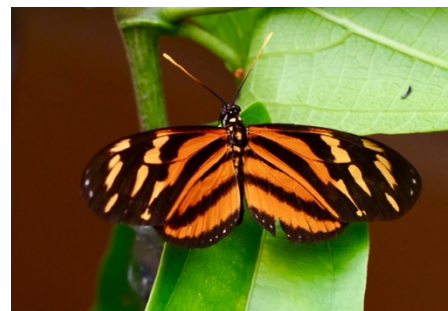
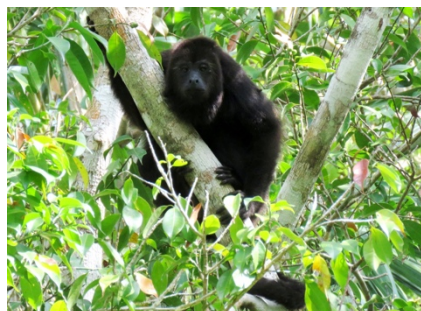


Belize: Green Season | Trip Report

July 17 – 24, 2021 | Written by Robert Gallardo



With Guide Robert Gallardo, and participants Angelo, Inara, Daniel, Leslie, William, Norita, Stephen, Susan, Richard and Elizabeth





Belize is a small country in Central America and is about the size of New Jersey. But small does not mean boring or less biodiversity. In fact, Belize has one of the highest percentages of forest cover in the region with large swaths of its landscape where the human footprint cannot be seen easily. Along with harboring a large portion of the Mesoamerican reef system it also has a large swath of lush rainforest where Jaguars and Scarlet Macaws still roam freely.

During this summer season tour we would revel in the presence of entirely resident birds with some nice mammal sightings and beautiful butterflies to boot as well. All while staying at two comfortable lodges with excellent cuisine. Habitats visited include lowland rainforest, pine-grass savannah and upland pine-oak forest.

Sat., July 17 Arrivals in Belize

Today everyone arrived in the late afternoon. At the boat ramp area, they saw Black Catbird, a regional specialty, and was a great way to start the trip. During the boat ride we also observed Scaled Pigeon, parrots, Laughing Falcon, and Purple Gallinule. After everyone got settled in, we had an orientation from the Lodge staff and dinner. We met Ruben and Vidal, the lodge guides, who would accompany us each day as we visited different sites in the area.

Sun., July 18 Lamanai Archaeological site | Nocturnal Boating | Mask Temple

After a hearty breakfast, we loaded up the boat and cruised over to the nearby Lamanai archaeological site with Ruben and Vidal. Along the shoreline near the ruins dock were numerous Limpkins, Northern Jacana and many Neotropical Cormorants. After an orientation at the ruins entrance, we started our walk down the forested trails that were lined with Mayan ruins covered with rainforest. An Ivory-billed Woodcreeper made a brief showing. Cohune Palms dominated much of the forest and the understory was dark. Bird activity was quiet until we reached the Mask Temple where there was a burst of activity. A pair of White-necked Puffbirds were excavating a nest inside an arboreal termite colony. Right behind us was a lovely Royal Flycatcher that was continuously sallying out for bugs but would often land on the same vine. A Pale-billed Woodpecker also decided to make a showing at the same spot as well as Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias. The place was hoppin'! On another large liana was a pair of the stunning Rufous-tailed Jacamar and behind it a Plain Xenops was foraging. It seemed like the birds wouldn't allow us to see the ruins themselves. The activity at that temple eventually slowed down and Ruben gave a brief interpretation of the temple. We got our first look at Lesson's Motmot before moving on. We visited numerous temples and observed other birds including Gartered, Black-headed, and Slaty-tailed Trogons. At one point a pair of the giant and majestic King Vultures flew over. We also saw numerous, Black-cowled Orioles which is a Caribbean slope lowland species. By the end of the walk, we had



detected a nice set of birds. Our boat arrived to pick us up and on the return ride we saw a perched Roadside Hawk in a distant tree and a white phase Short-tailed Hawk.

