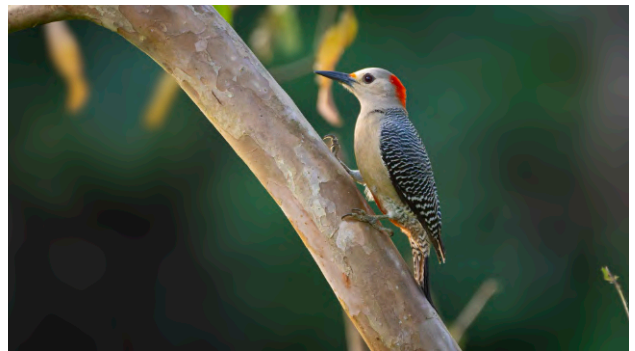
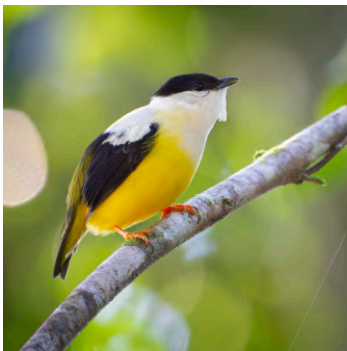


# Belize: Three Great Lodges | Jan. 5-15, 2026

## Trip Report by Bryan Calk



**Bryan Calk with guests Jan, Bill, Ann, Bruce, Jan, Tom, Fima, Gennie, Gary, and Donna**



### **Mon. Jan, 5**

### **Arrivals | Black Rock Lodge**

The group came together today with pickups by our guides, Isaias and Jeffry from Black Rock Lodge. After everyone was gathered, the drive west began with a stop for lunch at Amigos Restaurant.

Bird activity showed up quickly. A Vermilion Flycatcher flashed its color near the restaurant, followed shortly by a Roadside Hawk perched nearby. As the road narrowed and forest closed in approaching the lodge, we made a brief stop for one of the lodge's celebrity birds of the moment, a Spectacled Owl at its daytime roost. One of the juveniles from a recent brood was present, offering excellent looks!



Arrival at Black Rock Lodge was followed by orientation and time to get settled into rooms. A welcome drink of fresh juice was well earned after travel. From the lodge grounds, Yucatán Black Howler Monkeys could be heard somewhere in the surrounding forest, their low calls carrying across the river corridor. A White Hawk perched in trees across the Macal River, while a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron hunted methodically among the rapids below. With daylight fading, everyone settled in before reconvening for the first group dinner before calling it a night.

## **Tue. Jan, 6                      Black Rock Lodge | Belize Botanic Gardens**

The day started with coffee and early birding around the Black Rock Lodge grounds before breakfast. Activity was steady around the fruit feeders, along the river trail, and through the gardens. Highlights before breakfast included a nice variety of hummingbirds at the feeders, large numbers of Red-legged Honeycreepers in multiple molting plumages, Central American Agoutis moving through the understory, and Yucatán Black Howler Monkeys visible across the river in the treetops. Additional highlights included three species of trogon, Collared Aracaris feeding in a strangler fig, Northern Bentbill, and Russet-naped Wood-Rails walking openly on the lawn - a lot to take in before taking our first bite to eat of the day!

The setting was also exceptional. Sunrise lit the massive bluffs rising above the Macal River, with the river flowing below and jungle-covered hillsides stretching in every direction. Breakfast on the deck came with sweeping views down the river corridor.

After breakfast, we headed to the Belize Botanic Gardens (with a stop for a roadside Lesson's Motmot along the way!). Founded in the mid-1990s as the life's work of Ken duPlooy and continued by his family since 2001, the gardens function today as both a public botanical garden and a conservation and education center, with a strong emphasis on native Belizean plants, economically important species, and rare or threatened flora.

Rudy was an exceptional guide, walking us through both native and introduced plant collections while explaining traditional uses, ecological roles, and ongoing conservation work. Highlights at the gardens included the extensive orchid collection and learning about active programs to rescue orchids and bromeliads from legally logged areas, propagate them, and later use them for restoration. The gardens also protect a large tract of surrounding forest, preserving intact habitat beyond the cultivated areas.

