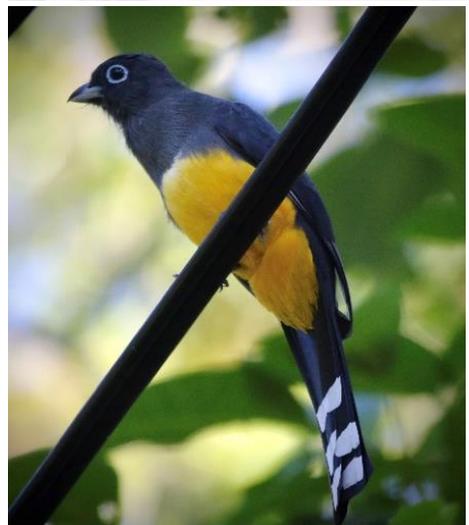


Belize: Birds & Beaches | Trip Report

November 6-13, 2021 | Written by Bob Meinke



With guides Bob Meinke and Steve Choco, and tour participants Peter, Rosemary, Ed, Kelly, and Mason



Thursday through Saturday, November 4-6: Early Arrival | Lodging at Black Orchid Resort, Burrell Boom Village

Several of the group elected to arrive a bit early, ahead of the main tour start date on Nov. 6, and made independent arrangements to stay at Black Orchid Resort (in rural Burrell Boom Village), which is conveniently located about 20 minutes northwest of the international airport.

After pick-up by a lodge driver on the afternoon of Nov. 4, we headed to the resort, which is situated on the banks of the Belize River. Birding commenced from the van almost as soon as we left the airport grounds, with Melodious Blackbird, Roadside Hawk, Vermillion Flycatcher, Tropical Mockingbird, Wood Stork, Black Vulture, and Tricolored Heron among the species easily seen before we even unloaded our luggage.

We finished check-in before dusk, allowing us to briefly explore the lush gardens of the resort while there was still some light. The resort grounds are within the tropical riverine forest that lines the Belize River,



with vantage points that offer views of the river below (including a riverside observation platform and a roof-top spa area, as well as outdoor tables near the main lodge building). Kingfishers (both Green and Ringed), wintering Summer Tanagers (all females), Pale-billed Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Clay-colored Thrush, Brown Jay, and Tropical Kingbird were quickly spotted. We enjoyed dinner the evening of the 4th from a breezy, screened-in porch, listening to Common Pauraque call from the fields across the river before heading to our rooms.

The early arrivals then enjoyed a full day of birding at Black Orchid on Nov. 5th, wandering the gardens of the resort, kayaking on the Belize River, and walking nearby dirt roads in search of species to add to our list. We carried masks with us, due to the sensible policies enacted by Belize which require masks to be worn by everyone, even in most outdoor settings. We didn't need to have them on when birding outside, and completely away from others, but were ready to quickly don them in case anyone came by a police car approached (which actually never happened).

Morning highlights included Squirrel Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Pale-vented Pigeon, Red-lore Parrot, Russet-naped Wood-Rail, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Olive-throated Parakeet, Black-cowled Oriole, Social Flycatcher, Black-headed Trogon, Morelet's Seedeater, and Lineated Woodpecker (among many others). Additional interesting sightings included a beautiful Speckled Racer, Yucatan Squirrels, and a small troop of Black Howler Monkeys.

Our stay at Black Orchid produced several species that we didn't see later on the main tour, including Yellow-headed Parrot (sought after for the pet trade, and consequently a threatened species), Red-billed Pigeon, Mealy Parrot, Black-collared Hawk, Sepia-capped Flycatcher (guide only), and (after dinner one evening) Middle American Screech-Owl, its characteristic rapid-fire toots first heard by Kelly and Mason, and later by Bob as he sat out in the rain straining his ears. Arguably the best find of the day was by Ed, who pointed out a beautiful Crane Hawk in a pasture just outside the main gate of the resort. Sitting low in a small tree, Ed and Bob had great views of this unique raptor, which is not seen up close and perched very often.



After a relaxing 2-day stay at Black Orchid, the early arrival group readied for departure on Nov. 6, when we would head back to the airport to pick up Peter, before our drive south along the Hummingbird Highway to Hopkins Bay.

