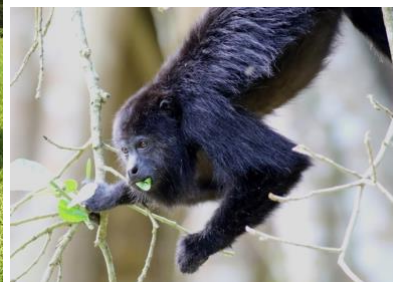


Belize: Birds & Nature | Jan. 15 – 23, 2023

Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guides Eduardo and Luis, and guests; Andrea, Barbara M., Barbara S., Dorothy, Kathy, Trina, Gordon, Rick & Terry, Tom & Sarah

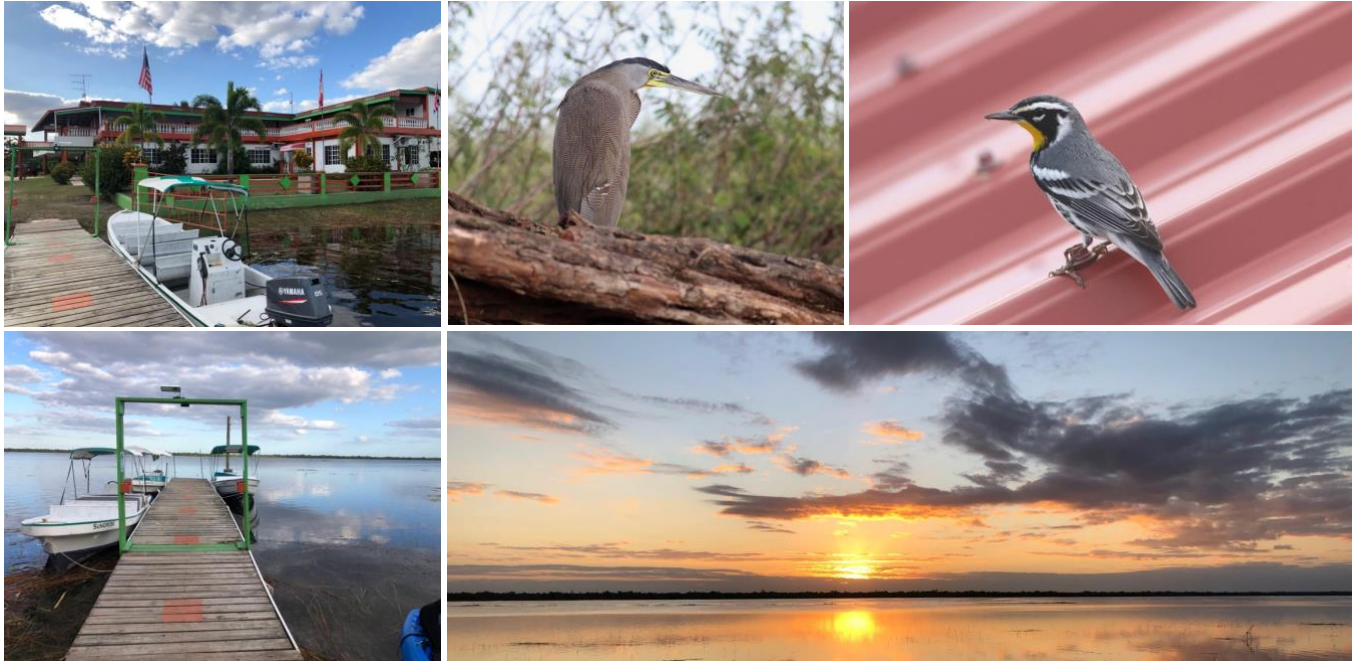


Sun., Jan. 15

Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort

A mere 20

minutes from Philip Goldson International Airport, the Black Orchid Resort served as a perfect meeting point for our Naturalist Journeys Belize Birding & Nature Tour. Some guests arrived early and managed some local birding in the resort grounds. Red-lored Parrot, Olive-throated Parakeet, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Great Kiskadee, Hooded Warbler and Montezuma Oropendola all being mentioned as well as roosting Proboscis Bats under one of the stairwells! Around 6 p.m. we met by the resort's rather attractive pool and quickly made use of the screened-in dining room as the mosquitoes had just begun to nibble! We enjoyed a fine supper while getting to know each other and then retired early in keen anticipation of an early start the next day.



Mon., Jan. 16

Burrell Boom | Crooked Tree Sanctuary | New River Lamanai Outpost Lodge

We gathered with suitcases in the resort parking lot around first light. Eduardo, the lead guide from Lamanai Outpost Lodge was there to meet us at 5:45 a.m., and once the vehicles were loaded, we drove north through Burrell Boom enjoying quiet, relatively traffic-free streets. Neotropic Cormorants and a couple of Ringed Kingfishers perched on wires as we crossed the Crooked Tree Causeway, and a tranquil scene greeted us in the sleepy village of Crooked Tree as we arrived at the dock at Bird's Eye View Lodge. Mr. Glenn Crawford was our assigned Captain for the morning, a local man quietly regarded as the best birder in Belize by his peers...we were in good hands! The lodge staff prepared coffee, tea, fruits and muffins, and as we pushed back from the dock, a rainbow suddenly appeared over Bird's Eye View Lodge as if to send good fortune our way or, in Glenn's words, "a pot of jade."

