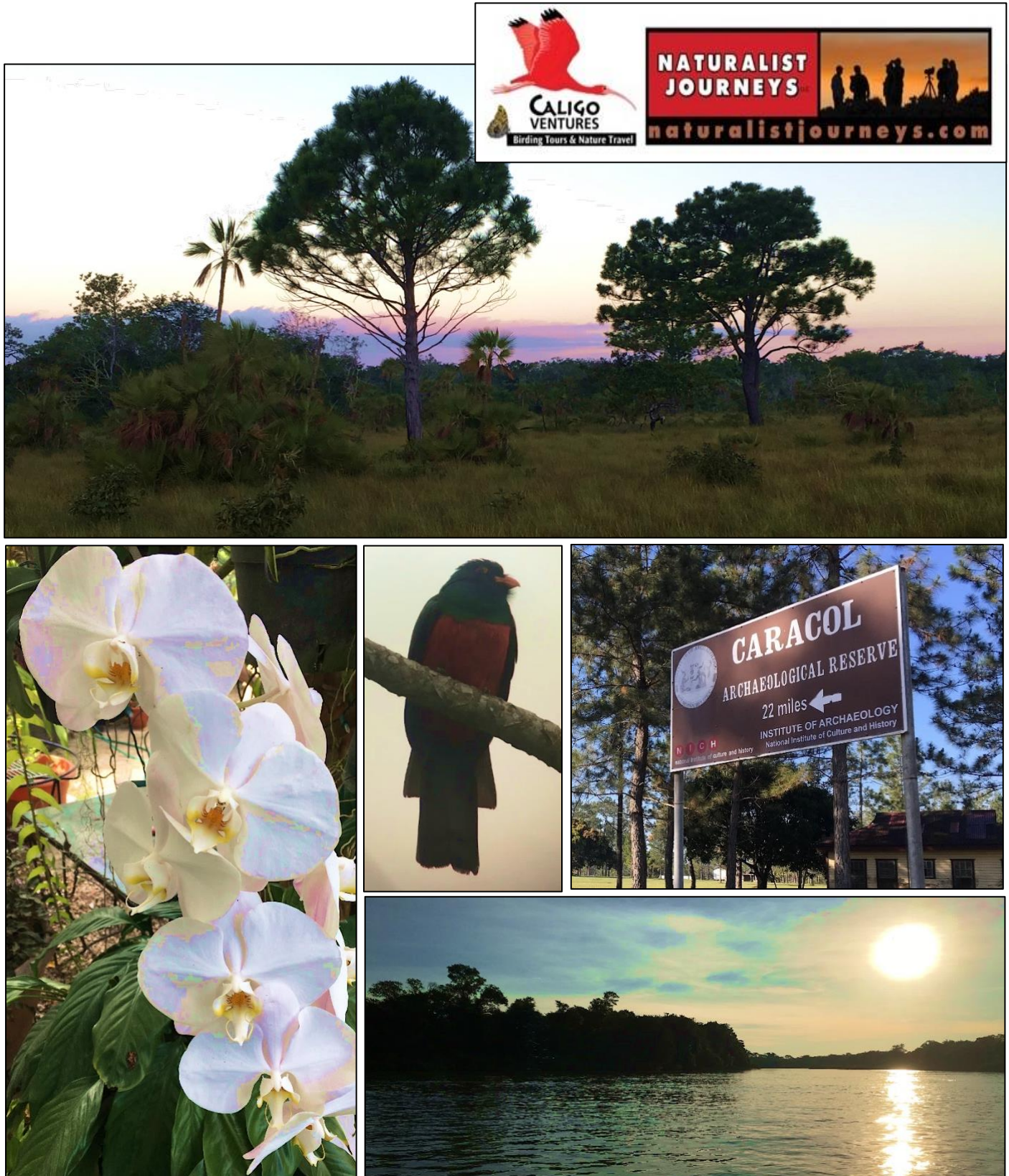


# Southern Belize: From Mountains to Mangroves

## — Trip Report —

March 10 – 18, 2018 | Written by Bob Meinke





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**Guide Bob Meinke**, with expert local lodge naturalists **Marvin** and **Steve**, plus 8 participants: Arthur, Dagni, Martin, Judith, Helen, Dorothy, Marcia, and Shirley

### **Fri., Mar. 9 Pre-trip Early Arrivals**

Most of the group planned to arrive in Belize a day early, on March 9. Bob's flight from Arizona arrived shortly after the other Friday arrivals, and we rendezvoused at D'Nest Bed and Breakfast, a comfortable inn on the northern fringe of Belize City that often hosts visiting birders.

