breakfast including fry-jacks and homemade flour tortillas.

After breakfast we climbed into two vehicles for the steady drive down to Belize Botanic Gardens and met up with Harry, long time senior gardener at this special place. Harry shared the thoughts behind the cultivation of numerous orchids including the national flower of Belize, the Black Orchid. In the background Isaias and Jeffry were busy searching for a Lesson's Motmot and sure enough they found one beautifully camouflaged and yet very cooperative as it posed for pictures and even some video! Hummingbirds again vied for attention with views of a Long-billed Hermit and a rather scarce Wedge-tailed Sabrewing. Harry did his best to keep on top of the botanical program and showed remarkable patience as his narrative was frequently interrupted by bird sightings particularly when Isaias spotted a pair of well-hidden Tody Motmots deep in the thickets. Wedge-billed Woodcreeper showed nicely too as did a couple of Ochre-crowned Greenlets and John managed to



photograph a family of Yucatan Black Howlers in the canopy, and there was an approachable Ghost Anole basking on a tree. We visited the Maya house, a tiny thatched dwelling which, in days gone by, would have hosted an entire Maya family. The botanic gardens just happened to be very good for flycatchers too with Ochre-bellied, Yellow-bellied and Great Crested Flycatchers all gracing our lists. We finished off the walk with a remarkable group of Collared Aracaris exploring former nest cavities made by a large woodpecker, perhaps Lineated or Pale-billed. Just before we made our exit, two White-necked Puffbirds teed-up wonderfully well for scope views and proved to be the only ones seen on the whole tour.

Despite our late arrival back at the lodge, Luna's was there ready and waiting to serve lunch as Vicky spotted a male Red-legged Honeycreeper from the balcony. Lunch was a delight of course, after which we settled for an hour or so of down time. Around 4:00pm we met up with Isaias and Jeffry for an afternoon walk, this time heading up the valley towards Black Rock's organic garden and met with considerable success eventually having both scopes focused on an Orange-breasted Falcon perched high upon the cliff face. The falcon was quite difficult to spot against the vegetated cliffs but any views of this range restricted rarity are welcome. We had better slightly luck with views of a Black-and-white Hawk Eagle perched near its nest in a giant Ceiba tree. Rufous-naped Woodrails were present around the organic farm with Spotted Sandpiper and Black Phoebe catching some of the many bugs around the compost piles in the afternoon warmth. Later we welcomed Judy who unfortunately missed her flight the previous day due to a mechanical issue on Delta but at least she made it good time to enjoy the remainder of the tour!

After dinner we met our guides once more, this time for night birding along Black Rock Road. Before setting off Isaias showed a Red-eyed Tree Frog to several in our party.....Lisa was thrilled! The night drive itself was initially quiet but interest picked up as we spotlighted several Common Pauragues and Jeffry's sharp eyes soon spotted an owl through the darkness as it hunted over the fields. It was a little distant but with the aid of a strong spotlight it eventually 'morphed' into a beautiful American Barn Owl! A couple of distant Northern Potoos were spotted resting on fence posts too but it wasn't until we got all the way down to Maya Flats that our guides felt one was close enough to share. Remarkably, this particular potoo didn't move and appeared to tolerate the vehicles headlights shining directly on it before it eventually flew off into the murky darkness. The evening had been a fine success and it was time to head back to the lodge. On the drive back, a spotlighted Yellow-crowned Night-heron was noted, but only as a 'fly-by'.



Day 3, November 4th – Black Rock Lodge | Mountain Pine Ridge | Caracol National Monument

An early breakfast found us on the road by 6:45 am and heading for Mountain Pine Ridge on yet another beautiful Belizean morning. Our route skirted around San Ygnacio and climbed up to an expansive plateau dominated by open forest consisting mostly of Caribbean Pine. Caracol National Monument was our destination, a much-anticipated highlight of the trip. To get there we drove south-west on vastly improved roads, not only enhancing the speed of the journey but also the comfort levels on the bus!