We had lunch, followed by some downtime. After a brief burst of rain, we decided to stay close to the Lodge and took a walk on the grounds toward the airstrip. A group of Plain Chachalaca, including immatures, fed quietly on palm fruits which is the opposite of the noisy calls we often hear. We also saw the first of many Squirrel Cuckoos that would be found on the trip. Some distant Red-lored Parrots were already on their way to a roost site, and we were strafed by a flock of forty White-fronted Parrots. Barred Antshrikes seemed to everywhere and we got great views of a calling male, decorated in his inmate outfit. We also got good views of Mangrove Vireo which often stay hidden deep within dense foliage.

A large group of White-nosed Coatis strolled across the path, including many toddlers and teenagers. After dinner we set off for our nocturnal river trip. It didn't take long until we found a large (close to 10ft.) Morelet's Crocodile and roosting Green Iguanas in the foliage. Along the near side of the river we also spotted a couple of Common Pauraques and our first of several Yucatan Nightjars. We continued down the channel and Ruben spotted another secretive bird, an adult and young Least Bittern. Down a small channel we found two Russet-naped Wood-rails that were roosting high in a tree adjacent to the water. Later, we would see three more in a tangle. Now that's something one doesn't see every day! Then there were the roosting Green, Ringed and American Pygmy-Kingfishers—talk about awesome. And to top off the night we had a male Snail Kite, a Northern Potoo on a hunting perch and a roosting Sunbittern, the latter complete with its checkered feet. It was nothing less than an incredible evening and worth every minute we spent on the water.

Mon., July 19 Lamanai Outpost Lodge

This morning we got together at the crack of dawn. Reason being was that we were heading over across the river to explore the natural pine-grass savannahs in search of numerous regional endemics. We had muffins and coffee, then were on our way. In no time, we were in a side channel and quickly reached a spot where we would get out and walk. The savannas are filled with Caribbean pine, oaks, palmetto palms, calabash, and craboo trees (*Byrsonima crassifolia*) as well as low-lying shrubs. There are grasses, sedges and a nice variety of small wildflowers. The overall openness allowed for some great viewing opportunities, especially with spotting scopes.

It wasn't long before a Buff-bellied Hummingbird came by as it fed on some wildflowers. We had a short and light rain shower and after it passed, the bird activity really started to pick up. Some Red-lored Amazons came by, then we had a pair of the regionally endemic Yellow-headed Parrot which perched off in the distance. A while later another pair flew by, but much closer, and we were afforded great views. The haunting calls of a Collared Forest-Falcon echoed in the distance. A bit down the trail, there was an open area predator; four White-tailed Hawks, including two immatures. Yucatan Woodpeckers, another regional endemic, were also observed as well as a pair of the stunning Vermilion Flycatcher, a resident of this habitat in the region. We were



also pleased to see four Plain-breasted Ground Doves which is the smallest species in the area and can often be a difficult one to find anywhere. Fork-tailed Flycatchers graced us with their presence and long, trailing tail feathers. Some not-so-showy, yet important species we also found, included the Botteri's, Grasshopper, and Olive Sparrows which all represent local breeding populations. We also came across a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher which represents a local breeding population and will likely represent an entirely separate species. To nearly top off our list of regional endemics, were two pair of the Black-throated Bobwhite which occurs in this habitat in the Yucatan Peninsula and reappears in eastern Honduras and northeastern Nicaragua. And another species we found, almost seemingly out of place, was a male Northern Cardinal. We thought we had wrapped up an incredible morning of birding until we got in the boat to return to the lodge when we found the stunning, Black-collared Hawk.

We returned to the Lodge for breakfast. Afterwards, most of the group wanted to stay and relax at the Lodge, but a few of us decided to go on the ruins walk that led to the old sugar mill, Spanish church then back to the lodge. We boated over to the Lamanai site and were dropped off. Just as we were getting ready to leave the ruins, something interesting was spotted trotting down the road. It was three Tayras and they were coming right toward us. We were able to get brief, but good views before they disappeared down another trail. What a great way to start the walk.

