

Belize: Birding & Nature | Trip Report

March 23 – 31, 2022 | by Dave Mehlman



With guide Dave Mehlman, and participants Donna, Ivan, Nora, and Roger



This was a fun and productive tour with a small, but enthusiastic and dedicated group. All the logistics worked to a T (with a few minor hiccups), the meals were great, and the local guides (Eddie, Vidal, Luis, Levy, Captain Mike, Captain Brenda) were awesome! The accommodations and meals were perfect and the weather was largely very cooperative, except for a bit of rain here and there and a few hotter afternoons. A truly enjoyable experience that we'll all remember for a long time.

Wed., Mar. 23 Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort

After a variety of extremely early starts, overnight stays, and flight issues, the group of five convened on-time at Houston/Bush airport and boarded the flight to Belize City, ready for adventure. Arrival was very smooth, with basically only a passport and vaccination card needed to enter Belize. Upon picking up our bags and exiting the terminal, we were met by Mario from Black Orchid Resort. Oddly, at this point we encountered one of the few snafus of the trip, since the Resort's van was "broke down" and all six of us (Mario was driving) had to pile into a small pick up (I'm still not sure how 4 of us fit into the back seat!) for the short drive to Black Orchid Resort, our



first night's lodging. After checking into our rooms, we met at the dining area/pool for a short briefing and then enjoyed lunch in the screened porch area. Following lunch, we took a brief break to rest and organize and to let the afternoon heat dissipate. Meeting in the late afternoon, Dave led everyone around the grounds to see what was out and about. This walk, great for stretching the legs after hours of travel, provided an opportunity to "tick" some of the more common and widespread species, such as Clay-colored Thrush, Tropical Mockingbird, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and Mangrove Swallow. Some diligent searching, however, yielded super view of a male Rose-throated Becard, Yellow-throated Warbler, Black-cowled Oriole, and House Wren. Meeting before dusk, we sat around the pool to do the bird list; as we did so, a pair of Red-lored Parrots flew into the dead palm right by the pool area, where they apparently were nesting in a cavity. We then enjoyed a fine dinner in the Resort's dining room, followed by rest in anticipation of our early start the next day.

Thur., Mar. 24 Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary | Lamanai Outpost Lodge

Today was going to be a great day, but we had to get an early start: a 5:15 am pick up at the Resort by Eddie and Vidal from Lamanai Outpost Lodge! We then drove through the dawn and ever-lightening day to our first destination: the famous Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. Arriving at the Bird's Eye View Lodge, right on the shore of the Lagoon, we could use the bathroom and had coffee and some fruit to get us going—pretty sorely needed at this point!

We then boarded a small boat with Captain/Guide Mike at the helm and Eddie along to spot and take photos. It was a truly memorable 3-hour boat ride, though the water levels were getting low enough in the Lagoon that it was slow going at some points. But the birds and other wildlife were stupendous! There were way too many species to list them all, but some of the highlights include a fly-by Yellow-headed Parrot; four species of kingfishers, including excellent views of a perched American Pygmy; Black-collared Hawk; Great Black Hawk; Boat-billed Herons; several Jabiru; and a flock of 26 American White Pelicans (not often found here) as we returned from our trip. After disembarking, we had great views of Baltimore and Orchard Orioles on the hummingbird feeders.



After that extremely satisfying morning, we headed over to Bats Landing, where we would depart for the boat trip down the New River to New River Lagoon and the Lamanai Outpost Lodge. Since we had a bit of time, most of the group strolled around the area, finding Yellow-winged Tanager, American Redstart, Black-and-white Warbler, and Common Tody-Flycatcher in the trees. A very obliging Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, the only one seen on the trip, perched at the top of some grasses for an extended view, even allowing scope looks! Then, we all piled into the boat, Captain Eddie at the helm and First Mate Vidal spotting, for the 2-hour ride down to the Lodge.

