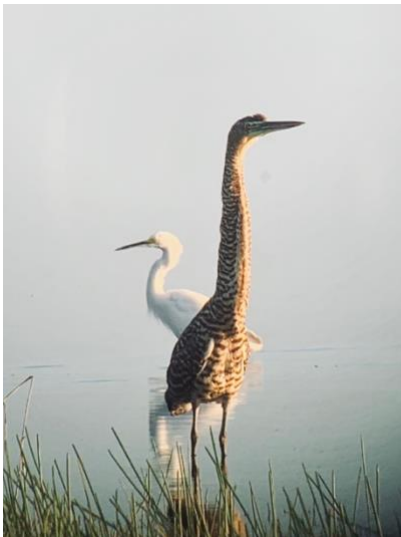


# Belize Birding & Nature | Trip Report

## February 27 - March 8, 2019 | Written by Pat Lueders



**Guide: Pat Lueders, local guides Ruben & Luis, and 10 participants: Elaine, Jane, Barb S., Dick, Tom, Ginny, Barb H., Ellen, Erik, & Candy**



### **Wednesday, February 27 | Arrival for the Crooked Tree Pre-tour extension**

Four of us were greeted at the Belize City airport by Robert from Beck's B & B, and we drove north on the main highway to Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, our pre-tour location for the next three days. On the causeway that provides access to the town of Crooked Tree across the original Big Pond, we stopped for our first looks at the large number and variety of waterfowl. When I first started traveling to Belize in 2007, it was rare to see a Jabiru, but we were looking at over 10 of this large stork, feeding in the pond. In front of us we saw Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Purple Gallinule, Limpkin, Northern Jacana, and hundreds of Wood Stork. Wow, what a great start to our extension!



We settled into our spacious rooms at Beck's B & B and enjoyed a delicious meal in the open-air dining room. With an early start planned for tomorrow, we settled into our rooms to rest after a long travel day.

### **Thursday, February 28 | Crooked Tree Big Pond boat tour; local birding at Beck's**

Michael was our boat captain on this boat tour at dawn of the Big Pond. Because the water was very low, thousands of water birds had gathered in this area to feed. Michael said that the pond would be closed to boats in probably a week. As we left the dock, a continuous stream of Wood Storks arrived, numbering in the thousands, and a few Jabirus were sighted with them. Russet-naped Wood-Rails were feeding out in the open along the edges, seven additional heron and egret species were mixed with the thousands of Wood Stork and Ibis. A group of Roseate Spoonbills stood out among the hundreds of white birds. As we snaked through the channels, we spotted Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, two groups of Boat-billed Heron, four species of Kingfishers including an American Pygmy Kingfisher at arm's length, a Prothonotary Warbler, and a low flying Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. Snail Kites, Fork-tailed Flycatchers, and Mangrove Vireos were perched on nearby branches. We hated to leave this magical area!

After lunch, some rested while others birded the grounds of Beck's, finding colorful male and female Vermilion Flycatchers, vocalizing Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets, busy Acorn Woodpeckers, active Yucatan Woodpeckers, and five species of Orioles coming to the hummingbird feeders.

We drove through the town of Crooked Tree, isolated as an island during the rainy season before the causeway was constructed, and enjoyed a delicious meal at the Crooked Tree Lodge. As we left to return to Beck's, we spotted a Common Pauraque sitting in the road, a fitting ending to a truly overwhelming day!



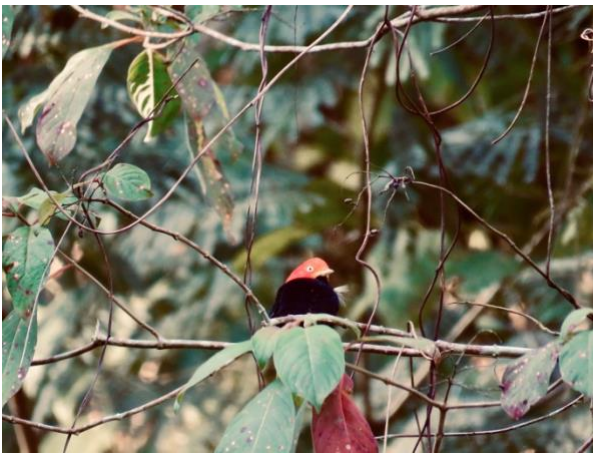
## Friday, March 1 | Birding at Crooked Tree Lodge; river transfer to Lamanai Outpost; evening spotlight cruise

