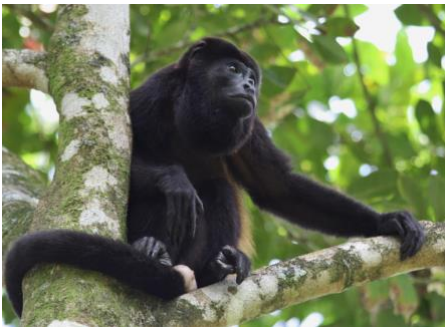


# Belize: Birding & Nature | Trip Report

## Oct. 2-9, 2021 | by James P. Smith



With guide James P. Smith, and participants Beverly, Cynthia, David, David, Dawn, Jessie, Margaret, Mark, Mary, Mike, Nate, and Wendy.



A highly successful green season trip and a much-needed tonic for those that hadn't been overseas since lockdown began in March 2020. For most on the tour it was their first international adventure in 18 months and the wildlife duly delivered with an *"off the charts"* sighting of a Jaguar at Lamanai less than 24 hours after setting foot in Belize! The remainder of the tour fell neatly into place as our group enjoyed two beautifully appointed eco lodges hosted by friendly, hospitable staff. Naturally, Covid protocols were strictly adhered to but ultimately proved to be no hindrance to our time Belize. In short, it was simply wonderful to be in Belize!



**Sat., Oct, 2**

## **Arrivals Belize City | New River | Lamanai Outpost Lodge**

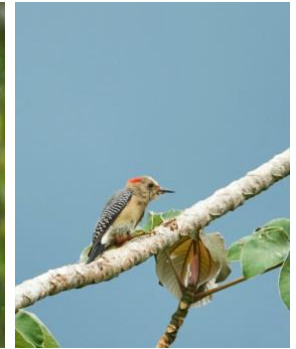
Members on the tour arrived on five different flights from the US and all reported a relatively smooth transition through customs and immigration in Belize City. Outside the terminal we were greeted by the wonderfully warm muggy air, typical of the tropics in 'green season'. Ruben and Christian, our enthusiastic yet relaxed guides from Lamanai Outpost Lodge, awaited us. The spread of flight arrival times meant the forming of two separate groups with the earlier arrivals being escorted by Ruben and later arrivals being met by Christian. And so, the early arrivals headed out with Ruben for a short afternoon visit to the Caribbean Shrimp Company, the only organic shrimp farm in the country. On leaving the airport some familiar species included several Turkey Vultures, Great-tailed Grackles and our first Vermilion Flycatcher, the latter perched on a fence just as we turned out from the airport. All of these were trumped by rather excellent views of a pair of hunting White-tailed Hawks within minutes of the airport – not too shabby!

Ruben drove down a myriad of bumpy back roads before reaching the shrimp farm where we received a warm welcome from Rob the site owner. A series of impoundments holding varying amounts of water hosted a fine array of water birds; Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, Great and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeer, Spotted, Least and Western Sandpipers, Willets and Black-necked Stilts. Ruben was especially keen to make sure that we noted the two Double-crested Cormorants fishing at close range. How right he was because, we'd ultimately encounter lots of Neotropic Cormorants over the following week, but these proved to be the only Double-crested Cormorants of the entire tour! We enjoyed a packed lunch and cold beverages in the shade overlooking impoundments while being serenaded by singing Tropical Mockingbirds and calling Tropical Kingbirds. Green Iguanas chowed down on the leafy vegetation in and a Ruben brilliantly spotted a Striped Basilisk basking against a thick tree trunk. It was warm, sunny and felt good to be back in the tropics! An all-too-short visit to the shrimp farm ended abruptly when Ruben suddenly signaled it was time to head out and rendezvous with the second half of group before embarking on the steady drive towards Carmelita and the Lamanai Adventures dock on the banks New River. After informal introductions we pulled out onto the open water, Ruben at the helm, Christian assisting. Both men are seasoned guides from Lamamai Outpost Lodge, Ruben having nearly 20 years of local guiding experience behind him. The New River would take us all the way to the lodge and happens to be the longest river within Belize borders and flows into



Chetumal Bay. It was so named by the Brits who opened the area to Mahogany logging and wanted to differentiate between this and the Old River that flows through Belize City. The 22-mile boat ride up river began with the kingfishers among the very first birds noted; Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers all appeared in rapid succession. Conspicuous and noisy along the route, Tropical Kingbirds and Social Flycatchers teed up everywhere on bare limbs and branches in the riverside vegetation. Indeed, the riverside thickets held multiple surprises with notably good views of Boat-billed and Yellow-crowned Herons, Anhinga, Roadside Hawk, a pair of Bat Falcons, Osprey and the first of many Neotropic Cormorants. Throughout the ride numbers of Mangrove Swallows flicked above the surface of the water and lanky, brightly colored Northern Jacanas trotted across lilies and floating vegetation. As we neared Lamanai the New River widened significantly and a flock of four locally rare Sandwich Terns flew over the boat just as the sun was setting. They were the only terns seen on the entire tour! Gazing toward the 'hills' at our west, Ruben informed us that we were actually viewing a series of Mayan Temples hidden by woodland, in fact, the whole of the Lamamai Archeological site!

Karen, our host for the next three days, was at the dock to greet us and Ruben led the way to our comfortable, spacious, thatched cabanas. Above, quite literally overhead, Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys chewed on (and dropped!) Avocados. After settling in we gathered in the main dining room and bar for welcome drinks (the margaritas were a hit!) where Karen gave an excellent briefing about the lodge, the logistics and what our expectations should be from spending the next three nights in the jungle! Dinner was an absolute delight and most welcome after a long day of travel; Empanadas De Paola for starters, a main course of Quinceanios Relleno followed by Coconut Cream Pie for those prepared to tackle dessert! We were the only guests on site and relaxed in a friendly, mellow atmosphere before heading off to our cozy cabanas for a well-deserved night's rest.