Naturally, our boat ride was “interrupted” by good birds! Some of the more interesting things spotted along the way included Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, a roosting Lesser Nighthawk, and Pale-vented Pigeons. Fortunately for us, a boat returning to the boat landing from the Lodge handed over lunches, so about mid-day we tied up on the riverbank and enjoyed sandwiches in the shade of the trees, disturbing a Boat-billed Heron in the process. After lunch, we continued our way, with some rain showers occasionally putting a damper on things (pun intended). When the sun came out, we continued birding, finding things like Mangrove Vireo, Tennessee Warbler, Golden-olive Woodpecker, and plenty of Osprey. Arriving at the Lodge, we were treated to welcome drinks and received a briefing. After settling into our rooms, Nora, Dave, and Vidal did a short walk around the grounds, enjoying a fabulous birding afternoon. Some of our good birds included Northern Beardless Tyrannulet (one of the best looks ever at this non-descript bird), Masked Tityra, Barred Antshrike, and Laughing and Bat Falcon. The entire group convened later in the day for happy hour, the bird list (there was a lot to review), and a fine Lamanai Outpost Lodge dinner. Everyone immediately retired to their rooms to rest after a long, but immensely rewarding, day.

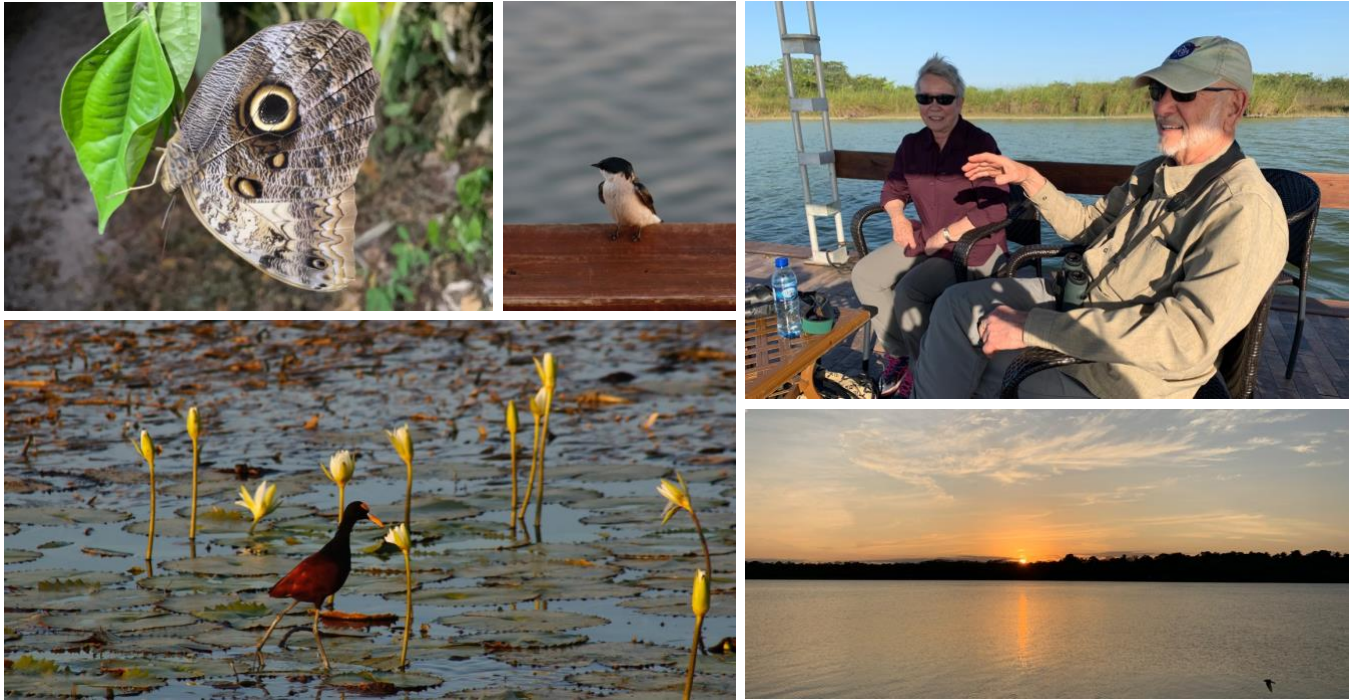
Fri., Mar. 25 Lamanai Outpost Lodge

A few got up a bit early to bird around the Lodge with Dave before breakfast. Mostly familiar friends were found, including a Russet-naped Wood-Rail, Limpkin, and Spot-breasted Wren, though we did hear Plain Chachalacas calling (or at least we tried to hear them, given that the Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys had spent the night in a tree right next to the rooms and decided to greet the dawn in their typical fashion!). After the usual Lamanai tasty and satisfying breakfast, we headed down to the boat dock for the short boat trip to the very nearby Lamanai Maya Archeological Site.