The blanket pine forest invited few reasons to stop although a Great Blue Heron looked strangely out of place flying over the pine wilderness and was probably a migrant. Equally out of place was an Olive-sided Flycatcher which chose a dead snag as its favorite lookout post, literally overlooking some busy roadworks near the Macal River. Eventually, the pines gave way to the primary rainforest habitat synonymous with the Chiqibul National Forest. We reached the gates of Caracol National Monument in good time and, as we stepped out of the vehicles, a high-flying Hook-billed Kite was there to greet us! Isaias acquired the now obligatory wrist bands for entry and off we went for a two mile loop through the rainforest and ruins. Jeffry started early and lined up a Gartered Trogon in the scope for all to see and we found more trogons along the forest trail with several Slaty-tailed and Black-throated Trogons coming into view. The woodland trail proved to be a fine place for several rainforest species as Isaias carefully picked out birds such as Black-throated Shrike-tanager, Red-crowned Anttanager, Stub-tailed Spadebill, Golden-crowned Warbler, Tawny-winged Woodcreeper and Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, all of them true denizens of the rainforest and often difficult to see. Moving out of the forest and into one of the plazas was equally productive where we encountered a busy feeding flock of Lesser Greenlets, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireos, Magnolia and Black-throated Green Warblers, and even a Banaquit, quite a scarce bird in Belize.

The warmth of the day began to have an impact so we sat for a while in the shade while Lisa and Daryl scaled the mighty steps of the 'Caana' or 'Sky Palace', a huge pyramidal temple widely regarded as the largest made structure in Belize. Isaias then took the opportunity to go into some depth on the fascinating human history around Caracol. First reported in 1938 by Rosa Mai, a logger searching for mahogany, Caracol ultimately 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 surface area greater 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.

The sky was intensely blue as we enjoyed yet another truly immaculate day in Belize. It seemed somehow appropriate that King Vultures would be soaring high above the Sky Palace with Bat Falcons zipping around the surrounding canopy. We strolled over to the 'A' plaza where Judy scaled one of the pyramidal structures though this one had a user-friendly stairwell up one of the outer flanks. Our forest loop continued to offer more delights including enormous Cieba trees and some exceptional birding. We had amazing looks at a Northern Schiffornis, a furtive forest dweller heard far more frequently than seen. Plus, there was a warbler flock that not only contained a Worm-eating, but also held a Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warbler...together! The morning passed quickly and after a wonderful walk, Isaias and Jeffry laid out a delicious picnic lunch in the shade with rice and beans, grilled chicken, pasta, fresh fruits and salad all on the menu.

Our trip at Caracol had passed seamlessly and it was already time to start the journey home. A juvenile Great Black Hawk flushed up at the roadside and was every bit as surprised to see us and we were to see it! By request we stopped by the old Guacamallo Bridge over the Macal River and found a magnificent Amazon Kingfisher perched above the rapids as well as a Neotropic Cormorant, while on the hillside above the Olive-sided Flycatcher was still flycatching from its favorite perch above the road works mayhem!

A little farther along the road we paused at the Douglas D. Silva Forest Camp, formerly abandoned but evidently undergoing some refurbishments. Perhaps as a result of the disturbance it was a little quieter than usual but still had some nice flights of Montezuma Oropendulas and great views of Acorn Woodpeckers. Vicky's sharp eyes picked out both Rufous-capped Warbler and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, and a warbler frenzy in the pines included Magnolia, Black-throated Green, Yellow-throated and Grace's Warblers as well as a couple of Hepatic Tanagers.



We returned to the lodge for another delicious four course meal and the daily checklist review. Afterwards, when all was quiet, a huge male White-nosed Coati came to poach the fruit on the tray feeders below the balcony, neatly spotlighted by local guide Henry!

Day 4, November 5th – Spanish Lookout

The rain came down hard and heavy during the night although it had largely cleared by the morning. Yucatan Black Howlers, low clouds and drizzle created quite a mystical start to the day. Gazing down from the Black Rock balcony, coffee in hand, a raging Macal River churned over angry and brown. During the early hours the feeders had been visited again by the male White-nosed Coati still putting on a show! After another hearty Belizean breakfast we headed out early to a rain soaked Black Rock Road and encountered a flurry of activity at Maya Flats. Isaias spotted a cuckoo in flight which thankfully landed on a roadside fence and turned out to be a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, an uncommon migrant in Belize. Isaias said he most frequently sees cuckoos when the weather is overcast and drizzly, just as it was on this morning. A Gray-crowned Yellowthroat popped into view too, sitting openly on a barbed wire fence while several Eastern Meadowlarks flew alongside the vehicles as we drove towards the main road.

