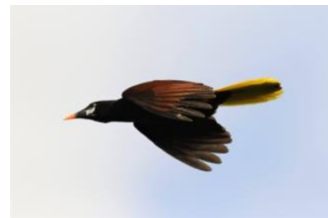


Belize: Birds & Nature | Jan. 15 – 23, 2022 | Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guides Ruben, Christian and Luis, Naturalist Journeys' guides James P. Smith, and tour participants: Andrew, Gayle, Judy, Jonathan and Shirley

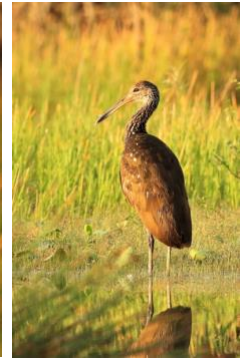


Sat., Jan. 15

Burrell Boom | Black Orchid Resort

The Black Orchid Resort, quaintly nestled on the lush banks of the Belize River, provided a perfect rendezvous point for our small Naturalist Journeys group. All participants had been in Belize for several days not only getting acclimatized, but also getting to know the country a little before the main tour began in earnest. At 4 p.m. Jonathan and James met for an optional afternoon bird walk, taking in the grounds of the Black Orchid while the rest of the group chose to relax and freshen up. Jonathan had been staying at the Black Orchid over the previous three days and had already amassed a bird list of some 76 species!

The tropical air was muggy and the evening warm. A few pesky mosquitoes buzzed around but weren't troublesome and the bitter January cold of Jonathan's Canadian home must have seemed like a world away. The birding on site was busy with a diminutive Trilling Gnatwren, wintering Gray Catbirds, Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart and Black-and-white Warbler all being found in the grounds of the resort. Moving out onto the road, noisy flights of Red-lored Parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets furnished the tropical ambiance, while Tropical Kingbirds and Pale-vented Pigeons teed up for easy viewing in the scrub. The real prize, however, was a pre-roost movement of some 15-20 Montezuma Oropendolas, which ultimately proved to be the only



oropendola flock seen during the whole tour! Further up the road, a mostly hidden, semi-dried pond hosted a couple of fast-moving Russet-naped Wood-Rails scurrying across the mud, and Common Yellowthroats and multiple Groove-billed Anis could be seen around the fringe of the pond. More Pale-vented Pigeons, as well as several Magnolia Warblers and Baltimore Orioles all showed in the surrounding scrub. As we walked back along the road, the rapid-fire ‘*bu-bup-bup*’ calls of wintering Wood Thrushes could be heard as the light faded and the dusk ensued. The birding element of the trip was off to a cracking start! The Black Orchid’s relaxed atmosphere was warm and inviting as we got to know each other around the dinner table. We shared travel stories from the previous days, and expressed hopes for the trip that lay ahead while the avian and cultural treasures to come ensured a good night’s rest in preparation for an early start the next day.

Sun., Jan. 16 Burrell Boom | Crooked Tree Sanctuary | New River Lamanai Outpost Lodge

We gathered with our suitcases in the resort parking lot well before first light. Ruben, from Lamanai Lodge, was already there to meet us at 5:15 a.m., and would be our main guide for the next three days. With him came some 20 years of solid guiding experience - we were bound to be in very good hands! We drove north leaving Burrell Boom in darkness and enjoyed some peaceful, traffic-free streets, so peaceful, in fact, that we came across a few Common Pauras resting on the road just before dawn. On arrival, Bird’s Eye View Lodge looked quite magical as the sun began to rise over Crooked Tree Lagoon. Flights of herons and cormorants, and the sounds of a tropical dawn greeted us, surely a welcome tonic after 20 months of Covid restriction!

The Bird’s Eye staff prepared coffee, tea, fruits and muffins, plus a seemingly well-trained and beautiful Yellow-throated Warbler in the dining area! Our Captain and local guide for the morning, Michael, would navigate the waterways and narrow channels with consummate ease as he knew Crooked Tree’s waters inside out. As we pushed back from the dock it was a comfortable 76 degrees coupled with a soothing breeze off the water, a perfect start to our Belize adventure. With six sharp-eyed observers on board, plus local guides Ruben and Michael, the birds were bound to come thick and fast, and so they did; Ringed Kingfishers, Limpkins, Tri-colored and Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egret, Northern Jacanas and Russet-naped Wood-Rails all appeared in rapid succession. Lines of Neotropic Cormorants departed from overnight roosts, and Gray-breasted Martins, Barn, Tree and Mangrove Swallows flitted over the surface of the water. We had fabulous, nay extraordinary views of perched Great Black, Black-collared and Roadside Hawks teed up in the waterside thickets, and Gull-billed and Caspian Terns over the water. Scads of Wood Storks were effectively dwarfed by a couple of mighty Jabiru, and at