Wildlife was active throughout the gardens. Species highlights there included Keel-billed Toucan, multiple woodcreepers, several warblers, Green Kingfisher on the pond, and especially prolonged, close views of a calling Tody Motmot, which was the clear standout of the visit.



After returning to Black Rock Lodge for lunch (with a stop for White-necked Puffbird along the way back!), the afternoon was spent resting and enjoying downtime before dinner. The day wrapped up with a night drive that was especially memorable. We had an excellent experience with a Northern Potoo that allowed close views and amazing photo opportunities from feet away at eye-level. A Common Pauraque was seen flying low through the grasses, and the drive wrapped up with prolonged looks at a Middle American Screech-Owl, singing into the night. The sky was clear and filled with stars and planets, and we even took time to enjoy views of Jupiter and its moons through the scope.

## **Wed. Jan, 7** **Spanish Lookout | Bullet Tree Falls | Aguacate Lagoon**

The day began before dawn with breakfast as soft light slowly filled the valley around Black Rock Lodge. With vehicles loaded for a full day in the field, we were barely underway when we relocated the Spectacled Owl once more, watching it settle back into its roost site for the day before continuing on.

Our first stop was Bullet Tree Falls, a community along the Belize River. Birding here produced a pair of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, Green Jays showing the yellow eyes typical of birds in this region, and a pair of Bat Falcons perched high in a tree, with one feeding on prey.

From there we moved on to Spanish Lookout, birding through the surrounding Mennonite agricultural landscape. Mennonite communities arrived in Belize in the late 1950s after migrating from Mexico and have since become central to the country's agricultural economy, particularly in dairy, poultry, and grain production, while maintaining a distinct cultural identity. The extensive fields, canals, and reservoirs created a productive mosaic of habitats.

Raptors were numerous throughout the area, including White-tailed Hawk being mobbed by White-tailed Kite, Aplomado Falcon, and Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. Wet areas held large numbers of herons and egrets, Northern Jacana, Wood Storks, and three species of kingfishers. Fork-tailed Flycatchers were also common in the area, frequently perched out in the open. Along the canal edges, Central American Gulf Coast Toads were active, while Morelet's Crocodiles were visible in ponds and ditches. Butterflies and other invertebrates were also well represented, including Julia Heliconians, White Peacocks, Banded Peacocks, Monarchs, and Queens. A good sized Mexican Red-rumped Tarantula was also found crawling along the edge of one of the canals.



But then, one of the most memorable moments of the entire trip came when a Jaguarundi burst from cover and ran across a harvested field, its long, low body, oversized tail, and uniform cinnamon coloration standing out against the stubble. It crossed the road directly in front of us before slipping back into cover on the far side, offering a brief but unmistakable look at this rarely seen cat.

Lunch in Spanish Lookout provided a welcome pause, with smoothies and ice cream enjoyed by some before heading back into the field. The afternoon took us to Aguacate Lagoon, a scenic wetland framed by forest and open edges. A massive old mahogany tree rose from the center of a limestone sinkhole near the lagoon, its trunk emerging dramatically from the earthen depression. Allspice trees grew around the area, adding structure and scent to the forest edge. Here we found White-whiskered Puffbirds and Rufous-tailed Jacamars. A final stop at a Mennonite-owned gravel pit with pine trees, wetlands, and disturbed open habitat produced roosting Lesser Nighthawks, Scrub Euphonias, and the first Pale-vented Pigeons of the trip. We returned to Black Rock Lodge in the evening for dinner and to compile the day's checklist.

## **Thur. Jan, 8** **Caracol National Monument | Mountain Pine Ridge | 1000 Foot Falls**

After breakfast we set out early for a full day in a very different landscape, traveling south and upward toward Caracol. The route out of Black Rock shifts quickly from the lush riverine broadleaf forest of the Macal Valley into higher, drier country. As the road climbs into the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, the scenery becomes a mosaic of Caribbean Pine woodland, granite ridges and sandy soils, with pockets of broadleaf forest tucked into drainages and limestone features and red clay appearing in places.