Luckily for us Isaias had a fast route in mind to the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout and we skirted around San Ygnacio passing through the village of Bullet Tree on quiet rural roads. It wasn't long before we pulled over to enjoy three Fork-tailed Flycatchers, surely the most elegant of all Central American flycatchers?! The same area held a couple of White-fronted Amazon's, plus scope views of Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. In no time at all we were entering the fields of Spanish Lookout but only after Isaias checked in at the Mennonite Town Hall to secure the essential permit for entry into the fields and wetlands. The rain and general gloom of early morning had cleared completely leaving only wide open vistas and pristine blue skies! The first stop not only produced several raptors including a perched Aplomado Falcon, but also a lovely surprise in the form of a soaring Roseate Spoonbill which turned out to be the only spoonbill of the entire tour. We were off to an auspicious start and further exploration of the fields yielded more raptors including Lesser Yellow-headed and King Vultures, a couple of distant Black-collared Hawks, Crested Caracara and really excellent views of a perched Great Black Hawk showing off its diagnostic barred 'trousers'. Wading birds featured too with Black-necked Stilts, Greater Yellowlegs and Northern Jacanas favoring the drainage ditches and we had excellent looks at



Bare-throated Tiger herons and Limpkins as they retreated to the forest edge for cover. Far less expected, but certainly most welcome, was a Golden-olive Woodpecker perched out in the open!

Exploring a myriad of white dirt roads eventually brought us to another large wetland. A White-tailed Deer bounded across the road and a walk along the berm here found Yellow-crowned Night-herons, perched Anhingas, Ringed and Belted Kingfishers, and nice views of White-tailed Kites. The real highlight though, was prolonged views of a calling White-throated Flycatcher, a scarce, highly localized species in Belize with a patchy winter distribution. To cap things off a couple of Cinnamon-bellied Saltators perched up and called for a while before it was time to head over to town and relax with a fabulous lunch at Sisters Diner.

After lunch (the quesadillas being a popular choice) we started to climb back into the vehicles just as Isaias spotted a dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk soaring over town with a couple of Black Vultures, though the hawk was high though and admittedly tough to see. With that we ventured back to the fields first pausing at the Mennonite recreational area of Aguacate Lagoon. An Amazon Kingfisher greeted our arrival while careful scope scanning of the far side of the lagoon revealed no less than 18 Yellow-crowned Night-herons hidden in the reeds. Isaias coaxed in a nice feeding flock of North American warblers but these were a little overshadowed by stellar views at a Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet looking for all the world like a miniature Social Flycatcher! A little deeper into the fields brought us to a spot that Isaias called "Little Yucatan", an attractive woodland edge offering views of Common Squirrel Cuckoo and Gartered Trogon, as well as further pairs of Apolomado and Bat Falcons. A Gray Fox was scoped up the road while perched White Ibis and Wood Storks offered great views for all but, alas, the Yucatan Jays calling in the distance couldn't be enticed our way. By way of compensation, we later stumbled across a wonderful flock of Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers accompanied by a couple of bright Vermilion Flycatchers! It was quintessential Spanish Lookout and we celebrated with another fantastic meal back at the lodge.

Day 5, November 6th – Mountain Pine Ridge | Green Hills Butterfly Farm | Jade Jungle Resort

Alas, it was time to finally leave Black Rock Lodge. Luna, who'd been our delightful server throughout, served up yet another fabulous breakfast while Jeffry picked out a couple of Crimson-collared Tanagers from the balcony, a new and rather gaudy species to add to our ever growing list. The skies were full of promise when we departed



the lodge 8 AM as the clouds from more overnight rain began to peel away revealing pockets of blue sky. After stopping at a local garage to check an underinflated rear tire, we moved on to Mountain Pine Ridge and met up with a National Park Ranger by the name of Aurelio. True to form, and looking after the best interests of his clients, Isaias used his local contacts to make arrangements for our group to be escorted along a narrow trail in the National Forest that wasn't open to the public. The motivation behind this adventure was the Stygian Owl, a mysterious, low density species with a patchy distribution across the pristine pine forests of Belize. The trail was about a mile long and after the overnight rain was a little gnarly but well worth the effort as we watched in awe, a stunning pair of Stygian Owls preening together in a stand of Caribbean Pine. The birds were certainly aware of our presence but by keeping a respectful distance we enjoyed a most private, intimate experience with one of the most sought-after bird species in Belize. It was a truly special moment and, in near-silence, we gave the birds (and the habitat) the respect they deserve. Other birds were quite scarce along the trail although Isaias did point out a pair of Bat Falcons calling above the forest, and a few Grace's and Magnolia Warblers came into view. The hike back to the vehicles became uncomfortably sticky as the heat and humidity increased but just as we were about to leave a Double-toothed Kite soared overhead, our first of the trip!