We arrived at the lodge in time to enjoy a spectacular sunrise. Over 36 Jabirus were counted with the scope feeding across the pond. The comeback of this magnificent species in the country of Belize was encouraging. A Bare-throated Tiger-Heron continued on the shore for great photo opportunity. Ringed and Green Kingfishers flew from pond to pond, as Morelet's Seedeaters fed in the grass. A nice mixed flock of warblers seen near the lodge contained Golden-winged, Black-and-white, Nashville, Kentucky, American Redstart, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, Yellow-throated, and Yellow.

Returning to Beck's, we walked the grounds finding a small family of Yucatan Jays with a few Brown Jays, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and numerous Gray Catbirds. Our last delicious lunch meant the ending to our stay at Crooked Tree, and we departed anticipating our future adventures in Belize.

We arrived at the New River transfer location to join the six of remaining members of the group arriving from the airport to travel by boat to Lamanai Outpost. Ruben, our Lamanai local guide, expertly maneuvered our boat along the channels, finding a roosting Lesser Nighthawk, Proboscis Bats, three King Vultures flying above us, our first mangrove Swallows, and a perched Bat Falcon.

We settled into our beautiful cottages and met for an early dinner. Tonight, we took the spotlight boat trip in the narrow channels of the New River, always a fantastic evening! We weren't disappointed sighting a Yucatan Nightjar, Northern Potoo, Russet-naped Wood-Rails, Boat-billed Herons, a Morelet's Crocodile, and a sleeping American Pygmy Kingfisher. However, the true stars of this evening were an Agami Heron perched in the open displaying its beautiful shades of blue and purple, and the overwhelming starlit sky with an unparalleled view of the milky way that all agreed was unbelievable!



## **Saturday, March 2 | Early morning bird walk; Lamanai Mayan ruin walk; Sunset cocktail cruise**

Our first early morning walk was very productive, with so many species we barely left the parking area. Ruben first spotted a Blue Bunting and Morelet's Seedeater feeding in the grasses, and the Yucatan endemic Black Catbird was seen at close range. With a fruiting tree on the trail, we watched Yellow-throated Euphonias, Black-headed Trogon, Yellow-winged and Blue-gray Tanagers, Groove-billed Anis, and Black-headed Saltators all coming in for breakfast. Bare tree branches held noisy Plain Chachalacas, Golden-fronted and Pileated Woodpeckers, and Red-lored Parrots. We saw 38 species before breakfast!

A short boat ride took us to the Lamanai Mayan Ruins dock, as Brown-headed and White-crowned Parrots flew over, and Limpkin fed on the shore. Lamanai (Mayan word for "submerged crocodile") Mayan Ruins date back to 200 BC. Excavation began in 1974, and we walked the well-groomed trails to visit four of the temples, birding as well spotting Ochre-bellied Flycatchers, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, and Pale-billed Woodpeckers. Four brave members of the group climbed the High Temple for an open view of the New River. Four Rufous-tailed Jacamars were demonstrating in full view with mating season rapidly approaching. A Masked Tityra pair were perched at a treetop. Before shopping at the local Indian Church souvenir cabin, we visited the museum to view the displays of stellas and other historical items excavate at this site.

After lunch, the group enjoyed a siesta or casually walked around the lovely Lamanai grounds. At 4:30 p.m., we boarded the comfortable flat-bottom boat for the popular sunset cocktail cruise on the New River. We immediately headed across the lagoon as a Jabiru was spotted on the opposite shore. He cooperated for the photographers and poised for close pictures. The piná and banana coladas couldn't have been more popular and tasted even better in this beautiful setting!

## **Sunday, March 3 | Lamanai savanna walk; visit to Indian Church village; afternoon village walk; night walk**

At dawn, we traveled by boat across the lagoon to visit a new habitat, the Lamanai savanna. We spotted a family of the Yucatan endemic Yellow-lored Parrot in a short, leafless tree for good scope views of their yellow lores.