**Sun., Oct. 3**

## **Lamanai Savannah | Dawson Creek | Lamanai Outpost Lodge**

The day dawned overcast and muggy. Evidently most of our party had been woken by the unearthly growls of Yucatan Black Howlers right over the cabanas just before 5am – no need to set an alarm at Lamanai! As it happened it worked out well as Ruben had plans for an early morning start with fresh coffee and homemade Blueberry muffins waiting in the dining room before we met at the dock at 05:45am. The overnight storms left some menace in the dawn sky and the sun peaked through giant thunderheads as we headed out across New River Lagoon toward Dawson Creek and Lamanai Savannah. A Morelet's Crocodile highlighted the crossing and Ruben pointed out a calling Yucatan Woodpecker, but it wasn't until we moored at the savannah that bird activity picked up with small flocks of Red-lored and White-fronted Parrots, and Olive-throated Parakeets passing overhead and a couple of Buff-bellied Hummingbirds buzzing around the dock area. Tropical Kingbirds seemed to be everywhere as we embarked on the roughly one-mile loop moving deeper into the savannah where stunning Fork-tailed Flycatchers provided interesting comparisons with newly arrived migrant Eastern Kingbirds, 'fresh in' from North America. Pockets of familiar North American migrants included American Redstarts, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Tennessee and Black-and-white Warblers and an abundance of Yellow Warblers. Vermilion Flycatchers, including a couple of much appreciated of gaudy males, put on a nice show as did a migrant Eastern Wood Pewee. Local species closely associated grassland savannah included great views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, a couple of Botteri's Sparrows and an exquisite Azure-crowned Hummingbird. Ruben mentioned that Lamanai Savannah had been inhabited and grazed by a herd of wild horses, apparently escapees after a hurricane some years prior. As we walked back to the docking area Black, Turkey and Lesser Yellow-head Vultures rode on the increasingly warm thermals and a fine group of half-a-dozen migrating Purple Martins passed overhead. There was also a vocal Boat-billed Flycatcher, very much a kiskadee look-alike and best identified by its distinctive voice.

As we cruised down Dawson Creek, our boat fully loaded with 12 participants and three guides, not even the most experienced of leaders could've anticipated what was to happen next. An Ivory-billed Woodcreeper looked large and rufous in bounding flight as it bolted across the water but, as we rounded a wide point in the creek, a commotion in the water just ahead drew everyone's attention. It was a large mammal, and it was swimming



right to left across the water. First impressions of it looked stocky and heavy headed, sandy-yellow in tone with black patterned rosettes all over the upper body - the penny dropped and the cry went out.... "JAGUAR!!!". Within seconds the magnificent beast had crossed the creek, hauled its soaking bulk out onto the nearest muddy bank and disappeared into the brush.... wow!! And again, wow!! It was all over in seconds but even so, and it's very much a cliché, but in those moments, time really did seem to stand still. Even the photographers on board froze and watched in awe...not a single picture of the Jaguar was taken! Ruben, senior guide at Lamanai and actively guiding in the area for some 20 years, said it was his first ever Jaguar sighting in Dawson Creek! For the group, having just landed at Belize City Airport less than 24 hours earlier the sighting was well, in Peg Abbott's words, "off the charts". Jaguar on the first morning was an impossible act to follow. As we cruised out of the creek and back into New River Lagoon, Pale-vented Pigeons, a Snail Kite and a Black-cowled Oriole all vied for attention. Ruben tried in vain to find the resident White-throated Flycatchers known to be present along Dawson Creek though we did hear Mangrove Cuckoo and a Black Catbird, but the morning, if not the whole day, belonged to one very special large feline! Remarkably, despite it feeling much later in the day, we were back at the Lamanai dining room in good time for a late breakfast where Karen and Nancy served Huevos Rancheros, sausage and stew beans – delicious!

The buildup of clouds looked heavy and threatening after breakfast which, combined with the early morning start, encouraged some in our party to take it easy before lunch. The rest of the group remained close to the lodge and were rewarded by an hour of excellence close to the staff quarters. Careful checking through every movement in the understory gave an impressive tally of species. Some, such as Golden-fronted and Pale-billed Woodpeckers, and a Dusky-capped Flycatcher were quite bold, while others including Lesser Greenlet, Spot-breasted Wren, Yellow-billed Cacique, Hooded Warbler and Green-backed Sparrow were far more skulking but every bit as enjoyable to work with. A fine variety of tanagers appeared too with Summer, Blue-gray and Yellow-winged Tanagers all on view, as well as Red-billed and Pale-vented Pigeons, and White-tipped Doves. There was even a perched Green Kingfisher taking it easy amid the Cecropia trees, perhaps taking a snooze after a heavy meal or maybe anticipating the heavy rainstorm that was about to come. Ruben's timing was perfect as we scurried back to the dining room and watched the rain come down like gangbusters! Lunch was impossible to fault; sour sop juice, an exquisite spinach dip with tortilla chips followed by Lamanai Fajita...plus house made carrot cake for dessert - simply delicious. We hadn't known Ruben for long but his penchant for getting things right was beginning to form a pattern. The heavy rain that persisted from lunch deep into siesta time had