From there it was a relatively short drive to Green Hills Butterfly Ranch, so short in fact that it would have been nice to spend a wee bit longer in the comfort of the air conditioned vehicles. But upon arrival we were greeted with a lovely smile from assistant and guide Reina who gave a wonderful tour of the butterfly house in all its glory, buzzing with activity as the captive species inside reacted well to the heat and humidity outside the enclosure. After an enthralling tour of the butterfly life cycle, the mind-boggling frenzy of hummingbirds around the feeders was something to behold and as well as being an important identification forum with so many species offering side-by-side, naked eye comparisons; Long-billed Hermits, Wedge-tailed and Violet Saberwings, White-bellied Emerald, White-necked Jacobin, and Scaly-breasted and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds! Green-breasted Mangos, both male and female, neatly capped off our hummingbird session as Isaias and Jeffry again put on the most fabulous buffet lunch of rice and beans (or was it beans and rice?), stew chicken, flour tortillas, salad, fruits, etc. and lime juice.

We later drove east along quiet roads before embarking on a drive of some 6 miles on dirt roads, eventually reaching Jade Jungle Resort tucked away deep inside the forested hills. The resort is set amid 300 acres of prime



rainforest and upon arrival we received a warm welcome, a brief orientation and settled into our comfortable thatched cabanas before meeting up at 4:15pm for a casual birding walk with local guide Mike Iko. Compared to our previous walks it was relatively quiet but we did have fantastic views of a male Barred Antshrike singing while 'shivering' its tail and sporting a neat white crest! There was also at Least Flycatcher, and in the background we could hear the distant 'bouncing-ball' song of a Great Antshrike.

With Tanya in charge of the kitchen, dinner was bound to be a triumph and so it was; sweet potato kale salad, chicken-tortilla soup, pork tacos, and chocolate ganache ding-dong cake for dessert...Wow!

Day 6, November 7th - Jade Jungle Resort

At 6am we sipped coffee and watched the extraordinary avian action right outside the main lodge building. Birds came thick and fast, many of them looking spectacular in the early morning light. Bright-rumped Attilas vocalized while Black-cheeked Woodpeckers showed well in the Cecropias and an impressive flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks filtered through the canopy as Black-headed Saltators could be heard chattering in the background. Great Kiskadees and Social Flycatchers were present father up the road where we enjoyed excellent scope views of the very similar Boat-billed Flycatcher which thankfully was vocalizing but otherwise looked quite similar to a Great Kiskadee. Lots more species came into view as the intensity of the birding continued unabated. Stunning Yellow-winged Tanagers and noisy Band-banded Wrens put on a fine show around the Maya ruins and the lodge's hydroponic garden before it was time to head off for the fabulous breakfast prepared by Tanya; scrambled eggs, roast potatoes, salad, fry-jacks, toast, and a delicious local herbal tea.

After breakfast, we again met up with Mike for a longer walk, this time along the Tapir Trail beginning at the meadow where we'd been the previous evening. The day was already hot and incredibly humid, and the pace was tempered accordingly as we slowly walked along the trails. As is typical in the forest, some species were seen only briefly while others, such as the Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Slate-headed Tody-flycatcher performed quite well. There was a huge surprise when we walked up to the beach at Red Cliff on the Roaring River and found a young female scaup swimming on the river at point-blank range! Despite the close proximity, it wasn't an easy bird to identify, especially in Belize where both scaup species are uncommon. At the time of writing, the jury's still out on the identification!



The Secret Garden did indeed hold some nice secrets not least of which was a vocalizing Barred Forest-Falcon and there was fine group of foraging Montezuma Oropendulas, plus a Hook-billed Kite lifted out of the forest and drifted right over overhead. We finished the Tapir Trail with an unexpected but thrilling walk across the suspension bridge....it was an adventure holiday after all! And, continuing the raptor theme, Vicky photographed another or the same Hook-billed Kite over the Riverview cabins where she and John were staying.

Lunch was served early at 12 noon and again it was another high point of the day; grilled chicken, seasoned pork, curry chicken, white rice, salad, and watermelon among the dishes offered.

The afternoon was highlighted by a pleasant walk along the resort's main access road. As we reached a clearing in the forest an impressive flock of almost 100 White-collared Swifts careened about the sky above the forest and lingered for a while in perfect afternoon sunlight. The forest itself was a little quiet at times but did offer great views of Long-billed Gnatwren, Ruddy Woodcreeper and Short-billed Pigeon. As we strolled back to our lovely thatched cabanas, a Laughing Falcon teed-up for fabulous scope views through a 'window' in the hedgerow.