least half-a-dozen stunning Fork-tailed Flycatchers were foraging out in the lagoon. Crooked Tree Sanctuary was putting on a show and there was more to come! Ruben had thought about breakfast too, and handed out some tasty egg burritos just before we headed into Spanish Creek, a shallow channel heavily vegetated on both banks and perfect for foraging/roosting herons: Great Blue, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Bare-throated Tiger-Herons, Boat-billed and Green Herons were all found, but all those paled when there was a sudden cry of “AGAMI!!!”. Amid the tranquility of Spanish Creek, Ruben had somehow managed to spot an Agami Heron lurking under the over-hanging tree limbs and vine tangles. The bird was something to behold with burgundy neck sides, dark blue-green upperparts and pallid, sky-blue “lattice” feathering across the breast. For many, Agami Heron is the most alluring of all the heron family, and as we watched this long-billed beauty creeping furtively between sun-dappled shadows and tangled vines, it was hard to disagree. One of the key birds of the whole trip had already surrendered to our notebooks and the tour was barely a few hours old! A minute to let this all sink in would have been nice but then there was another cry from the rear of the boat “AGAMI HERON on the opposite bank!” And this one was even better, perhaps a little closer and famously dancing in and out of the shadows as the sun lit up all those immaculate colors! Close-by, a regal Amazon Kingfisher perched, but was nearly overlooked after two close encounters with Agami Herons. Michael steered us back towards the main lagoon considerably faster than we’d entered. Along the way, multiple Green Herons flushed from the vegetation, Green and Belted Kingfishers flew alongside the boat and disgruntled Ringed Kingfishers ‘rattled’ their displeasure at being flushed. Several giant green iguanas and Morelet’s crocodiles were among the non-avian highlights seen. Heading back towards Bird’s Eye View Lodge, one last treat lay in store. Michael knew of a spot that hosted several roosting Boat-billed Herons on a heavily vegetated island swathed in rank grasses and reeds. As we steered closer, multiple roosting herons came into view, and as we carefully scanned through the vegetation we found more, many more in fact, with perhaps as many as 50 Boat-billed Herons at this one roost site - impressive to say the least!

The trip was off to a brilliant start. Back at the dock there was enough time for a quick break followed by a Ruben-led bird walk along the trails by the lagoon. The beginning was busy with orioles; Baltimore, Orchard and Black-cowled all by the lodge, as well as bright, male Vermilion Flycatchers and several feisty Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds. Further along the trail we had fabulous views of Mangrove Vireo, Barred Antshrike, Rose-throated Becard and even a couple of surprises for Ruben in the form of several Common Ground-Doves and a Greenish Elaenia feeding out in the open. Some of the denser thickets were a little quiet, but we still found pockets of birds including some wintering warblers: American Redstart,



Magnolia, Black-and-white, Yellow and Black-throated Green Warblers, as well as several Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Especially good finds included Ivory-billed Woodcreepers and a furtive pair of Rufous-breasted Spinetails skulking through the thickets that ultimately showed well to the whole group. Vermilion and Social Flycatchers, Groove-billed Anis and a Lineated Woodpecker were among the last birds seen around Bird's Eye View Lodge before we headed off across the Crooked Tree causeway and joined the Northern Highway towards Carmelita. Ever attentive, Ruben had pre-ordered a delicious Belizean lunch at the Bat's Landing Grill on the banks of the New River for when we arrived.

After lunch the New River would take us all the way to the Lamanai Outpost Lodge, a boat ride of some 22 southbound miles. Kingfishers were soon noted close to the dock with Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers all appearing in quick succession. Neotropical Cormorants, Tropical Kingbirds and Social Flycatchers were numerous along the route, often teed up on bare limbs and branches in the riverside vegetation. Indeed, the riverside thickets held multiple surprises with notably good views of Boat-billed Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Anhinga, Roadside Hawk, Osprey, a sweet pair of Bat Falcons and even a surprise flock of 20 Least Sandpipers swirling around searching for an exposed muddy shoreline. Throughout the journey, Mangrove Swallows flickered just above the surface of the water, and some stretches harbored handsome Northern Jacanas trotting across the floating vegetation. The New River widened significantly as we approached Lamanai, and Ruben informed us that the "hills" to our west were actually Mayan Temples shrouded in ancient forest. In fact, this was the Lamanai archeological site that we'd be visiting the following day. Karen, our on-site host, was at the dock to greet us and, together with Ruben, led the way to cozy, spacious cabanas scattered about the dreamy, jungle-like grounds of Lamanai Outpost Lodge, our home for the next three nights.

After settling in there was an orientation and welcome drinks by the bar. Karen gave an excellent briefing and advised on how best to spend the next three nights in the jungle! Later we caught up on the checklist and reflected on a truly fantastic day in the field, a day that included some 112 bird species! A delightful dinner of regional cuisine was served, especially welcome after a long day of travel, and we relaxed in the friendly, mellow atmosphere of Lamanai Outpost Lodge before heading off to our comfortable cabanas for a well-deserved night's rest.