Judith made arrangements to stay the evening of March 9 at Black Orchid Resort, about 30 minutes north of the International Airport, while the rest of the early arrivals ended up at D'Nest. Owned by Gaby (a retired local banker) and his wife Oty, D'Nest maintains just a few rooms (most with antique furnishings), and our group quickly settled in. The property is situated along a mangrove-lined canal less than a quarter mile from its merger with Haulover Creek, which in turn runs east through downtown Belize City before emptying into the Caribbean Sea. Oty tends to an eye-catching garden of orchids, bougainvillea, and other tropical flora, and sitting along the canal with a cool drink in

hand was a fine way to relax after our flights in from the U.S.



Despite being within a residential district, our proximity to the canal, the mangroves, and the nearby ocean allowed us to get a quick head start on our birding, and we ended up seeing several species here that we would miss during the rest of the trip. Notable examples included Wood Stork, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, White-winged Dove, Spotted Sandpiper, and Laughing Gull. And Cinnamon Hummingbird and Canivet's Emerald were two hummingbirds seen at D'Nest not found elsewhere during our stay in Belize. The latter species was the source of careful evaluation and discussion, allowing those in the group that had yet to crack open their *Birds of Belize* guidebooks the perfect

opportunity to do so. After some discussion regarding bill curvature and color, tail notching, and overall size, Canivet's seemed the consensus choice, despite our less than optimal views of the bird.

Oty and Gaby prepared a wonderful multicourse dinner on Friday evening, served indoors, yet just steps from the canal (which we could see through the French doors). We had our first chance for all to get properly acquainted during the meal, and we then headed upstairs to our rooms for some well-deserved rest.

### **Sat., Mar. 10 D'Nest Inn | Road Trip to Hidden Valley**

The previous night's spread was followed by a satisfying breakfast at D'Nest the next morning, with both meals reflecting the multi-ethnic amalgamation that characterizes Belizean cuisine. We were not scheduled to meet our drivers from Hidden Valley Inn (our first tour destination) until just after lunch, so we had ample time for an easy

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morning by the canal to continue birding, or a walk in the neighborhood.

Oty and Gaby's grandson was visiting that morning, and he promptly pointed out bubbles in the water that proved to be a submerged manatee. Just a few of us got a glimpse of what would be only a whiskered snout, and though we would ultimately have a much better manatee encounter later in the trip, it was an exciting event nonetheless. We were told that manatees in the water by D'Nest were not uncommon, and were also reminded that dangling your feet in the canal, while tempting on hot days, was not a particularly good idea (what with American Crocodile routinely reported here). As the mood struck us, we continued birding the garden off and on before lunch, with the most noteworthy finds a striking (but very blotchy-plumaged) Summer Tanager that briefly stumped us at first, as well as the russet-headed "mangrove" subspecies of the Yellow Warbler. All in all, just under 30 bird species were recorded by the group at D'Nest, a good start.

With lunch upon us, most of the group enjoyed a noontime meal at D'Nest (featuring salad and pork chops), while Bob and Gaby headed to the airport to gather up Arthur, the last arriving

member of the group. Defying the dark forces that occasionally meddle with timely arrivals at smaller Central American airports, Arthur flew in right on time. Judith in turn linked up with the group at D'Nest after a shuttle ride down from Black Orchid, and in no time the nine of us were on the road in a vehicle sent to fetch us by Hidden Valley Inn.

The drive to Hidden Valley from Belize City is about three hours, not including stops, and leaving at around 1:45 PM, we expected to arrive in time to check in just ahead of dinner. There was little opportunity for birding stops en route, yet as we moved along we spotted a few species from the car, mostly open perchers such as Melodious Blackbirds, Tropical Kingbirds, Great-tailed Grackles, Social Flycatchers, and Tropical Mockingbirds. Turkey and Black Vultures made their first of many appearances to come, and Cattle and Great Egrets were easily picked out in the fields.

We had two breaks during the drive, the first at a classic ex-pat owned roadside café and watering hole, capable of accommodating full-size tourist buses (and known to cater to British Army units training in the area). It was a welcome and timely stop for us, with decent washrooms and cold drinks — we also picked up a Buff-bellied Hummingbird at a feeder here (the only one of the trip), and saw our first of several American Redstarts flitting along the walkways. Our second stop (an hour later) was at the Orange Gallery gift shop and hotel, at Milepost 60 along the Western Highway, where in addition to the customary reasons for pulling in, we managed to enjoy great views of several species in the canopy of nearby trees, in particular Olive-throated Parakeets and Baltimore Orioles.