Day 7, November 8th - Jade Jungle Resort | Blue Hole National Park | Hopkins Bay | Tanager Rainforest Lodge

Lesson's Motmots could be heard calling all around the lodge before sunrise as another wonderful day dawned in Belize and it was hard to imagine we were having so much luck with near-perfect weather. The birds responded accordingly with another sensational pre-breakfast walk on the property. The species profile was somewhat similar to the previous day with another terrific showing of Black-faced Grossbeaks, and this time we had much better views of a pair Slaty-tailed Trogons as well as Black-headed and Gartered Trogons. Lisa and Daryl were delighted with the woodpeckers too, not only did we have great views of Black-cheeked but as many as four Pale-billed Woodpeckers put on a fantastic display around the Maya plaza. Meanwhile, the smaller songbirds vied for attention with Yellow-throated Vireo, Yellow-throated warbler, and Yellow-bellied and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers. Common Squirrel Cuckoos, Band-backed Wrens and Yellow-winged Tanagers all showed up again by the hydroponic garden until the constraints of time forced us to leave the birding behind and head for breakfast. Tanya, ever reliable, offered yet another fantastic buffet breakfast to send us on our way. And then,



sadly, it was time to say goodbye to Jade after a short but sweet visit. Mike was to be our guide and driver for the remainder of the morning, and once loaded up we embarked on a fascinating sojourn on the back roads skirting around Belmopan, passing over the Roaring River and delivering us straight on to the Hummingbird Highway! We arrived at Blue Hole National Park early and immediately spotted a skulking Yellow-breasted Chat and a couple of Yellow-olive Flatbills in the parking lot area while Vicky pointed out a lone Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture soaring over the fields on the opposite side of the road.

We moved onto a second parking area where Marie and Judy had a cooling dip in the 'Blue Hole' itself, a 'cenote' formed by the collapse of an underground cave in limestone bedrock, apparently quite a common phenomenon throughout the Yucatan Peninsula. It was still early and we had the whole place to ourselves. Not only was the area scenically picturesque but it hosted a number of interesting birds including wonderful looks at a female Rufous-tailed Jacamar as we hiked down to the Blue Hole. A bold male Kentucky Warbler showed incredibly well while Dot-winged Antwrens flicked around the vine tangles and a Blue-black Grosbeak sang in the background and, eventually, we had reasonable views of a Smoky-brown Woodpecker as well. We came across a nice feeding flock close to the parking area and suddenly became surrounded by warblers; Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, Hooded and Northern Parula though these were a little overshadowed by a couple of hummingbirds joining the frenzy in the form of Purple-crowned Fairies. As if the fairies weren't enough, a Common Squirrel Cuckoo sat out in the sunshine for the longest time.

Afterward a wonderful visit to the Blue Hole we sped along the Hummingbird Highway towards the Caribbean Coast spotting several Roadside Hawks along the way and, after a brief stop for coffee and refreshment, continued east along the Hopkins causeway reaching the beautiful azure waters of the Caribbean Sea. Our chosen spot for lunch was the Rhum Shack in Hopkins Bay Resort where met Steve Choco, our guide for the next four days and said our goodbyes to Mike as he headed back home to Jade Jungle Resort. We dined on the sand under the shade as Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised overhead, and Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns patrolled up and down the inshore waters. Several bold Black Spiny-tailed Iguanas were strutting about the resort but a Green-headed Tree Snake was a genuine surprise as we walked back to Steve's vehicle... it was the only snake of the entire tour.



A steady drive south along the Southern Highway found us heading towards Steve's hometown of Big Falls but with plenty of time to pause by the roadside for excellent views of three White-tailed Hawks (two adults and a juvenile) playing on the breeze with the local Turkey Vultures. Further south, a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture and an Aplomado Falcon were seen in the pine savannah just before we reached the lovely Tanager Rainforest Lodge. After a warm welcome, refreshing local beverage and brief orientation we were shown to our delightfully appointed cabanas and later met Steve for some optional light birding around the lodge with calling Collared Forest-Falcons being a highlight. Then it was drinks at the bar and the first of several of delicious home cooked meals prepared by Steve's wife Cordelia.