Mon., Jan. 17 Lamanai Archeological Reserve | Indian Church Village New River Night Safari

The day dawned clear, bright and surprisingly cool. A cold front moved through overnight and cleared away the mugginess that we'd experienced in the coastal plain. Sweatshirts and hoodies were surely in demand at breakfast! Red-ored Parrots screeched overhead and a small posse of Plain Chachalacas showed up around the dining area. A pair of Bat Falcons overlooked the lodge at breakfast and were still on view from the dock as we boarded the boat to head down to the Lamanai Archeological Reserve. Upon arrival, Ruben explained that "Lamanai," while generally understood to mean



“submerged crocodile” in the Maya language, should be closer to “*Lama'anayin*” in pronunciation. Ruben grew up locally and would later relay stories of playing in the ruins as a child and ultimately studying to qualify as a tour guide and continue his work close to home.

After being given some time to explore the museum and exhibits, we began a complete walking loop of the archaeological reserve incorporating five of the temples en-route. The first was Mask Temple where, ironically, Masked Tityras (and Yellow-throated Vireos) fed in the giant guanacaste trees, laden with Devil's Guts Cactus and Strangler Figs. One particularly bold male white-nosed coati came to visit, behaving as if it recognized Ruben's voice, and a male Slaty-tailed Trogon showed rather nicely to the group. After listening to Ruben's compelling exposition of the Mask Temple, a few in our party took up his offer to climb the ruins and enjoy fine views over the surrounding forest canopy.

Lamanai Archeological Reserve is a site of roughly two square miles with six temples excavated to date, and a further 727 temples that remain unseen and unearthed. The area formerly covered 10 square miles harboring a civilization of some 40,000-50,000 people. Its presence in the lowlands was evidence of an impressive trade system between Belize, Guatemala and Mexico. Evidence of early construction at the site dates back to 100 BC, but a prolonged drought around 950 AD decimated the population, with some survivors apparently fleeing to Costa Rica. It was fascinating listening to Ruben share his deep, intimate knowledge of the area. In a heartbeat he could switch from history to birds and back to history. The on-site birding was outstanding with a fabulous mix of resident species such as Laughing Falcon, Ivory-billed and Olivaceous Woodcreepers, Green-breasted Mango and a smart Chestnut-colored Woodpecker all seen alongside winter migrants including Northern Parula, American Redstart, Hooded, Black-and-white, Magnolia and Worm-eating Warblers. Red-fored, White-crowned and Brown-hooded Parrots, and Olive-throated Parakeets, screeched around the reserve throughout the morning, and a stunning male Red-capped Manakin put on a show by the High Temple. Eye-ringed Flatbill, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias and small flocks of Lesser Greenlets were further highlights from the morning, as were the trogons with Slaty-tailed, Black-headed and Gartered Trogons all seen well during our walk. And there was an ever-present background of growling Yucatan black howler monkeys, some of which were well seen in the canopy.

Our ride back to the lodge was slightly delayed by a rare mechanical issue on one of the boats, but no matter, it gave us ample time to enjoy yet another perched Bat Falcon along with Limpkin, Northern Jacana and several other smart wetland birds. A classic Lamanai lunch was well received: Spinach dip with Tortilla chips followed by Lamanai Fajitas, all washed down with Soursop Juice. In late afternoon we headed towards Indian Church Village for a short walk before supper but didn't get very far! We'd only gone a few paces when large numbers of birds were found feeding right behind the lodge, but Ruben was as cool as they come and found a way to tease out all the key species at just the right pace. Kingbirds, Tropical and Couch's together separated by those all-important calls, we had flycatchers; Great Crested, Dusky-capped, Yellow-olive



and Least, and a Bright-rumped Attila, and orioles; Baltimore, Hooded and Black-cowled, and a whole host of wintering warblers including Hooded, Blue-winged, Magnolia, Yellow and Black-and-white, Northern Parula and more American Redstarts. Several Red-billed Pigeons teed up in the taller, leafless trees offered good scope views. Yellow-throated Euphonias were plentiful, and close, and White-eyed Vireos and a Common Yellowthroat were seen before we headed through the lodge gate.

Red-legged Honeycreepers were present in numbers as we skirted around Indian Church Village and loads of parrots flew over including several Brown-hooded showing off their diagnostic red arm pits! Northern Rough-winged Swallows swept over the village in good numbers, which Ruben thought unusual, and with them came two Gray-breasted Martins. As the evening drew to a close, the walk back to the lodge was rewarded with magnificent views of a perched Gray Hawk. Dinner was yet another local delight -- Shrimp Curry preceded by Tortilla Soup. Afterwards we grabbed headlamps, flashlights and long sleeves and headed down to the dock for a spotlight night safari on the New River Lagoon. Ruben wasted no time in making a start and found a roost of Neotropic Cormorants and a Great Blue Heron. The first crepuscular species was a Common Pauraque resting at the Lamanai Ruins boat dock, and we later went on to find two other nightjar species, the regionally endemic Yucatan Nightjar and the magnificent Northern Potoo. Ruben must have spotlighted half-a-dozen of the latter in one of the best displays of the species that we've seen in Belize.

