

Southern Belize: Pristine & Wild | Trip Report

February 12 – 21, 2020 | Written by Dodie Logue



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With Guide Dodie Logue, and participants Dennis, Helen, Kay, Hayden, Judy, Tony, Christine, Larry, Carol, Jamie, Ellen,





Wed., Feb. 12 Early arrivals | Transfer to Crooked Tree | Pre-extension

Today most of the group arrived; some had come in a day or two earlier on their own. There were airport shuttles and getting situated in the two lodges, Crooked Tree and Beck's, which were just over a mile apart. Some of the earlier arrivals had a little time to bird the grounds of their lodge. Crooked Tree Village is a small area, NW of Belize City, about 45 minutes by car. The residents rely on tourism, as well as fishing and farming, for their livelihood. Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1984 and is run by Audubon. It encompasses around 25 square miles of government-sanctioned land, including freshwater lagoons, savannah, and broadleaf and pine woods. Some of the birds seen right on the grounds for the early arrivals were Black-cowled Oriole, Red-lored Parrot, and Lineated Woodpecker. There were two airport shuttles to pick up the various arrivals, and at 6:30 PM we all met as a group in the dining room at Beck's for a meal of coconut curry fish, herbed chicken, and rice and beans. Hearty and delicious! Most were tired from a long travel day and, knowing about the early departure the next morning, we all went off to our lodges and were soon tucked in.

Thurs., Feb. 13 Crooked Tree Lagoon | Local savanna

This morning we had a 5:30 AM departure from our lodges to be at Bird's-Eye View Lodge for our lagoon boat excursion. After arrival, we gathered and had coffee and fruit, before meeting our guide, Glen Crawford, who was phenomenal. We were lucky to be the first boat on the water, just as the sun was rising. Right off we saw a Jabiru—our only one of the day. It flew up and in front of our boat, then dropped out of sight. We also saw many egret and heron species, including Boat-billed Heron. Other highlights were a nice group of Fork-tailed Flycatchers in the low shrubs, quite a few Black-collared Hawks, Mangrove Swallow, Mangrove Cuckoo, and Mangrove Vireo. The cuckoo was extremely cooperative, we were able to cut the motor and float about two yards from it for great views. As we motored along a channel, a break in the water was noticed, Manatee! Amazing to think of these huge gentle beings munching water grass in the shallows. We saw three species of Kingfisher—Ringed, Belted, and Green. There were many Green Iguana hanging over the water in the Logwood trees, eating, sunning, or showing off their size and color to prospective mates. The water lilies and Mimosa were blooming, and the morning was thoroughly enjoyable. We were able to see and hear both Tropical and Couch's Kingbird for a positive ID of both, as they are virtually identical. The time went quickly by, and we were back to Beck's by 10 AM for a hearty breakfast and coffee, then some down time to regroup until lunch.

After a 1:30 PM lunch at Becks, we hung out at the lodges and then headed out with Robert for some afternoon birding. First, we headed to the lagoon, where we saw a little blue heron, two fly-over Wood Stork, and lots of Coot—but it was pretty quiet. Next we headed to a Blackberry Forest right off the causeway and walked into the cool density. Here the birds picked up and we saw Northern Waterthrush, Red-throated Ant-tanager, Hooded Warbler, and Wood-thrush. After this we headed to a stretch of pine forest and walked a bit as the light was leaving the sky. No birds presented themselves, but it was a beautiful twilight. Dinner tonight was at Crooked Tree Lodge where we had a delicious shrimp and rice dish, and where some of us tasted our first Cashew wine—really a sort of sherry, which Robert had given us. Cashews are locally grown and are a specialty of the area. Then we met for the checklist and were off to bed.



Fri., Feb. 14 Crooked Tree | Belize Zoo | New arrivals | Hidden Valley Inn

This morning we met at 6:30 AM at Beck's for some early birding around the grounds. Robert took us first around the immediate yard and then along a trail by the water tower. Some highlights were a Lineated Woodpecker, Vermillion flycatcher—both male and female, putting on quite a mating display, White-fronted and Red-lored Parrot, and Dusky-capped Flycatcher.

We also had our only Canivet's Hummingbird here, and our only Chipping Sparrows. Breakfast was back at Beck's at 8:30 AM, then we all went to our prospective lodges to get cleaned up and packed, for we were moving lodges today. We left at 11 AM and drove 1.5 hours to the Belize Zoo, where we had a picnic lunch at tables by the entrance, then we got to spend an hour or so looking at the incredible species that live in Belize, while we waited for the two folks on the tour who were to arrive today to join us for the main tour. The zoo opened in 1983, as a last-ditch effort to provide a home for a collection of wild animals which had been used in making a documentary film about tropical forests. Today the zoo and Tropical Education Center exhibits over 200 animals, representing over 45 species native to Belize. The zoo keeps animals which were orphaned, rescued, born at the zoo, or rehabilitated.