cleared by the time we met for a late afternoon bird walk, just as Ruben said it would. We began in the lodge grounds and then walked out onto a wide dirt track, what Ruben called the “airfield road”. The habitat proved to be a nice mix of tall grass savannah along the forest edge. Along the way Ruben pointed out the rather dramatic Provision Tree and Bird of Paradise Flowers. After the rain many birds were active despite it being late in the day. The almost comical ‘yaffle’ of Barred Antshrikes was a near-constant coming the low scrub with both male and female showing themselves well. Above the track, an impressively large Squirrel Cuckoo performed nicely as did Black-headed and Grayish Saltators. And for the notebooks, Ruben was quick to remind us of the very recent (summer 2021) taxonomic change on the latter now named Cinnamon-bellied Saltator after a three-way split from the former Grayish Saltator with Cinnamon-bellied being the only one of the three present in Central America - nice and easy to identify! Smaller passerines included great looks at a female Red-capped Manakin, several Morelet’s Seedeaters and plenty of wintering Magnolia Warblers though the latter proved especially tricky to see well. On entering a more mature belt of woodland we were treated to our first proper views of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys where we found a large troop basking and hanging out, occasionally calling. Standing quietly in the same spot we were treated to a whole host of secretive woodland species including an excellent Smokey-brown Woodpecker, a couple of Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, and furtive woodland skulkers such as Yellow-olive Flycatcher and a Slate-headed Tody-flycatcher! We did see two Black-headed Trogons slipping away through the forest but good views of those would have to wait until the following day.....

We wrapped up a brilliant first full day with more drama as Ruben spotlighted a Kinkajou foraging in the palms right by the dining room. It was a ‘lifer’ mammal for many in the group and an interesting species more closely related to raccoons but with a prehensile tail, often mistaken for a monkey and known locally as a ‘night walker’. Ruben then led the bird and mammal list followed by dinner, the third glorious meal of the day and another triumph; Tortilla soup followed by Caribbean Shrimp & rice, and Mango Cheesecake for dessert.



**Mon., Oct. 4**

**Lamanai Outpost Lodge | Lamanai Archeological Reserve | Dawson Creek Cocktail Cruise | New River Night Safari**

The day dawned cloudy, muggy and calm. Although we'd scheduled breakfast for 7am there was enough early morning light for a short visit to the Lamanai boat dock overlooking New River Lagoon. Ruddy Crakes called from the reeds and a surprise Muscovy Duck flew upriver as well as several spectacular lines of White Ibis and Snowy Egrets dispersing from their respective roosts. Mangrove Swallows hawked for insects around the dock and perched on the moored boats, and several Keel-billed Toucans flew around the grounds of the lodge.

After a hearty 'Belizian Breakfast' we boarded the boat and headed down river for the five-minute trip to Lamanai Archeological reserve. Neotropic Cormorants and a Little Blue Heron greeted us at the dock. Our guide, once again, was Ruben and we'd barely entered the reserve before his introductory talk was rather rudely interrupted by a family party of 3 or 4 Tayras bounding through the park between the boulders and ruins. Tayra is a giant member of the weasel family, an impressive beast and the largest of the '*Mustelids*'. Indeed, the color morph occurring in Belize is the rather attractive blond-headed form confined to Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. Although the Tayras were fast moving, we all enjoyed reasonable views and notched the second top quality mammal sighting in as many days! Once inside the reserve we visited the museum after which Ruben and Christian guided us around the grounds, a site of roughly two square miles where six temples had been excavated to date and yet, apparently, a further 727 temples remain unearthed! Formerly, the site covered some ten square miles harboring a civilization of some 40,000 – 50, 000 people. Early construction at the site dates back to 100 BC but a prolonged drought around 950 AD decimated most of the population, some of the survivors fleeing to Costa Rica. Incidentally, Lamanai, means 'submerged crocodile' in the Maya language.



We visited the Mask Temple first where, rather appropriately, a Masked Tityra was one of the bird species to be seen along with a cooperative Yellow-throated Vireo, a Lineated Woodpecker and for the mammal enthusiasts a bold, inquisitive, White-nosed Coati! Some members of the group were invited to climb up the side of the Mask Temple, no easy undertaking on a humid day, but Mark literally bounded straight up the front like a mountain goat! Back on the trails, a male Black-headed Trogon showed much better than the previous day, and we added Gartered and Slaty-tailed Trogons to our collection, all in one morning! There was also a remarkably cooperative male Red-capped Manakin at High Temple and Yucatan Black Howlers were seen and heard throughout much of the morning, seemingly happiest around the museum and gift shop area. A small feeding flock of passerines there included Yellow-throated and Black-and-white Warblers and a Red-eyed Vireo. As we waited for our boat ride back to the lodge, Little Blue Heron and Limpkin were spotted foraging in the shallows, a Bat Falcon teed up for the longest time and Ruben spotted a Gray Hawk which proved to be the first of the tour.

A slightly belated lunch began with chips and salsa washed down with exceptionally refreshing hibiscus juice, followed by beef enchiladas, Spanish rice and garden salad.....dessert was delicious house made banana bread! Late afternoon found us back at the Lamanai boat dock for a Sunset Cocktail cruise. Ruben at the helm, Christian spotting and Nancy at the bar serving cocktails, beers and beverages of choice. After the previous day's Jaguar sighting, we could only think of one place and cruised across the New River Lagoon to the soothing tranquility of Dawson Creek...it was simply lovely! While there was to be no repeat Jaguar, we did enjoy close views of Green Kingfisher, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture (perched), Yucatan Woodpecker and a close, bright Prothonotary Warbler, neatly photographed by Nate and Mike. A Mangrove Vireo was enticed close to the boat, the only sighting of the species for the whole tour. Bare-throated Tiger-heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Boat-billed and Green Herons were all spotted and as dusk approached long lines of Cattle Egrets flew upriver towards their roosts just as a large flock of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks gathered in their favorite roost tree along with several Greats Egrets.