This region has a long management history and some real conservation challenges. The reserve was established in 1944, and much of the pine forest has been shaped by fire history and, more recently, major outbreaks of southern pine beetle, which has killed large areas of pine since the early 2000s and changed forest structure across the reserve.

Continuing farther south, the road enters the larger protected landscape of the Chiquibul. Caracol sits within the broader Chiquibul forest complex, an area that includes national park and forest reserve designations and is widely recognized as one of Belize's most important remaining blocks of interior forest. This is also one of Belize's most pressured protected regions, with long-running challenges tied to cross-border incursions and illegal extraction, including illegal logging and other resource removal that enforcement groups have tracked over time.



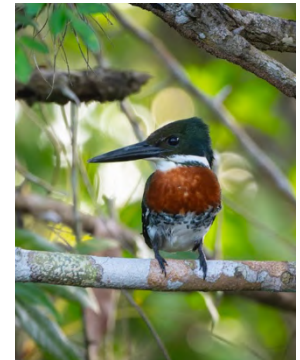
At Caracol, we spent the morning walking through the site and learning its story from the ground up, from the earliest occupation areas through the major plazas and monumental core. “Caracol” is a modern Spanish name meaning “snail,” a reference commonly tied to the winding approach road, and the ruins were first reported in 1937 by a local logger, Rosa Mai, with the name later applied by A. H. Anderson soon after.

We also talked about what modern research has revealed. Airborne LiDAR mapping has been a game-changer at Caracol, allowing archaeologists to see settlement, terraces, and infrastructure beneath the forest canopy and refine how the city’s scale is understood. Peer-reviewed LiDAR work tied to the Caracol Archaeological Project discusses population estimates on the order of ~115,000 people around A.D. 650 across a mapped landscape of roughly ~177 km<sup>2</sup>, underscoring just how urbanized this “jungle” landscape once was.

On the historical arc, we covered the rise of a permanent, agriculture-supported city system and then the unraveling that followed centuries later. A hard anchor point is that the last recorded dated monument at Caracol is A.D. 859, and archaeological evidence indicates major parts of the core were largely abandoned around A.D. 900, even though some limited use continued afterward in places. In the broader region, multiple Belize cave and speleothem records point to serious hydroclimatic stress and drought during the period when Classic Maya systems destabilized.

But of course, while exploring this amazing ancient city, we also found some birds. Hook-billed Kites soars high overhead, the last stragglers in their little-understood regional migration. Woodpeckers made a great showing, with Pale-billed and Chestnut-colored being major showstoppers. A Golden-crowned Warbler snuck through the understory, and we watched our step for the army and leaf-cutter ants.

After Caracol we shifted back to the pine country for birding in the Mountain Pine Ridge, picking up specialties like Grace’s Warbler and Plumbeous Vireo. We then visited Thousand Foot Falls, a dramatic waterfall within the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, actually plunging about 1,600 feet from the ridge. A King Vulture crossed the road, a Hepatic Tanager showed in the trees, and we returned to the lodge for dinner and the evening checklist.



## **Fri. Jan, 9**                      **Green Hills Butterfly Ranch | Lamanai**

After breakfast we checked out of Black Rock Lodge and started down the road. Once we hit service, Isaias got word of a special bird holding a day roost in a protected section of the Mountain Pine Ridge area. We met park rangers along an unmarked dirt road in the pines, and they guided us down a narrow, winding track through ravines and along the hillside. At the end, in an unassuming patch of trees, an oak held an unforgettable Stygian Owl, staring back at us. In Belize this owl is infrequently encountered, tied most strongly to pine-forest landscapes like Mountain Pine Ridge, and it remains a species we know surprisingly little about, with conservation groups emphasizing how limited basic life-history information still is. Work in Belize has included focused study and tracking efforts specifically because the species is so poorly understood.