Vermilion Flycatchers, Botteri and Olive Sparrows, and Gray-crowned Yellowthroats moved around in the tall savanna grasses. We startled a covey of Black-throated Bobwhite (and they startled us); however, luckily, one female froze on a log and provided great looks and photos. Brown-crested and Dusky-capped Flycatchers were seen before we got good looks at a busy Yellow-bellied Elaenia. As we departed, a Sungrebe hid quickly in the reeds, vocalizing but not showing itself again. Ruddy Crake were also heard, and a White-throated Flycatcher finally appeared for all to see. What an interesting visit to this unique habitat!

Indian Church is an indigenous village of close to 300 Mayan people located behind Lamanai Outpost. The residents work for the Mennonites, at the Mayan Ruins, or for Lamanai Outpost. Many of our group brought items for the children to donate to their library or school. On our way to lunch in the village, we stopped to meet the librarian and dropped off our items. The ladies' league operates a small restaurant in town where we were taught how to make corn tortillas the traditional way by hand grinding the corn. We came away from this delicious meal with a true appreciation of the labor-intensive life of these hard-working Mayan women!

An afternoon walk on the edge of Indian Church proved very rewarding, with many new species for us enjoying the cooler temperatures before their evening roost. A busy avocado tree hosted Yellow-olive Flycatchers, Red-capped Manakin, Rose-throated Becard, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, and Blue-black Grassquit. A White-tailed Kite circled above us and a Gray Hawk sat in the open. One small tree held a conservative count of 50 Yellow-throated Euphonias!

One more activity was scheduled for this busy day, a night walk around the cabins. A Gray Four-eyed Opossum, a Blunt-headed Tree Snake, and Mexican Tarantulas were great finds, and we were treated to a spotting of the resident Barn Owl and its two juveniles in the nest hole.

## **Monday, March 4 | Mayan Ruin Sugar Mill Walk; transfer to Chan Chich**

We enjoyed our last delicious breakfast in the open-air dining room and took one last trip to the Lamanai Mayan Ruins, to visit the Sugar Mill and Spanish Churches. The rare Double-crested Cormorant was waiting for us as our boat arrived at the dock. A Laughing Falcon was spotted in an open tree as were numerous pairs of parrots and vultures. While exploring the Sugar Mill, a flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks flew in and behind them Collared Aracari were feeding in a fruited tree. Smoky-brown and Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers as well as Olivaceous and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers were busy feeding along the trail. A Yellow-billed Cacique and a pair of Dusky Antbirds were new species added to our list on this last walk of our visit to Lamanai.

We thanked the Lamanai staff and our fabulous guide, Ruben, for a memorable visit to this historical and beautiful area of Belize, moving on to Chan Chich with heavy hearts but a feeling of anticipation for the adventures ahead of us.

Our van transfer to Chan Chich Rainforest Lodge traveled through the agricultural area owned by the



Mennonites, located just south of their border with Mexico. We spotted Wood Storks and White Ibis feeding in

the rice fields and stopped at the Mennonite town of Blue Creek for snacks and restrooms. The unexpected van problem was quickly resolved by the efficient Chan Chich staff, and we continued to the resort traveling through Gallon Jug, spotting our first Great Curassows, Ocellated Turkeys and White-tailed Deer.

## **Tuesday, March 5 | Early morning village walk; trail walk; afternoon drive to Laguna Verde**

Our “nature wake-up alarms” at Chan Chich, set in a Mayan Plaza dating from 250-800 AD, were the Oscillated Turkeys and Crested Guans replacing the Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys at Lamanai. Our local guide took us to the new road between the employee villages where fruiting trees were loaded with birds. One tree had Ochre-bellied, Yellow-olive, and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, Masked Tityras, and a Bright-rumped Attila. Another was loaded with Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias, Golden-hooded and Yellow-winged Tanagers, and Red-legged and Green Honeycreepers. Which way to look? Don’t forget up, where we spotted Hooked-billed Kites, Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracaris, and a Roadside Hawk in a large, leafless tree. We also had our first sightings of families of Central American Spider Monkeys moving high in the canopy and see a youngster riding on his father’s back. All of this before a delicious breakfast in the open-air dining room.

Some of the group swam in the delightful screened pool, others enjoyed a siesta, before our afternoon safari-style open truck trip to Laguna Verde. We birded along the way spotting Eastern Meadowlarks, an American Kestrel, perched Laughing Falcons, and a White-whiskered Puffbird. At Laguna Verde, our local guide Luis spotted a Sungrebe along the shore of the lake and all got good scope looks at this rare species. Keel-billed Toucans were seen at the top of trees along the lake as a Great Tinamou was heard vocalizing, hidden in the woods. We returned to a delicious dinner at the lodge, marveling at what a wonderful first day we had enjoyed at Chan Chich!