Saturday, November 6: Start of Main Tour | Hummingbird Highway | Arrival at Hopkins Bay

After some final morning birding at Black Orchid, which included nice views of Mangrove Swallows, Cinnamon-bellied Saltator, Tropical Pewee, several flycatchers, and our first Yellow-bellied Elaenia of the trip, we checked out and packed up for our afternoon drive to the coast. Peter arrived on time, which was negated somewhat by Belizean immigration being swamped by the simultaneous arrival of two flights (the charming, small size of Belize's international airport occasionally has its drawbacks). He eventually emerged, no worse for wear, and after introductions, we were soon off with our driver to our anticipated stay at Hopkins Bay Resort, about a three-hour drive south.

Naturalist Journeys has only recently started including a coastal stop on some of its Belize tours, and we were excited to be among the first to experience a stay at the Hopkins Bay Resort, right on the

beach in central Belize. Taking a newly constructed cutoff from the airport area to the Western Highway—a nice time-saver—we were soon enroute south on the beautiful and mountainous Hummingbird Highway, after passing by Belize's capital city, Belmopan.



To stretch our legs a bit, we made an impromptu stop at St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park, for some quick birding and a restroom break. A bit slow at first, we were soon picking up North American migrants such as Wood Thrush and Hooded Oriole, as well as some nice resident species such as Band-backed Wren (a close relative of Arizona's Cactus Wren), Dusky Antbird, Gartered Trogon, Groove-billed Ani, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift, and Long-billed Hermit. Our stop was brief, however, as we wanted to arrive in Hopkins before dark. So we were soon on our way, heading through Santa Marta Village and the vast orange groves around Middlesex (Belize is a major juice exporter to the EU) towards Hopkins Bay.

Making excellent time, we were soon pulling into our lodge at Hopkins, where we joined Steve Choco, lead guide at The Lodge at Big Falls (our next destination after Hopkins), who would be with our group for the rest of the tour. The staff was ready for us, and in no time they had our bags on the front porches of our well-appointed rooms, all within sight of the nearby ocean. Not quite dark, we quickly stashed our luggage and took a walk on the beach, or birded the resort grounds. We quickly located Cinnamon Hummingbird, Black-cowled Oriole, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and Morelet's Seedeater, as well as overwintering Baltimore Orioles, Black-and-white Warblers, and Summer Tanagers.





Meals were served in a covered, outside venue (with a small bar), mere feet from the bay. And although there were a few other guests here, the grounds were far from crowded, and the number of diners at any given time was negligible. It was a safe and comfortable environment, and following a delicious dinner we were off to bed after a long day.

Sunday, November 7: Coffee and Birds at Hopkins Bay | Birding at Cockscomb Basin Preserve | Afternoon at Hopkins Lagoon

We were up very early, and had a quick breakfast and coffee at Hopkins as the sun came up. Sanderlings, Spotted Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plovers, Willits, and Long-billed Dowitchers were already patrolling the shoreline in the gorgeous morning light, and Plain Chachalacas were calling. Our goal today was to take the short drive inland to Cockscomb Basin, an area with vast reserves of lowland tropical forest crisscrossed with streams and small rivers. We arrived around 8:00 AM, and were soon unloading Steve's scope, grabbing our water bottles, and heading off on one of Cockscomb Basin's many trails.

Today was the day we began to bird in earnest, and our species list really took off, both in terms of quantity and the overall quality of the species seen. Shortly after leaving the van Steve spotted a pair of Crested Guan in a nearby tree—good thing we had the scope! We then ambled off down the trail into the forest, recording Central American classics such as Plain Xenops, Keel-billed Toucan, Green-breasted Mango, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, White-necked Jacobin, Slaty-Tailed Trogon, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Laughing Falcon, Dot-winged Antwren, Northern Barred-Woodcreeper, Masked Tityra,



Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Yellow-throated Euphonia, and Mayan Antthrush (a regional endemic that was infuriatingly "heard only" for most of us—no matter the enticement, it simply would not cooperate).