Glenn navigated the waterways with the ease of a local who knew Crooked Tree Lagoon inside out. The freshwater lagoon covers a huge area, 14 miles wide in places, and wraps much of the way around Crooked Tree Village. Water levels were unusually high for mid-January, thanks to hurricane Lisa that made landfall on November 2nd, 2022. Glenn mentioned that the lagoon is sometimes visited by West Indian Manatees when the water is high, as well as hosting Tarpon and Ciclids. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Ringed and Belted Kingfishers, Limpkins, Tri-colored and Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egret, Northern Jacanas, White Ibis and a distant Snail Kite all appeared in rapid succession in the early part of the trip, and Northern Rough-winged, Tree and Mangrove Swallows flitted over the surface of the water. Glenn sounded decidedly surprised when an Aplomado Falcon was spotted perched high on a thin, dead snag and we had extraordinary views of a Black-collared Hawk perched in the waterside thickets just as it dropped down to take a prey item from the water. Terns were virtually absent from the lagoon, so the one bird that did appear attracted a good deal of attention as it passed the boat. Caspian, Gull-billed or Sandwich Tern would have been expected, but this bird was a Common Tern, quite rare in Belize, in fact it was Glenn's first in the country! By mid-morning thoughts turned to breakfast, and the guides handed out hot burritos, muffins, bananas and fresh fruits as we appreciated the roosting Boat-billed Herons and a fine pair of Bare-throated Tiger-Herons. As the channel narrowed, we carefully eased along Spanish Creek, and our stealthy approach paid off with unbelievably good views of a perched Crane Hawk, a



widespread species in Belize, but only rarely showing itself well. The tranquility of Spanish Creek was well and truly shattered when Glenn suddenly cried out “AGAMI HERON!” which he’d somehow managed to spot from the rear of the boat! This heron wasn’t an easy bird. In fact, Glenn had spotted it roosting about 10 feet above the water in a tangled mess of over-hanging tree limbs and vines and, despite his best efforts to maneuver the boat for everyone to have the best chance for views, the heron sensed the pursuit and moved further back into the branches and eventually out of view. Glenn was surprised as it was his first Agami of the year and hadn’t been on his radar at the start of the day due to the extremely high water levels. Perhaps the Agami was his “pot of jade” at the end of rainbow?

Soon afterwards a Blue Ground-Dove crossed the creek and Glenn turned the boat around and brought us back to the main lagoon at a considerably faster pace than we’d set out. Many Green Herons flushed from the vegetation and Ringed, Green and Belted Kingfishers matched our speed as they flew alongside the boat. We also had good, but brief, flight views of two Great Black Hawks. While the morning belonged largely to the birds, non-avian sightings included giant Green Iguanas, actually more orange-brown than green, and several Morelet’s Crocodiles. The trip was off to the best possible start as we bid farewell to Glenn who’d been quite superb both as a guide and as a Captain. It was time for the next stage of our journey, and the dreamy, Crooked Tree wetlands were already in the rear-view mirror as we drove across the causeway and headed for Bats Landing on the New River, just north of Carmelita. The second boat trip of the day involved a southbound journey along the New River for some 22 miles, all the way to the Lamanai Outpost Lodge. Notably good birds along the way included Anhinga, Brown Pelican, Roadside Hawk, Osprey, a pair of Bat Falcons, a roosting Lesser Nighthawk and a surprise Black Hawk-Eagle right over the boat. But the prize went to the half dozen or so mighty Jabirus seen in flight, some right over the boat, and looking even more majestic than imagined. Throughout the journey, Northern Rough-winged and Mangrove Swallows flickered above the water or perched on riverside snags, and Northern Jacanas trotted across floating vegetation. The New River eventually widened into the New River Lagoon, and as we approached Lamanai, Karen and Marvie, our on-site hosts, were there at the dock to greet us. Logistics had been so smooth that the luggage had already made it to our cabanas before we’d reached the lodge! After settling in, Karen gave a brief orientation and most of us enjoyed a welcome drink from the bar.