The 5 species of cats amazed, the Harpy Eagles were regal and truly amazing, and the natural setting made the experience moving. The zoo does a beautiful job of educating, rescuing, and allowing people to be touched by the wonders of our fellow earth inhabitants. We met up with Kay and Hayden, the last of our group to join in for the main tour, and we were on our way to Hidden Valley Lodge before 3.

The drive was smooth sailing until the bumpy road of the last hour or so. The lodge greeted us with eucalyptus infused cool wash clothes, and a cold fruit drink—a good sign of things to come. Many of us jumped in the pool or hot tub, or walked the grounds, before doing the check list at 6:30 PM, and then dinner at 7. Carol saw Crested



Guan in the yard! The meal was delicious and the service wonderful. The night sky was star filled as we made our way back to our rooms. Happy Valentine's Day!!

Sat., Feb. 15 Mountain Pine Ridge | Thousand Foot Falls

Marvin Ramirez, our local guide for Hidden Valley, met us at 6:30 AM for some pre-breakfast birding on the grounds. Right around the lodge, we had Yellow-backed and Yellow-tailed Oriole, Hepatic Tanager, and the regal Azure-crowned Hummingbird. Next we walked down to the coffee growing area, where we found Black-headed Saltator, Lesson's Motmot, and heard but only the guides saw a flock of Green Jays. It started drizzling, so we headed to the lodge for breakfast. After eating, we loaded the van for some local birding around the Pine Ridge area.

Hidden Valley Inn manages a large, private reserve set up for the conservation of Orange-breasted Falcon and other vulnerable species. There is an extensive trail network, and the grounds are landscaped to be both beautiful and to attract birds. As we pulled onto the road, we saw a Laughing Falcon perched—we were able to stop and get out of the van for good looks. Next we went to Thousand Foot Falls, the highest falls in Central America, where we had a very distant perched Orange-breasted Falcon. It was drizzling on and off this morning, and the birding was quiet. We saw some soaring Swallow-tail Kite, and a Gray Hawk along the way. We noticed that the pines were patchy, and some areas were a bit barren, Marvin said Pine Beetles had infested the area a few years ago and did lots of destruction.

We headed back for lunch and a break. Before heading off with Marvin again, we saw a few birds by the parking lot and ended up seeing a pair of Grace's Warbler, as well as Hepatic Tanager, White-tipped Dove, and more. It was sprinkling as some of the group headed out in the van with Marvin again at 3:30 PM, others decided to relax or take a walk around the grounds. The group that went off in the van drove a short distance to King Vulture Falls. Here we did indeed see King Vulture—there were 5 soaring and riding thermals. We had wonderful looks; at times they flew right over us! We even saw several perched in a tall tree across the ravine, as a quick rain came on and they dropped and landed. We also saw a perched and later flying Orange-breasted Falcon, White-throated Swift, and an accipiter species which will remain unidentifiable. It was time to head back to our lodge; we met in the lobby for cocktails and the checklist at 6:30 PM, dinner at 7—an amazing Banana flan tonight!

Sun., Feb. 16 Caracol Maya Ceremonial Center | Rio Frio Cave

This morning we had an early departure to get to Caracol, the largest Mayan site in Belize. After a quick continental breakfast, we loaded into the van and departed. Marvin kept joking that the government has



promised to pave the road to Caracol, but promises are made pre-election, and post-election once again nothing happens....

On the way we made a few stops, the first being just a bit down the road, where we saw singing Rusty Sparrow, as well as close views of Rufous-capped Warbler and Yellow-bellied Elaenia. Rio Frio Cave was our next stop; here we had Long-billed Gnatwren, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Golden-crowned Warbler, and Red-crowned Ant-tanager. The cave was interesting, some of us made our way in until we could see the opening on the far side. It was lovely here and we could have stayed longer, but we had a drive ahead of us. Just after 11 AM we arrived at Caracol, and as we had eaten such an early light breakfast, we opted to eat our picnic before heading off into the site. What an incredible place! Caracol means snail in Spanish, this was not the original Mayan name, but local tour guides say the nickname comes from the large amounts of snails present on the site. The ruins were first “discovered” in 1937 by a logger searching for Mahogany. It is now known to be one of the most important regional political centers of the Mayan Lowlands. It covered an area much larger than present day Belize City. The core area is 15 sq. miles and once supported a population of about 120,000.



