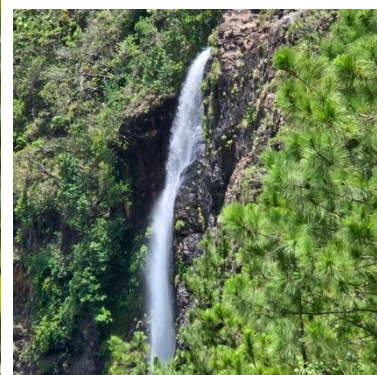


Belize: A Week at Black Rock Lodge

July 19–25, 2026 | Trip Report by James P. Smith



With local guides Isaías and Jeffry Morataya and guests, Ava & Scott, Terrie & Robert, Karen & Kyle, Kimberly, Clare, Jason and Pete.



Sun., Jul. 19

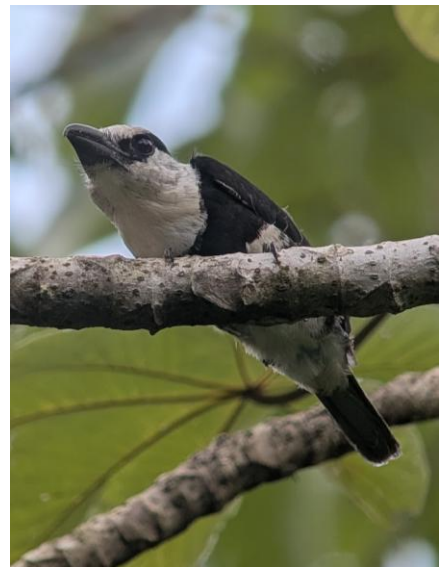
Arrivals | Black Rock Lodge

Our Naturalist Journeys travelers converged on Belize City from all points of the compass on an immaculate summer's day. It was hot, tropical, and gorgeous as guides from Black Rock Lodge picked up guests from the Black Orchid, Riverbend Resort, and various hotels and guesthouses around Belize City. We headed west on the George Price Highway first pausing at Amigos Restaurant for a delightful lunch sitting down at exactly the same time as the World Cup final was about to kick off. The restaurant bar was full of Belizeans sporting Argentinean and Spanish soccer shirts while enjoying lunch and watching the build up to the game. Rice and beans, stew chicken and veggie quesadillas all proved popular choices as did the refreshing locally made Soursop juice. Since it was open air dining, we managed to find a few notable birds from the dining area including a stunning male Vermilion Flycatcher, a couple of Golden-fronted Woodpecker and several Bronzed Cowbird. The journey continued west as a superb Bat Falcon perched up on dead snags called for an impromptu stop by the road. The views were exceptional and even Isaías expressed surprise as he'd never seen the species in that spot before. Still on the George Price Highway, we passed through the towns of Belmopan (the Capitol), Santa Elena and San Ignacio before finally hitting the first of seven miles of white dirt roads to access Black Rock Lodge. The journey went well, and we arrived in good time to be greeted in the parking lot by Emily, and a beautiful Rainbow

Ameiva. Meanwhile, the remainder of the group arrived in Jeffry's vehicle a few minutes later having paused for an Amazon Kingfisher and a Black-throated Bobwhite along Black Rock Road. Pete was in the third vehicle with local guide Derek and got extremely lucky finding a Central American Red Brocket Deer just few miles from the lodge.

After an orientation from our delightful hosts we enjoyed a little down time before returning to the balcony feeders for White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed and White-bellied Emeralds and a Long-billed Hermit, all of which would feature daily over the coming week. With the breeding season in full swing, it was thrilling to watch Black-crowned and Masked Tityra, and Brown-crested Flycatcher nesting in the trees right in front of the balcony.

Soon afterwards the first of many delicious four course meals was served as we got to know each other around the dinner table and then retired to those cozy cabanas.