We reached an old sugar mill that the rainforest was slowly devouring, and Ruben related some historical information. The surrounding forests were crawling with birds from the beginning. We got good looks at both White bellied and Spot-breasted Wrens, as well as Yellow-billed Cacique. Some smaller army ants were attracting numerous birds and a Northern Barred Woodcreeper showed well. At two different spots we got good looks at multiple Red-legged Honeycreepers and female White-collared Manakins. One of the most stunning birds we saw was a pair of Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers. A few tiny species we caught up to were Northern Bentbill, Long-billed Gnatwren, and Tawny-crowned Greenlet. These rainforest denizens can often be hard to see, but we got good looks at all of them. The sighting of a male Blue Bunting toward the end of the forested trail was a great way to end an incredible walk and the ruins of an old Spanish church were a reminder of when civilizations clashed.

After some downtime we had a late afternoon sunset cruise on the river. The warm air, light breeze, and a sky dotted with puffy clouds (coupled with some cocktails) was a great way to end our visit to Lamanai.



Tues., July 20 Lamanai Outpost Lodge | New River Boat Transfer | Black Rock Lodge

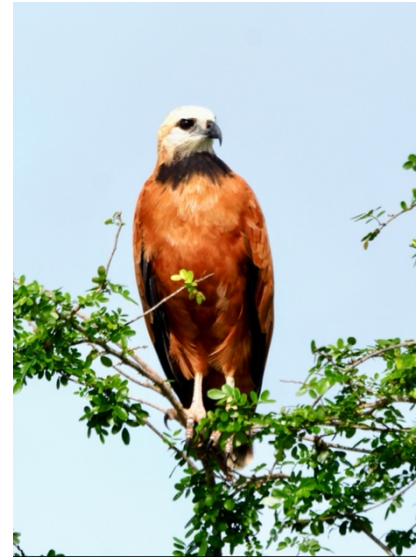
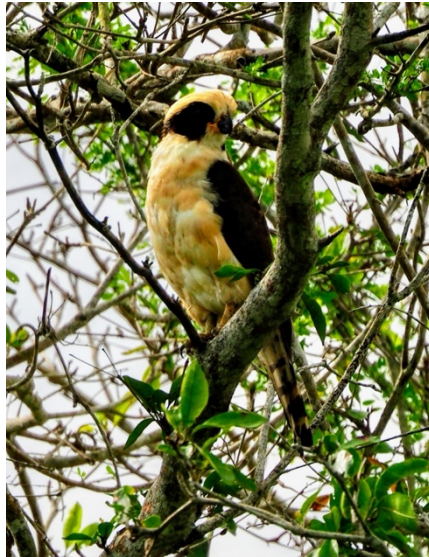
We had an early breakfast this morning and said 'goodbye' to Lamanai, wrapping up an excellent visit to this unique part of Belize set against rainforest, savannahs, a river, and ruins. We loaded the boat and made our way back to the boat landing. En route we saw many of the familiar birds that were observed on the previous days, but we also found a Roseate Spoonbill and an Aplomado Falcon soaring very high; the latter inhabiting savannah-type areas in the region. We reached the landing and were shortly on our way back to the airport. We thanked Ruben and Vidal for their excellent service, keen eyes, (and ears) and knowledge.

At the Lamanai office we were met by Isaias (Chi) who would be our local guide during our stay at the Black Rock Lodge. We made our way to the nearby Belize City Zoo, where we were able to learn about many of the rescued animals that are found there. After lunch there we were on our way again and made the 1 ½ hour drive to the lodge which is nestled in a steep canyon filled with rainforest. As we approached the lodge, we could see the limestone cliffs that loomed in the distance. This is an area where the endangered, Orange-breasted Falcon, is known to nest and would be one of the birds we were going to look for.

Upon arrival, we were greeted with a welcome drink and an orientation to the lodge. The Macal River far below the dining area and facing limestone cliffs would be our backdrop during meals for the next several days. Right off the bat we had our first two new birds for the trip on a feeder; a Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, which seems to prefer this type of habitat in the region and a very obliging Emerald Toucanet that was perched close by. We had time for a later afternoon bird walk and found Piratic Flycatcher, Short-billed Pigeon, Yellow-winged Tanagers, flocks of Mealy Parrot and Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts.