Eduardo offered a short afternoon bird walk around his home village of Indian Church, and nearly all the group decided to join him. The afternoon light was superb and the raptor theme that we so enjoyed earlier in the day



continued with fine views of a perched Bat Falcon as well as an Osprey and a Short-tailed Hawk soaring overhead. Melodious Blackbirds were both vocal and plentiful, and we spent some time looking at familiar village birds: Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Grooved-billed Ani, Black-cowled and Hooded Orioles, Red-legged Honeycreepers, Yellow-winged Tanager, Morelet's Seedeater and Keel-billed Toucans, the national bird of Belize! As the daylight began to fade, we'd almost made it back to the lodge when a large raptor was spotted in a Mahogany. The views were good, and the bird itself, in full profile, left no doubt of its identity...it was a magnificent, adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle, one of the most sought-after raptors in Central America! It was remarkably cooperative, so much so that Eduardo had time to set-up his camera to snap a few pics. What had already been a wonderful day for raptors finished on a true high, and we strolled back to the lodge to freshen up for dinner and to go through the all-important bird list. Dinner was a fine meal of regional favorites: Maya chicken soup with fresh bread rolls, pollo de sol, rice and beans and Creole potato salad, and sour sop cheesecake for dessert. After a long day with over 90 bird species seen, we retired to our comfortable cabins for a well-deserved night's rest.

Tues., Jan. 17 Lamanai Lodge & Archeological Reserve | New River Night Safari

The day dawned beautifully crisp and clear. After a delicious Lamanai breakfast (Spanish scrambled eggs, flour tortillas, bacon and stewed beans) we met at the dock for the short boat ride down to Lamanai ruins. A pair of Bat Falcons had watched over us during breakfast and were still on view as we boarded the boat, and a pair of Ringed Kingfishers gave guttural rattles as they flew downstream. Lamanai Archeological Reserve is a site of about two square miles with six temples excavated to date, yet more than 700 temples remain unseen below the ground. The area formerly covered some ten square miles supporting a civilization of 40,000-50,000 people with its presence in the lowlands evidence of an impressive trade system between Belize, Guatemala and Mexico. Records show constant occupation of the site for the last 3,500 years. Indeed, Eduardo's mom owns a gift shop on site and commutes every day from Indian Church!

The museum and exhibits proved a big attraction, particularly as we were the first group on site and had the place to ourselves. Afterwards we began a walking loop of the reserve, incorporating several of the temples while trying to balance archaeology and wildlife interests, which wasn't easy but being a local lad, Eduardo managed both with consummate ease. About halfway through the loop he received news of an ant swarm near the Mask Temple, and off we went at a brisk pace! Timing is everything for ant swarms as the highly mobile



army ants push through the forest, scaring up insects that are subsequently preyed upon by a number of bird species, but especially Antbirds and Woodcreepers. The avian extravaganza before us was something to behold and we stayed with the ant swarm for a solid 30 minutes while finding Gray-headed Tanager, Red-throated Ant-Tanager and a whole selection of woodcreepers including Ivory-billed, Northern Barred, Ruddy, Tawny-winged and Olivaceous. As if that wasn't enough, Eduardo's sharp ears picked out the calls of a Collared Trogon that was soon located and scoped...the rarest of the four possible trogons in Belize! Throughout the morning we'd had amazing fortune with an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher by the museum, a stunning Chestnut-collared Woodpecker and a Squirrel Cuckoo near Jaguar Temple, a Gartered Trogon near the Ball Court, and a couple of Rufous-tailed Jacamars near High Temple. Mask Temple was surrounded by some particularly impressive giant Guanacaste trees laden with Devil's Guts Cactus and Strangler Figs, and the habitat below hosted a couple of difficult, heard-only species, Tody Motmot and Stub-tailed Spadebill, though with patience a few in our group did get views of the spadebill. Non-avian highlights included lots of Yucatan Black Howlers, some of them low down and close as they foraged on freshly unfurled leaves, providing the photographers in our party with an absolute treat!

The ride back to the lodge was warm and breezy and the mood relaxed as we retired to the dining area and enjoyed a classic Lamanai lunch featuring Anna's chicken soup, fresh bread rolls and house salad as we sipped hibiscus juice. In the afternoon we retraced our route back to Lamanai Archeological Reserve, then explored a new route leading to the Sugar Mill built by the British in the late 1800s, the remnants of which were still standing. The location, in the middle of woodland, seemed odd, but was apparently chosen due to the proximity of New River Lagoon. The mill was later abandoned because of increasingly poor health among workers and site owners alike, and towards the end, the owners apparently resorted to paying their workers in rum! Even so, the Lamanai site is one of only two remaining examples in Belize. All the others have been demolished.

We saw a few winter warblers around the mill including Black-throated Green and Black-and-white Warblers, American Redstart and Northern Parula along with Yellow-winged Tanager and Greenish Elaenia. The hike out was nothing short of spectacular, with great views of Chestnut-colored and Golden-olive Woodpeckers and a