Mon., Jul. 20

Black Rock Lodge | Night Drive on Black Rock Road

It was extremely pleasant to wake up to cooler air and the sounds of the tropical rainforest around the cabins. Sulphur-bellied and Social Flycatchers were among the most vocal. In true Black Rock Lodge tradition, coffee and cookies were served on the balcony from 6 AM where we gathered with Isaias and Jeffry to make the most of the early morning start. White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, White-bellied Emerald and Long-billed Hermit were joined by a Green-breasted Mango while both species of tityra again showed well and there was even a brief sighting of a Crimson-collared Tanager.

We had the whole day to explore this magical place, and the weather couldn't have been better with clear sunny skies and a few puffy white clouds in the distance. We began with a pre-breakfast walk finding, amongst other things, eight Mealy Parrot flying over and a Yellow-green Vireo feeding in the open while the distinctive calls of a Barred Forest-falcon could be heard coming from across the Macal River on the other side of valley and Isaias pointed out Brown's Leopard Frogs on a small, specially constructed pool behind the cabins. Our walk took us

downslope towards the Macal River where we had exceptional views of a Slaty-tailed Trogon which had just caught and dispatched a small, green baby iguana. Mangrove Swallow were hawking over the river and an Amazon Kingfisher flew slightly downstream, seen by a lucky few in the group. Oddly, we found a flock of seedeaters feeding high up in a Cecropia and though most were Morelet's, Isaías did point out a couple of Variable Seedeater, a good species for this itinerary.

After typically hearty Black Rock breakfast (granola and yogurt, breakfast quesadillas and the classic Belizean breakfast) we ventured upstream following the trail towards Vaca Falls, a route overlooking the lodge's organic gardens. The lodge produces a lot its own fish, vegetables and eggs all of which are served in the restaurant. The birding along the trail included a few surprises not least of which was a Limpkin. We also had great views of Greenish Elaenia, Plain Xenops, and Black-headed Trogon, and Pete spotted a Central American Gulf Coast Toad. The highlight though, came at the end of the trail where a bench overlooked the Macal River facing a massive limestone cliff across the valley. Soon Isaías spotted a couple of high-flying, Orange-breasted Falcon playing around and catching aerial insects on the wing. We later realized the prey items must have been high flying Giant Red-winged Grasshopper, surely a wholesome snack for an Orange-breasted Falcon! The falcons sparred with Black Vulture too and the raptor theme of continued with a wonderful pair of Swallow-tailed Kite. A stunning White-necked Puffbird consuming at large grasshopper was the last notable bird of an awesome morning before the heat of the day found us cruising back to the lodge for refreshment and lunch; fish burgers, veggie burgers, fajitas, quesadillas all being popular choices. Even during the lunch hour up to seven species of hummingbird appeared at the feeders and several of us stayed to enjoy them and become acquainted with their characteristic features; White-necked Jacobin, Wedge-tailed Saberwing, White-bellied Emerald, Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits, and Rufous-tailed and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds all put on a wonderful show.

The heat of the afternoon brought time to relax around the lodge with the spring-fed pool, the Macal River, and siesta time being viable options. Central American Agoutis potted around the grounds and Jason was lucky enough to have Northern Emerald Toucanet nesting by right his cabin.



Later, after an early supper, we embarked on a spotlight safari which got off to a racing start as an Ocelot walked right in front of Isaías's vehicle! Apparently, it was only the 5th time in 15 years that Isaías had seen an Ocelot at Black Rock, a rare sighting for sure. Further down the road we came across a Virginia Opossum, several Common Pauraque and a stunning American Barn Owl before our guides entered what appeared to be a private cattle pasture and drove straight up to a Northern Potoo perched at point-blank range on a fence post. Despite the glare of the spotlights the potoo never flinched offering the most fantastic views and we watched in eerie silence disturbed only by the snorting of 30 – 40 cows surrounding us in the murky blackness. The journey back to lodge was highlighted by a couple more Barn Owl sightings and fabulous looks at a Kinkajou foraging in the Cecropias. Known locally as 'Nightwalker', 'Honey Bear' and even 'Lion Monkey' in Spanish, Kinkajou is an arboreal mammal with a prehensile tail somewhat related to Coati and Raccoon but the sole member of the genus *Potos*.