Day 8, November 9th - Tanager Rainforest Lodge | The Dump

The day began in the most magical fashion as the delightful surroundings of Tanager Rainforest Lodge came into their own. With our cabanas were nestled on the banks of the Rio Grande we were, once again, surrounded by the sounds of the tropical rainforest merging with the sounds of the neighboring village of Big Falls just across the river. Cordelia and the kitchen staff served coffee and muffins at 6am and we birded from the lodge balcony for a while enjoying so many species on view; Stripe-throated Hermits 'buzzed' the flowers around the balcony, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Buff-throated Saltators visited the tray feeders, Northern Waterthrush and Clay-colored Thrush could be seen on the lawns, and a handsome male Hooded Warbler worked his way around the swimming pool fence. A couple of Central American Agoutis poked around along the edge of the forest and a Rufous-naped Wood-rail boldly strutted across the lawn. In the distance, clearly audible, the distinctive 'cow-cow-cow' calls of a Collared Forest-falcon could be heard, a rainforest raptor known to be shy and difficult to see. A more discreetly hidden tray feeder was favored by the secretive yet well named Orange-billed Sparrow.

The day was warming up quickly so we went for a walk around the grounds before breakfast finding a whole host of wonderful species many of which were new to the trip; White-winged Becard, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Bronzed Cowbird and exceptional views of Rufous-breasted Spinetail and Smoky-brown Woodpecker. Steve became particularly animated when he found a couple of Golden-hooded Tanagers, perhaps one of the more spectacular tanager species of the trip. After all, we were staying at Tanager Rainforest Lodge.



Breakfast was a delight with scrambled eggs, bacon, breakfast sausage, yoghurt, granola, fruits and fresh juices after which we birded a little more around the lodge before heading out to The Esperanza Road, a lightly wooded area bordered by agricultural fields. On arrival at 11:30am it was hot and sticky, and stepping out of the air conditioned vehicle felt like stepping into a sauna! However, Steve's boundless enthusiasm was shining through and we soon enjoyed a close Black-headed Trogan and exceptional looks at an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. Blue-black Grassquits and Morelets's Seedeaters were feeding in the rank grasses and, as we crested a rise in the road, several raptors rose on the warm-air thermals above the fields. In the distance we could hear the high-pitched calls of a displaying Black Hawk Eagle and after a couple of minutes of scanning it was spotted cruising around the skies etched against white, puffy cumulus clouds. Black and Turkey Vultures played on the thermals and we were especially fortunate to have both dark morph and light morph Short-tailed Hawks soaring with them.

Steve kindly went to fetch the vehicle as we benefitted from the shade before loading up and heading off to lunch in the heart of the Big Falls village. Miss Pearleen's Restaurant offered a fabulous all-you-can-eat buffet of Indian and Caribbean influenced cuisine, and wonderfully refreshing ice cold juices including soursop and watermelon.

A little down time was welcome and the lodge's beautiful swimming pool was well attended! We later met at 3:30 pm for an afternoon in the Big Falls area beginning at Piedra Lagoon where we'd hope to find a Boat-billed Heron (or two) but instead found a local fisherman flushing most of the herons out of the vegetation almost all of which were Black-crowned Night-herons. Even so, Jim and Steve managed to spot a single Boat-billed Heron.

From there it was just a short drive to 'the dump', a wonderful wetland area composed of lightly flooded rice fields and with the recent rains, the water levels were absolutely perfect for water birds. On arrival we soon found an adult Jabiru towering above a couple of Wood Stalks and Limpkins. A Black-throated Tiger-heron perched up nicely, and White-tailed Kites and White-tailed Hawks cruised around the rice fields for much of the remainder of the afternoon. A couple of Merlins were new to the tour, zipping around the meadows attempting to catch some of the many seed-eating passerines in the area, and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird perched up for several lucky folks in our group as did a female Barred Antshrike close to the road. But one family of birds



really captured the imagination - the crakes and rails. Sora, Ruddy Crake and Gray-breasted Crake we're all heard frequently and we even had good flight views of a couple of the Gray-breasted Crakes. Several handsome Purple Gallinules were rather obliging too as they sat up quite high in the shrubbery and, with that, another stellar day wrapped up as the clouds of the next rain bearing front appeared over the distant Maya Mountains.