Finally leaving the pavement, our last few miles (up the slopes of Mountain Pine Ridge and into Hidden Valley) were slow-going, but we scanned the landscape for birds as we inched along. Roadside Hawks were seen, as well as Great Kiskadee, Brown Jays, Gray Hawk, Red-lored Parrots, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. We arrived around 6:00 PM,



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and in no time we had checked in and were back out evaluating the grounds, the pool, and the birds. Rooms were spacious and well-maintained, and soon it was time to review our species list, grab a drink, and get ready for dinner.

Meals at Hidden Valley are excellent, and portions during our stay were invariably substantial. We were seated together, which facilitated the first of our evening reviews, where we covered what was planned for the following day. Clouds were gathering, but this evening we still had snippets of clear sky, and the stars were brilliant. Having no mosquitoes was a blessing, and after dinner and a look around the lodge, most of us headed for our rooms and a comfortable mattress. Tomorrow would be the first of many early mornings, as we began birding in earnest.



#### **Sun., Mar. 11 Hidden Valley Inn Reserve Local Birding | Thousand Foot Falls**

Our first day at Hidden Valley Inn started bright and early — coffee and breakfast were a welcome sight. The initial day for a group tour here typically includes an orientation, involving visits to birding sites and habitats within a short distance of the lodge, as well as a discussion of trail options. We met our local guide, Marvin, who would be with us for the duration of our stay. Marvin was relatively new at Hidden Valley, though very experienced, having previously spent many years as a guide at Chan Chich, another prestigious Belizean birding lodge.

Our first destination was a small lake about a mile northwest of Hidden Valley Inn, set within a fern-grass-sedge savannah, and surrounded by scattered Caribbean Pine (the namesake for the Mountain Pine Ridge) and a range of low shrubs. We stopped above the lake, and immediately noticed a small flock of Black-headed Siskin working the tall grass culms near the road. But the real show was happening overhead. In just the last few days, Plumbeous Kites — exquisitely gray, migrant raptors that move north into Belize when

breeding — had arrived en masse. Hard to say just how many were there, but at any given time 10 to 15 birds could be seen soaring overhead. As we eventually saw additional birds at several other sites, it seems likely that dozens of Plumbeous Kites had moved into the Mountain Pine Ridge area just prior to or concurrent with our arrival. The species is infrequent in most of Belize. Also in the same area, but less common, were beautiful Swallow-tailed Kites.

We then walked the perimeter of the lake, where birds in general were not terribly abundant. That said, a pair of Least Grebes, a species not easy to see in most areas, was plainly evident swimming on the lake and were a very nice find. Blue Grosbeak was located as well.

We then moved over to King Vulture Overlook for a quick stop. The overlook, less than a mile from the lodge, sits at the edge of a steep precipice where raptor species are often evident, either perched nearby or cruising across the canyon. We quickly spotted Orange-breasted Falcon on a horizontal branch alongside the cliff, not more than 50 feet away. While seeing the species here is not unexpected, it's never a given. Orange-breasted Falcon is arguably one of the rarest known falcons, and Hidden Valley is a destination for birders who hope to see the species. So mission accomplished on this one.

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The other species we were keen to find here, quite naturally, was King Vulture. Anyone who has reviewed my species list for this trip may have noticed that King Vulture *isn't on it*. That was my error. We did, in fact, see the species here, but at a great distance, with its largely white plumage apparent as the birds perched on wet cliffs across the canyon from the overlook. We only had our binoculars with us on this particular outing, and we all agreed that a scope would have improved our views considerably.

We were soon back at the lodge for lunch, and a bit of a panic ensued, as those in the group who passed on the early morning

birding were justifiably shocked to hear we had already checked Orange-breasted Falcon off our list!

After lunch we headed to nearby Thousand Foot Falls (it actually tops out at around 1,600 feet, but whatever), the highest cataract in Central America. Solitary Eagle occurs here, as well as Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle, two of the most elusive and sought after raptors in the Neotropics. We didn't see either species, unfortunately, but as luck would have it we DID see an additional pair of Orange-breasted Falcon — phew! Rusty Sparrow was also seen here, as well as Purple Martin, Hepatic Tanager, White-collared Swift, and Scaled Pigeon.

Heading back to the lodge, we rested up during the remainder of the afternoon, and then enjoyed a relaxing dinner with excellent entrée choices and tempting desserts. A big trip tomorrow to Caracol was next on the agenda.