Tue., Jul. 21

Black Rock Lodge | Mountain Pine Ridge | Thousand Foot Falls | Green Hills Butterfly Farm

A chorus of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys was in full cry at 4:45 AM - no need for an alarm clock at Black Rock! Just before breakfast, Clare and others had an early Spotted Sandpiper flying up the Macal River, a North American migrant returning to Belize for the winter. Then it was on to an early 6AM breakfast, the Black Rock staff having delicious breakfast plates out on the table right on the hour.

As we loaded up the vehicles for the day, a pair of Orange-breasted Falcon sparred with a Bat Falcon high over the parking lot and then we sped down Black Rock Road enjoying the early morning atmosphere as did a Gray Hawk perched up and drying out its wings from the morning dew (while being mobbed by a male Red-legged Honeycreeper!) We passed through sleepy San Ygnacio and then started the climb towards Mountain Pine Ridge, a forest plateau higher in elevation than Black Rock and notably a completely different habitat. A Plain Chachalaca flew across the road just west of San Antonio and we paused by the road to enjoy the grinding calls

of several Keel-billed Toucan, the national bird of Belize. The same fortuitous stop found a Roadside Hawk and a pair of Rufous-capped Warbler, the only sighting of the latter species for the whole trip. Once through the forest reserve checkpoint, we paused by the road where four Plumbeous Kite cruised around and eventually passed right over the road and Isaías spotted a distant ‘hulking’ Scaled Pigeon flying just above the horizon. And then it was onto the spectacular Rio Frio Cave where another pair of Plumbeous Kite and a Montezuma Oropendola flew over the entrance gate and the shaded forest road was home to both White and Common (Blue) Morpho butterflies. The cave itself was something to behold and quite easily accessed with limestone walls etched with visible stratification. Birds were to be seen here too. A Green Kingfisher perched by the riverside and Isaías was very excited by a pair of Tropical Royal Flycatcher putting on a fine display going back-and-forth to their delicate pendulant nest hanging basket-like over the river.



A brief scenic stop by Rio On Pools was rather quiet bird-wise but did produce a surprise Golden-hooded Tanager before we moved onto the spectacular Thousand-Foot Falls where the sheltered viewing point provided a perfect venue for a Black Rock picnic lunch; rice and beans, grilled chicken, pasta salad, fruits, salad, and lime juice. The whole area is a National Monument and famed among birders for its breeding Orange-breasted Falcon which we did see distantly but had better luck with up to four Swallow-tailed Kite cruising around the escarpment. The mature Caribbean Pines here hosted a couple of aloof Black-headed Siskin and a brief male Hepatic Tanager, and Pete came back with reports of a Guatemalan Kite Swallowtail, a butterfly that looks every bit as spectacular as it sounds!

Isaías then drove us through an extensive area of pine/fern habitat and paused below a high point called Cooma Cairn. The air was comfortably cool at this elevation and the breeze through the pines made for a pleasant atmosphere. Soon we found a calling Rusty Sparrow in its preferred pine/fern habitat and the commotion around it also pursed out a stunning Azure-crowned Hummingbird and a Grace’s Warbler. The latter two species would not be found elsewhere on the trip.

We retraced our route down to the lowlands and Green Hills Butterfly Ranch for a wonderfully guided tour of the Butterfly House and learned about the butterfly life cycle and the fantastic conservation efforts initiated by

Green Hills Butterfly Ranch itself. Afterwards there was enough time to watch the phenomenal display of hummingbirds at the feeders, many of which were at arm's length! The most abundant was White-necked Jacobin, most of them being males flaring their pure white tail feathers, but there was a good showing of other species including Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Green-breasted Mango, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, White-bellied Emerald and the biggest prize of all, a couple of male Violet Sabrewing.