At the Site, we received a truly great archeological and wildlife tour of the area from Vidal, who provided us an excellent overview of the history of the site (which was never abandoned, like so many other sites). It was a very special commentary coming from someone who grew up there and used to climb on the temples as a child—what a treat! One of the joys and challenges in visiting a site like Lamanai is that it can be hard to multi-task between admiring the structures (the tallest temple at Lamanai is 33 m tall!) and looking for birds and wildlife—it's a tough job, but we did it.

No doubt about it, though, we saw many nice birds at Lamanai. A large, fruiting, stranger fig was full of feeding birds including Yellow-throated, Scrub, and Olive-backed Euphonia; Gartered and Black-headed Trogon; and an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. With some patience, Vidal and Dave were able to get everyone on to almost all the species while we stood or sat on a building wall. All the time, a large group of White-nosed Coatis foraged on the ground, tails held straight in the air. Moving slowly through the site yielded good lucks at many birds, such as Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, and Greenish Elaenia. At the end of our walk, we took a quick tour through the nice museum on site and then headed back to the Lodge in the van for lunch and a brief rest. Most of the group got together in mid-afternoon for a walk on the Lodge's trails and roads with Vidal, adding some nice new species to our trip list. Some of the notable species included White-necked Puffbird, Blue-black Grosbeak, Black-headed Saltator, White-collared Manakin, and a few migrants such as Yellow-throated Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Black-throated Green Warbler. A very satisfying afternoon which whetted our appetites for another delicious Lodge dinner. After dinner and sunset, we headed down to the dock for one of the most notable parts of our tour: the night-time spotlighting boat trip on New River Lagoon. With Eddie driving the boat and Vidal on the spotlight, we experienced this area, its birds, and other wildlife in a completely different way. Pretty much everything we found was fun and interesting, but we saw Fishing Bats foraging over the water, Common Pauraques on the shore, a roosting Northern Waterthrush completely asleep and tucked into a feathered ball, a Purple Gallinule, a Snail Kite, and roosting Ringed, Green, and American Pygmy Kingfishers. Most amazing, and none of us have any idea how Eddie found it, but a roosting Least Bittern was spotted among the cattails to top off an unforgettable evening!



Sat., Mar. 26 Lamanai Outpost Lodge

Today began with early coffee and muffins at the Lodge, followed by an approximately 2-hour walk on the roads in the adjacent town of Indian Church. The mix of open spaces and various trees provided ideal birding conditions and our progress was slow, but steady. A plethora of Orchard Orioles was feeding in a flowering tree, along with a Baltimore Oriole or two. Keel-billed Toucans appeared, always a crowd-pleaser, as did a Roadside Hawk, Cinnamon-bellied Saltator, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Hooded Oriole, and some Bronzed Cowbirds. Given the season, we saw many neotropical migrants, including Tennessee, Yellow, Black-throated Green, and Magnolia Warbler; Rose-breasted Grosbeak; and Northern Parula. After this nice walk, we recharged our batteries at breakfast. A few of us then met a bit later in the morning for a short walk on the Lodge grounds, enjoying a pair of Bat Falcons and a Summer Tanager along the way.

After lunch, we had most of the afternoon off, but then went down to the dock for a sunset cruise in late afternoon, this time led by Brenda and Vidal. Sitting in comfortable chairs on the deck of the pontoon boat, we cruised around the lake, spotting a variety of typical birds, such as Northern Jacana, White Ibis, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, and more Russet-naped Wood-Rails. Much to our complete lack of surprise, there was a bar on board for those interested, so some enjoyed a sunset cocktail on the water on this pleasant late afternoon. However, our day here was not yet done! After dinner, we met again at about 7:30pm for a night walk with Vidal, who had headlamps for those who had not brought one. Although it was a quiet evening, we did spot a roosting Wood Thrush right next to the trail and a Gray Four-eyed Opossum. For the latter, it was easy to see the eye-shine from its real eyes as well as the two white “fake” eyes immediately above them with the aid of the spotlight. Other fun critters included a bunch of Marine (Cane) Toads and Rio Grande Leopard Frogs roosting by some pools of water and an Owl Butterfly. After this, it was time for a well-earned rest for the evening.