Arriving at a small river where our trail dead-ended, Kelly spotted the first Amazon Kingfisher of the trip, perched on a rock in mid-stream. We also saw Thick-billed Seed-Finch here, as well as Yellow-tailed Oriole, Blue-black Grosbeak, Golden-hooded and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, and Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, all very nice birds. Back at the preserve headquarters area, we saw a Black Hawk-Eagle high overhead. And Bob and Peter had good looks at a Sulphur-rumped

Flycatcher in the brush, a bird known to follow Army Ant swarms. It was our only sighting of this interesting species on the tour (and we looked, but didn't see any ants).

By November, many of the warbler species that breed in the U.S. have migrated to Central America for the winter, and we saw many of them. Included during our visit to Cockscomb, for example, were Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Hooded, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, Yellow-throated, and



Black-throated Green Warblers, as well as Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, and American Redstart. During our winter tours in January, and especially February and March, many warblers are often sporting their breeding colors, as they get ready to fly back north to breed. But during our trip most species were in basic plumage, presenting a bit more of an ID challenge, especially for those of us living on the west coast.

After lunch back at Hopkins Bay, we headed out a few miles to Hopkins Lagoon, a large swampy area just outside Hopkins Village. This is where a trip can pick up quite a few species that a tour restricted to inland sites will often miss, and we took full advantage of this opportunity. Our only Jabiru of the tour was spotted here today by Steve (we had decent scope views of a distant bird), and we also saw most of the expected waders for the area, including Little Blue Heron, Black-necked Stilt, Wood Stork, numerous White Ibis, beautiful Roseate Spoonbill, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Snowy Egret, Purple Gallinule, Tricolored Heron, and Green Heron, as well as American Coot, Blue-winged Teal, Common Black Hawk, and a quick view (in flight) of the uncommon Pinnated Bittern.

But it was in the low, emergent vegetation of the flooded lagoon that we hit the jackpot, with wonderful views of several Clapper Rails, clambering up and calling from the tops of nearly submerged shrubs just a few feet from us, as we stood alongside the road that bisected the lagoon. If that wasn't enough, we then had an elusive Spotted Rail, when Mason, Kelly, and Peter spotted the species fluttering between clumps of reeds. A scarce species overall, and virtually never reported for this part of Belize, Steve Choco was impressed. He used a bit of playback to get it to respond, allowing those in the group who missed a visual could still count it as "Heard Only" on their lists.

A full day of excellent birding concluded with drinks, dinner, a species list review, and an evening of Garifuna drumming (all outside and appropriately distanced). As the resident Yellow-crowned Night-Heron slipped in without a sound, just behind us on the beach, we headed back to reacquaint ourselves with our pillows and get ready for the next morning.

Monday, November 8: Early Drive to Red Bank Village | Shoreline Birding at Hopkins Bay | Afternoon at Hopkins Lagoon

This morning all we had time for at Hopkins Bay was coffee and a piece of fruit, and then we were off for the hour-long drive to Red Bank, a small village known for its seasonal population of Scarlet Macaws. Hunted and collected for its feathers, mostly in areas outside Belize, the species is nearing threatened

status in much of Central America. We arrived not long after 7:00 AM, planning to initially bird the forests just outside the village, before retreating for breakfast at the Scarlet Macaw Bed and Breakfast, a small, family-run establishment focused on conservation. After breakfast we would make our attempt for the macaws.

Our early birding was very productive, and the morning was cool and comfortable. As we dodged local residents on donkeys and bicycles, on their way to work in the forest, and Mennonite buggies heading in the opposite direction, we picked up a number of new species for the trip. Noteworthy sightings included Boat-billed Flycatcher, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Stripe-throated Hermit, Gartered and Black-Headed Trogon, White-crowned Parrot, Dusky Antbird, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Couch's Kingbird, Lesser Greenlet, Orange-billed Sparrow (great photos by Peter!), Black-faced Grosbeak, Yellow-winged Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and Buff-throated and Black-headed Saltators.

After a wonderful local breakfast, featuring a myriad of fresh fruits and juice (and pungent local coffee!), we headed out for the very short drive down a back road to a nearby plantation. We parked where the road petered out, and walked in to a small shelter, escorted along the way by an uncharacteristically active trio of rain-drenched White-whiskered Puffbirds, who offered the best photo ops for the species you could possibly want. We also had nice views of other often difficult-to-see birds, including both Great and Barred Antshrikes, Spot-breasted Wren, Long-billed Gnatwren, White-collared Manakin, and Slaty-tailed Trogon.