### **Mon., Mar. 12 Caracol Archaeological Reserve**

Three of our group (Marcia, Shirley, and Helen) elected to stay back at Hidden Valley today and skip the drive south to Caracol. At over two hours each way, on sometimes rough roads, it was a decision made after careful consideration. The stay-behinds were well-traveled, and had visited similar archaeological sites on previous trips, and ultimately decided on a relaxing day around the lodge. The rest of us enjoyed our customary early coffee and breakfast, and were soon on our way south to Caracol. But just before leaving we found a very cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy Owl perched in the open outside the lodge entrance. A nice start to the day!

Caracol, located about 25 miles south of the town of San Ignacio and close to the Guatemalan border, is one of the largest Mayan archaeological sites known. It sits on the Vaca Plateau at about 1,500 feet above sea level in the foothills of the Maya Mountains. The site was one of the most important Maya political centers of the lowlands, and at its peak of influence, Caracol covered approximately 77 square miles, encompassing an area larger than present-day Belize City.



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Although our drive from Hidden Valley to Caracol involved only a gentle descent, no more than about 700 feet all told, the vegetation underwent a dramatic transition, from an open, subtropical pine savannah (at Hidden Valley) to a dense, tropical broadleaf forest (at Caracol). The avifauna we observed along the route shifted as well. We birded along the road as we went, first stopping at Rio Frio Cave to search for understory species (Clay-colored Thrush was the dominant).

Moving on, we paused next at a largely abandoned forestry camp (Douglas Da Silva), which was situated on the cusp of the tropical forest but still with scattered pines. The local bird species reflected this habitat overlap, and included Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Collared Aracari, Keel-billed Toucan, Pale-vented Pigeon, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Gray-headed Dove, and Black Phoebe.

Eventually we crossed the Macal River, with Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Vaux's Swifts overhead. We slowed for a few moments to watch a mid-sized Morelet's Crocodile basking on rocks midstream. After stopping at the Belize Defence Force checkpoint further down the road, we continued on our final leg of the trip, arriving at Caracol close to noon.

With nowhere near the crowds seen at Tikal (in nearby Guatemala), we had the trails almost to ourselves in some areas as we strolled the grounds. It was a warm day (probably the warmest of the entire tour), but we largely stayed within the confines of the forest and were seldom in direct sunlight. We listened to the incessant calls of Lesser Greenlets in the subcanopy, and got very nice looks at a Bat Falcon (similar to Orange-breasted Falcon, and sometimes mistaken for it). We also picked up Slaty-tailed and Gartered Trogons, Black-cowled Oriole, and Squirrel Cuckoo in the trees, and heard Bright-rumped Atilla. Above one of the stone monuments were the enormous hanging nests of Montezuma Oropendola, which had attracted the attention of Giant Cowbirds, a brood parasite known to lay its eggs in the nests of oropendolas and related birds.

After cold drinks and a picnic lunch kindly set out by Marvin, we departed Caracol about 3:30. Not long after, while still in the heavy forest, a beautiful White Hawk was spotted a few feet above the road, clutching (and eating) a large snake (species undetermined). We watched for several minutes, the closest any of us had ever been to this striking raptor. The trip back to Hidden Valley then went fairly quickly (only a single quick stop), and we were at the lodge by dusk. While the trip to Caracol was certainly worth the effort, the ladies who remained behind today reported a



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wonderful, relaxing time watching birds on the lodge grounds. We soon completed a quick review of our species list, followed by dinner, and we were then off to our rooms.

### **Tues., Mar. 13 Local Morning Birding | Barton Creek Cave**

When this tour was first conceived, today had been planned to include a morning stop at the Green Hills Butterfly Ranch (renowned for hummingbirds and butterflies). But the ranch had unexpectedly closed down not long before our trip started, and we suddenly needed an alternative activity. Hidden Valley staff suggested that we do some local birding at a place called Slate Creek, and Marvin had arranged for coffee and breakfast to be brought out to us there so we could get an early start. Sounded like a good plan.

But that said, we had been flirting with sprinkles over much of the trip thus far, and this morning would prove to be a challenge, as visibility plummeted and a penetrating mist set in. Try as we might, our efforts at birding were unproductive. Not only was the weather proving to be miserable, even with raincoats and umbrellas, the birds were nowhere to be seen. Taking matters into his own hands, Marvin got on the radio and halted the breakfast delivery, and we headed back to the lodge to dry out and reboot our start to the day, with coffee and buffet served in the dining room, and the possibility of birding the lodge grounds after that, weather permitting.

Unfortunately, the low fog continued through the morning, and many of us simply chose to relax, read, or watch for infrequent sunbreaks to try and sneak in a short walk. The heavy brush surrounding the lodge was worth investigating, and a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat was coaxed into view by a little pishing — our one and only view of this furtive species. The Ferruginous Pygmy Owl was still out, now bedraggled, and a soggy Masked Tityra was in view near the lodge.