stunning male Black-throated Shrike-Tanager! A close family of White-nosed Coatis put on a show foraging in leaf litter near the Spanish Church, and on the way to the lodge, Kathy spotted a male Lesser Goldfinch and a Boat-billed Flycatcher by the gate. Dinner was yet another triumph – shrimp ceviche, pork and chicken kebabs with loaded potatoes. Afterwards we grabbed headlamps and long sleeves and met down at the dock for a night safari on New River Lagoon. Eduardo was at the helm once more, somehow balancing spotlight duties while simultaneously driving the boat. Like all true professionals, he made it look easy finding a Least Bittern in the phragmites, a roosting Great Curassow, a close Ringed Kingfisher and a number of Provision Tree Flowers in full bloom. The regionally endemic Yucatan Nightjar was our main target for this trip, and Eduardo worked especially hard to ensure that we all had great views of one roosting in the scrub. Numerous Greater Fishing Bats hawked over the water as we moved into the middle of the lagoon, and Eduardo turned the boat off so we could drift in silence, gazing up at the star-spangled sky. Eduardo used his laser pointer to direct us to the most visible constellations: Orion, Canis Major, Gemini, Taurus, Beta, Karina and more. It was a most unexpected finale to the evening...had we just witnessed the highlight of the entire tour?

Wed., Jan. 18

Lamanai Outpost Lodge (Airport Trail) | Indian Church Village | New River Lagoon & Sunset Cocktail Cruise

The day began early with tea, coffee, juice and pastries in the dining area. Eduardo guided us along the airport road a.k.a. the rice trail, a route that took us into some early-successional habitat. We soon heard the deep, resonant calls of a Gray-headed Dove and the tuneful, jolting song of a Green-backed Sparrow. In the crisp morning, Limpkins called relentlessly from the New River Lagoon as herons of several species flew overhead including an adult Little Blue Heron. Further along the trail, a White-necked Puffbird perched high in a Cecropia in perfect morning light and was duly scoped for all as Blue Buntings flitted on either side of the trail.

Once inside the mature rain forest, massive Guanacaste trees offered food and cover for a whole host of woodland birds as well as a troop of Yucatan Black Howlers, evident from the monkey “bathroom” in the middle of the trail and unearthly growls in the distance. The ground-dwelling Mayan Antthrush was a key bird for this area and, with some fortune, might be seen walking crane-like across the forest floor. Despite Eduardo’s best efforts, we only managed fleeting glimpses on this visit, but did enjoy the vocalizations with a pair of birds calling back-and-forth from both sides of the trail. In the same spot, leafcutter ants had worn clear, linear pathways across the trail leading to a huge mound nest. The morning was full of heard-only observations: Collared Forest-Falcon, White-tipped Dove, Northern Bentbill, Yellow-olive Flycatcher and trilling Long-billed Gnatwren, to



mention a few, so it was especially satisfying to have proper views of Red-legged Honeycreeper, White-eyed Vireo and Black-throated Green, Yellow and Magnolia Warblers along with American Redstart and a couple of flyover flocks of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. Getting back to the lodge for breakfast was easier said than done. Exquisite views of a female Gartered Trogon as well as a perched Roadside Hawk and perfect comparisons between Turkey and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures against a crisp blue sky were among the many distractions along the way! Enjoying frittata and sausage with flour tortillas and a fruit plate while gazing through the palms across New River Lagoon was a perfect way to end to the morning. The heat of the day was becoming a factor as we set off for a walking tour of village life. Eduardo explained that many of the 250 or so residents of Indian Church were of Guatemalan descent, refugees that settled the area during the Guatemalan Civil war from the 1950s to the early 1990s. Despite several decades of residency, many villagers were apparently still going through the process of acquiring official residency from the Belizean Government. Eduardo escorted us around the village, even taking the group to his home where we met his young son. His wife, Daisy, was accustomed to having visitors in the yard, and was enterprising enough to set up a village store during Covid to keep the household going while tourism in Belize was at a standstill. Thankfully 2022 was a great recovery year, and they'd managed to keep the store going while Eduardo worked on his guiding.

Next, we experienced the grinding of masa for tortillas and tamales under the expert guidance of the staff of Las Orquideas restaurant, which would be our venue for lunch. In the afternoon, following a little downtime, we settled in for a relaxed cocktail cruise on New River Lagoon, a mellow atmosphere with Belikin Beer, Piña or Banana Coladas, Margaritas and soft drinks. The heat of the day slowly dissipated with the delightful breeze off the water further cooling things down as we gently cruised around the fringe of the lagoon and into Dawson Creek. Ruddy Crakes were vocal in the reeds, and Eduardo did his best to coax in a pair of Rufous-breasted Spinetails, though they were sadly missed by most of the group. In the commotion, Tom and Sarah managed to spot a Black Catbird in the thickets, a Yucatan Endemic. Snail Kite, Black-crowned Night-Heron and a few Yellow-billed Caciques all put in appearances as we cruised down Dawson Creek just as the sun set behind Lamanai ruins, a stunning finale to our last evening at Lamanai. The days at Lamanai had flown by and the cozy atmosphere and delicious meals were bound to be missed. One last supper included empanadas de Paola,

quinceanos rellenos and white rice, with coconut cream pie for dessert. And if that wasn't enough food, Karen and Marvie also served the tamales that the group made at Las Orquideas earlier in the day!