On what was otherwise an unusually cool trip for Belize (which means extremely comfortable for most visitors!), this was the only time where it was a bit on the hot side, as we stood in the sun, waiting for signs of the macaws. But we were striking out, it seemed, so in time the group went in different directions, seeing what else we might run across. Plenty of flycatchers were on hand (Great Kiskadee, Social, Boat-billed, Yellow-bellied, Dusky-capped, etc.), as well as a few woodpeckers (Black-cheeked, Golden-fronted, Smokey-brown, Lineated, and Golden-olive). And a very nice White Hawk was also spotted by Mason here, standing out against the green backdrop of a nearby hillside, the only sighting of the species for the tour.



We were literally up against it, time-wise, as we reluctantly started to gather ourselves to head back to the van. We'd been in Red Bank for 5+ hours, and still no macaws. It's never a given that they'll show up, but you always come in expecting to see them. And finally, we did. You typically hear macaws in flight before you spot them, and sure enough the distinctive, harsh "raahk" calls were easily heard, even though the small flock was a good half-mile away. Eventually the birds soared into view along a distant ridge, where our group had some decent scope views. The brilliant red plumage was visible even to the naked eye, despite the distance. Exquisite. And perfect timing.



We finished off the day (well after lunch) with another late afternoon visit to Hopkins Lagoon. We didn't see any species we hadn't found on earlier stops, but were treated to a spectacle of hundreds of White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbills coming in to roost on the mangroves. And to top it off, the now infamous Spotted Rail put in an additional brief appearance.

We enjoyed another delicious dinner at the resort's outdoor bar and grill, after our species list update, and then it was off to our lodgings. The stars on the scarcely populated southern coast of Belize are fantastic, and a few of us stayed up and enjoyed the view on this cloudless night, prior to heading to bed before our drive tomorrow south to Big Falls.

Tuesday, November 9: Early Birding at Hopkins Bay | TexMar Shrimp Farm | Arrival at Big Falls



The drive to Big Falls is not a long one, and we had time to bird some in the morning at Hopkins before finishing our packing and heading out. Kelly finally had some time to hop in one of the resort's kayaks, and experienced as she is, was soon on her way to getting close-up looks at some of the marine species in the area. In addition to the resident race of Ospreys in Belize, she (and the rest of us back on shore) had good views of Royal and Sandwich Terns, Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls, and Magnificent Frigatebirds, as well as the same array of shorebirds we saw the previous two mornings (listed for November 7).



Just after sunrise, Bob, Peter, and Mason enjoyed a relaxing walk with Steve along the back roads beyond the resort property, where they picked up Common Yellowthroat, Mangrove Vireo, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Belted Kingfisher, White-fronted Parrot, Common Tody-Flycatcher (more nice photos by Peter), Mangrove Swallow, Gray Catbird, Black-cowled Oriole, Blue-gray Tanager, and Tropical Kingbird.

Anticipating our next stop, we were soon checked out, loaded, and on the road (looking to arrive in Big Falls ahead of dinner), with a planned stop along the way at the TexMar Shrimp Farm, just off the Southern Highway and west of Independence. Although an eBird Hotspot, TexMar is not open to the general public, and we were fortunate that (1) Steve Choco knew one of the managers here, who was granting us special

access, and (2) the manager was also an avid birder! So we were not only being allowed to visit an otherwise restricted site, we were also getting the inside scoop on where to find the birds! Very nice.

The only down side was that the pools here were largely dry, since farmed shrimp operations in Belize have recently been hit hard by disease, necessitating the drying out of the lagoons to get rid of the pathogen that's been impacting the shrimp. Production is set to resume soon, but during our visit we didn't have the swampy pools that are known for attracting waders and shorebirds. That said, we still had a great visit. Two lagoons were still partially full, and we picked up several good species here, including Gull-billed Tern, Northern Jacana, Anhinga, Belted Kingfisher, and Greater Yellowlegs. On dry land we also saw a mixed flock of Scissor-tailed and Fork-tailed Flycatchers, our only sightings of the tour. The two species were sitting together on some wires, and it was interesting to compare them up close.