Sun., Mar. 27 Lamanai Outpost Lodge to Chan Chich Lodge

Today was our final day at the wonderful Lamanai Outpost Lodge, so we got an early start with some coffee and muffins, then down to the dock for our final field trip. This time, we headed over to the opposite side of New River Lagoon and entered a narrow, but very passable, old Mayan canal. Birds were spotted right away, of



course, including a variety of egrets and herons, a Spotted Sandpiper, and Ringed Kingfisher. We then “docked” the boat at the shore for a hike in savanna habitat, a habitat type we had not explored on the trip. With Vidal’s excellent help and the aid of our spotting scopes, we had an excellent morning finding some of the restricted-range Yucatan Peninsula endemic species of birds we had come to look for. Quite a few Yellow-lored Parrots were flying around and several perched well enough to clearly see the blue cheeks, red face patch, and tiny yellow lores that distinguish this species from the similar White-fronted Parrot. The other species we found that we were unlikely to encounter again during the trip included Yucatan Woodpecker (fortunately close enough to separate from Golden-fronted Woodpecker with ease), Black Catbird (nicely perched in a tree), Olive Sparrow, and Botteri’s Sparrow—the latter perching very obligingly in a bush for scope views (something that does not happen often!). Other interesting sightings included Blue Bunting, Couch’s Kingbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Scrub Euphonia, and Mexican Cycadian (a butterfly). Returning to our boat, we enjoyed more birds on the boat trip back (including a nice Green-breasted Mango) and landed back at the Lodge for a well-earned breakfast.

After breakfast, it was time for everyone to organize their things and get packed up for our transfer to Chan Chich Lodge. After lunch, we said farewell to Eddie, Vidal, and the wonderful staff at Lamanai and joined Levy for the several hour drive to the west and north to Chan Chich. Of course, the drive to Chan Chich had birds along the way, the most interesting of those, perhaps, were Eastern Meadowlark, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and lots of Barn Swallows over the rice fields at Blue Creek and the first of many Ocellated Turkeys as we passed through Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area on our way to Gallon Jug Farm and Chan Chich. Upon arrival at Chan Chich Lodge, we given a welcome drink and a briefing by the ever-cheerful Anabella and then got settled in our comfy cabins. A short walk around the Lodge buildings (built in a Mayan plaza) yielded a few things to whet our appetites, including Long-billed Hermit at the feeders, Mealy and Red-lored Parrots, and a beautiful male Hooded Warbler foraging on the lawn. Before dinner, we met to review the bird list and discuss plans for the next day, followed by a delicious dinner and a good rest for the adventures that lay ahead.

Mon., Mar. 28 Chan Chich Lodge & Nature Reserve

Up early in the darkness, Dave heard a Central American Pygmy-Owl calling from his porch, the only one of the trip. Convening the group before breakfast, Dave then led a short walk in the Lodge area, which yielded some interesting birds, including Strong-billed Woodcreeper, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Lineated Woodpecker (which turned out to have a nest cavity in a dead tree right in front of the Lodge!), the double-knock of the Pale-



billed Woodpecker, and more of the very numerous Magnolia Warbler. Our breakfast table was outside on the porch, and numerous distractions abounded, especially a male Red-capped Manakin eating fruits from a tree right next to the porch, Red-legged Honeycreepers knocking everyone's eyes out, White-necked Jacobins monopolizing the feeders, Gartered Trogon, and a Yellow-throated Vireo. Hard to eat with all this going around, but we persisted and polished off the first of many satisfying breakfasts at Chan Chich. After breakfast, we met our guide Luis for the first of several outings with him. We spent about 2½ hours in a loop hike, working our way out the entrance road, back through the staff housing areas, and then returning to the Lodge. Probably the highlight of this walk was a custard apple tree in the staff area, full of ripe fruit with birds feasting on the fruit! Highlights included great views of Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonia, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Clay-colored Thrush, Gray Catbird, and a male Painted Bunting spotted by Roger. Other things found by the group during this nice walk included Vaux's Swifts overhead, a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamar, 2 Russet-naped Wood-Rails in the ancient Maya reservoir by the road, a White Hawk soaring, and Deppe's Squirrel (the common forest squirrel here).