However, by lunchtime we finally had a real break in the weather, and observations around the lodge were starting to pay some dividends. Azure-crowned Hummingbirds were seen in abundance, as were Acorn Woodpeckers, and the feeders (which our group had upgraded by sneaking out some fruit from the lodge's breakfast buffet!) were now attracting Plain Chachalacas, Brown Jays, Yellow-backed, Yellow-tailed, and Black-cowled Orioles, Clay-colored Thrush, White-tipped Dove, and the occasional Red-lored Parrot. And surveying the pines behind the lodge area, we discovered migrating Grace's and Black-and-white Warblers, as well as a small group of beautiful Green Jays.



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The improving weather was welcome, and it made our winding trip downslope to Barton Creek Cave (our afternoon outing) much more enjoyable. We botanized and birded as we went (it was about an hour drive each way), and a quick stop by a field that was alive with colorful Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, and White-collared Seedeater was especially memorable. The forest understory as we approached the cave was damper than back at Hidden Valley, and Arthur commented on the abundance of spikemoss (*Selaginella* sp.), a shade tolerant species (not a true moss) that carpeted the forest floor in places. Many of the forest trees were also festooned with epiphytes, good habitat for warblers and tyrannulets. Arriving at our destination, we spotted swirling pairs of Ridgway's Rough-winged Swallow, a distinctive subspecies of Northern Rough-winged that nests in caves, and which some authorities believe may be a separate species in its own right.

Barton Creek flows through the cave, so we boarded canoes for our spelunking efforts (the roundtrip covering maybe half a mile). There were three of us to a canoe, one to hold the spotlight, one to paddle, and another to provide encouragement, it would seem. Most canoes managed very well as we followed the creek inside, although those riding with Bob as he paddled were rightly

concerned at his general inability to maintain a proper heading (he did get better as time went on). The attraction at Barton Creek Cave is largely cultural, and Marvin highlighted various alcoves along the cave walls with clearly visible artifacts as we slipped quietly through. It was a fascinating afternoon.

As we made our way back up to Hidden Valley, we noticed Black-headed Saltator, Roadside Hawk, and White-eyed Vireos during a couple quick roadside stops. We made it back in time to freshen up before enjoying our final dinner at the inn, when we had the chance to meet and compliment the chef. In the quiet of the evening later on, a couple of us thought we may have heard a Stygian Owl in the distance. But chasing it down just wasn't an option at that point, as we needed to get packed for our departure tomorrow to Big Falls.

### **Wed., Mar. 14 Road Trip to Big Falls | Lunch at Blue Hole National Park**

Although we were leaving Hidden Valley Inn today, we had not seen the last of Marvin. Hidden Valley staff would be taking us south to the Lodge at Big Falls, with Marvin driving one vehicle, and a second driver behind the wheel of a comfortable quad-cab truck. Two vehicles made a world of difference and were much appreciated. We could have all fit in Marvin's van, but with this arrangement we had loads of room to stretch out and not be crowded by luggage.

The drive to Big Falls would take much of the day — we left Hidden Valley about 9:00 (after breakfast and check-out) and arrived close to 4:00 PM. But the drive was leisurely, and included breaks along the way to scout for birds and shop for snacks, etc., as well as a 90-minute stop at St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park for birding and hiking, and a



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picnic lunch packed for us by the Hidden Valley kitchen. The park is situated on the northern fringe of the Maya Mountains, and the lush vegetation, as compared to the Mountain Pine Ridge we had just left, reflects the greater rainfall here combined with the lower elevation.

We stopped in at the park visitor center, then most of the group took a hike before lunch along a forested trail. We tried to lure a very vocal Spot-breasted Wren from cover, with mixed results, and then shortly after had the best looks one could hope for of a male Barred Antshrike. Gray-breasted Martin were everywhere, Lesser Greenlet were fairly common in the trees, and Green-breasted Mango perched overhead. A few of us managed to see a King Vulture spiraling over nearby hills, and a Great Black-Hawk briefly soared overhead just before lunch.

After a satisfying meal of Belizean beans and rice, salad, and BBQ chicken, washed down with fruit juice, we were back on the Hummingbird Highway, heading to Big Falls. We had considered stopping again about 90 minutes later, at the Cockscomb Jaguar Preserve off of the Southern Highway, but in Marvin's estimation, the road conditions into the preserve were such that it would have taken too much time to do that. So we took a peek inside a small store by

the highway and then headed south once again, though not before spotting Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Red-billed Pigeon, and Yellow-winged Tanager in some nearby trees.