We returned to the Outpost Lodge at dusk with plans for an earlier than average dinner but still found plenty of time to catch up on the day's bird list and sightings. Dinner was yet another triumph with black bean soup and dinner rolls, Outpost Chicken Tamales and scrumptious Lamanai Lime pie for dessert! Then it was back down to the dock for a Ruben led night safari....by boat! It had become easy to take Ruben's boating skill for granted but, not only did he navigate the channels and river edges with ease, but his penchant for bird finding at night was something to behold. The trip opened with several giant Fishing Bats hawking low over the water behaving much like terns or nightjars, indeed it would have been easy to mistake them for birds had it not been for Ruben's spotlighting skills and we were fortunate to see at least one grab a small fish with its feet. The dock at Lamanai Archeological reserve provided a roosting spot for a very obliging Common Parakeet, its placement on the dock offering exceptional views for us at eye level. Then, as we sauntered through an overgrown creek things really got interesting; a pair of roosting Great Curassows right overhead, perched Green, Belted and American Pygmy Kingfishers, a stunning male Sun Grebe and even another Prothonotary Warbler! We continued to explore the woodland edge finding Russet-naped Woodrails aplenty, seemingly totally unconcerned by our close presence, offering fabulous views. As the trip went on, we couldn't help but marvel at Ruben's ability to navigate the narrow-overgrown waterways and spot birds at the same time. The truly nocturnal/crepuscular species came towards the end with 3 – 4 Northern Potoos and a Yucatan Nightjar seen perched and in flight. A Least Bittern clambering around the reeds was a surprise and, despite being buried in the reeds, Ruben again did his best to have most the group see the bird well. As we cruised back to the lodge in darkness, Fishing Bats and Proboscis Bats flying around us, Ruben switched off the spotlight and simply admired the staggering constellations above. With virtually no light pollution to speak of, being out on the New River Lagoon gazing up at the brilliance of the night sky was pure magic.



**Tues., Oct. 5**

## **Lamanai Outpost Lodge | Indian Church | Blue Creek | Chan Chich Lodge**

For those not sleeping well, the joy of spending the first few minutes of the day on the Lamanai boat dock was a treat. The early morning hustle and bustle of birds leaving roost sites along the New River was thrilling, and this morning Nate spotted a Neotropical Otter as flocks of Cattle Egrets, White Ibis and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks started their day. Along the heavily vegetated shoreline we picked out such gems as Keel-billed Toucan, Melodious Blackbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow-billed Cacique, Yellow-throated and Magnolia Warblers, Least Flycatcher and Groove-billed Ani. Several pairs of Red-lore Parrots screeched as they flew over the lodge and busy flocks of Orange-chinned Parakeets flew about the camp as well. A final Lamanai breakfast consisted of Grapefruit juice, Scrambled eggs, beans, bacon and flour tortillas.

At 8am we met for a casual birding walk from the lodge up through Indian Church Village, home for many of the staff working at the lodge. The early part of the walk featured a nice male, Black-cowled Oriole, a male Blue Bunting, and fine views of a perched Gray Hawk. Indeed, raptors became a major feature of the morning as several species rose on warm air thermals neatly illuminated against the first really blue skies that we'd seen since arriving. A major surprise came in the form of an Apolmado Falcon sparring with an immature Black Hawk-eagle and several Black and Turkey Vultures. Indian Church Village seemed quite sleepy in mid-morning, but we certainly enjoyed seeing a little of village life, and got the chance to see Ruben's two-year old son - that was a real treat! Great Kiskadees were seen and heard in the village, and we got to learn the call differences between Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds, otherwise the two species couldn't be safely separable by sight alone.



Overhead, raptors continued to entertain with magnificent views of an adult King Vulture right over us along with a Bat Falcon, a superb White-tailed Hawk, a rather more distant Roadside Hawk and an Ornate Hawk-eagle. Even a soaring Wood Stork could be seen enjoying the thermals. Closer to the lodge we enjoyed calling Melodious Blackbirds, a couple of Baltimore Orioles and a fantastic, perched White-collared Puffbird! With a long journey planned for the afternoon, Ruben gave a generous amount of time for packing before a final Lamanai lunch of Spinach dip (delicious!) and Log Cutter's Pasties & fries. We said our goodbyes to guides Ruben & Christian, and lodge staff Karen and Nancy all of whom had all looked after us with warmth, generosity and humor. It was certainly hard to imagine that the lodge had been largely unoccupied for 18 months and that we just happened to be their first major group since lockdown.