But it was the raptors that stood out here, and made the stop absolutely worthwhile. First up was White-tailed Hawk, with TexMar being one of the few reliable places to get this beautiful species in Belize. Short-tailed Hawks (both light and dark morphs) were also present, as well as Osprey and three vulture species (Turkey, Black, and Lesser Yellow-Headed). We also had great looks at a Laughing Falcon perched on a pole, and remarkable, close views of three Aplomado Falcons, which surprised even Steve Choco. Those with the appropriate camera gear got some very nice pics!

By mid-afternoon we were back on the Southern Highway, arriving at The Lodge at Big Falls well before dusk, just as planned. (Steve Choco knows how to keep a tour on schedule, while still finding the birds!) Being a rather small resort, our group filled the cabins, and there were no other guests during our 4-night stay. We checked into our lovely



rooms, and were soon out birding the grounds as the shadows lengthened, quickly spotting Spot-breasted Wren, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, and Scarlet-rumped Tanager just outside our doors.

Although located within the village of Big Falls, the lodge nonetheless seems very isolated, surrounded by a loop of the adjacent Rio Grande River, with many acres of tropical hardwood forest surrounding the property. It's a fabulous place to stay, not only having beautiful and spacious lodgings, but also excellent birding right on the site. Having

been here before, Kelly made a beeline for the river before dinner, and was rewarded by being the only person on the tour to find a Sungrebe, a unique and secretive aquatic species that's not easily seen.

The covered front porch of the main lodge building (*see photo on title page*) offers a great place for a group to meet at the end of the day, and we gathered here this evening (serenaded by Common Pauraque) to chat ahead of dinner, while reviewing our species list and enjoying some well-deserved drinks and really tasty hor'dourves. Tomorrow would be our introduction to birding in Far South Belize.

Wednesday, November 10: Morning Birding at Big Falls | Dump Rice Field Wetlands | Piedra Lagoon



Steve Choco, who lives in Big Falls, arrived at dawn this morning for coffee, ready to bird with anyone who was up early. Breakfast at Big Falls is a simple but hearty buffet, with cold options as well as hot dishes. It reflects typical Belizean cuisine (including fry jacks!) more so than the Hopkins Bay Resort. The staff working for Rob Hirons, the lodge owner, have been with him for years in many cases, and there is a real sense of continuity and comradery here (especially noticeable to those who have been here before).



The Lodge at Big Falls has a number of feeders, and birds are active by sunup. By far the most dominant hummer was Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, although Long-billed Hermit was also common. By the time we arose, the fruit feeder on the central lawn was attracting Scarlet-rumped and Crimson-crowned Tanagers, Plain Chachalaca, Brown Jay, Melodious Blackbird, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Blue-gray Tanager, Black-cowled Oriole, Clay-colored Thrush, and the occasional Collared Aracari (though this species is more commonly seen in the canopy here). And Collared Forest-Falcon was heard every morning (but never seen!).



On a group's first day here, Steve Choco always plans a lengthy walk on the property after breakfast. We headed out today at about 7:30 AM, and kept at it for 2-3 hours. Although there are many species to be seen here, a highlight for many (especially experienced listers!) is Bare-crowned Antbird, rare in Belize and uncommon throughout its geographic range (it's restricted to Central America). The lodge property is one of very few reliable places to find the species, which is an understory skulker. But Steve knows the lodge grounds well, and was able locate the antbird for us in short order, although the views were somewhat obscured. Nonetheless, it is a highly sought-after species, and any glimpse is significant.

Continuing on, we had excellent looks at several species that are often hard to pin down, with the curious Stub-tailed Spadebill leading the list. A tiny, understory flycatcher that inhabits the darkest recesses of the forest, we had remarkable views of the species on the lower part of the lodge compound. A really nice find. We also had fun looks at a male Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, engaged in his dive-bombing display flight, suggesting the species was already getting ready to start breeding. And we picked up another tiny

flycatcher, though unlike the spadebill, the Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet is a high canopy dweller—Steve was able to use a bit of recorded playback to temporarily lure the species into view for the group.