We arrived back at the lodge with enough time to cool off in the spring-fed pool, or simply chill around the lodge watching the agoutis, basilisks and a few more birds before another exceptional four-course supper and the daily checklist review.



Wed., Jul. 22

Black Rock Lodge | Spanish Lookout Mennonite Community

Our schedule again called for an early breakfast with a view to leaving the lodge at 6:45 AM. A big day out to the Mennonite Community of Spanish Lookout was on the agenda offering a range of habitats radically different to those at Black Rock and Mountain Pine Ridge. We pressed on through the outskirts of San Ignacio, Isaias taking us on a shortcut to avoid the hustle and bustle of town, passing through the quiet village of Bullet Tree where an Amazon Kingfisher perched on wires at eye level over the Mopan River. Several smaller rural settlements passed by before we crested a rise in the road and dropped down into the manicured fields of Spanish Lookout, the characteristic landscape of Mennonite farmland. Almost immediately good birds began to appear; Vermilion Flycatcher, Olive-throated Parakeet and a spectacular Fork-tailed Flycatcher. And there was some drama as Jeffry spotted a Striped Cuckoo foraging and calling along an overgrown fence line. Initially it spent most of its time on the ground but eventually perched on the fence flaring its wings and raising its crest in display. The views were sensational and Isaias was beside himself with excitement - prolonged sightings of Striped Cuckoo are rare in Belize, even for the most seasoned birding guides. Next was the 'Mennonite Beach' along the Belize River, a recreational area established with the arrival of the Mennonites way back in 1958. The area was lush and tropical hosting several giant Guanacaste trees and home to some exceptional birds notably Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Barred Antshrike, Rufous-breasted Spinetail and a pair of White-winged Becard at the nest.

Mid-morning proved to be an ideal time for a break at Sister's Diner where orders were placed for lunch, along with time-out for refreshment; espresso, soursop juice, coke and more beverages all happily consumed. Bird-wise, the café area was quiet, but Pete managed to spot a Brown Anole occupying the disabled parking sign. We entered the main Spanish Lookout fields, a permit entry only site lying within the greater Rio Bravo Conservation area which is the largest landlocked conservation area in Belize. The first bird encountered was a Plain-breasted Ground-dove along with a juvenile Roadside Hawk close by. The hawk was looking up in the sky rather than at us, evidently peering up at a high passing raptor. Initially thought to be a White-tailed Hawk, after some deliberation and consultation the high-flyer proved to be a light morph Short-tailed Hawk.



Eastern Meadowlark, Bronzed Cowbird and ubiquitous Great-tailed Grackle flew up everywhere along the white dirt roads, and Ruddy and Plain Ground-dove were evidently quite common. At the first large wetland we encountered our first herons of the tour finding Little Blue Heron, Great, Snowy and Western Cattle Egrets, plus several Anhinga and Neotropic Cormorant. The wide horizons and big skies indicated a major shower was on the way but before we piled back into the vehicles several Crested Caracara flew across the skyline, and Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture and a small group of migrant Barn Swallow passed close by along with a couple of Gray-breasted Martin and Mangrove Swallow. The rain came down hard and heavy but only lasted a few minutes and wasn't enough to interfere with us spotting a juvenile Great Black Hawk perched on a low bush along one of the berms. The shower was over almost as suddenly as it began as we overlooked the fabulous Morelet's Crocodile reserve replete with numerous large, handsome crocodile specimens on view. Limpkin, Northern Jacana and Black-necked Stilt all featured in the wetlands, but the highlight was surely an Apolomado Falcon that flew low over the group and then landed on a nearby berm. We continued our exploration of the Spanish Lookout fields finding several Spotted Sandpiper and more stilts before returning to Sister's Diner for lunch and a wide variety of dishes; poutine, quesadillas, rice and beans, fajitas and more as we passed the heat of the day with more liquid refreshment.