Wed., July 21 Black Rock | Belize Botanical Gardens

Our first morning at Black Rock consisted of a pre-breakfast walk, part way down the entrance road. The Cecropia trees in the parking lot were bustling with activity and we saw Yellow-winged & Blue-gray Tanagers, Red-legged Honeycreepers and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. Chi found a low hanging nest of the migrant Yellow-green Vireo and it contained one chick. Close to the lodge we had three of the giant Pale-billed Woodpeckers that foraged not far above us. Close to twenty of the graceful Swallow-tailed Kites were seen along a nearby ridgeline as they started to catch thermals and continue their migration southward. Down the road we also had a good look at the tiny Tawny-crowned Greenlet, and at the end of the walk a Tody Motmot teased us from within the forest, so we would try to catch up with it later at a different spot.



After breakfast we strolled down a nearby trail that paralleled the Macal River. At one point there was a Russet-naped Wood-rail that foraged on food thrown out for chickens by a house and was chased away by a hen. A pair of falcons were spotted perched atop a dead palm and turned out to be Bat Falcons. As we were returning to the lodge a pair of Ornate Hawk-Eagle was spotted soaring high above the river. Not long after that Chi spotted another prized bird; it was a pair of Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle in a giant Kapok tree high up on the forested slope. They had nested there previously, and it appears they would nest there again. This is one of the most difficult bird-of-prey to see in the region, so we took ample time to see them in the scope. During lunch Pete spotted a Black Hawk-Eagle soaring against the cliff. Getting all three species of hawk-eagle in one morning is quite the feat!

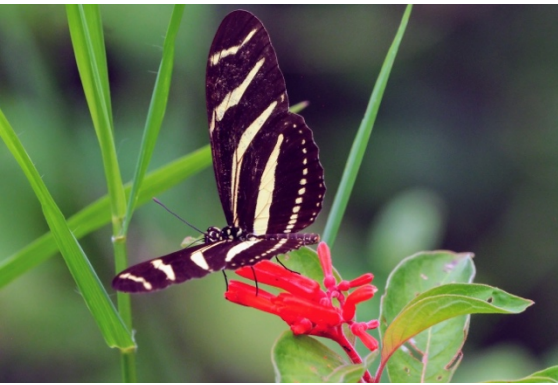
We also saw some nice butterflies including the Pixie (*Melanis pixie*), Sky-blue Hairstreak (*Pseudolycaena damo*) and Blue Morpho (*Morpho helenor*).

After lunch we went down the road a bit and visited the Belize Botanical Gardens. We received an informative tour by a knowledgeable young man named Rudy who showed us a wide variety of plants and their various uses. Naturally there were birds there as well and we got to see another Royal Flycatcher, Green-backed Sparrow, Golden-Olive Woodpecker and another Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle. It was a nice way to end a great day.

Thurs., July 22 El Pilar Maya Site | Aguacate Lagoon

Today was another action-packed day, as we explored a couple of different sites away from Black Rock. We first went to El Pilar archaeological site that sits on the Guatemalan border. However, we had some great bird action before we got there. Chi spotted a Great Black-Hawk dive into the forest so we stopped to see if it would return, and it did. Robert then spotted something perched atop a snag on a far ridgeline, and through the scope we determined it to be a male, Orange-breasted Falcon which is one of the prize sightings for this region. It then came racing toward us to meet another larger falcon (the female) and there was a brief interaction before they raced back toward the perch on the far ridge. During a couple of briefer stops we saw a male Blue-black Grosbeak, a pair of the typically shy Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher and the resident Golden-crowned Warbler.

On the back side of the ruins, we had a nice mixed flock that included Greenish Elaenia, Yucatan Flycatcher, a female Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, Lesser Greenlet and Red-legged Honeycreepers. Oddly enough, behind them a Northern Tamandua descended a large limb and disappeared. The uncommon Eye-ringed Flatbill was also observed as well as a pair of the diminutive Stub-tailed Spadebill. Toward the end of the walk, we came across two Tody Motmots that stayed almost out of sight down a steep slope, but some of the guests were able



to get a look. Closer to the van was a pair of the large Mealy Parrot that fed on some ripening fruits. Having the chance to see them so close and not fly off is quite unusual, but we were very glad they stayed.