Other birds seen on our walk included an aerial Hook-billed Kite, Northern Bentbill, Yellow-billed Cacique, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Southern House Wren, Greenish Elaenia, White-tipped Dove, Bright-rumped Atila, Tawny-winged and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Olive-throated Parakeet, and several overwintering warblers (with Northern Waterthrush, Hooded, Chestnut-sided, Yellow, Kentucky, and American Redstart the most common).



Up next was a visit to an extensive wetland that is known by locals as the Dump Rice Fields (on eBird this Hotspot is simply listed as “The Dump”), mostly comprised of old rice paddies that are now largely overgrown. Just a few miles south of Big Falls along the little travelled Southern Highway, the site is remarkably diverse, now covered with dense wetland vegetation. Interestingly, this spot yielded the most hummingbirds of any single location on the tour, including migrant Ruby-throated, as well as Long-billed Hermit, Canivet’s and White-bellied Emeralds, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, and White-necked Jacobin.



Other new or especially interesting species for our list here included Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, Muscovy Duck (from a wild population, and not the barnyard version), Limpkin, Least Bittern (calling only and not seen, but there had to be a dozen or more!), and White-tailed Kite. We also heard White-throated Flycatcher far out in the brush (but this locally rare species wasn’t seen until after the main tour, when Bob and Kelly spent a few extra days in the area).

And of particular interest here were the rails. Our appetites were whetted by the Spotted Rail we located at Hopkins Lagoon earlier, and we wanted more! But although we could hear

several species calling in the dense rushes and grass, with only scant openings in the matted vegetation it seemed unlikely that we’d actually get any easy looks.

With this in mind, our first target was Sora, a species we all knew from home. It seemed like a good bird to start with, since it was calling loudly here, and it can be rather confiding when seen in the U.S. Sure enough, after maybe 10 minutes, one finally slipped out where the road shoulder met the marsh, creeping along in full view.

Next was Ruddy Crake, which is actually pretty common here, but so hard to see. Yet it seems these birds can’t resist sneaking across a narrow opening, given the chance, and it’s just a matter of being in the right place when they do. Right? (Hmm). Anyway, with this in mind, and based on our notions of where the birds were in the brush, based on their calling, we positioned ourselves to wait and watch what looked like a narrow game path, no more than 12 inches across. We stood still for what seemed like an eternity (probably less than 20 minutes), and were finally rewarded when, without warning, a bird bolted across

like lightning just a few feet from us. And before we could give any thought to what species we'd actually seen, it unexpectedly peeked out again for a moment, and it was definitely a Ruddy. And remarkably, just minutes later, another crane followed suit, but this one was a Gray-breasted! We didn't have as good a look at this bird, but it was enough, when added to the call notes we heard, to feel comfortable with the ID.

Anyway, that was it for the Dump Rice Field, and we headed back for lunch at the iconic Pearleens's Café (formerly Coleman's), in Big Falls, for a Belizean mid-day buffet—plenty of veggies, rice, plantains, chicken, and beef, washed down with ice-cold starfruit punch! Open and breezy, we had Pearleen's largely to ourselves, and it was a good place to go. And despite all our morning birding, we still couldn't resist studying a friendly Yellow-faced Grassquit perched on the fence as we headed out!

One last outing for the day involved stopping in at Piedra Lagoon, a large pond near Big Falls. It was mid-afternoon and very slow, but then we spotted a flock of Boat-billed Herons, a bird we hadn't seen yet. It's an amazing species with an astounding bill. And back at the lodge, Kelly and Steve located a final good bird for the day, a White-winged Becard. We repeated the previous night's itinerary of a species list review, drinks and pre-dinner snacks, and then dinner. Afterwards we went with Steve to try and find a Black-and-white Owl that often is seen or heard in trees near the pool area, but it was somewhere else tonight.

Thursday, November 11: Nim Li Punit Mayan Site | Blue Creek Trek | Birding Blue Creek Road

One of the many advantages of working with local guides is they can get you into birding sites that you'd never manage to access on your own. The TexMar Shrimp Farm was one example, and the Nim Li Punit Mayan site that we visited today is another. While the latter is open to the public, we can visit the site with Steve Chaco well before opening time, and have the site to ourselves for 2-3 hours. Located just 15 minutes up the Southern Highway from Big Falls, we were on site and birding today (after early morning coffee) before 7 AM.



