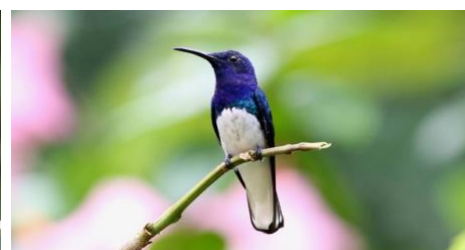
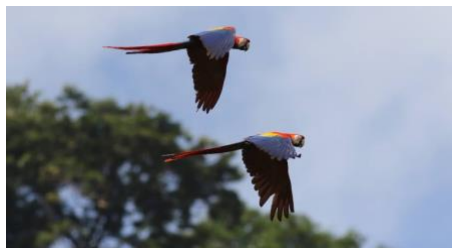


Belize: Three Great Lodges | Feb. 7 – 17, 2023 | Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guides Isaías, Mario and Steve; and guests Barb, Jan, John, Julie, Kathy, Liz, Mike, Norm, Phyllis, Tom & Thea

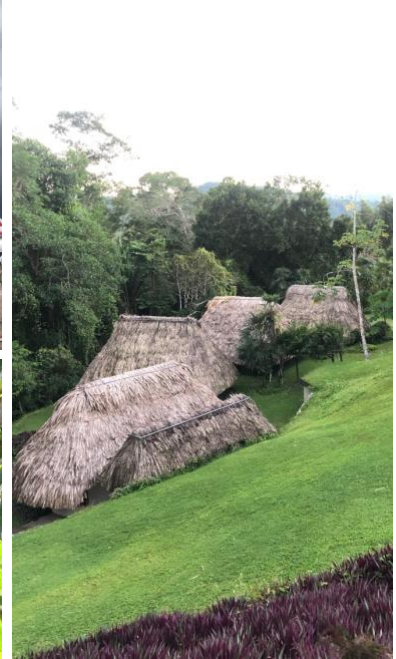


Tues., Feb. 7

Burrell Boom | Black Orchid Resort | Black Rock Lodge

The Black Orchid Resort, nestled on the southern bank of the Belize River, served as a perfect meeting place for the majority of our Naturalist Journeys group. Most had been in Belize for a day or more, not only getting acclimatized, but also enjoying the local fauna and cuisine before the tour began in earnest. Tom and Thea arrived at Philip Goldson International Airport around noon, perfect timing since lunch was already reserved for the group at the Black Orchid Resort, a mere 20 minutes from the airport. The resort directly overlooks the Belize River, and we watched Little Blue Heron, Spotted Sandpiper and Mangrove Swallows while getting acquainted with our local guide Isaías and meeting up with old friends from previous travels. The delightfully warm, tropical air was clear as the heavy rain clouds from the previous day had dispersed altogether.

By 3:30 we were heading west along the George Price Highway toward San Ygnacio. Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets were noted along the way as well as numerous Black and Turkey Vultures that would be constant aerial companions for much of the tour. As we headed west, the pine-savannah gave way to agricultural fields,



meadows and broadleaf woodland, the Maya mountains clearly visible but in the background. A welcome stop at the Orange Gallery near Georgeville provided a couple of gems in the form of Olive-throated Parakeets and Red-lored Parrots, both species appearing bright 'fluro-green' in the brilliant afternoon sunlight. The parakeets were feasting on flowering Madre de Cacao trees, a neat little cameo signaling our tropical adventure was well and truly underway. The journey passed through Capitol of Belmopan and the bustling town of San Ygnacio before we hit several miles of white dirt roads, some stretches delightfully lined with flowering pink Madre de Cacao. Following the banks of the majestic Macal River, we climbed ever closer to Black Rock Lodge, a sense of remoteness hitting home as we finally reached the lodge. After welcome drinks and a brief orientation, we were shown to our well-appointed, cozy cabanas. John, Phyllis and Mike had arrived several days prior, and we joined them at the dinner table for the first of many delicious meals and discussed activities for the week ahead.

Wed., Feb. 8 Black Rock Lodge | Belize Botanic Garden

The local Yucatan Black Howlers were especially vocal first thing in the morning. No need for an alarm clock at Black Rock Lodge! Coffee was served at the restaurant balcony neatly enhancing a beautiful start to the day as we looked down on the fast-flowing Macal River. Isaias anticipated the appearance of Collared Aracaris at the feeders and sure enough they came in to feast on bananas and other fruits laid out on the bird table below. Yellow-winged Tanagers and a Wood Thrush made appearances, and up to eight aracaris were counted at times. White-necked Jacobins, Long-billed Hermits and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds all visited the sugar feeders, further enhancing a first rate start to the day. Isaias was full of energy and keen to keep the morning moving. Before long we were off for a pre-breakfast walk around the grounds, finding Olive-sided Flycatcher (rare in winter), Yellow-throated Warbler, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, White-crowned Parrots, a female Gartered Trogon and great views of a Pale-billed Woodpecker. The sun peeked over the mountains bringing genuine warmth to the morning after a chilly start. Bird activity increased dramatically with the sunshine as we enjoyed