About 1:30 in the afternoon the passenger vehicles, complete with guides Levi and Luis arrived and we loaded up with a view to traveling cross country to the renowned and much anticipated Chan Chich Lodge. It was beautiful day for the drive with azure blue skies, billowing cumulus clouds and huge thunder clouds. A few pauses along the road through Mennonite farmlands produced Roadside Hawks, Boat-billed, Vermilion and Fork-tailed Flycatchers, Black-and-white Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Morelet's Seedeater, Blue-black Grosbeak, Blue-black Grassquit and more. About 40 minutes into the journey, we made a quick stop at the rice fields at Blue Creek, easy birding from the road and in fact, heat and humidity encouraged us to stay in the vehicles for this short stop. The wetlands held plenty of birds in terms of volume but rather little in terms of diversity and, as far as we could tell, all 400 or so ducks present were composed of only one species, Blue – winged Teal! Good numbers of Black-necked Stilts were present however, along with some White Ibis, Snowy Egrets and Little Blue Herons and an Osprey taking a bath! Our drive continued briefly hugging the southern border of Mexico where a rather nice male Blue Ground Dove flew between the vehicles. After a brief comfort stop for restrooms and snacks at the Mennonite supermarket in Blue Creek we pressed on as the countryside became increasingly rolling. A telling sign stated "Chan Chich Lodge 36 miles" as we left the tarmac, and we began the long adventure on dirt roads toward the lodge. The initial drive passed through rural farmland where we enjoyed a sizable flock of Fork-tailed Flycatchers and one or two more Roadside Hawks. Entry into the Rio Bravo Conservation area was greeted by increasingly thick forested habitat, and a more jungle like feel. Levy and Luis had a stop in mind and as we pulled up, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, Levy announced "she's still here", "she" being a fully-fledged juvenile Ornate Hawk-eagle that remained close to its nest site. Although we'd seen Ornate Hawk-eagle soaring over Indian Church earlier that morning, it had to be said that the view of this creamy juvenile with peach-buff head markings was far more satisfactory. We enjoyed her at a safe and



respectful distance before pressing on. Two large terrestrial bird species featured along the remainder of the entrance to Chan Chin with audible gasps as we admired the multi-colored iridescence of roadside Ocellated Turkeys, yet another Yucatan Endemic for us, and several rather shy, prehistoric looking Great Curassows. Both species would feature daily during our time at Chan Chich though the turkeys were far more emboldened and evidently quite accustomed to people in protected areas. Having driven miles through enchanting tropical forest, finding Chan Chich Lodge at the end of the road seemed like stumbling across Brigadoon! We received such a warm welcome from site manager Annabella and all the ground staff and cool, refreshing spiced tea and cold towels to hand – just lovely! Once the formalities were over (a quick temperature check and some light paperwork) we were shown to our dreamy luxury cabanas. It was early evening and as the sun disappeared Common Paurasques serenaded us on our way to the dining room. Dinner was so relaxed and in beautiful surroundings and, much like Lamanai, we were the only group on site and received superb treatment. Randa, our server, went out of her way to take care of individual interests, and did so with generosity and a wicked sense of humor! A long but highly satisfactory day had come to an end. Mary, Wendy and Jessie found their way to the delightful screened-in pool under the cover of darkness while the rest of us relaxed and slept in our cabanas amid the sounds of the jungle. After 18 months of Covid, all the restrictions and uncertainties that had gone before just seemed to vaporize and it was nothing short of heavenly to be at Chan Chich.

## **Wed., Oct. 6                      Chan Chich Lodge | Laguna Seca | Sylvester Village Road**

A beautiful morning began at 6am as we met Luis and Levy in the lodge grounds for a casual, optional pre-breakfast birding walk. The morning air was comfortably cool when we began some easy paced birding in the lodge grounds beautifully situated in a Mayan Plaza dating from 250 – 800 AD. Red-lored and Mealy Parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets teed up nicely for us in the scopes as did a Bat Falcon, while Ocellated Turkeys strutted around the grounds and Central American Spider Monkeys crashed through canopy. A Blue-black Grosbeak gave instant, metallic ‘*pwik*’ calls by cottage #7 and gave the best views of the species thus far. Crested Guans clumsily foraged in the trees and shrubs around the plaza and a Collared Aracari put on a nice show for some. We had rather less luck with a Stripe-throated Hermit that frequently buzzed around the flowering plants in the plaza and must surely qualify as the fastest bird in Belize!



From there we ambled down towards the staff village where Yellow-winged Tanager, Pale-billed Woodpecker and a calling Couch's Kingbird proved to be among some of the highlights and an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, a Red-eyed vireo and a Long-billed Gnatwren all appeared within just a few seconds of each other as a huge Brown Basilisk Lizard basked on a thick trunk. Continuing the woodpecker theme, Golden-fronted and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers both put in nice appearances. The wetter areas provided winter homes for Kentucky Warblers and Louisiana Waterthrushes both of which were shy but readily enticed into view. Then it was back to the lodge for a classic Chan Chich breakfast and a fine range of items on the menu including fresh fruit platter, Heuvos Rancheros and "Eggs your way". Moreover, we enjoyed it all from the dining room balcony whilst watching birds and White-tailed Deer around the plaza!

After breakfast we boarded the lodge's recently acquired open-sided game ranger vehicles offering fantastic visibility to all on board and a suitably ideal vehicle for cruising the quiet roads throughout the reserve. Laguna Seca was the venue of choice, a large lake surrounded by tropical forest. Along the way several Roadside Hawks and Great Curassows were seen well and the entrance road to Laguna Seca hosted several quality passerines including a Rufous-tailed Jacamar and a Northern Barred Woodcreeper! Arrival at Laguna Seca was greeted by pleasant conditions but, my goodness, was it humid! We walked a narrow trail down by the lake shore noting Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and a nice male Hooded Warbler along the way. The lake itself was pretty good for Anhingas along with two Neotropical Cormorants, some Great and Snowy Egrets, a Little Blue Heron, and a tree full of roosting Cattle Egrets. Northern Jacanas worked the edges of the lake though the open water was surprisingly devoid of waterfowl, a pair of Blue-winged Teals being the only ducks that we could find. Magnolia Warbler popped into view several times and there was a fine Prothonotary Warbler working the shrubs overhanging the water as a Morelet's Crocodile swam nonchalantly by. Farther along the trail the bizarre harsh-clicking and rasping calls of a male White-collared Manakin vied for attention and finally gave itself up for



views to a lucky few. Though it wasn't the first time we'd seen them on the tour, we couldn't help but marvel at the exploits of the many lines of leaf-cutter ants crossing the trail, an ever-present companion in the rain forest.