Featuring wooded habitats and tall trees, Nim Li Punit is a great place to look for a wide range of forest species. We had by far our best looks here at several, including Masked Tityra (feeding on berries right at face level, and not the least bit concerned by our presence), a group of gorgeous Lesson's Motmots (flycatching for huge moths in the lower canopy), woodcreepers (i.e., Ivory-billed, Wedge-billed, and Olivaceous), Barred Antshrike, Rose-throated Becard, Great and Brown Crested Flycatchers, Montezuma Oropendola, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Golden-olive Woodpecker, and Dusky Antbird.



After Nim Li Punit, we headed back for a late breakfast at Big Falls, and picked up a Great Black Hawk on the lodge grounds. We then moved out again for our trail walk along Blue Creek, about an hour's drive south of Big Falls. The distance isn't that far, but the road is seriously pot-holed. That's not so good, but the silver lining is the slow pace allows for some pretty good car birding as you head in. Bare-throated Tiger-Heron in an open field was a very nice find as we drove along—we were no more than 20 feet away for those taking photos from the van windows.

After reaching Blue Creek Village, we loaded up with a picnic lunch (and plenty of water), and slowly worked our way along the trail, but not before seeing a King Vulture overhead. And within just a few



minutes of heading in, Steve then whirled and spotted a Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, a tiny and very unobtrusive understory species that's seldom reported. Except for Kelly, it was a life bird for the group (even for Bob), and a good omen it seemed! We continued along, seeing Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, Black-faced Grosbeak, Gray-chested Dove, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Lesson's Motmot, Collared Aracari, Plain Xenops, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and Roadside Hawk.

Before hiking back to the van, we enjoyed our packed lunch by a beautiful pool, and watched Green Kingfishers dip for minnows in the water. We saw tiny Mistletoe Tyrannulets in the forest across the river from us, as well as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Tropical Pewee, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, and Black-crowned Tityra. We did some additional birding as we departed Blue Creek, and came across a nice American Pygmy Kingfisher and White-collared Manakin at a small pool along a side road. And on the way back into Big Falls, we spotted both Bronzed and Giant Cowbirds, perched high on a grain elevator with Great-tailed Grackles.



Lodge owner Rob Hirons and Steve Choco joined us for dinner tonight, and afterwards we tried again for the Black-and-white Owl, but as before, without success. Tomorrow we visit the Punta Gorda Hawkwatch, as well as a private conservation preserve, and a cacao farm and local chocolate shop. A busy schedule for our last full day!

Friday, November 11: Tunich Ha Reserve and Ecological Center | Punta Gorda Hawkwatch | Mayan Belizean Chocolate

Coffee and birding at 6 AM awaited early risers this morning, and then we headed off in the van to the Tunich Ha Reserve and Ecological Center, not far from Punta Gorda, a privately managed conservation park noted for its birds and colorful gardens.



We birded the bumpy track that led from the main road into the reserve property, where we were scheduled for breakfast at about 8 AM. A target bird here was Black-crowned Antshrike, which only enters Belize in this area. We had very nice looks at 2 or 3 birds.

In the nearby fields we also saw Variable Seedeater, Thick-billed Seed-Finch, and Blue-black Grassquit, and Bob, Mason, and a nameless Ruddy Crake were all simultaneously scared witless when the squawking crake leaped out of a grassy ditch right at our feet! (After all the effort we made back on Wednesday, and here one jumps out right in front of us!)

Continuing on, we had great looks at a group of feeding Keel-billed Toucans, an elusive Northern Schiffornis, Black-headed Saltator, a soaring Gray Hawk, Common Black Hawk, Great Antshrike, lounging Groove-billed Anis, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, migrant Red-eyed Vireos and Yellow-breasted Chats, Pale-vented Pigeon, White-tipped Dove, Stripe-throated Hermit, White-bellied Emerald, Black-headed Trogon, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, both Greenish and Yellow-bellied Elaenias, and Ruddy Ground-Dove, among many others. It was a very bird-rich environment.