After lunch Isaias brought us to the "New Rice Fields". Initially, we found a nice concentration of Great Egret plus a Black-crowned Night-heron, a fine Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and there was great excitement around a hunting Snail Kite. A couple of White Ibis flew over, a Ruddy Crake gave its rapid-fire trilling calls but, in the end, it was a raptor that really stole the show with stunning close-up views of an adult, Black-collared Hawk, an uncommon wetland raptor in Belize.

The final stop of the day was Aguacate Lagoon where we stepped out of the vehicles to a bevy of woodpeckers. Of the woodpeckers two species were only heard but two others were new to the trip and seen very well – Chestnut-colored and Pale-billed Woodpeckers. Sated with woodpeckers, Isaias focused on the small lagoon here and found a pair of Least Grebe and a family of Ruddy Crake, the young of which were confusingly blackish

gray in color and tough to see. Black-headed and Gartered Trogons were here too as was a Brown Basilisk, evidently one of the more frequently seen reptiles on the tour.



Thu., Jul. 23

Black Rock Lodge and road | Belize Botanical Garden

The cool, comfortable morning air at Black Rock Lodge was a fine way to start the day as was a slightly later relaxed breakfast before we headed out on Black Rock Road. The first Birding stop was only a couple of miles from the lodge where we found an inquisitive pair of Russet-naped Wood-Rail by the road, a calling Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, a Gartered Trogon, and a calling Tody Motmot which flatly refused to show itself. Another stop by denser forest offered really excellent views of a White-browed Gnatcatcher, a perched Lesson's Motmot and a very vocal Chestnut-colored woodpecker.

The main venue for the morning was Belize Botanic Gardens where our guide Rudy gave an excellent and informative tour with vivid descriptions of epiphytes saved from logging operations, close-up views of the National flower of Belize, the Black Orchid, and the incredibly unique Monkey Pot Tree. The gardens themselves were exceptionally birdy with Ivory-billed, Olivaceous and Wedge-billed Woodcreepers, several species of trogon, our first Streaked Flycatcher and yet another Chestnut-colored Woodpecker in what was developing into an exceptional tour for seeing the species. Perhaps the most bizarre site was a singing Gray-headed Tanager perched in the open on an overhanging vine above the pond, behavior almost unheard of for a species that prefers following ant swarms deep inside the rainforest. Overhead and soaring on the thermals, the local Turkey and Black Vultures were joined (at times) by a King Vulture and a Plumbeous Kite. Warm air thermals continued to favor soaring raptors during the lunch hour with a pair of Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle and up to three Double toothed Kite all visible from the Black Rock restaurant balcony, as well as up to 20 Vaux's Swift buzzing above the valley.

A couple of hours of downtime in the heat of the afternoon followed but later in the day the magic of Black Rock came into its own as a White Hawk soared over the valley followed by an adult King Vulture along with the continued presence of Northern Tropical Pewee, Piratic Flycatcher, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, and Green-breasted Mango right in front of the balcony. Around 6PM we met for an early checklist, Pete gave us the

butterfly highlights of the day, and we discussed plans for the big adventure to Caracol the following day. Needless to say, supper was sensational once again!