It was close to noon when we finished the loop and this day, perhaps more than the other days, felt especially humid, keeping Luis and Levy especially busy handing out cold beverages from the coolers! The return from Laguna Seca in heat of the day should have been birdless affair but, alas, it was far from that, and a couple of large feeding flocks stalled our journey back to the lodge in the nicest possible way! Good numbers of Lesser Greenlets with a few Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos drew in a number of other rain forest denizens including a pair of Black-headed Shrike-tanagers, a Green Shrike-vireo, and at least two Olive-backed Euphonias – pretty exciting for the guides as well as us! A little farther down the road we had very good but brief views of a perched juvenile Gray Hawk. Lunch at the open-air dining room was refreshing and well deserved after a long morning in the field with choices including beef or fish tacos, Fish n' Chips, a 'Gallon Jug Salad' or a 'Jug Burger'. We reconvened at 3:30pm to find and enjoy Golden-hooded Tanagers in the lodge grounds before we embarked on an afternoon walk.

Dropping down the hill to the Sylvester Village Road, several Central American Spider Monkeys scaled the trees around us, and Luis pointed out some fresh Baird's Tapir tracks in the mud. Though initially quiet, the Sylvester Road soon delivered rich prizes in the form of a pair of Red-throated Ant-tanagers, a family group of diminutives, fast moving Tawny-crowned Greenlets, a pair of Pale-billed Woodpeckers and an Olivaceous Woodcreeper. The walk back through the staff village produced fabulous views of a couple impressively large Rhinoceros Beetles, one of which was resting on a utility pole and teed up in the scopes. Ocellated Turkeys appeared accustomed to village life and oblivious to our presence and, as we walked back up the hill to the lodge, Crested Guans, Red-colored and Mealy Parrots closed their day and settled down in their respective roosting places. The calls of wintering Eastern Wood Pewees and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were among the last passerines of the day to be heard calling around the cabanas.

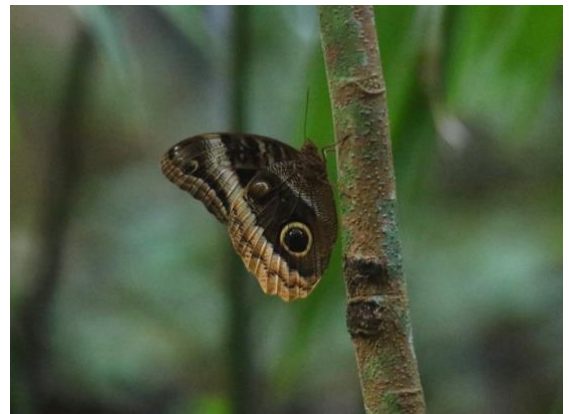


**Thurs., Oct. 7**

## **Chan Chich Lodge | Rio Bravo Escarpment | Gallon Jug fields | King's Tomb Trail**

A casual start to the day began with breakfast at 7am. On view within the plaza, Crested Guans, Pale-billed and Lineated Woodpeckers, Golden-hooded Tanager, Blue-black Grosbeak and two rather personable but fast-moving hummingbirds – Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits! It was a gorgeous morning for a drive as we headed for the Rio Bravo Escarpment, a journey that would take us around the fringe of the Gallon Jug fields where we found a large flock of 45 or more Eastern Meadowlarks and good numbers of migrating Eastern Kingbirds. Closer to Sylvester Village we came across several Keel-billed Toucans feasting in a fruiting ficus and a large flock of Turkey Vultures looking slightly comical as they roosted, all simultaneously drying out their wings after the morning rain showers. A Bare-throated Tiger-heron lifted from the river crossing near Sylvester Village as we began the steady climb towards the escarpment. Midway through the climb a large feeding flock was worthy of a more thorough stop and included many birds fast moving birds, some too tricky to identify. Even so, we eventually had excellent looks at a pair of Black-headed Shrike-tanagers (for the second consecutive day, wow!), a male Rose-throated Becard, and about four Black-faced Grosbeaks! Reaching the escarpment wasn't quite a mountain top finish but relative to the surrounding landscape it wasn't too far removed from it either. A hilltop clearing overlooking thousands of acres of rainforest and, in the distance, views of Gallon Jug farm. A significant portion of the 250,000 acres of privately owned and permanently preserved Rio Bravo Conservation area lay before us.

Light winds from the north worked in our favor, hitting the edge of the escarpment and creating updrafts for soaring raptors. Almost immediately a flurry of activity included two passing Broad-winged Hawks, a Mississippi Kite and an Osprey, all of them migrants. Local species also using the thermals included Bat Falcon, Turkey Vulture and King Vulture, the latter treating us to a magnificent close fly past followed by perched views with a display that would be difficult to better anywhere in Central America. Indeed, the Rio Bravo escarpment must be