Thurs., Jan. 19

Lamanai Savanna & Dawson Creek | Lamanai to Chan Chich Lodge via Blue Creek

The day dawned slightly muggier than of late with a distinct increase in humidity. Lamanai Savannah was calling and demanded an early start for the short boat ride across New River Lagoon. Coffee, tea, juice and muffins were available in the dining room prior to our meet-up at the dock at 6 a.m. As we gently cruised the tranquil waters of Dawson Creek, we were treated to four Yucatan Jays flying over the channel. How cool to start the day with a regional endemic! Feisty Ringed and Green Kingfishers announced our arrival at the dock as we clambered off the boat, stepping onto a mix of sandy soils, clay and knee-high tussock grass. Discrete, narrow trails snaked through an attractive mix of Caribbean pines, oaks and palmettos.

Botteri's Sparrows were among the first birds heard, giving their classic bouncing ball songs. Several White-fronted Parrots flew over just as a Laughing Falcon started its loud, monotonous "*gua-cow*" calls. We eventually enjoyed excellent scope views of the comical masked predator. Eduardo had stressed the importance of an early start and how right he was. The beauty of sunrise was impossible to ignore, and to be on the savannah as the sun rose through oaks and palmettos was something to behold. For a few minutes the sky was on fire, the early morning, cumulus clouds and mist adding to the drama. The savannah had more treats in store as we slowly pursed out some tricky species including better views of Botteri's Sparrows, a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, a pair of Plain-breasted Ground-Doves, a pair of Yellow-headed Parrots and a Tropical Pewee located by its unique vocals. Acorn Woodpeckers clung to the oaks and some in our party had brief but excellent looks at two new hummers: Azure-crowned and Ruby-throated. Even common species, such as Pale-vented Pigeon, looked especially colorful in the perfect morning light and were fully deserving of attention.

Back at the dock, several Black-throated Bobwhites flushed low across the grasslands. Also called Yucatan Bobwhite, the species is near endemic to the region. Eduardo and James tried without success to arc around them and give the group a better look, but of course the quail had other ideas! Cruising down Dawson Creek, our journey was pleasantly interrupted by eight Yucatan Jays and four Yucatan Woodpeckers, with Eduardo skillfully maneuvering the boat to ensure all of us had great views of these endemics. After breakfast there was



time for packing and some last-minute birding before we bid Lamanai adieu. Eduardo would not be making the journey with us, and his spirit, exceptional field skills and cheeky sense of humor were going to be missed. Karen and Marvie made sure we wouldn't go hungry, serving one last delicious lunch of Lamanai fajitas.

Our carriages to Chan Chich arrived at 1:30, one a 12-seat Chevy Van that had perhaps seen better days, the other a pick-up truck with limited seating but good suspension. Mr. Luis Romero, a stalwart among the Chan Chich guides with some 30 years of experience drove the lead vehicle, with Chan Chich resident, Chelise, at the wheel in the pick-up. Soon after leaving Indian Church, the landscape changed dramatically as we crossed acre upon acre of Mennonite farmland. After the forested surroundings of Lamanai, it was a little shocking to see, but the Mennonite farmers apparently make an important contribution to the agricultural economy of Belize, and even provided work for some Lamanai staff during the Covid pandemic. Wood Storks, Roadside Hawks, American Kestrels and several male Vermilion Flycatchers graced the farmland en-route. Kathy and Trina, while traveling with Chelise in the pick-up, scored a rich prize in the form of a Gray-headed Kite, an uncommon raptor and the only sighting of the species for the entire tour! At one point we passed very close to the Mexican border before making a short stop for bathrooms and refreshments at Blue Creek. From there it was pretty much 36 miles of white dirt roads all the way to Chan Chich Lodge. Squirrel Cuckoos featured on the drive with at least four, maybe five, flying across the road in front of the vehicles. A Black-headed Trogon, a rather brief but identifiable Great Tinamou, a White-necked Puffbird and a perched Gray Hawk were other notables. Once inside the gated entrance to the Rio Bravo Conservation Area, Ocellated Turkeys, Great Curassows and White-tailed Deer were constant features on the wide, grassy shoulders as we approached Gallon Jug.

Arrival at Chan Chich Lodge was quite late, but after the long drive, the offer of a warm towel and a refreshing spiced beverage was most welcome. Assistant manager Eljio greeted us and took us to our comfortable thatched cabanas. We reviewed our bird list and enjoyed dinner at the main lodge building where fish fillet, grilled chicken and stewed garbanzo beans were among the choices on the menu. It was also time to introduce Emil, the head waiter at Chan Chich, and a man with an infectious passion for sharing his knowledge of the fauna and flora here on his own doorstep.