## **Wednesday, March 6 | Morning drive to Gallon Jug; Archeological walk; afternoon birding; Night drive to Gallon Jug**

We left early this morning to drive to Gallon Jug and their shade-grown coffee plantation. We had great looks at five parrot species, Keel-billed Toucans, Crested Guans, and Montezuma Oropendolas weaving their sock-shaped nests. Coffee from the plantation was purchased by many of us at the lodge.

During the archeological walk to the Upper Plaza, we spotted our first mixed feeding flock following an ant swarm. Our heads spun as we tried to identify Cinnamon Becard, Green Shrike-Vireo, Tawny-crowned and Lesser Greenlet, Yellow-throated Vireo, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Long-billed Gnatwren, Worm-eating Warbler, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, and Black-throated Shrike-Tanager. Wow! We entered the Mayan burial chamber with painted friezes intact to appreciate the importance of protecting this area from marauders.

In the afternoon, we found a small tree with berries that attracted the diminutive Red-capped Manakin. A pair of Bat Falcons vocalized near their nest, as did the Slaty-tailed Trogons. Always an exciting event, we gathered after dinner for a night drive to Gallon Jug. Near the village, we found two Spectacled Owls perched on wires, and 3 Common Pauragues flew up from the road. Our first of three Fer-de-lance snakes, the most poisonous in the world, was seen in the grass near one of the homes. Near Gallon Jug, we found Northern Potoo on the fence posts, a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in the field, and a perched Black-and-white Owl. A Gray Fox was seen running across the field, and a small, and later a larger, Fer-de-lance snake was slowly crossing the road. A plate size Mexican Tarantula was spotlighted on our return to complete a truly magical jungle night drive!

### **Thursday, March 7 | Morning trail walk; morning drive around Chan Chich; afternoon River Trail hike**

We walked this morning to the suspension river bridge where traditionally many species can be seen. We found a blooming tree that held 5 hummingbird species including Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds, a Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, and White-bellied Emeralds. Golden-olive Woodpeckers were exciting to find as were male and female Red-throated Ant-Tanagers. Six parrot species were perched in the trees and a Gartered Trogon poised for our attention.

After breakfast, we took a slow drive in the area and spotted a White-necked Puffbird, Black-crowned Tityras, a huge Morelet's Crocodile in the village pond, a striking Crimson-collared Tanager, and many Red-legged Honeycreepers. A visit to the River Trail in the afternoon was very productive. We sat quietly as many species visited the stream including a Scaly-throated Leafhopper, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, and a collection of warblers including Worm-eating, Black-and-white, Kentucky, Hooded, Magnolia, and Yellow. We hated to leave!



### **Friday, March 8 | Early morning walk; departures to Belize City**

Sadly, today our visit to Chan Chich had come to an end. A few new species were found before breakfast on the Sylvester Village Road including Rufous Mourner, Northern Schiffornis, White-throated Thrush, and Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers.

Farewells were bitter sweet as we all flew back to Belize City in small groups in different planes from Gallon Jug. We all agreed that this wonderful visit to Belize was a memorable trip we would never forget!



**Photo Credits:** A big thank you to Pat Lueders for providing photos for the report Lamanai Mayan Ruins; Green Heron; Vermillion Flycatcher; Bare-throated Tiger-Heron; Mennonite Village; Boat to Lamanai; Beck's B&B; Jabiru with Wood Storks; Chan Chich Lodge; Agami Heron; Russet-naped Wood-Rail; White-necked Jacobin; Yucatan Black Howler Monkey; Slaty-tailed Trogon; Jaguar Temple; White-whiskered Puffbird; Spectacled Owl; Visiting Gallon Jug; Fer-de-Lance; Lineated Woodpecker nest; Spider Monkey; Red-capped Manakin; Keel-billed Toucan; Blunt-headed Tree Snake; Chan Chich Dining; Chan Chich jungle birding; Safari-style open truck; Blue Bunting; High Temple; Ocellated Turkey; Maya Ruin Museum; View from High Temple; Birding from open truck; Black-cheeked Woodpecker; Group photo.