From there we continued to Green Hills Butterfly Ranch. The ranch describes itself as Belize's largest butterfly ranch, with a large flight area featuring at times up to 30 native butterfly species, and it sits on a 250-acre property managed with a strong conservation message about protecting rainforest habitat while creating local jobs. We toured the butterfly house with Malachites, Mexican Bluewings, morphos, and glasswings, then visited the caterpillar rearing area to see how they manage the full life cycle. Time at their hummingbird feeders gave us nice looks at Violet Sabrewing and Green-breasted Mango before a picnic lunch on-site.

After reaching the boat ramp, we said goodbye to Isaias and Jeffry and met our new guides, Eduardo and David, from Lamanai Outpost Lodge. From there we boarded the boat and began a scenic ride down the New River toward New River Lagoon, where the lodge is located.

The ride itself was a beautiful transition between landscapes. Bird activity was constant along the river, with frequent sightings of kingfishers, herons, egrets, flycatchers, vireos, and Wood Storks among many others. The riverbanks were lined with dense vegetation, especially Bullet Trees and Provision Trees, giving the waterway a lush, enclosed feel. Occasionally the forest opened to reveal Mennonite farms reaching the river's edge, but for most of the journey the surroundings felt largely undisturbed and remarkably intact.

The water was calm and the ride smooth, and our timing could not have been better. As we approached the dock, the sun dropped below the horizon, setting behind the lodge and casting pink and orange light across the



lagoon. After docking, we settled into our rooms and gathered for an orientation to Lamanai Outpost Lodge, along with an overview of the plans for the coming days.

The evening wrapped up with our first dinner at the lodge and a quick review of the day's checklist. From the moment we arrived, the atmosphere felt welcoming and relaxed. Between the setting and the staff, it was easy to feel settled and excited for what lay ahead as we prepared to explore the area the following day.

## **Sat. Jan, 10**

## **Lamai Maya Ruins | Rice Fields | Spotlight Safari**

The day began with early morning birding around the lodge and into Indian Church Village. Activity was steady right away, with Orchard Oriole, Magnolia Warbler, American Redstart, Groove-billed Anis sunning and preening, Common Squirrel Cuckoo, Olive-throated Parakeet, Long-billed Gnatwren, and Black-headed Saltator all found during the walk. Just before breakfast, time at the feeders produced Yellow-winged Tanager and Blue-gray Tanager before we boarded the boat for the ride down the New River Lagoon to the Lamanai archaeological site.

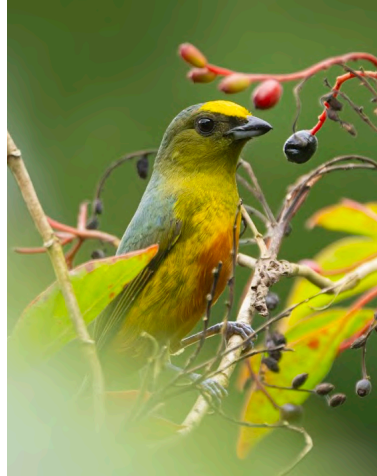
At Lamanai, we spent the morning learning about the long history of the site, which spans from the Preclassic period through the Postclassic and into the Spanish contact era. We visited major areas of the site, including plazas, stelae, the ball court, and the structures associated with the city's ceremonial and astronomical importance, and also saw original carved stones in the museum, and historic images showing the site before excavation. Wildlife was busy during our time among the ruins. Birds included a Slaty-tailed Trogon posing exceptionally well, Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, Gartered Violaceous Trogon, Lineated and Pale-billed Woodpeckers, and White-crowned Parrot. Mammal activity added to the experience, with Central American Spider Monkeys feeding on palm fruit overhead and Yucatán Black Howler Monkeys nearby, including babies resting while two adult males engaged in loud, animated vocal exchanges. A Sheep Frog was also seen on the ground at the site.

We returned to the lodge for a relaxed and delicious lunch, then some continued birding on an optional afternoon outing into the agricultural areas outside Indian Church Village. Before even leaving the parking lot, time was taken to photograph a cooperative Black-headed Trogon in the garden. Out in the surrounding fields and wetlands, flooded agricultural areas attracted a wide range of species. Some of the best included a Jabiru, a Peregrine Falcon that successfully caught a gallinule, Pinnated Bittern, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, a large flock of Blue Grosbeaks, and Giant Cowbirds.