Day 9, November 10th - Tanager Rainforest Lodge | The Dump | Blue Creek Village

It rained heavily overnight with downpours continuing well into the morning and directly impacting on our departure plan to the archeological site of Nim Li Punit. After a brief discussion the leaders elected to skip Nim Li Punit in the rain and instead opted for an early breakfast. Miraculously though, the clouds and rain began to break up almost as soon as we drove the short distance to the village of Big Falls. Giant Cowbirds were drying out on the top rail of the rice mill, and Collared Aracaris and Plain Chachalacas could be seen 'hanging out' together in a leafless cercropia. Despite the gloomy start, things were going well and we soon found a pair of Spot-breasted Orioles known to reside near Miss Pearleen's.

In ever-brightening conditions we headed west to the dump and the spot that offered so much action the previous evening. It soon became apparent that the heavy rainfall had induced even more activity as a large flock of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks 'whistled' as they flew over, a White-tailed Hawk perched alongside a Turkey Vulture in a cluster of palms and a White-tailed Kite sat up on a small bush in the marsh on the opposite side of the road. Numerous kingfishers put on a spectacular display with Belted, Green, and our first American Pygmy Kingfisher of the trip, the latter initially spotted by Marie. Once again, crakes and rails were vocalizing from the rice fields and soon we were having good views of several Soras whilst simultaneously listening to Ruddy Crakes in the background. Jim even got eyes on one of those Ruddy Crakes! But, as thrilling as these sightings were, little could have prepared us for what happened when a large, dark rail walked out onto the open road and simply looked at our group! The decurved bill and dark, blackish plumage replete with white smudges and speckles could only mean one thing, it was a Spotted Rail!! As an oncoming vehicle approached, the rail scurried back into the vegetation. It felt like we'd already been incredibly lucky. Then, remarkably, the same bird started walking back out into the road and Lisa called "there's another one!" And then another walked out, this one being a smaller downy juvenile, perhaps only about a week old. Thankfully, all three birds made it across the road safely....and there was much rejoicing! Steve, who'd grown up birding locally, had never



seen anything quite like it and couldn't believe how much luck was coming our way. As the buzz and excitement settled down we enjoyed prolonged views of a perched Yellow-tailed Oriole just across the road.

There was an air of euphoria in the bus as we headed west towards the Maya Mountains and onto the long bumpy approach road to Blue Creek Village. After the morning's rain several Gray Hawks perched in the Cecropias drying out their wings and groups of Black Vultures were ground feeding, presumably looking for dead bugs flushed to the surface by the rain. Ruddy Ground-doves and Pale-vented Pigeons perched on roadside wires and there was a Bat Falcon, our first in several days.

The pleasant environs of Blue Creek offered good birding around the village and along the creek itself where a round walk of about a mile generated over 60 species including often aloof residents such as White-whiskered Puffbird and Northern Bentbill and our first really good views of a White-breasted Woodwren. Some 10 species of North American warbler were noted too, including the first Tennessee Warblers in the village where we found Yellow-winged Tanagers and Yellow-bellied Elaenias. Yona's Restaurant on the banks of Blue Creek was then the venue for a delightful riverside lunch.

A little downtime was in order when we returned to the lodge and later a reduced group assembled to meet Steve for an afternoon bird walk just as a Collared Forest Falcon began vocalizing around the cabanas. Steve was determined to get some actual views of this most elusive of rainforest raptors and soon we saw this large, long tailed raptor stealthily slipping between the taller trees around the lodge. It eventually settled near the staff work area, fortuitous for us because the same area hosted a couple of vocalizing Couch's Kingbirds and a pre-roost gathering of no less than 15 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, some of them fine males with a lovely splash of bright red across the chest.

After drinks at the bar and the daily checklist review we enjoyed another of Cordelia's delicious meals; Black Bean Soup, Pork Roast or Baked Fish served with roast potatoes and green beans, and ice cream sundae or tropical fruit for dessert. For Lisa and Daryl their day wasn't quite over as they found a welcome visitor on the glass panel on the front door of their cabana – a Common Mexican Tree Frog *Smilisca baudinii*!!



Day 10, November 11th – Tunich Ha | Punta Gorda | Ixcacao Chocolate Farm

Another night of heavy rain and cooler temperatures saw the Rio Grande looking brown and swollen. As with the previous day we anticipated to the rain would ease off in the early hours and so it was. After coffee and muffins we set off southwards to Tunich Ha, a privately owned ecological and educational reserve just north of Punta Gorda and run by two of Steve's closest friends, Nick and Jessica. The journey south was tempered by light rain and drizzle but not enough to deter some species from perching out in the open including Gray Hawk and Keel-billed Toucan.