Fri., Jan. 20

Chan Chich Lodge | Gallon Jug Fields & Farm Tour Sylvester Village Road

An optional early morning bird walk with Luis began at 6:30, and most of the group showed up, keen and ready to explore Chan Chich on foot. Set within an ancient Mayan plaza dating back to 250-800 AD, the lodge is surrounded by some 275,000 acres of privately owned, forested nature reserve. The whole site feels remote, and many of the best bird and wildlife sightings took place within the lodge grounds and its immediate surroundings. With this in mind, we set off as flights of parrots screeched overhead and Boat-billed Flycatchers called from the upper plaza, though it was a struggle to see their true colors in the early morning mist. We fared better down by the staff quarters where fruiting Red Gumbo Limbo and Custard Apple trees attracted a host of species and captivated our interest for some time. Black-cheeked and Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers, Bright-rumped Attila, Great Crested Flycatcher, Yellow-winged Tanager and super views of a male Masked Tityra were all enjoyed. Family groups of Ocellated Turkeys walked around the village, at times feeding at our feet. "Ocellated" is a reference to the large, eye-like, metallic-blue and orange spots at the tip of each tail feather. We had scope views of several White-crowned Parrots, and Tom and Sarah did especially well to spot the first Mealy Parrots of the tour, the largest *Amazona* parrot in Central America.

The day was off to a grand start, and we headed back to the lodge for breakfast Chan Chich style, dining outside on the porch while watching an abundance of avian action right off the deck. White-throated Jacobins (mostly males), Long-billed Hermits and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds graced the feeders while Tom spotted a Black-headed Saltator and Barbara S. photographed a dazzling male Red-capped Manakin! After breakfast we climbed into two vehicles, one an open-topped game-ranger and the other a pick-up truck and headed out for a farm tour of the Gallon Jug fields. We explored Gallon Jug's shade-grown coffee plantations, home to an impressive range of organic coffee varieties. Ocellated Turkeys were again plentiful along with a few Great Curassows, and we finally caught up with decent views of the closely related Crested Guan. Though largely arboreal, we found the latter ground feeding in the plantation with a couple of Great Curassows. Afterwards we drove up the hill to Gallon Jug farm where we were introduced to the whole coffee roasting process from start to finish - the aroma was divine! Being atop the hill overlooking Gallon Jug airfield gave wonderful views of a good deal of the surrounding farmland and forest. Though not strictly a birding stop, a stunning adult King Vulture soared right over us in immaculate light, providing one of the best sightings of the tour. We headed back to the lodge via the airfield, skirting around a handful of isolated yet incredibly heavy showers. Roadside Hawks, Fork-tailed Flycatchers and Eastern Meadowlarks highlighted the journey home. As with breakfast, lunch was served on the porch with the non-stop avian action something to behold. In addition to the jacobins and hermits, Black-cowled



Oriole, Black-cheeked Woodpecker and Golden-hooded Tanager were among the species seen at close range. In the afternoon most of the group joined Luis for a walk down Sylvester Village Road, a wide trail through dense, mature rainforest. Things got off to a great start with fine views of a male Blue-black Grosbeak and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and there was a Gulf Coast Toad hopping about in the leaf litter. Parts of the forest were pretty quiet, perhaps to be expected in late afternoon, but all that changed when we had amazing views of a Great Tinamou feeding openly on the trail in front of us. Small passerines included Dot-winged Antwren and Lesser Greenlet, both quite difficult to see against the sun-dappled canopy. A crepuscular Yellow-bordered Owl-Butterfly put on a fabulous show just as the light faded, signaling our return to the lodge for the bird list and another delicious dinner where choices included carrot and ginger soup or Belizean garnaches, with a main course of roasted chicken, spice-rubbed pork chops or veggie stir-fried rice, and ice cream or fruit plate for dessert.

Sat., Jan. 21

Chan Chich Lodge | Rio Bravo Escarpment via Sylvester Village | Logger's Trail | Night safari

A beautiful day dawned, feeling particularly crisp and refreshing after a rain-bearing cold front moved through overnight. We began with an early breakfast in hopes of an early departure but, as we'd already experienced, getting through breakfast wasn't quite so straightforward with so many quality birds around. One particularly attractive, fruiting Firebush (a.k.a. Polly Red Bead) drew in several species including some astonishing views of Black-faced Grosbeaks as well as Red-capped Manakin (male), Summer Tanager (male), Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias, Clay-colored Thrush, Gray Catbird and Golden-hooded Tanager! Just after breakfast, Luis talked us through a collection of skulls at the lodge's improvised "museum" before we climbed into the vehicles for the drive out to Chan Chich escarpment. Passing through Gallon Jug fields produced several photogenic Roadside Hawks, many Eastern Meadowlarks and super views of a hunting White-tailed Kite as well as a distant perched Wood Stork, quite unusual for the location. On the drive, we passed through Sylvester Village, the staff quarters for most of the Gallon Jug workers. A couple of Green Kingfishers enlivened the crossing of Chan Chich Creek before we began the steady climb up to the escarpment, passing through increasingly mature woodland though pausing for several White-whiskered Puffbirds and a Rufous Piha along the way. A rather more sobering sight was a giant Mahogany downed close to the road, a victim of Hurricane Lisa the previous November. Formerly one of the largest and oldest trees in the entire Rio Bravo Conservation Area, it was estimated to be some 300