one of few spots in Belize when one can look down upon a soaring King Vulture! But the escarpment wasn't all about raptors and it supported some interesting passerines too. A wintering White-eyed Vireo in the hilltop scrub eventually gave good views, as did a very tricky Yellow-bellied Eleania. Luis's sharp hearing then picked out the calls of 2 – 3 Rose-throated Tanagers, all of them females and a surprise so high up the escarpment in early successional habitat – another Yucatan Endemic for our lists! Despite the late hour, there was no let-up in the action and the journey back to the lodge produced staggering views of a Collared Forest-falcon feeding on the track before us, views so good that our guides got visibly excited! The same Bare-throated Tiger-heron again flew up from the river crossing at Sylvester Village, several flocks of Vaux's Swifts coasted overhead, pairs Great Curassows popped into view by the roadside, several Black-headed Trogons flew across the track in front of the vehicles and a family of Montezuma Oropendolas joined the Keel-billed Toucans in the fruiting fichus trees in Sylvester Village. Back at the lodge, Nate spotted a Royal Flycatcher working its way around the plaza resulting in a near mass exodus from lunch! The flycatcher was fast, too fast for most in fact, and moved off around the back of the lodge towards the Temple Loop missed by most of the group.

After lunch some of our party rested while others took full advantage of the delightful screened-in pool. Later, a small group composed of Mike & Dawn, Mark, Wendy and Nate assembled for a late afternoon bird walk from the lodge. With a plethora of trails to choose from, the King's Tomb Trail was picked out by our guides as a favorite late in the day and, despite our small number, we still had both Luis and Levy join us ensuring more sharp eyes and invaluable help on the rich sounds of the rainforest. Though initially quiet, the forest once again came up trumps with winter migrants such as Great Crested Flycatcher, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers all seen pretty well as well as the remarkable, crepuscular Yellow-banded Owl-butterfly. Without doubt, the most charismatic bird species from the walk was the Stub-tailed Spadebill. We saw a pair of these tiny, front-heavy passerines gleaning insects and sallying up to the underside of leaves and branches. First detected by call we watched these usual 'flycatchers' foraging around us for a good 20 minutes or so, the best strategy being to



simply stand in one spot on the trail and let them come to you! Pork tenderloin was among the dinner choices in the evening and those that chose it from the menu will remember a long wait for its appearance at the table. Naturally, Randa made the best of it and joked that they first have to catch the pig and drive it across from Gallon Jug Farm but little did we know at the time that her story was true! The rain came on hard and heavy during dinner and the plans for our scheduled night safari were well and truly scuppered. We postponed until the next evening and settled down to the sounds of tropical rain falling upon the cottages.

## **Fri., Oct. 8                      Chan Chich Lodge | Gallon Jug fields | Laguna Verde | Sylvester Village**

We began the day with a slow birding drive along the Chan Chich entrance road, Tropical Kingbird, Social Flycatcher and rather attractive Yellow-winged Tanagers among the first birds of the day. After heavy overnight rain the day dawned muggy and overcast but by the time, we reached Gallon Jug it was brightening up. A female Blue-winged Teal was a surprise on the fast-flowing river downstream from the suspension bridge. Birds were plentiful around the Gallon Jug Fields with good numbers of Eastern Meadowlarks, Roadside Hawk, Lineated Woodpecker, Plain Chachalaca, Bat Falcon and a surprise Least Flycatcher that sat openly on a fence for the occupants of both vehicles to enjoy. An American Kestrel played and hide n' seek around the farm buildings but eventually gave itself up for immaculate views. Surprisingly, it turned out to be the only kestrel of the trip. A troop of Yucatan Black Howlers entertained us for a while in Gallon Jug's coffee plantations as did a rather excellent flock of White-crowned Parrots, plus a pair of Cinnamon Becards and good views of a pair of Black-headed Trogons. Fortune and good weather followed us all the way to Laguna Verde where, just by way of a change, we had a delightful picnic breakfast by the lake. Breakfast burritos, egg sandwiches, fruit & yogurt, all served with fresh squeezed juice and freshly pressed local coffee. Chan Chich Lodge was really looking after us!

Birding around the lake itself was best described as 'steady' though did deliver a major surprise in the form of a Least Grebe as soon as we arrived though it was initially called as a Pied-billed Grebe leading to some confusion.



However, Mike's excellent photo clearly showed it was a Least Grebe! White Ibis, Ringed Kingfisher, Morelet's Seedeater and a singing White-eyed Vireo were also seen around Laguna Verde before we headed out to explore the quieter roads back towards Sylvester Village. It wasn't long before we stumbled across a rather large feeding flock with fast moving birds zipping across the road. Securing good views wasn't easy but eventually we had our first 'antbirds' of the trip with a pair of skulking Dusky Antbirds and a sizeable party of Dot-winged Antwrens as well as a Barred Antshrike. Other denizens of the deep forest included a pair of Gartered Trogons and the remarkably aloof Northern Schiffornis, its presence betrayed only by its highly distinctive 'wolf-whistling' song. Lunch and post lunch hours saw a good deal of bird activity around the lodge and plaza highlighted by a beautiful white bellied hummingbird photographed by Mike – it was a stunning Purple-crowned Fairy! Nate once again spotted the Royal Flycatcher which, once again, worked its way around the plaza with very few of us getting views. Mike and Dawn lingered around the plaza catching up on final photo opportunities as, sadly, our trip was already ending; Golden-hooded Tanager, Long-billed Hermit, Clay-colored Thrush and Black-cheeked Woodpecker an especially personable Gray Fox all being captured by Mike's camera and lens. In late afternoon a small group headed down towards the River Trail finding a Louisiana Waterthrush and a family party of Red-crowned Ant-tanagers. We also found ourselves at the receiving end of taunts from a couple of youthful male Central American Spider Monkeys! On the trail itself we did well to see a Gray-headed Dove, not especially rare but often difficult to see and yet another denizen of the deep, humid rainforest. After an early dinner we gathered at 7:30pm as Randa and Esmeralda collected orders for breakfast the following day, another rather sobering sign that our time at Chan Chich was coming to an end. However, the weather was perfect and, in many ways, a night safari would be an ideal way to spend a final evening at Chan Chich. And it was well attended by the whole group employing both vehicles, guides and drivers for roughly 2 ½ hours.