It was magical walking around the ruins; some of us climbed the highest “Sky Palace” or Caana, where we had good looks at a perched Bat Falcon. Other birds seen throughout our time here were Collared and Slaty-tailed Trogon, a colony of Montezuma Oropendola with their nests—as well as the Giant Cowbirds who parasitise them. We had brief looks at a Keel-billed Toucan, and good looks at Band-backed Wren, spotted by Carol. It was interesting to try and imagine how life was back then. The site remains mostly unexcavated, it includes 5 plazas, an astronomic observatory, and over 35,000 buildings which have been identified.



Mid-afternoon we loaded up the van for the drive back. We had a little time to regroup before meeting for the usual cocktails and checklist at 6:30 PM.



Mon., Feb. 17 Hummingbird Highway | Blue Hole National Park | Lodge at Big Falls

Today we moved to another lodge; as we had just had three quite early mornings, we had a bit more time to pack up and have breakfast before hitting the road by 9 AM. Our drivers and guides for the day were Ferma and Noel. Along the way we made two stops at Herman's Blue Hole National Park—first at the cave entrance—St. Herman's Cave, where there are a few subspecies nesting Ridgeway Swallow; we saw these birds enter the cave and also fly around near the trail from the parking area. Along the trail leading to the cave we also saw Orange-billed Sparrow, Black-headed Trogon, White-bellied Emerald, and Black-cheeked Woodpecker. Also present were Yellow-throated Euphonia, and Yellow-breasted Chat. By the time we returned to the parking area we were hot, tired, and hungry, so we made our picnic lunch here at some tables under a canopy.

After lunch we drove a few minutes to the Blue Hole swimming "pool". Helen was in up to her knees in the water as soon as we got there. Over the pool we spotted a Sepia-capped Flycatcher, and a Red-legged Honeycreeper creeping around a palm tree. A bit later we had some migrant warblers and Ellen spotted a few Howler Monkeys—we had glimpses of these amazing creatures through the dense foliage. Here we also had a very cooperative White-whiskered Puffbird. Back at the entrance to the trail some of us got views of a Yellow-winged Tanager in the big trees. It seemed like the birds were starting to pick up a bit, but unfortunately, we had a long drive ahead....

We were on the road for almost three more hours, making one pit stop along the way. We arrived at our Lodge at Big Falls at dusk, met the owner and made it to our jungle rooms. At 7 PM, we all met by the bar, and some delicious appetizers were served, followed by a scrumptious dinner. Our guide for the next three days, Steven Choco, had dinner with us, and briefed us on the upcoming days. Off to bed and the sound of night creatures, including a Black-and-white Owl.

Tues., Feb. 18 Local Toledo District Birding

6 AM coffee this morning, we met with Steven and hung around the deck watching the sun rise. As the birds started singing, we walked by the river, seeing Bright-rumped Attila, two of them in a tall tree. Next we headed to the back field, where the bird activity picked up. Here we heard and saw Barred Antshrike—male and female and had good looks at both Black-headed and Grayish Saltator. Saltators are a type of Tanager that often consume flowers or leaves. The birding activity continued as we saw Rufous-breasted Spinetail, two species of Tityras, Masked and Black-crowned—and right behind the kitchen we had Slaty Antwren, Black-headed Trogon, and Olive-throated Parakeet. We saw these a few times as a flyover, but these were in a blooming tree eating blossoms, so we had much better looks.



After this productive morning we had breakfast around 8:30 AM, which was a wonderful buffet. We took a bit of a break, then went back out at 10 AM, loaded in the van and drove to Blue Creek Mayan village. Here we took a couple hours walking along the creek in the shade—so many birds! Olivaceous, Wedge-billed and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, female White-collared Manakin (with her bright orange legs), Lesson's Motmot, as well as some migrant warblers, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, Hooded, and Magnolia, which seemed to be the most common here. Also, along the trail we had Olive-backed Euphonia, we heard Gartered Trogon up and down the trail, but only at their very end did some of get brief looks at one. It was hot and we were all pretty tired as we sat down for a picnic lunch along the river, and the breeze picked up nicely. Some Mayan women had set up their handicrafts to sell, and we fed some skinny dogs. On a nearby trail, a female Rufous-tailed Hummingbird was found on a nest. On the way home we stopped by some open areas to scan for raptors. We saw a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk, a Merlin, and Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture.

We were back by 4 PM for a needed cool off swim! Time to relax, we met for drinks and check list at 6:30 PM with appetizers, dinner at 7 PM. Steven ate with us tonight, we were hearing the Black-and-white Owl again, and Steven went out by the pool and found it in the large "bird tree", he was able to show it to most of us.