We began birding along the entrance road to Tunich Ha finding several Red-legged Honeycreepers, flyover White-crowned Parrots, and our first Green-backed Sparrows of the trip. Steve somewhat miraculously managed to pick out a Common Black Hawk perched in a Cecropia allowing for good scope studies in what was proving to be a very good tour for raptors. Once inside the reserve we were greeted by Nick and Jessica as well as a trio of trogons with Slaty-tailed, Black-headed and Gartered all on view in the parking area! Jessica served a fabulous buffet breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, homemade tortillas, fresh papaya and more. During breakfast Nick described his 20 years of experience working on his property and the importance of not only preserving the land to prevent it from illegal logging but also as an educational tool for youngsters and adults alike. Nick was also proud to host birders from the Belize Hawk Watch, a constant effort raptor migration count which takes place every fall just down the road at Cattle Landing. For us though, the rain and drizzle would mean no raptors would be flying so we spent time around the grounds of the reserve viewing from the balcony of the main building and enjoying incredible views of White-collared Manakin, Stripe-throated Hermit and Mistletoe Tyrannulet, the latter being something of a localized specialty in Belize. A short walk around the grounds offered yet more special birds including a stunning Chestnut-colored Woodpecker and several Red-capped Manakins.

After thanking Nick and Jessica for a great morning we headed south to Punta Gorda where the weather actually worsened but, again thanks to Steve's enterprise, we found our first Cinnamon Hummingbirds in a local yard as well as some coastal species such as Laughing Gull, Sandwich and Royal Terns and a nice roost of Yellow-crowned Night-herons along the shore. We then headed inland and west towards the Maya Mountains and Ixcacao Chocolate Farm in the village of San Felipe. Henry, our host, was quite superb explaining the traditional



process of growing cacao, and had a clear understanding of the science behind making chocolate, as well as going deep into the history of his family's chocolate business in San Felipe – The Chocolate Queen. Lunch was served here too including the house specialty, 'chocolate chicken' and some very hot house-made pickles! Of course, varieties of chocolate samples, nibs and drinks were offered and souvenirs keenly snapped up from the gift shop before leaving. And, we could hardly leave without seeing a handful of good birds and Vicky was delighted when Steve spotted and scoped a perched White Hawk on a distant wooded hillside...our first of the trip.

Steve offered one final afternoon bird walk from the lodge which was surprisingly well attended and highlighted by a Mayan Antthrush walking 'crake-like' through the leaf litter across the forest floor, and we finally had decent views of a Great Antshrike which, despite its large size and striking plumage, was a remarkably difficult bird to see well. It all felt a bit 'final' at supper with our last group checklist and dinner together though Cordelia's cuisine certainly brightened the mood; Coconut Carrot Soup, Moroccan Chicken or Shrimp Curry, and Banana Pineapple Sorbet or Chocolate Mousse for dessert.

Day 11, November 12th – Departures

After one last delicious breakfast we gathered for traditional group photos on the lodge verandah. Steve, Cathy, Sarah and all the staff had been wonderful hosts and then, sadly, it was time to head south to Punta Gorda airport for our respective journeys home. Steve drove us to the airport where we thanked him once again for a wonderful adventure and some especially memorable wildlife experiences, not least of which was the Spotted Rail family crossing the road! Despite the US government shut down, we all had trouble free journeys home. Marie managed to jump onto an earlier flight while Lisa, Daryl and Jim went on to spend a couple more nights in Belize at the delightful Crooked Tree Sanctuary.

James P. Smith
Northfield, MA.

Photos: Group (James P Smith - JPS), Golden-hooded Tanager (John Burke -JB), Groove-billed Ani (JB), Golden-Fronted Woodpecker (JB), Couches/Tropical Kingbird (JB),Howler Monkeys (JB), Caracol National Monument (TF), Northern Schiffornis (JPS), Scenic (JPS), Mountain Pine Ridge (JPS), Ringed Kingfisher (JB), Black -and-White Warbler (JB), Rufous-tailed

Hummingbird (JB), Blue morpho (TF), Gartered Violaceous Trogon (JB), Butterfly (TF), Maya plaza at Jade Jungle Resort (JPS), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (JB), Hopkins Bay (JPS), Jabiru (JPS), Spot-breasted Oriole (JPS), Black-bellied Whistling Duck (JB), Blue Creek (JPS), Keel-billed Toucan (JB), Chestnut-colored Woodpecker (JB)