After lunch, we had the afternoon off, though Dave spent a bit of time on the King's Tomb and Logger's Trails, finding a few things, including the only Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, White-breasted Wood-Wren, and Green-backed Sparrow of the trip. After dinner, however, we rallied for a night drive with Luis out to Gallon Jug Farm for about 2 hours. Although the quantity of things seen was low, the quality was extremely high! Easily the best sightings were 2 Ocelots in the cattle pastures by the side of the road, a life mammal sighting for all! Also found were Common Pauraque, 2 Northern Potoo, and a Barn Owl that flew into a tree by the road with a large "rat-like" object that it proceeded to voraciously consume. This was truly another night outing to remember for a long time.

Tue., Mar. 29 Chan Chich Lodge & Nature Reserve

After our late night, we slept in a bit and started the day with breakfast at 7:30. As usual, our eating and coffee-consuming was interrupted by birds, this time by a Stripe-throated Hermit that appeared every once in a while, as well as the "usual suspects" such as Summer Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, Social Flycatcher, and Blue-black Grosbeak. After breakfast, we went on a morning outing with Luis, driving to the Escarpment where we hoped to observe soaring raptors. This turned out to be a wonderful trip, with many stops along the way to look at



birds and wildlife as we traveled some dirt roads through the forest. Several small groups of male and female Great Curassows crossed the road, allowing good observations of these large, terrestrial birds, infrequently seen these days outside of protected areas. A variety of birds new for our trip were spotted, including a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens and a King Vulture. A real highlight for the morning occurred when Luis stopped on a hill in the forest and asked us to look carefully behind us at a large nest in an even larger tree by the road. Sure enough, close examination through the scopes showed a bird in it, with tufts coming out of its head: an incubating, female Ornate Hawk-Eagle! Since we were on a hill looking at the nest in a tree in a valley, we were on almost eye level with the bird and we all got to observe it at great length. After some time, it finally stood up in the nest and we could see its majestic profile with its beautiful brown cheeks—truly, another highlight of the trip.

Arriving at the actual Escarpment, we came to a cleared area with a spectacular view back to the East, from which we had come, with the Gallon Jug Farm in the far distance. However, at this time rain clouds began to loom ominously on the other horizon and it became a bit cloudy and windy. Therefore, we saw hardly any raptors soaring but the few there were, were very good birds: a Swallow-tailed Kite and a Black Hawk-Eagle! Once again, low quantity but extra high quality. We then hustled into the truck to start back before the rains came, spotting a few birds along the way including a heard Rufous Piha and a nice group of birds by the suspension bridge over Chan Chich Creek such as Louisiana Waterthrush, Golden-hooded Tanager, Yellow-green Vireo, and Black-crowned Tityra. This excellent outing was followed by lunch and a short siesta. Reconvening in the late afternoon, we climbed into the field trip vehicle for another road trip, this time to Laguna Seca. This large lake and marsh were far from “seca” and, although kind of quiet, proved a lovely spot for a late afternoon walk. After some searching, we spotted two or three Pinnated Bitterns periodically sticking their long necks out of the reeds—one of our target species for this spot. Also around were some Central American Spider Monkeys, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, a few Blue-winged Teal, and a lovely male White-collared Manakin. After this peaceful spot, we returned to the Lodge to refresh, do our daily bird list, and enjoy another fine dinner.