Wed., Feb. 19 Nim Li Punit & San Felipe Hills

This morning we again had a 6 AM meet up for coffee, with departure shortly after for Nim Li Punit—a Mayan ruin. The name translates as The Big Hat. It was a beautiful overcast morning, and after a short half hour drive, we were at the ruins before 7 AM. The air was soft and cool as we birdied the parking lot and around the front of the museum—we saw Rose-throated Becard, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Boat-billed Kingbird, and had better looks at a Gartered Trogon. The ruins were empty as we were there before visitors, so we had the place to ourselves and it was magical. In the ruins we had Orioles and Brown Jays and good looks at a Lineated Woodpecker in the scope. There is a high overlook that scans the valley and some ponds below. After walking through the ruins, we went into the small museum, where they had some amazing stelae—including the longest in Belize and the second largest recovered in the Mayan region. It was a great morning and we headed back to the lodge for breakfast.

Breakfast as always was fresh and delicious with amazing fruit and especially the small local apple bananas. Some chose to stay back and relax after breakfast, while a group went out birding the grounds at 10:30 AM. It was quite hot and fairly quiet, still we saw Dusky Antbird, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, White-winged Becard, and Barred Antshrike; we checked the area for Bare-crowned Antbird, but it was not seen.



Next was lunch, we departed just after noon and arrived in San Felipe for a meal at the Ixcacao chocolate farm. We had a traditional Mayan meal which was fantastic! Chocolate coconut mole chicken, coconut rice, mixed sautéed vegetables, Kalaloo, black beans, fried plantains, and a tomato and cucumber salad. It was all local organic and very tasty. We had cocoa to drink, and afterward we had two types of chocolate liquor and many samples of a variety of chocolate to taste. A great meal at this family run place, we all checked out the small gift store as we left, many of us purchasing some type of chocolate items.

We were back to our lodge by 2:30 PM, swimming and relaxing. At 6:30 PM we again had appetizers and drinks as we did the checklist, followed by a wonderful dinner.

Thurs., Feb. 20 Monkey River | Sanctuary

This morning breakfast was at 6:45 AM, with a departure time of 7:30 AM to head to Mango Creek, about an hour away. Right after breakfast, Steven was excited by a song and ran out to the porch, he motioned to us and those interested followed him to the area behind the swimming pool. He was hearing a Bare-crowned Antbird, an elusive and very uncommon bird for Belize. With some patience we did manage to get decent views of a male through some dense brush near the ground. Then we loaded up in the van for the hour drive to the dock for our morning boat tour. After we were all settled in the boat, Rambo, our local guide zoomed us off along the coastline, making small forays into the mangroves here and there, but at times we were on the open water of the Caribbean Sea.

Along the way we saw Common Black-hawk, Bat Falcon, Merlin, Osprey, and lots of Little Blue Heron. After going up Monkey River, we stopped to walk in the Howler Monkey Preserve. We did see and hear some howlers,



even a mother with a baby, mostly lounging on tree branches. We also saw a Long-billed Hermit, a Northern Bentbill, Dusky Antbird, and a Yellow-bellied Elaenia. We also had a few bats, and back in the boat we saw a Mesoamerican Slider turtle. It was lunch time and we headed back to monkey river village, where we saw a lovely Bare-throated Tiger-heron. We docked and had lunch at Kazy's Kichen. It was simple fare, then some of went to look at the small market set up with handicrafts. We made the boat trip back, getting a few glimpses of Manatee snouts. We were back to our lodging by 3:30 PM, to swim, relax, and pack. We said our goodbyes to Steven Choco, who had been an excellent guide during our time at Big Falls.

Tonight, we had our last supper, it had been a full and interesting trip, and tomorrow most of us we were heading home.

Fri., Feb. 21 Departures

Two couples were staying on in Belize a bit longer, and some of us were heading home, all on various flights. After our last group breakfast, the first of our group departed, with others to follow shortly for our Tropic Air flights to Belize City and on home. We had had a memorable time together!

Photo Credits:

Caracol, Dodie Logue (DOLO); Larry at Big Falls, DOLO; Belize Zoo, DOLO; Ixcacao Chocolate farm, DOLO; Lineated Woodpecker, Tom Dove (TODO); Ceba Trees, DOLO; Mangrove Swallow, Gerold Morrison (GEMO); Jabiru, Peg Abbott (PEAB); Red-lore Parrot, Bob Hill (BOHI); Hidden Valley, DOLO; Chipping Sparrow, Sandy Sorkin; Black-headed Saltator, GEMO; King Vulture overlook, DOLO; Caracol day x3, DOLO; Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Greg Smith (GRSM); White-whiskered Puffbird, PEAB; Black-headed Trogon, PEAB; Nim Li Punit, DOLO; Monkey River, DOLO; Howler Monkey Preserve, DOLO.