We were met at The Lodge at Big Falls by Steve Chaco, who would be working with us each day of our stay. Steve, the 2016 Belize Bird Guide of the Year, visited with us during dinner, and shared insights into the various areas we would be birding. He emphasized that there could be some minor itinerary changes, based on what areas were currently the most promising for birds, although as it turned out we stuck pretty much to the schedule we had planned. Meals at Big Falls were every bit as good as Hidden Valley, and our dinner this evening was excellent. Similar to



Hidden valley, our lodgings were in individual cottages scattered across the lodge grounds. Wails of the Common Pauraque serenaded us before dinner, and again at dawn the next morning.

### **Thurs., Mar. 15 Nim Li Punit Mayan Site | Birding & Hike at Blue Creek**

Coffee, fruit, and fresh pastries were available first thing, and Steve was already waiting for us, offering an early walk around the property. Resident House Wrens (the "southern" subspecies) were active, and the trees that surrounded the grassy quad that fronted the main lodge building were alive with birds. Buff-throated Saltator, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Crimson-collared Tanager, and Brown-crested Flycatcher were all species we quickly located that had not



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been seen at Hidden Valley. Northern Waterthrush were common on the lawns, and feeders were dominated by Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds. The sun was out and it looked to be a very promising day.

Caffeinated and content, we set out for Nim Li Punit, a Mayan archaeological site not far down the road. Normal opening time is at 9:00 AM, but were in well ahead of that with Steve leading the way, and had the grounds to ourselves. The birding was excellent, and we quickly added new species to our trip list: Rose-throated Becard, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Black-headed Trogon, Lineated Woodpecker, Gray-chested Dove, and Boat-billed Flycatcher were seen within minutes of exiting the vehicle. The forest was exceptionally active — one tree held three different woodcreepers (Ivory-billed, Streak-headed, and the tiny Wedge-billed), and migrating warblers in breeding plumage (e.g., Black-and-white, Magnolia, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, and Ovenbird) were commonly seen in mixed flocks. The site was on a bluff with views of the valley below, and the roots of the trees (especially *Ficus* spp.) grew in tangles across some of the ruins. It was an exquisite site, combining great birding with a fascinating set of (under visited) ruins, and just minutes from the lodge.



After lunch we headed south towards Blue Creek Village, where we would hike along the creek looking for antbirds, manakins, and other elusive species. The road in (off the Southern Highway) was slow, giving us the chance to bird as we travelled along. Arguably the “car bird” of the trip was seen here, an amazingly cooperative Striped Cuckoo that Steve pointed out, skulking in heavy grass along a roadside fence. Presumably a male bird, it suddenly started preening and strutting in full view for 5 to 10 minutes, raising its feathered crest and shoulder “epaulettes” repeatedly. We wondered if a female might be close by, but none were seen. A very charismatic display, especially for a typically shy and seldom seen species.



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By the time we reached Blue Creek Village we'd already had an active day, and a few of the group decided to wait and bird by the vehicles rather than strike out along the trail, which had a bit of uneven footing. Those who chose to stay behind were entertained by a lively group of local children, and also took the opportunity to negotiate prices with several women selling handicrafts. Those taking the creekside hike with Steve were rewarded with several species not seen elsewhere on the trip, including Amazon Kingfisher, Scale-breasted Hummingbird, Red-capped Manakin (female), Black-faced Grosbeak, and an impressive Band-tailed Barbthroat.

During our trip back from Blue Creek we stopped shy of the highway to scan some trees, and saw a half dozen or more Keel-billed Toucans, which eventually flew across the road behind us, one by one. And then just outside Big Falls we pulled over at a marsh, and those in the right place at the right time got views of both Sora and Ruddy Crake, species commonly heard but far less often seen (especially the crake). This is definitely a place we'll explore further on future trips. Nearby we had our only looks of the tour at Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (stalking along a fencerow), and an indifferent flock of Bronzed Cowbirds casually observed us from the fields as we finally returned to the lodge.

A busy day, but quite fulfilling. At this point, some of us headed off for a shower and a nap, others enjoyed the pool, and a few kicked back with a bourbon and continued birding from the front porch of their unit (Golden-hooded Tanager was one of the better sightings). Lodge owner Rob Hiron (returned that morning from a trade show in Germany) joined us for dinner, and despite his jet lag, was his usual charming and erudite self. We briefly listened for the resident Black-and-white Owls before retiring, but no luck (although they did start their odd mewing calls later, well after bedtime). Tomorrow would be the earliest morning of the tour — who would show up?