After such an exciting morning everyone was ready for lunch, and we ate at a local diner in a Mennonite town. A female Vermilion Flycatcher was nesting in a tiny tree at the edge of the parking lot. Afterwards, we went to the nearby Aguacate lagoons to see what was stirring. It was warm so there wasn't much bird action, but Robert did find the bizarre Helmeted Basilisk as he searched for an elusive Tody Motmot deep within the forest. Chi caught it for everyone to see and photograph as it is quite rare to find one during daylight hours. We returned to the lodge and at the turnoff a family of Crested Caracaras perched in a coconut tree and was a great way to end another exciting day in Belize.

Fri., July 23 Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve

On our last full day, we explored an entirely different area and habitat. We drove to Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve, which is a low-lying massif of pine-oak habitat mixed with some broadleaf tree species. Our first stop at a visitor center was met with a brief spatter of rain, but that didn't deter us. We wandered down a road and were rewarded with a lot of bird activity. Chi heard the familiar song of the Gray-throated Chat, a regional endemic, and from deep within the brush appeared a young male. We also heard the song of the Carolina Wren which may someday be split. A couple of Rufous-capped Warblers also made an appearance which represented one of four resident wood-warblers we would encounter on this trip. We also came across a nice flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks, a species that typically inhabits lowland broadleaf forest in other countries.

Further up the road, Chi spotted something perched in a tree, so we stopped. It turned out to be a young Plumbeous Kite! Soon after, one of its parents arrived. We stopped at a promising spot, the place was literally hopping and crawling with birds. The first to appear was a pair of the handsome and large Rusty Sparrow. Then the trees started to fill with Chipping Sparrow, Grace's Warblers, and many Hepatic Tanagers. A snazzy Azure-crowned Hummingbird also came in to check out the commotion. Behind us was a Brown-crested Flycatcher "whip"ing away.

Our next stop was a brief visit to a research station where a group of scientists are undertaking flora and fauna studies of all



sorts. There, we met Lee Jones, author of the *Birds of Belize*, who gave us a brief overview of what they're doing. We also couldn't help but notice five Blue Ground-Doves walking around in plain sight. Those males are quite the stunners!

We continued and took another road with an overlook of a 1,000 ft. (in reality 1,600ft.) waterfall. It was quite impressive and very scenic. Off on the far ridge Daniel spotted something on a snag and it turned out to be another Orange-breasted Falcon. It sometimes nests right alongside the waterfall on a ledge. We scoured the canyons in search of soaring birds and eventually found a pair of distant White Hawks. We had a wonderful picnic lunch then had to leave as some ominous black clouds were promising rain and would have made getting out of there a bit difficult.

We kept on searching for more birds along the ridgeline. One that we really wanted to see was the Black-headed Siskin and we did catch up to a small flock before we got a nice rain shower or as Chi puts it, 'a gift from the heavens.' As we were descending the mountain, we also found the stunning Golden-hooded Tanager and some shy Yellow-backed Orioles. What a morning it turned out to be!

We descended the mountain and our final stop for the day was the Green Hills Butterfly Ranch. This is a working butterfly farm that exports pupae to N. America and Europe. We received a tour of the facilities and they showed us how they rear a variety of species. There were also hummingbird feeders that drew in a crowd of colorful species including Violet Sabrewing, Green-breasted Mango, White-necked Jacobin and Long-billed Hermit.

As we approached the lodge Chi heard a familiar sound through the noise of the AC and closed windows! It turned out to be several Green Jays, and we were rewarded with good looks of them. It was a great way to end the day and a wonderful trip.

We recorded a total of 223 species of birds which is a good number taking into consideration that migrants from North America were virtually absent.

An overall favorite bird was the Boat-billed Heron that was seen at eye level as we were leaving the Lamanai area.



Photo Credits:

Morning at Black Rock, Robert Gallardo (RG); Emerald Toucanet, Leslie Williams (LW); Squirrel Cuckoo, LW; Scenic, LW; Tropical Pewee, LW; Yucatan Howler, RG; Ringed Kingfisher, RG; Isabella's Longwing, LW; Azure-crowned Hummingbird, LW; Silver Emperor, LW; Boat-billed Heron, LW; Northern Nessaea, LW; Savanna birding group, RG; Malachite, LW; Roadside Hawk, RG; Laughing Falcon, LW; Mealy Parrot, RG; White-necked Puffbird, LW; Butterfly Zebra Longwing, LW; Proboscis Bat, RG; Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, RG; Blue-beak Grosbeak, LW.