As we entered the narrower waterways, Ruben navigated the channels with ease not only guiding the boat but simultaneously spotlighting myriad interesting avian and non-avian species including a tiny American Pygmy Kingfisher, a provision tree (in flower!), a gray four-eyed opossum, and the absolute highlight, a couple of Mexican dwarf porcupines...a small, arboreal porcupine with relatively short yellowish spines - a sighting that even got Ruben excited! A remarkable night safari was drawing to a close and as we cruised back to the dock, several greater fishing bats hawked and dipped above the water, looking remarkably bird-like and behaving much like Black Terns. And who would have thought that a night safari was the best way to see kingfishers?! Somehow we managed to see all five species possible in Belize in just one evening! It was close to 10 p.m. on arrival back at the dock. The tropical night was peaceful and calm, and another rewarding day in Belize had come to an end. Our cozy cabanas beckoned once more...

Tues., Jan. 18

Lamanai Savannah | Dawson Creek | Indian Church Village | New River Lagoon | Sunset Cocktail Cruise

Lamanai Savannah was calling and demanded an early departure with a short boat ride across New River Lagoon. Marvi and Nancy had been up early as well making sure we had coffee, tea, juice and homemade muffins available in the dining room at 5:45 a.m. There was a slight chill in the air as we crossed the open water, but that soon dissipated once we entered the tranquil waters of Dawson Creek. Gently cruising upstream, we enjoyed a host of herons including Tricolored and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, and there was a fine chorus of trilling Ruddy Crakes. A perched Snail Kite further ensured the day was off to a fine start and the guttural rattle of a Ringed Kingfisher announced our arrival at the dock area. The savannah was a



new habitat-type for our adventure and ripe for exploration. Sandy soil, mixed with clay and carpeted with knee-high tussock grass, hosted a mix of Caribbean pines, oaks and palmettos. Sandy trails snaked through most of the habitat, and Ruben led the way with Michael, his son and guide-in-training, at the rear.

Yucatan Jays were heard calling as soon as we stepped off the boat, but alas couldn't be coaxed any closer. Similarly, a Botteri's Sparrow gave its classic "bouncing ball" song, but never showed well to the group. On the other hand, Greenish Elaenia and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers foraged in the oaks, Red-lore and White-crowned Parrots flew overhead, and we got very lucky with close fly-by views of a Yellow-headed Parrot, sadly a species in decline due to illegal poaching for the caged bird market. True to form, Lamanai Savannah had many treats in store hosting several unique species that we had little chance of seeing elsewhere on the trip. The day warmed up from a chilly 58 degrees F, and so too the birding improved. Acorn Woodpeckers jumped around on oak trunks and limbs, and we had brief but excellent looks at two scarce hummers in the form of Azure-crowned and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, neither of which would be seen anywhere else on the tour. There was more magic to come as Ruben spotted a perched raptor in the distance, and scope views revealed it was an adult White-tailed Hawk! Throughout the morning we'd been accompanied by a monotonous warbling song coming from the oak scrub, the voice of a Rufous-browed Peppershrike, a large, gaudy passerine with a reputation for being nearly impossible to view. We could hardly believe our luck when Ruben coaxed one into the crown of a large oak right in front of us for spectacular views. A pewee perched silently close by and induced a little angst as we wrestled with the ID, though it later transpired that the migratory Eastern Wood-Pewee is virtually unknown in Belize in January, with Tropical being a fairly widespread resident. And Tropical Pewee it was! A few minutes later Ruben heard, and then saw, a Yucatan Flycatcher, one of the *Myiarchus* family sharing a very similar overall appearance with the much more widespread Dusky-capped Flycatcher. Though a fast-moving bird, most of our group managed to have reasonable views of another scarce regional endemic.

The morning had been a fabulous success and we strolled back toward the docking area in the warmth of the tropical sun enjoying one last look at the beautiful herd of "wild" horses that shadowed our passage through the savanna for most of the morning. Though not truly wild in the purest sense, the origin of the herd is believed to have come from escapees during Hurricane Hattie in 1961 that eventually established a self-sustaining population in Lamanai. They looked incredibly wild and healthy, and added a nice element of enchantment to our morning in the savanna. Back at the lodge a hearty Belizean breakfast was served: Johnny cakes, fry jacks, scrambled eggs, bacon, refried beans, fresh fruits and more. The day warmed up rapidly and our post-breakfast walk saw us head back toward Indian Church Village where Ruben showed us an endemic hibiscus as well as some very good birds including Black-headed Saltator, a pair of Barred Antshrikes and a Black-crowned Tityra, the latter being new to the trip. Andrew's sharp eyesight had already been noticed and this time he spotted



a Rose-breasted Grosbeak in the village, the only one to be seen on the entire tour! The group enjoyed a fairly lengthy stroll around Indian Church, taking in the sights and sounds of the village where many of the Lamanai staff lived. Commoner birds around the village included Ruddy Ground-Doves, Melodious Blackbirds, Social Flycatchers and Great Kiskadees, a calling Couch's Kingbird and a small flock of Morelet's Seedeaters that shared a weedy patch with a Blue-black Grassquit. The warmth of the day ultimately turned to genuine heat signaling a return to the lodge, but not before we had fantastic views of a pair of Lineated Woodpeckers excavating a nest cavity in a small orchard right next to the road.