Wed., Mar. 30 Chan Chich Lodge & Nature Reserve

After a sort of leisurely breakfast in the morning, Roger, Donna, and Dave met Luis again with the trusty tour vehicle and we headed out for the Gallon Jug Farm “tour”, which was actually a birding trip in disguise—who knew?! This turned out to be a lovely morning of birding along the Farm’s roads, sometimes in the open, but also through the coffee plantations and even in some forest. Some of the new species encountered included Squirrel Cuckoo, Dusky Antbird, Gray Hawk, Plumbeous Kite, Long-billed Gnatwren (very hard to see that one



well, though), White-bellied Wren, and a Monarch feeding on milkweeds (Monarchs here are a resident population, not part of the migratory population in North America). Perhaps the highlights were a Double-toothed Kite perching nicely in a tree and a Collared Aracari, seen by some. After this fun and productive morning, we returned for lunch at the Lodge, where we met up with Nora and Ivan again. After our usual post-lunch siesta, Roger, Donna, and Dave met Luis once more for our final Chan Chich walk. This time, we walked out the entrance road to the suspension bridge, then took the short Sac Be Trail to the edge of Chan Chich Creek. The bird gods truly smiled on us this afternoon; we arrived at the Creek at the end of the Trail at a perfect time to watch a variety of birds come in to bathe and drink at the end of a hot day. Putting in an appearance, sometimes multiple times, were Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Kentucky Warbler, American Restart, Green Kingfisher, and Stripe-throated Hermit. Best of all, however, were multiple appearances by an appropriately named Purple-crowned Fairy, who appeared to hover over the stream, periodically dipping down for a quick bath, and then hovering again. The combination of late afternoon soon and the dark setting of the stream caused this bird to literally glow—a radiating vision of white, green, purple, and black—a truly, magical, special moment. On our way there, we also saw more Central American Spider Monkeys, White-crowned Parrots, a Collared Trogon (to complete our trogon four-fecta for the trip), and a dead False Fer-de-Lance in the road. What a way to conclude the tour! Returning to the Lodge, everyone met up for our final bird list and dinner.

Thur., Mar. 31 Chan Chich Lodge | Departures

We began our last day of the tour with breakfast on the Lodge patio at 7:00AM, once again enjoying numerous avian distractions from our wonderful food. Another Purple-crowned Fairy appeared, the first we had seen near the feeders, along with Social Flycatchers, Blue-black Grosbeaks, Morelet's Seedeater, and a Hooded Warbler. Chan Chich Lodge truly has an awesome breakfast "menu"! We had a couple of hours to pack and organize for our trips home, then Levy took us in the van to the Gallon Jug airstrip to await our charter flight to Belize City. Unfortunately, the flight was a bit late, so Dave and Levy spent an anxious half hour or so on the front steps waiting in vain for the noise of an airplane engine to appear. After just about giving up hope, the Maya Airways plane appeared to pick us up! The pilot loaded us and our bags and off we went into the Belizean sky for the 25-minute flight to Belize City airport. Upon landing, we entered the terminal, retrieved our checked bags, then

walked around the corner for our covid tests at Belize Medical Associates. Annabella at Chan Chich had kindly sent them our info, so we could almost go directly into the testing area for the test (but, if they liked us so much, why were they sticking things up our noses??). In what seemed like an endless wait, but was more like 15 minutes, we all got negative results back (it does feel like winning the lottery) and then we parted ways. Dave went off to his slightly earlier Southwest flight and Roger, Donna, Ivan, and Nora went to the United flight. And, with that, our most excellent Belize Birding & Nature tour came to an end.

Photo Credits: Group Birding (David Mehlman - DM), Crooked Tree Lagoon (DM), Great Black Hawk (DM), Group on the boat (Roger Mattson - RM), Yellow-tailed Oriole (DM), Boat-bill Heron (RM), Black Orchid (DM), To Lamanai! (DM), Lamanai (RM), Coati (DM), Queen's Wreath (DM), Pygmy Kingfisher (DM), Orchid (DM), Owl Butterfly (RM), Mangrove Swallow (DM), Northern Jacana (DM), Donna & Roger (DM), Sunset (DM), Birding at the lodge (RM), Tropical Milkweed (DM), Closer Look (RM), Black-headed Trogon (DM), Passionflower (DM), Ivan and Roger (DM), White-collared Seedeater (DM), Ornate Hawk-Eagle (DM), Great Curassow Chick (DM), Aplomado Falcon (DM), Plane (DM)