### **Fri., Mar. 16 Scarlet Macaws & Red Bank Village | Afternoon at Big Falls**

Well, EVERYONE showed up at 5:15 AM for coffee and cinnamon rolls! That was so encouraging, and now it was up to the Scarlet Macaws to uphold their end of the bargain. Dawn was just breaking as we drove north from Big Falls to the small village of Red Bank in Stan Creek Province, a site well-known for its proximity to several family groups of the macaws. No guarantees, but we usually have a good chance to see the species if we depart early enough from Big Falls.

Red Bank is a small village just off the Southern Highway, largely populated by farmers and their families. The notoriety of the area as a biodiversity hotspot has been fueled by the presence of the Scarlet Macaws, which are most reliably located here in winter and early spring. We pulled into the village and stopped briefly at the Scarlet Macaw Bed and Breakfast, a simple establishment run by the family of Florentino Sub, a local cacao farmer. Mr. Sub

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was away, but we enlisted the assistance of his son as a guide for the morning, and we moved on in search of the macaws. We were initially disappointed, only getting a brief and rather distant view of a single pair of birds while we stopped on the outskirts of the village.

Yet not easily deterred, we forged ahead and drove several miles into the forest to the Sub family cacao plantation, where we learned a bit about the sustainable farming practices that support local chocolate production in Red Bank. We sampled ripe (i.e., fresh and unprocessed) cocoa beans right from the plant, all the while keeping our ears open for the tell-tale squawks of our target species.

We'd all but given up hope, I think, when a beautiful pair of macaws were finally sighted, heading our way. Soon they were well within viewing range, and although we did not see the waves of birds that occasionally are observed here (typically a bit earlier in the year), we eventually had good looks at 6 to 8 pairs of macaws, which circled the area and were very vocal. We celebrated with coffee, juice, and snacks (packed by the Big Falls staff), and then went for a walk on the plantation.

The sun was intense and the day was warming up, so we focused on birding from shady vantage points as we moved into the adjacent forest. Smoky-brown Woodpecker was the day's first new addition to our species list (after the Scarlet Macaw), followed by Short-billed Pigeon, Green-backed Sparrow, and (seen by some of us) Great Antshrike. By 11:00 AM the heat and humidity were taking their toll, and we agreed it was time to drive back to Big Falls for our planned lunch at Coleman's Café, a local eatery not far from the lodge.

Our birding was not quite over for the day, however, and we had three very nice sightings from the car on our way back down the highway. Steve Chaco had us watching utility lines and fences for Vermillion Flycatcher (certainly hard to miss, even at 50 mph), and while that species never materialized, we had excellent (and quite diagnostic) looks at Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, when we pulled over and a bird slowly flew over and around the van several times. Later we stopped near a heavily-vegetated stream crossing, and Steve was able to coax both a Common Tody-Flycatcher and a Rufous-breasted Spinetail into view, while we sat comfortably in our seats! (Yes, Steve did briefly use a little playback to accomplish this — something he seldom does — but the good looks we had at the shy spinetail, in particular, emphasized how the judicious use of recordings in some cases can result in sightings of species you may never otherwise see).

We arrived at Coleman's Café by 1:00 PM for a delicious Belizean lunch buffet, with iced lemonade and fruit juices.



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The selection of dishes was excellent, and though Arthur was disappointed at the lack of Gibnut on the menu (just kidding, Arthur), the offerings were delicious and plentiful. As we left the café, a Gartered Trogon was seen perched in the garden by the dining area, and a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle soared high overhead (an unexpected place to finally pick up this species). We then headed back for a low-key afternoon, including (for those so inclined) inner-tubing on the river that surrounds the lodge property, a little time in the pool, and a pre-dusk bird walk with Steve (during which we located Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Couch's Kingbird, and Orange-billed Sparrow, and had extended close looks at a vocalizing Bright-rumped Atilla). Dinner was a pleasure once again, and we looked ahead to what would be our final full day of the tour.



### **Sat., Mar. 17 Manatees, Dolphins, & Howlers — A Trip to Monkey River**

Compared to Friday morning, our departure for Monkey River at 7:30 AM was a luxury, and after breakfast we settled in for the roughly hour-long drive to the small port at Independence-Mango Creek, situated across an inlet from the tourist town of Placencia. We were loaded in the boat by around 9:00 AM, and were soon motoring along the mangrove-lined coast towards the village of Monkey River Town, around 15 miles south. Our boat driver was not only a skilled seaman, he was also knowledgeable about the forest and river ecosystems, and we enjoyed his commentary throughout the trip.