A relaxed cocktail cruise on the New River was just the ticket for late afternoon, time to unwind a little with a slightly boozy affair: Belkin Beer, Piña Coladas, Margaritas and other beverages of choice on the menu. Despite the booze, or perhaps because of it, the trip wasn't short on spectacular birding with closeup views of Limpkin, Snail Kite, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and much more. Ruben tried hard to coax in a Black Catbird, without success, but the Ruddy Crakes that we'd heard that morning was still audible in the evening, and this time, with a little patience, we had almost unheard-of views of two or three crakes running between the grasses at the water's edge very close to the boat! Another fantastic day was neatly wrapped up with a checklist of the day's sightings at the bar, and another fabulous dinner of local cuisine (Black Bean Soup, Outpost Chicken Tamales, and Lamanai Lime Pie for dessert), and it was a real pleasure to have Ruben join us at the dinner table for one last supper at Lamanai.

Wed., Jan. 19

Lamanai Outpost Lodge (Airport Trail) | Lamanai to Chan Chich Lodge via Blue Creek

The day began early with tea, coffee and muffins available in the dining area once more. Ruben had plans for a guided walk along "the airport road," which would take us through the lodge, down toward the dock, past a remarkably well-hidden generator and into early successional habitat. Then we would wander through mature rainforest and back towards the lodge along a small canal. All in all, a diverse range of habitats over a roughly 1.5 mile loop. Weather-wise it was a different day yet again, being completely overcast with periods of light rain and a distinct increase in humidity. Ruben worked hard to purse out some of the sounds coming from the forest including Northern Barred and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, and Green-backed Sparrows. Eventually we had views of two female White-collared Manakins, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Olive-throated Parakeets and several wintering Wood Thrush. Once into the more open habitat, yet another a Green-breasted Mango was spotted in what had been a very good tour for the species. We also wrestled with a few skulkers, species that called frequently but were admittedly quite difficult to see. Among them, Yellow-breasted Chat, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Spot-breasted Wren and a surprise Mangrove Vireo were all heard but only poorly seen or not at all.

Once inside the forest, the massive guanacaste trees provided food and cover for a whole host of woodland birds as well as a sizeable group of Yucatan Black Howlers. We did extremely well to hear, and then see, a skulking Mayan Antthrush



walking across the forest floor behaving much more like a crane than an antbird. Ruben pointed out a calling White-breasted Wood-Wren and we all had views of a pair of White-bellied Wrens working huge vine tangles by the track. A fairly large flock of Red-legged Honeycreepers hosted a single Trilling Gnatwren that gave excellent views and, further along the trail, a furtive Smoky-brown Woodpecker joined a feeding flock that included Northern Parula and Black-and-white, Magnolia and Blue-winged Warblers along with American Redstart. Several large and distinctive pale owl-butterflies flitted along the trail too. A chattering family group of Red-throated Ant-Tanagers closed out the trail just before the habitat opened once more to reveal the canal zone. Ruben's sharp ears tuned in on a calling Golden-olive Woodpecker which finally gave itself up for views as it flew across the clearing before us. After that we stepped up the tempo to ensure we weren't too late for breakfast, but still had time to note a calling Roadside Hawk and a sizeable flock of Black-headed Saltators along the way.

After a leisurely breakfast there was some downtime, actually time required for packing, settling bar and room bills, and some last minute birding on site. Our time at Lamanai was sadly coming to an end. Marvi and Nancy made sure we wouldn't go hungry, serving delicious meat pasties, steak fries and salad for lunch. As for Ruben, well the hope was that he could join us for the Chan Chich portion of the trip, but he was already preparing for his next group. In his leadership we'd found patience, enthusiasm, exceptional field skills and a decidedly cheeky sense of humor. His spirit would be missed. Our carriage arrived at 1:30 p.m., a comfortable 12-seater Chevy Van with high clearance for some of the more dubious elements of the two-hour drive that lay ahead. At the helm we were again blessed with one of the most seasoned local guides in Belize, Mr. Luis Romero, a man of Mayan descent who'd lived and worked as a guide at Chan Chich Lodge for most of his adult life. Not long after leaving Lamanai the landscape changed completely. We left the rainforest behind and crossed acres of expansive farmland worked by a Mennonite community of mainly Russian descent having arrived in Belize in 1958. They made an important contribution to the national agricultural economy, and actually provided work for some of the Lamanai lodge staff during the Covid pandemic when tourism in Belize was more or less at a standstill.

Several Northern Harriers, Roadside Hawks and American Kestrels graced the farmland en-route, and we enjoyed wonderful looks at a couple of male Vermilion Flycatchers. At the Blue Creek community we passed very close to the Mexican border and then chose the opportunity to make a quick stop at the local supermarket for snacks, restrooms and miscellaneous supplies. From there it was pretty much 36 miles of packed dirt roads all the way to Chan Chich Lodge. Squirrel Cuckoos became *the* feature of the drive, with at least half-a-dozen flying across the road in front of the vehicle and a few settling in the low roadside vegetation for entertaining views. Luis thought a sudden hatch of tent caterpillars had enticed the cuckoos close to the road and made them especially visible to our group! The rest of the drive was peppered by more great wildlife sightings with White-necked Puffbird, White Hawk (briefly) and Royal Flycatcher all being seen before we entered the lodge grounds at Chan Chich, which also happened to be the domain of Ocellated Turkey and White-tailed Deer, both of which would be seen with ease each and every day. Another busy day drew to a close as we were shown to our spacious thatched cabanas, the sounds of parrots screeching overhead as they gathered to roost. We notched up some 80 bird species during the day and spent time at the bar catching up on sightings and getting to know Naturalist Journeys' staff leader, Kelly Vandenheuvel, who'd arrived from California earlier that afternoon.