After a wonderfully prepared breakfast served to us by the owners of the Tunich Ha Reserve, we walked along a small creek in the nearby forest, searching for tinamous. Peter had a glimpse, but the rest of us had to settle for vocalizations of a Great Tinamou calling in the dark understory.

We then headed into Punta Gorda town and stopped by the local Hawkwatch to meet the ornithologists and birders staffing the site. It was late in the season, and the diversity of raptors had waned considerably from the previous month or two. At this point, the group was largely counting Hook-billed Kites, as most of the other migrating species had moved south earlier. But it was an interesting stop, and Bob got to see an old friend of his, Eduardo Ruano, a guide from Lamanai Outpost (an ecolodge in Orange Walk) who was helping to run the count.



As lunchtime approached, we headed back towards Big Falls, stopping at Mayan Belizean Chocolate, a small business run by Juan and Abelina Cho. We had lunch here on an open, elevated porch (they were serving a dish called chocolate chicken, what else?), before listening to a very interesting (and persuasive) presentation by Juan about chocolate production in Belize. He was providing almost limitless samples, which never hurts. We then lingered for a while to let everyone buy as much chocolate as they felt they needed, before heading back to relax for the rest of the afternoon at Big Falls.

But not before one last stop, at a small, nondescript pond along the Southern Highway, just outside Big Falls. Steve had been trying to get the group a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat for a couple of days, and this site was his last ditch attempt. With cars whizzing by on our left, Steve was (astonishingly) able to point the species out, as it crept into view across the other side of the pond. With nice clear looks, it was somehow the perfect final species to add to our tally for the tour. And nearby was a Lineated Woodpecker, carving out a home in a telephone pole! Just another day in Belize!



We had a great guide in Steve Choco, who enjoyed working with our fun, easy-going, and knowledgeable group of travelers, whose birding skills and patience resulted in a near-record species list for a week-long Naturalist Journeys tour to Belize (i.e., 278 species, including the pre-trip stay at Black Orchid).

We reviewed our list for the last time this evening, enjoying a final dinner with Steve, Rob, and his excellent staff. And then some of us sat out and watched the stars a bit, before turning in. It was almost time to pack up and be ready for our airport transport tomorrow morning.

Saturday, November 12: Departures

After breakfast and check-out at The Lodge at Big Falls, most of us departed around 8:00 AM for Punta Gorda, to catch our TropicAir flight north to the international airport and our connecting flights home. It was fabulous to finally return to Belize, after a nearly 2-year hiatus—we are definitely looking forward to coming back!

Photos (by Bob Meinke)

Front Cover (clockwise from upper left): Birding with guide Steve Choco; Ivory-billed Woodcreeper; Barred Antshrike; front porch at The Lodge at Big Falls; Black-headed Trogon; Tiger Orchid at Tunich Ha Reserve; Great Kiskadee; Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (juvenile); Spot-breasted Wren (center photo).

Text photos, from the beginning: Summer Tanager (female); Ed's Crane Hawk; Kelly with Steve Choco; Groove-billed Ani; early morning at Hopkins Bay Resort; Plain Chachalaca; Yellow-tailed Oriole; Ovenbird; Magnolia Warbler; Ivory-billed Woodcreeper; rain-soaked White-whiskered Puffbird; Kelly at sea in her kayak (Hopkins Bay); Royal and Sandwich Terns; Mangrove Vireo; Turkey Vultures; White-tailed Hawk; Laughing Falcon; The Lodge at Big Falls, main lodge building; The Lodge at Big Falls, lounge; Rufous-tailed Hummingbird; Bare-crowned Antbird; Black-cowled Oriole; Rufous-breasted Spinetail; group with Steve Choco; ball court at Nim Li Punit Mayan site; Masked Tityra; Lesson's Motmot; group at Blue Creek pool; American Pygmy Kingfisher; White-collared Manakin; three garden flowers at Tunich Ha Reserve: Cat's Whiskers [*Orthosiphon* sp.], Blue Butterfly Bush [*Rotheca* sp.], and Peregrina [*Jatropha* sp.]; breakfast at Tunich Ha Reserve; Juan offering unlimited chocolate samples; Lineated Woodpecker; on the bird, with Steve Choco