We returned to the main lodge area for breakfast, a buffet with bacon, eggs, fry jacks, fresh fruit, and Jamaican lime juice, before loading into the van for the day's outing.

Our first stop was an area near Big Falls known locally as "the dump." Historically, this low-lying area functioned as a disposal site for nearby communities, but over time it was cleaned up, reclaimed, and converted into productive agricultural land. Today it consists largely of flooded rice fields and wetland edges, which now support a high concentration of birdlife. The change in land use has created a mosaic of shallow water, reeds, and open fields. Birding here was immediately productive. The flooded areas held large numbers of Morelet's and Variable Seedeaters, and we had excellent looks at Sora, with one tucked in the reeds. A pair of White-tailed Hawks circled overhead, adding to the open-country feel of the site.

From there, we continued on to Blue Creek in the Toledo District. We walked the trail along the creek itself, where water moved steadily over moss-covered limestone rocks. Trees grew directly out of the streambed, and the porous limestone showed its texture along the banks. Portions of the walk passed through cacao plantings, blending cultivated areas with intact forest along the water.

Bird activity along the creek was steady. Amazon and Green Kingfishers worked back and forth along the channel, a White-whiskered Puffbird perched quietly, and Brown-hooded Parrots were busy chewing at a palm trunk. We also had awesome views of Ivory-billed Woodcreeper along the forest edge.

Lunch was at Yona's Maya Restaurant, where we were served a traditional Maya meal. Chicken was prepared three different ways, accompanied by soft fresh corn tortillas as well as crispy tortillas heated on the comal. Fried breadfruit was part of the meal, followed by an excellent banana cake for dessert. After lunch, some chose to swim in the creek, which was refreshing after a warm, humid morning, while others continued birding around the grounds. Fruiting trees there produced Yellow-olive Flatbill, along with very good looks at Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and Olive-backed Euphonia.

We returned to the lodge in the afternoon for some downtime. Some relaxed around the pool, others spent time enjoying the grounds, before regrouping for dinner and the evening checklist. Over dinner, Steve shared stories about his long history at the lodge and his life-long connection to Big Falls.

After dark, we walked around the lodge grounds with flashlights and found a pair of Mottled Owls. One individual settled into the beam of the spotlight and scope, allowing clear views and bringing the day to a quiet close before turning in for the night.



**Wed. Jan, 14**

### **Tunich Ha | Punta Gorda | Chocolate Queen**

Some were up well before sunrise for another round of owling around the lodge grounds. The effort paid off with multiple looks at a Black-and-white Owl, perched calmly and calling into the morning. A Collared Forest-Falcon was heard nearby in the darkness, and a pair of Common Pauragues flew low over the lawn, calling as they moved back and forth through the open space around the buildings.

As the sky lightened, we regrouped for coffee and muffins before loading up and heading out toward Tunich Ha Reserve & Ecological Center, run by Nick and Jessica Requeña.

Tunich Ha sits in a transition zone between coastal mangroves and lowland broadleaf forest, which creates a high level of habitat diversity within a relatively small area. The property has been actively managed for more than two decades, with a strong focus on maintaining intact forest and riparian corridors. In addition to conservation work, Nick and Jessica run environmental education programs throughout the year for students of all ages, emphasizing hands-on experiences and the importance of healthy waterways and forest systems. They also practice small-scale, sustainable subsistence farming on the property.

Birding began immediately along the entrance road, where a fruiting strangler fig was full of activity. Golden-hooded Tanagers, multiple warblers, and euphonias moved constantly through the canopy, with birds appearing in quick succession. In a nearby grassy area, a female Thick-billed Seed-Finch and a Blue Grosbeak perched on the same grass stalk, providing an excellent side-by-side comparison. A pair of Red-lored Amazons perched together and gave steady scope views. On the grounds, White-collared Manakin males showed well, while Common Black-Hawks circled overhead, calling repeatedly. Additional highlights included Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet high in the canopy and a Northern Plain Xenops that worked in close with a mixed flock.