Thurs., Jan. 20

Chan Chich Lodge and staff village | Gallon Jug fields Sylvester Village Road | Spotlight Night Safari

Chan Chich Lodge is set within a Mayan plaza dating back to 250-800 AD and surrounded by some 275,000 acres of private nature reserve, most of which is rainforest. It feels remote and isolated, and many of the best wildlife sightings take place within the lodge grounds -- our tour was no exception. The day dawned overcast, calm and a little muggy. Noisy groups of parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets passed over the lodge to begin their day, and the delightful plaintive trill of a Bright-rumped Attila was a near constant as we met up with Luis for an early morning bird walk. Slaty-tailed Trogons sat rather obligingly close the lodge entrance, and our first Golden-hooded Tanagers flew in to excite the group. Enormous guanacaste trees dominate the lodge grounds so it was nothing short of miraculous that Andrew managed to pick out a Central American Pygmy-Owl in one of them! Luis was certainly impressed as Central American Pygmy-Owl is uncommon throughout Belize and a life bird for most in our party.

The day was off to cracking start and a smallish group composed of Andrew, Gayle, Judy, James and Jonathan set off for a Luis-led walk through the staff quarters and back to the lodge, a loop of roughly one mile. It was birdy....very birdy in fact, with Black-cheeked and Lineated Woodpeckers, Yellow-winged Tanagers and two fabulous hummingbirds: Purple-crowned Fairy and White-bellied Emerald. Deeper inside the forest a pair of Mealy Parrots, seemingly engaged in nesting behavior, were new to the tour. We came across Hooded and Kentucky Warblers in the damp understory and watched a Louisiana Waterthrush walking nonchalantly along the track in front of us. It was also a little sobering to find a recently dead Fer-de-Lance on the track, though it wasn't large, and Luis thought it may have been a young male, mentioning that the younger males have a tendency to strike more frequently than adults, and thus making them more dangerous to humans. Either way, it was a little sad to see this fine reptile dead on the road but at the same time a stark reminder of the need for caution while in the forest. After breakfast we enjoyed a field outing to the Gallon Jug area in the "birdmobile," an open-topped jeep offering superb all-round visibility. The early morning clouds dispersed and warm air thermals began to rise over the open fields at Gallon Jug. Conditions were ideal for soaring raptors and they duly appeared: White-tailed Kites, Gray and Roadside Hawks and several adult King Vultures joined the flocks of ubiquitous Black and Turkey Vultures.

Slowly driving the forest edge towards Sylvester Village produced fabulous views of White-whiskered Puffbird, Gartered Trogon, Rose-throated Becard, Olive-backed Euphonia, a noisy group of Black-faced Grosbeaks, a singing Blue Bunting and a wintering Blue-winged Warbler. Returning to the fields, the air above Gallon Jug continued to fill with raptors, with more King Vultures including a nice showing of the different age classes: adults, sub-adults and juveniles. An American Kestrel hovered and Eastern Meadowlarks sang from the meadows and perched along fences. A pair of Boat-billed Flycatchers provided a nice vocal study against the closely related, and much more abundant, Great Kiskadees as a glorious morning in the field drew to a close.

Lunch is always a treat at Chan Chich, offering a rich menu and outdoor dining from the restaurant's balcony. Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits worked the hummingbird feeders and Golden-hooded Tanagers, Black-cowled Orioles and Blue Buntings visited the water features. Ocellated Turkeys and white-tailed deer strutted across the lawns as if they've never seen a predator! It was a hot afternoon and some downtime was in order after lunch meaning siesta for some, and/or the beautiful screened-in pool for others. An afternoon walk would take the group from the lodge, down the Sylvester Village Road and deep into the forest. Kentucky Warbler and Northern Waterthrush entertained in the early part of the walk, the latter offering nice comparisons with the Louisiana Waterthrush seen earlier in the day. The Sylvester Village Road was rich in rainforest fauna. Central American spider monkeys crashed and barked their way through the canopy, and Luis pointed out limestone and rainforest toads in the leaf litter as well as the fresh tracks of a mountain tapir! The birding focused on forest dwellers, difficult species found in or near the understory. What may have been lacking in quantity was certainly made up for by quality with Northern Schiffornis, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager and Dot-winged Antwren all being noted before we left the forest and headed back to the lodge to freshen up.