It took us 90 minutes or so to reach the mouth of the Monkey River, as we stopped along the way for close-up views of the mangrove habitat, watching Osprey, Royal Tern, Great Egret, Laughing Gull, and Brown Pelican. We were also accompanied for a while by a pod of dolphins (presumably Bottled-nosed) that offered some close looks. We stopped briefly at the town site for a washroom break, then were away and upriver, heading for the Howler Monkey preserve that is maintained and managed by local guides. Along the way we saw Neotropic and Double-

crested Cormorants, Common Black-Hawk, Anhinga, Green and Little Blue Herons, and Magnificent Frigatebird.

As we approached the location for our short hike into the forest, Black Howler Monkeys (right on cue) were sighted lounging on tree branches above the shoreline. While the males can be deafening (howlers are the loudest mammals in the Western Hemisphere), these were largely silent, seemingly content to simply stare at us as we readied ourselves to go ashore. We followed a trail that led through a closed canopy riverine forest, with low-hanging lianas and bamboo thickets.

# Southern Belize: From Mountains to Mangroves

## — Trip Report —

March 10 – 18, 2018 | Written by Bob Meinke



It was nearing mid-day, and the bird activity had waned a bit. But just when it appeared not much of interest was going to be found, a Crane Hawk was spotted swooping through the leafy branches. It perched not far from the trail, and most of us ended up with clear views of this scarce raptor. Continuing on, we came across Tawny-winged Woodcreeper and Yellow-olive Flycatcher near a small army ant swarm, both birds new to our species list.

We then sailed back for lunch at Monkey River Town, enjoying another variation on the theme of grilled chicken, beans, and rice, this time at Alice's Restaurant, and washed down with juice or a cold beer. We were right at the mouth of the river, and before re-boarding for the trip back up the coast, we took a few minutes to scan the area for shorebirds. None were located, but Dorothy did spot a Palm Warbler working the beach, a nice find — Steve pointed out that this pass-through migrant species is very seldom seen on mainland Belize, usually being limited to the offshore cayes.



On our way back our boat operator spotted manatees, and what at first appeared to be a single animal turned out to be an entire family group, including young. We stayed with them for a while, watching as they fed and surfaced repeatedly and had excellent, close-up views from the boat. This was really a nice way to end the day — manatees are scattered in the waters off Belize, and while not rare, they are local in their distribution. So seeing a group this size was an exceptional opportunity, and we spent roughly 20 minutes quietly observing. Icing on the cake for an overall brilliant day.

The rest of our final day at Big Falls included late afternoon birding followed by another excellent dinner this evening, and then a last attempt at locating Black-and-white Owls (once again not sighted, but then heard later in the evening). We made final adjustments to our species list for the trip, and then turned our thoughts to packing and organizing for the trip home the next day.

### **Sun., Mar. 18 Flights Home**

After breakfast we were driven into Punta Gorda, where



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we caught a 45 minute Tropic Air flight back to the International Airport at Belize City (so nice not to have to drive the 5+ hours back north to get there!). We then connected with our flights back home to the U.S. or Canada. Manatees, Mayan archaeology, tropical pine forests, great lodges, and 200+ species of birds seen — a memorable trip!

### Photos

(1) Oty's Garden, D'Nest Inn, Belize City; (2) Haulover Creek Canal, D'Nest Inn, Belize City; (3) Lakeside birding (Shirley and Helen), Hidden Valley, Mountain Pine Ridge; (4) King Vulture Overlook (Judith, Marvin, Martin, Marcia, Shirley, and Arthur), Hidden Valley, Mountain Pine Ridge; (5) Road to Caracol at Douglas Da Silva, south of San Ignacio; (6) near Macal River Crossing, Maya Mountains; (7) Caana Monument, Caracol Maya Archaeological Site; (8) Epiphyte-laden tree, forest above Barton Creek Cave; (9) Cabin at Lodge at Big Falls; (10) View towards Punta Gorda and the coastal plain, from Nim Li Punit Mayan site; (11) *Ficus* roots and stone foundations at Nim Li Punit; (12) Watching for woodcreepers (Steve, Judith, Dagni, and Marcia), at Nim Li Punit; (13) Ripe cacao fruits, Florentino Sub family plantation, Red Bank; (14) Lodge at Big Falls guide Steven Chaco, on the Monkey River; (15) Tracking Crane Hawk in bamboo thicket (Dorothy, Marcia, and Steve), Howler Monkey Preserve, Monkey River; (16) Beach at mouth of Monkey River, Palm Warbler habitat