We were then welcomed with a generous breakfast made largely from homegrown ingredients, including fresh vegetables, handmade tortillas, and a cacao drink. Butterfly activity was abundant throughout the morning, with multiple heliconian species and others moving through the gardens, which were clearly designed to support nectar and fruit resources. A Black Witch moth was also hanging in the screen around the breakfast area. Leaving Tunich Ha, we drove through coastal Punta Gorda, Belize's southernmost town and the capital of Toledo District. Punta Gorda was founded in the late 19th century as a fishing and trading settlement and later developed into a small port town serving surrounding Maya and Garifuna communities. Today it remains compact and culturally diverse, with strong Maya, Garifuna, Creole, and Mestizo influences, functioning as a regional hub while staying closely tied to the sea and surrounding countryside. Along the waterfront,



Magnificent Frigatebirds glided overhead, Cinnamon Hummingbirds worked ornamental plantings, and several Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were found roosting in small mangrove patches growing right along the street edge.

From there we continued to San Felipe to visit the Chocolate Queen cacao operation, IXCACAO, a small, locally run operation based in San Felipe. A presentation tied modern chocolate production back to the deeper Maya story. In the Maya world, cacao was more than a flavor, it was a prestige item and a form of social currency. Archaeological chemistry has repeatedly identified cacao residues in ancient vessels, supporting long-held views that cacao drinks were prepared and consumed in elite and ceremonial contexts. Scholarship also emphasizes cacao's role in tribute and exchange networks, and analysis of Classic Maya imagery suggests fermented, dried cacao beans could function as money by around the 8th century CE.

At the facility, we learned the full plant-to-bar sequence in detail, from flower pollination and pod development to harvest, fermentation, and drying, with discussion of how different fermentation and roasting choices shape flavor. We sampled a wide range of products, from ceremonial-style cacao preparations to more modern flavored varieties, watched a hand-grinding demonstration, and then had lunch on site.

After San Felipe, we returned to the lodge for downtime before dinner. The evening meal gave space to slow down and talk through favorite moments from the day. Later, some took a short walk around the grounds after dark and found a Common Opossum, bringing the day to a quiet close before turning in.

## **Thur. Jan, 15** **Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Departures**

Some were up early again for another chance at the Black-and-white Owl, giving those who had missed it previously a chance to connect with the bird before daylight took over.

The rest of the morning unfolded at an easy pace on the lodge grounds. We spent time watching the feeders while sipping coffee, listening as the forest gradually came to life around us. Breakfast followed, and as we ate, a Russet-naped Wood-Rail wandered calmly across the lawn, unfazed by the activity around it. Fresh papaya picked up in town the day before rounded out the meal.

After breakfast, it was time to pack up. We said goodbye to Gary and Donna, who stayed on for a few extra days to snorkel the reefs, and then to Steve, who drove us back to Punta Gorda for our flight. From there, we headed back to Belize City and began the journey home, each of us carrying bags filled with chocolate and hot sauce, memory cards full of images, and a deep appreciation for the landscapes, wildlife, and people that shaped our time in Belize.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (BC), White-collared Manakin (BC), Spectacled Owl (BC), Red-throated Ant Tanager (Jan Lewis - JL), Red-legged Honeycreeper (BC), Tody Motmot (JL), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (BC), Pale billed Woodpecker (JL), Caracol National Monument (JL), White-crowned Parrot (JL), Melodious Blackbird (JL), Mexican Bluewing (BC), Stygian Owl (BC), Malachite (BC), Green Kingfisher (BC), Groove-billed Anis (BC), Slaty-tailed Trogon (BC), Central American Spider Monkey (BC), Barred Antshrike (BC), Brown Basilisk (JL), Morelet's Crocodile (BC), Common Tody-Flycatcher (BC), Olive-backed Euphonia (BC), Black-and-white Owl (BC), Black-headed Trogon (BC), Crimson-collared Tanager (BC), White-fronted Amazon (Gary and Donna Brewer)