After a delicious supper we met up with Luis and Chris and climbed back into the birdmobile for the second night safari of the tour. Luis used a powerful spotlight to scan the forest edge while Chris drove along. Nocturnal and crepuscular species were very much a goal for the trip, but it wasn't long before Luis's spotlighting skills picked out several roosting Slaty-tailed Trogons and Crested Guans. A few moments later we had some remarkable looks at Middle American Screech-Owls and must have tallied four or five individuals during the course of the evening. Mottled Owls too showed incredibly well with about three seen, mostly around the Gallon Jug fields. Of course, there was the ever-present chance or hope that we might spotlight a large cat, perhaps a Jaguar or Puma. It wasn't to be on this evening though we did come across a fine Kinkajou, a strictly nocturnal mammal, golden-tan in color with a prehensile tail. The local name of "Night Walker" seemed totally appropriate as this arboreal beauty scaled the upper branches of one of the larger trees at Gallon Jug. Numbers of white-tailed deer, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and stunning views of several Northern Potoos all appeared in the spotlight. The latter must surely be one of the weirdest birds seen on the tour, with its peculiar vertical perching posture and disturbingly staring "teddy-bear" eyes. We headed back toward the lodge finding a sizeable boa constrictor on the road, a morelet's crocodile in Chan Chich Creek, and even a Mexican red-rumped tarantula that somehow attached itself to the vehicle's wheel and was gently "encouraged" to leave before we could press on. It was close to 10 p.m. when we made it back to our cabanas and settled down after an awesome day (and night) in the rainforest. This night excursion had been blessed with brilliantly clear moonlit skies and the complete lack of light pollution bringing the constellations so close it seemed like they might be touched – just wow!

Fri., Jan. 21 Chan Chich Lodge | Rio Bravo Escarpment via Sylvester Village | Trisha's Hill

The day began with a relatively casual start after the late finish the previous evening. "Eggs your way" Belizean breakfast, fruit plate and Huevos Rancheros were all available on the breakfast menu, and thoroughly enjoyed. Slaty-tailed Trogons and both Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits were seen from the balcony before we loaded up the birdmobile for a morning adventure to the escarpment.

The day was overcast with showers threatening but undeterred, we pressed on as the journey produced a number of birds that were either new to the tour or had only been seen briefly. In particular, two giant *Cracids*, one species arboreal (Crested Guan) and one terrestrial (Great Curassow) showed well on the drive, and we were thrilled when Luis picked out several Keel-billed Toucans, the first toucans of any kind during the tour. Though far less gaudy, one species did stand out during the drive: the White-whiskered Puffbird. We had immaculate views of several, often in pairs and, being ground-nesters, they had a tendency to fly low across the road right in front of the vehicle. Luis suspected that the large number of sightings was attributed to the beginning of the breeding season as pairs scouted for nest sites on the forest floor. Gray-headed Doves and Short-billed Pigeons were also noted at the roadside, as was a Central American agouti, a large rodent that proved surprisingly scarce on this trip.

Climbing up toward to the escarpment, Luis pointed out the pendulant nest of a Royal Flycatcher by the track, a stop which in turn produced a fine selection of forest-dwellers including Rufous Piha, Northern Schiffornis and Greenish Elaenia plus a number of heard-only species including Northern Bentbill and Stub-tailed Spadebill. A giant mahogany close to the track, one



of the largest and oldest in the entire conservation area, happened to be the home of a nesting pair of Ornate Hawk-Eagles and fortunately the female was close to the nest during our visit!

We finally reached the magnificent vista of the escarpment some two hours after leaving Chan Chich, but it was well worth the drive with awesome views across expansive areas of forest, Guatemala to the west, Mexico to the north and the Gallon Jug fields in the foreground. At almost 900 feet above sea level, the escarpment has several local names: the Rio Bravo Escarpment, the Chan Chich escarpment or, as Luis preferred to call it, the La Lucia escarpment. Initially it was pretty quiet as we watched heavy rain clouds deposit deluge after deluge across the horizon while we remained dry. Luis broke out cold beverages while simultaneously noting that the pulses of rain in the distance might just be heading our way!

Despite the slow start it wasn't long before raptors started to appear. First we noted Bat Falcons, then King Vultures and then a surprise Hook-billed Kite right overhead. Another large, broad winged raptor with a stark brown and white appearance began to rise on the thermals below. It looked interesting, very interesting in fact, and the call went out to everyone in our group to take a look at this bird. It rose revealing several more crucial features and then the cry went out, "Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle!" My goodness did this bird put on a show and was even mobbed by a light morph Short-tailed Hawk! After briefly disappearing, Shirley then spotted it even closer to us giving breathtaking views. Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle is one of Belize's rarest raptors, and equally rare throughout most of its Central American range. The views were simply staggering, perhaps once in a lifetime views and indeed it was a life bird for just about everyone in our party. As if that wasn't enough, only moments later a Black Hawk-Eagle flew steadily by giving great views of yet another scarce rainforest raptor. In a matter of minutes, we'd managed to see all three possible species of hawk-eagle in Belize, a hawk-eagle trifecta if you like, and a very difficult act to follow. Besides, threatening rain showers were heading our way just as Luis predicted, and it was time to drive back to Chan Chich for a date with lunch.