Fri., Jul. 24 Black Road | Chiquibul Forest Reserve | Caracol National Monument

The day began with the coolest start so far, with a comfortable 67° F at first light. The dawn chorus began at about 5:10 am with Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Gartered Trogon, Clay-colored Thrush, Scaly-throated Hummingbird and Stripe-throated Hermit ringing in the day. After breakfast we paused for a while in the 'dry forest' portion of Black Rock Road. Up to four Lesson's Motmot could be heard 'counter calling' and a couple of Green Jay gave tantalizing calls from the understory but sadly didn't show themselves. We'd almost given up on the main target when Jeffry suddenly announced he'd met with success - a pair of Rose-throated Tanager! While not quite as bright as other tanager species, the subtle plumage offered great camouflage in the sun-dappled dry forest canopy. Moreover, the species is endemic to the Yucatan region and the whole group was justly rewarded with good views. From there we pressed on to Mountain Pine Ridge and eventually reached the entrance gate to Chiquibul Forest Reserve where a 30-minute stop offered some of the best birding of the tour as King Vulture, Double-toothed and Plumbeous Kites and even a Bat Falcon rose up on the thermals and four (two pairs) of Scarlet Macaw majestically winged their way across the valley.

And then it was on to Caracol National Monument, the largest and perhaps most famous Maya site in Belize lying within the Chiquibul National Forest and only a few miles from the border with Guatemala. The Sky Palace (or Caana) is impressive and the largest man-made structure in Belize. It's fully open to the public and Kyle and Karen wasted little time in scaling the terrace-like pyramidal structure that offers stunning 360-degree views from the top. Isaias gave a wonderful verbal introduction to the site, skillfully combining birding with an excellent historical tour. It was magical to walk among the ruins discovered as recently as 1937 by a logger searching for mahogany, Caracol subsequently becoming recognized as one of the most important political centers in the Maya lowlands. At peak the area was thought to have supported a population of c.120,000 people and covered an area larger than modern day Belize City. To this day, the majority of the site remains unexcavated but includes five plazas, an astronomical observatory and over 35,000 buildings identified.

With some patience we did have nice views of a pair of Dot-winged Antwren, a cooperative, White-breasted Wood-Wren, a couple of Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, and a Black Witch Moth was neatly hidden within the roots of a Guanacaste straddling the footpath. After the tour Isaias and Jeffrey laid out the most wonderful buffet lunch courtesy of Black Rock Lodge after which we embarked on the long, steady drive back to Black Rock but pausing once again at the Chiquibil Forest Reserve where a troop of vocal Yucatan Black Howler and a high-flying Hook-billed Kite proved to be the highlights.

The final Black Rock dinner was every bit as scrumptious as they had been all week, Mestizo Chicken, Pork Chops, and Vegetable Tamales all on the menu. The final checklist review revealed we'd found about 190 bird species and an impressive range of mammals, reptiles and butterflies thanks to our hard working, committed group and guides.

Sat., Jul. 25 Black Rock Lodge | Departures

It's never easy to say farewell to a place as beautiful as Black Rock Lodge but the hour had finally come, and we gathered for one last 6am breakfast. The spread of departing flights meant that we'd have two separate transfers with Ava, Scott, Karen, Kyle and Pete leaving the lodge at 7am and Terrie, Robert, Kim, Clare and Jason departing at 9am. Despite the sporadic heavy downpours, we all still arrived at the airport in good time for our flights home.

On the way there a Louisiana Waterthrush suddenly appeared in front of Isaias's vehicle on Black Rock Road, the first true harbinger of fall migration in Belize. The bird that must have spent the breeding season in Eastern North America. Regardless, it was the last new bird of a fabulous summer tour.

Photo Credits: Group Short (James P. Smith, JPS), Black-headed Trogon (Terrie Ashbaugh, TA), Black Orchid (TA), Waterfall (TA), Slaty-tailed Trogon (Kyle McCafferty, KM), Palm Tree (TA), Northern Emerald Toucanet (JPS), White-necked Puffbird (KM), Macal River (JPS), Northern Potoo (JPS), Kinkajou (JPS), American Barn Owl (JPS), Group Birding (JPS), Common Morpho (KM), Caracol National Monument (TA), Slaty-tailed Trogon (JPS), White Ibis (JPS), Tropical Royal Flycatcher (JPS), Aplomado Falcon (JPS), Black-collared Hawk (JPS), Black-collared Hawk (JPS), Caracol National Monument (JPS), Caracol National Monument (JPS)