years old and had been the nest site of a pair of Ornate Hawk-Eagles as recently as 2022. At nearly 900 feet above sea level, the escarpment provides awesome views across expansive areas of rainforest with Guatemala to the west, Mexico to the north and the Gallon Jug fields visible in the foreground. Locally the escarpment goes by several names: the Rio Bravo escarpment, the Chan Chich escarpment or as Luis prefers to call it, “La Lucia” escarpment. A close passing, immature King Vulture was the first raptor of note, followed by more distant views of adults and other immatures in varying stages of plumage development. A pair of Bat Falcons, resident in this spot, could be watched perched and skipping past the escarpment at speed in pursuit of swallows or flying insects. Luis did well to pick out a pair of soaring White Hawks way out over the forest, scope birds for sure and admittedly distant but their distinctive white plumage allowed for easy identification. Indeed, they proved to be the only White Hawks seen on the tour, so well worth the effort. Back at the lodge, lunch was a real treat with options including watermelon salad or shrimp ceviche for starters, followed by sliders, quesadillas or a chicken chipotle sandwich for the main course. Being the heat of the day, the water feature just off the balcony had a number of dazzling visitors including a male Blue Bunting, Yellow-throated and Kentucky Warblers, Red-capped Manakin and a Golden-hooded Tanager. Serenaded by Yucatan Black Howlers, a few of us joined Luis for a short afternoon walk along the Logger’s Trail, easily accessed from the lodge grounds. Tom, Trina, Kathy, Terry, Barbara M., Dorothy and James all had the good fortune to be on the walk as the rest of the group opted to relax or use the beautiful, screened-in pool. The Logger’s Trail was narrow, passing through relatively thick forest with many of the species close to the trail. We had great views of a Crested Guan flaring its red gular pouch, and Luis somehow managed to spot a perched Short-billed Pigeon, a species that had been uncharacteristically scarce on the tour. A pair of Spot-breasted Wrens played hard-to-get, though most of us eventually clinched views, but we did rather better with a pair of Pale-billed Woodpeckers and a Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, the latter being a real denizen of dense, mature rainforest.

Dinner was yet another triumph, and as we reviewed the day’s bird list, we learned that Rick had photographed a Lesson’s Motmot right by cabana #6 first thing in the morning! After an early supper we clambered into two game-rangers and set off for a night safari in the cool, crisp, clear air. The local guides made the somewhat unexpected decision to separate the two vehicles to minimize the effects of dust along the dirt roads. And with that in mind, we headed off into the blackness for some 2 ½ hours. It was a cool evening, perhaps suppressing bird and mammal activity to some degree, but between the two vehicles, we ended up with fine views of a perched Northern Potoo, surely the weirdest bird of the trip with its “teddy bear eyes,” a fine Yucatan Nightjar, a Mottled Owl and a cooperative Middle American Screech-Owl. It was also fun to watch Yellow-crowned Night-Herons foraging out in the middle of the pasture along with numerous White-tailed Deer. Alas, no large or medium-sized felines were seen, but smaller mammals included Southern Opossum and Northern Raccoon, plus Ghost and Vesper Bats.



Sun., Jan. 22

Chan Chich Lodge | Laguna Seca via Gallon Jug | Chan Chich Creek

Breakfast on the balcony was lively once more with a great showing of hummingbirds, plus many species feasting of the fruiting Firebush, and the Strangler Figs cloaking the giant Breadnut Tree known to our group as the “magic tree.” Afterwards we climbed into the vehicles and enjoyed a casual drive to Laguna Seca via the Gallon Jug fields. Rising warm air induced a lot of raptor activity though our initial stop was prompted by some stunning Fork-tailed Flycatchers, perhaps a dozen or more! At the same spot a pair of White-tailed Kites gave the most fabulous display and eventually started sparring with a distant pair of Aplomado Falcons. Another large raptor rose on the thermals above the forest demanding attention before it circled several times and glided out of sight. The identification was questioned at the scene, but the consensus was a Black Hawk-Eagle, and it was logged as such. However, retrospective study of the images revealed that it was actually a dark-morph Hook-billed Kite, the only sighting of the species for the whole tour. Raptors aside, Brown Jays, Eastern Meadowlarks, Mangrove Swallows and more Fork-tailed Flycatchers were highlights around the Gallon Jug airfield. The loop trail at Laguna Seca followed the fringe of the lake hugging the forest edge. A mixed flock containing Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Northern Schiffornis, White-breasted Wood-Wren and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper were all noted before we hit the trail. In fact, the jacamar insisted on holding court right over the trail, allowing for some lovely scope views!