The afternoon saw the general aura swing back to humid, muggy conditions with thunder showers threatening. Most of the group opted for relaxation at the lodge, but a small party (Jonathan, Andrew and James) headed out with Luis for an afternoon bird walk along the entrance road to Trisha's Hill, a new location for us. Another Louisiana Waterthrush offered excellent views as it walked along the road ahead of the group, and on reaching the bottom of Trisha's Hill, Stub-tailed Spadebill and Squirrel Cuckoo could be heard calling. We eventually claimed views of the spadebill, a triumph considering just how difficult it can be to see this pocket dynamo in the dank, shaded rainforest.



The summit of Trisha's Hill offered views over a small clearing in the forest. An old, screened-in gazebo perched at the edge of the overlook, seemingly a relic from days gone by. The clearing itself was quite birdy with Chestnut-sided and Magnolia Warblers, and a nice flock of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts overhead. Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-bellied Emerald, Stripe-throated Hermit and a dapper flock of Yellow-throated Euphonias were also found, and Luis pointed out the distinctive calls of Ruddy Flycatcher and Northern Bentbill, though neither showed well and thus would remain heard-only birds for the rest of the tour. The air was heavy as we walked back to the lodge, but a steady sequence of wildlife sightings continued with a family of Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers, a troop of Central American spider monkeys and a Great Tinamou calling from the forest just as the last of the daylight disappeared. The rain came hard and heavy during dinner, a chance to reflect on just how fortunate we'd been to have scheduled the night safari for the previous evening!

Sat., Jan. 22

Chan Chich Lodge | Laguna Seca | King's Tomb Trail and Temple Loop

Breakfast on the restaurant balcony was again lively with a great showing of hummingbirds including White-necked Jacobin, White-bellied Emerald, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and sightings of a Royal Flycatcher and Bright-rumped Attila for some. Afterwards we loaded up the birdmobile once more for a casual drive up to Laguna Seca. Luis spotted a black-tailed indigo snake in the early part of the drive, and as we drove north along the entrance road, it soon became clear that the heavy overnight rain had stimulated the appearance of unusual numbers of Great Curassows...the roadside verges were full of them, and by the time we reached the Gallon Jug fields we must have noted well over 20 individuals. The fields too were lively with several Rose-throated Becards feeding openly from the fence wires, plus one or two Fork-tailed Flycatchers in the meadows and the only Scissor-tailed Flycatcher of the entire tour. We arrived at Laguna Seca to the growls of Yucatan Black Howlers while the impressive display of Great Curassows continued...they were simply everywhere!

A loop trail at Laguna Seca hugged the fringe of the lake along the forest edge. Scanning the extensive reedbeds produced Northern Jacanas, Green Herons and a couple of Anhingas. An exceptionally cooperative Great Black-Hawk perched right above the trail, so close the barred "baggy trousers" (a distinct characteristic of the species) could easily be seen. A Bare-throated Tiger-Heron gave great views a little farther along the trail as did Belted and Ringed Kingfishers, and a pair of White-collared Manakins vied for attention just off trail inside the forest edge. A huge Morelet's crocodile cruised by in the shallows only a few feet from shore, and Luis pointed out a provision tree flower, a species that only blooms at night and is pollinated by bats and moths! A short but productive walk was neatly rounded off with cold beverages at the birdmobile, and a comfortable drive back to Chan Chich noting perched Laughing Falcon and White-necked Puffbird along the way.



At 3:30 p.m. a small posse of birders joined Luis for a final afternoon walk through the forest while others chose to relax, use the delightful screened-in pool, or simply take advantage of the wifi, which was only available around the main lodge building. The King's Tomb trail was Luis's choice, and it wasn't long before we came across some fine species; Hooded and Kentucky Warblers, a calling Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, Olivaceous and Ivory-billed Woodcreepers, Crested Guan and really great views of a pair of Dusky Antbirds, a species that had formerly been aloof. Moving onto the Logger's Trail we disturbed several Gray-headed Doves, enjoyed remarkably good views of a female Blue-back Grosbeak and a Northern Schiffornis, and saw three Collared Aracaris flying over, the first time that this colorful species had managed to grace our notebooks. As dusk approached, we watched several massive yellow-bordered Owl-butterflies flying along the trail before us. The tour had passed quickly but it was great to find everyone in good spirits, relaxing at the bar before moving onto one final delicious dinner served by the ever-courteous Chan Chich wait staff. Randa, Emil and Jezron had been especially welcoming and never once flinched at our demands during the four-night stay. Chan Chich Lodge is a special place, unique in so many respects and long may it remain so.

Sun., Jan., 23

Chan Chich Lodge | Departures from Gallon Jug

Regrettably our Chan Chich visit came to an end this morning. We all had plans to fly back to Belize City on various flights out of Gallon Jug, but with staggered departure times throughout the morning, we said our good-byes at the lodge just after breakfast. It had been a wonderful wildlife-rich tour full of good humor and group camaraderie, greatly enhanced by stays at two fabulous lodges and the genuinely warm, friendly people of Belize.

Photos by James P. Smith