Along the Chan Chich entrance road, we found several roosting birds, beautifully spotlighted including Crested Guans, Slaty-tailed Trogons and a Prothonotary Warbler. On reaching Gallon Jug good numbers of White-tailed



Deer roamed the fields but that all paled into insignificance as a Fer-de-Lance was spotted crossing the road! The magnificent beast quite sensibly moved off the road into the short grass shoulder. There it settled for the most sensational views, a much-wanted reptile for some in our party and the most venomous snake in Central America, apparently responsible for more human fatalities than any other venomous snake in the Americas! After the most fantastic views the Fer-de-lance was left in peace and the spotlights closed. Within seconds it had disappeared! The Gallon Jug fields remained of great interest with three or more Yellow-crowned Night-herons foraging out in the open meadows among the livestock and perhaps three or four North Potoos perched on the fence posts including one bird that gave a wonderful fly past at close range giving a firm impression of just how big the species really is! Farther down the track, a Mottled Owl showed briefly but well, and we had fabulous views of a Red-rumped Tarantula walking across the track in front of the vehicles. A final loop around the Gallon Jug fields brought us close to the forest edge where we rounded off a perfect night with stunning views of a close, highly cooperative Mottled Owl – many pictures were taken!

## Sat., Oct. 9

## Chan Chich Lodge | Gallon Jug airfield | Departures

Chan Chich is always going to be one of those places that's difficult to leave and this morning was no exception. Our group of 12 travelers had to be split on to two smaller flights catering to early and later departures. The staff did their level best to accommodate us with an earlier than average breakfast for the early departures. Despite the early morning start, Randa, who'd been our server throughout the stay, was as perky and witty as ever and a character from Chan Chich that would be missed as much as the lodge itself. Quite naturally, the birding went on until the very last moments, and the male Purple-crowned Fairy put in several appearances close to the dining room making it even harder to leave! David and Nate staked out what had become colloquially known as "the magic tree" and had incredible success right down to the wire with Golden-olive Woodpecker (uncommon), Gartered Trogon and two Red-capped Manikins all seen and photographed in the final moments before taking the shuttle to Gallon Jug. After a short but spectacular flight with Maya Air over



expanses of rainforest, winding rivers and azure bays it was back to Belize City and the Philip SW Goldson International Airport. On-site preflight Covid testing proved to be a breeze taking no more than 20 minutes and we all headed toward departures for our respective flights home. The tour had been a remarkable green season adventure with wonderful group camaraderie and new friendships formed. A special thanks go to all the staff and guides at Lamanai and Chan Chich Lodges who must have endured some very difficult days during the height of Covid and yet delivered their services with ease, courtesy and professionalism. Having traveled to Belize before the pandemic it was remarkable to see how little had changed over the previous 18 months - kudos to the friendly, hospitable people of Belize! Thanks as well to Jessie Hallstrom from client services who joined the tour at very late notice but proved to be an invaluable help throughout and afterwards, to Ruben at Lamanai Outpost Lodge for his unflappable guiding and leadership, and to Randa for bringing so much humor and fun to the mealtimes at Chan Chich.

*Photo Credits: Keel-billed Toucan, Black Howler Monkey, Anhinga (James P Smith - JS), Palms (Nathan Welch - NW), Group Birding (JS), Social Flycatcher (Michael Freeman - MF), Vermillion Flycatcher (MF), Little Blue Heron (MF), Ringed Kingfisher (MF), Neotropical Cormorant (MF), Black-collared Hawks (MF), Boat-billed Heron (MF), Northern Jacana (MF), Water Scenic (JS), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (MF), Dusky-capped Flycatcher (JS), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (MF), Spiny-tailed Iguana (MF), Smoky-brown Woodpecker (MF), Black-headed Saltator (MF), Thoas Swallowtail (MF), Eastern Kingbird (JP), Scenic (JS), Lamanai Entrance (JS), Water Scenic2 (JS), Howler Monkey (MF), Gartered Trogon (MF), Unknown Species (JS), Coati (NW), Lamanai (JS), Spot-breasted Wren (JS), Limpkin (MF), Tree (JS), Water/Sunrise (NW), Black-cowled Oriole (JS), White-necked Puffbird (MF), Roadside Hawk (MF), Collared Aracari (MF), Ornate Hawk-eagle (JS), Scenic (JS) Striped Basalisk (MF), Morlet's Crocodile (JS), Ocellated Turkey (JS), Lodge (JS), Crested Guan (MS), Drive (NW), Pale-billed Woodpecker (JS) Gray Fox (JS), Keel-billed Toucan (MF), Great Currassow (JS), Eastern Meadowlark (JS), Stub-tailed Spadebill (JS), Turkey Vulture (MF), Tree scenic (NW), Panoramic Birding (NW), Montezuma Oropendula (JS), Yellow-banded Owl Butterfly (JS), Blue-winged Teal (MF), Howler Monkey (MF), White-crowned Parrots (JS), Branded Peacock Butterfly (MF), Black-headed Trogon (MF), Golden-hooded Tanager (MF), Scenic (JS), Snake (JS), Hummingbird (NW), Mottled Owl (MF), Plane (JS), Belize from above (JS)*