Laguna Seca hosts extensive reedbeds harboring several wetland species, and careful scanning produced Northern Jacanas, Great Egrets, both Great Blue and Little Blue Herons and nice looks at a perched Ringed Kingfisher. Luis had mentioned the possibility of Pinnated Bitterns at the beginning of the walk, and his patient scanning was ultimately rewarded. Though distant, we all had scope views of the bill, head and neck of a beautiful Pinnated Bittern, an uncommon bird anywhere in Central America, both local and secretive within its fragmented range and easily the rarest bird seen that morning. A young Striped Basilisk was noted on one of the docks and we stopped to admire more Provision Tree Flowers and a Julia Butterfly (*Dryas iulia*). The journey back to the lodge was neatly punctuated by more great wildlife sightings including a family party of three Central American Spider Monkeys and, for those traveling in the game-wagon, a perched Barred Forest-Falcon! As well as being uncommon, the latter has a reputation for being one of the most secretive of all rainforest raptors and is heard far more frequently than it's seen. Lunch was excellent with soup de jour, tostadas, Belizean stewed chicken, fish and chips (!), and/or tortilla wraps (shrimp, chicken or veggie). A fine male Blue-black Grosbeak came into the



water feature. Our final afternoon saw Dorothy, Barbara M., Terry, Kathy and James join Luis for a casual stroll along the entrance road towards Chan Chich Creek. Central American Spider Monkeys were right above the lodge entrance, and we hadn't gone far when we became aware of heavy rustling in the understory and the most peculiar odor emanating from the forest. As we got closer, the odor became downright repulsive as we came upon a sizable group of White-lipped Peccaries, perhaps 18 – 20 in all. For a mammal the size of a small pig, they were surprisingly difficult to see well and impossible to photograph! Even so it was an interesting encounter with a seldom seen mammal, a lifer for all except Luis. From there we followed the Sac Be Trail down to the river. A Louisiana Waterthrush showed well, the first and only one of the tour. Equally impressive was a Central American Pygmy-Owl that responded to James' whistled calls! Despite much effort, the feisty little owl couldn't be located in the dense canopy but was fantastic to hear all the same. Kentucky and Magnolia Warblers, as well as American Redstart were all noted before some pesky mosquitoes chased us out of the forest, though it proved to be no hardship as a calling Black-throated Shrike-Tanager came into view right at the forest edge – a stunning black and yellow male! We strolled back along the entrance road, making the most of the warm, tropical atmosphere and just enjoying the place itself as White-crowned Parrots flew to roost with Red-throated Ant-Tanagers and a Yellow-olive Flycatcher being among the last birds noted. Back at the lodge, Andrea, Barbara S., and Gordon had had a wonderful time following a small group of photogenic Crested Guans around the plaza and produced some fabulous pictures! One last delicious supper was served by Emil, who'd been our knowledgeable and humorous waiter from day one, and a real pleasure to work with. His guidance and willingness to share sightings during mealtimes had been a wonderful compliment to the tour.

Mon., Jan. 23 Chan Chich Lodge | Departures from Gallon Jug

Sadly, our time at Chan Chich had come to an end. We all had plans to fly back to Belize City on various flights out of Gallon Jug and said our goodbyes at the lodge just after breakfast. A pair of Red-lored Parrots fed openly by the side of the lodge, giving some of the best views of the species that we'd had on entire the tour! The tour had been truly memorable, not only for its spectacular wildlife sightings, but also for the cordial, well-humored nature of everyone in the group and, of course, the genuinely friendly people of Belize who we met along the way.

Photo Credits: Group (James P. Smith - JS), Gartered Trogon (JS), Black Howler Monkey (JS), Pale-billed Woodpecker (JS), Lamanai Ruins (Sarah Peterson - SP), Collared Trogon (JS), Black Orchid Resort (JS), Bare-throated Tiger Heron (JS), Yellow-throated Warbler (JS), Dock at BOR (JS), Sunset (JS), Yucatan Jay (JS), Agami Heron (JS), Whistling Ducks (JS), Tree (JS), Getting the shot! (JS), Morelet's Crocodile (JS), Black-collared Hawk (JS), Arrivals (JS), Lamanai Dining Room (SP), Squirrel Cuckoo (NJ Stock), Gray-headed Tanager (NJ Stock), White-nosed Coati (NJ Stock), Lamanai Ruins (SP), Chestnut-colored Woodpecker (JS), Northern Barred Woodcreeper (JS), Grinding Corn (SP), Ringed Kingfisher (JS), White-nosed Coati (JS), Black-throated Shrike Tanager (JS), Group (JS), Hazy Morning (JS), Birding the docks (JS), Group Birding (JS), Chan Chich Lodge (JS), Yellow-boarded Owl Butterfly (JS), Black-faced Grosbeak (JS), Ocellated Turkeys (JS), Dinner at Chan Chich (JS), Coffee Bean Cycle (JS), Mealy Parrot (NJ Stock), Northern Potoo (JS), Blue Bunting (JS), Golden Hooded Tanager (JS), Crested Guan (JS), Group Birding (JS), Lagoon Scenic (JS), Breakfast at Chan Chich (JS), Red-capped Manakin (JS), Group Dinner (JS), Birding Pano (JS)