local species such as White-whiskered Puffbird, Black-headed Saltator, Stripe-throated Hermit and a high-flying Keel-billed Toucan, the National bird of Belize! Isaias walked us down to a sandy beach on the incredibly picturesque Macal River, a place that looked perfect for kingfishers. In no time both Green and Amazon Kingfishers duly appeared! A magnificent White Hawk perched high above the canopy on the far side of the valley and was thoroughly enjoyed in the scope by all. The morning had flown by and we were already late for breakfast, but even there the distractions continued to abound! Isaias brilliantly scoped a perched Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle drying out its wings after the heavy overnight rain. Green-breasted Mangos and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds worked the flowers of a Quamwood (*Schizolobium parahyba*) just off the restaurant balcony. Quamwood is a fast-growing, leguminous tree that does particularly well in open forest and clearings. The main flowering period is February through April, and the yellow flowers are a big attraction for pollinators. We really couldn't have timed our visit better as Quamwood flowers are a magnet for hummingbirds, honeycreepers and warblers.

After breakfast we loaded up the vehicles and headed down the Black Rock access road, a drive highlighted by fine views of a perched Laughing Falcon. Arrival at the Belize Botanic Garden was greeted by warm sunshine, increasing temperatures, perfect conditions for soaring raptors and it wasn't long before Isaias spotted a superb adult King Vulture soaring with Black Vultures right overhead! The garden's principal Education Director, Rudy, escorted us on a first-rate interpretative tour around the gardens, though it couldn't have been easy for him as the audience was constantly distracted by an abundance of avian riches: Gartered Trogon, Keel-billed Toucan, Brown Jay, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Rose-throated Becard and more all vied for attention. Norm somehow spotted a Plain Chachalaca sneaking into the canopy, and a flowering *Mimosa* suddenly became a hive of activity with Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Lesser Greenlet, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Magnolia and Yellow Warblers and multiple Red-legged Honeycreepers in view. In the meantime, Rudy did his best to impart his own knowledge, introducing many orchids, especially the Black Orchid, the national flower of Belize. By noon the heat of the day



was starting to have an impact and we looped around the gardens to the parking area, though not before having great views of a Rufous-tailed Jacamar by the pond, and a male Black-headed Trogon by a thatched Maya House. On reaching the vehicles, cold drinks and air conditioning were well received but before reaching the lodge, Isaias had one last tasty morsel in his back pocket! A large stick nest had been noted high in a Mahogany over the access road, and on this occasion the occupant was home! It was an adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle, one of the most strikingly beautiful, and most sought-after, raptors in Central America. The scopes were promptly set up and many a phone-scope shot was taken. Fortunately, the bird itself remained remarkably calm and seemed oblivious to the pandemonium going on below but wow, what a way to finish the morning! After an early dinner we embarked on a night drive hoping to find a range of crepuscular and nocturnal species. Over the course of the next two-and-a-half hours, we enjoyed prolonged views of one or two perched Northern Potoos, a Gray Fox and great views of a Kinkajou, the latter easily being the highlight of the night drive. The lead vehicle also noted a Virginia Opossum while the second vehicle had great fortune finding a perched Mottled Owl. The most frustrating bird of the evening was a Middle American Screech-Owl that called constantly for 10 or more minutes, but couldn't be coaxed into view, though it was nice to listen to the vocalizations up close. On the way back, Isaias showed us the suspended nest of a pair of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts under a cliff overhang right above the road - and the nest was occupied! The hour was late, and the grumpy growls of Yucatan Black Howlers announced our arrival back at the lodge snuffing out any chance of sneaking back to our cabanas unnoticed!

Thurs., Feb., 9

Black Rock Lodge | Spanish Lookout Mennonite Community and fields

A few in our party opted for a relaxed day around Black Rock Lodge, but most elected for a vehicle tour around the large Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. After an early breakfast we loaded up the vehicles and prepared for a long day out, noting a perched White-necked Puffbird near the laundry building just before departures. Expansive areas of agricultural land combined with wetlands surround the town of Spanish Lookout, making it a prime destination for birders and introducing us to a new habitat type for the tour. To fully explore the area, Isaias used his contacts to secure permits for both vehicles (Roque was driving the second vehicle), which involved a visit to the Mennonite Town Hall, surely one of the most immaculately clean buildings to be found anywhere in Belize! Vermilion and Social Flycatchers, White-crowned Parrots and an out-of-place



American Redstart entertained us by the Town Hall building and from there, permits in hand, we headed through a gated entrance into the fields of Spanish Lookout. Blue Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings and other seed eaters were noted. Our first stop produced close-up views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures as well as Black-necked Stilts, Wood Storks and several Crested Caracaras foraging in a recently plowed field. We continued up a steep gradient to find a small pond situated in meadows atop a hill that just happened to be full of waterfowl! Most were Blue-winged Teal, but we came across Northern Shovelers as well as a Cinnamon x Blue-winged Teal hybrid...apparently the first of its kind to be recorded in Belize! A Pied-billed Grebe was spotted within a larger flock Least Grebes, and we enjoyed Greater Yellowlegs, Least Sandpipers and even a Sora foraging out in the open! An Aplomado Falcon teed up on a dead snag just a few hundred yards down the same road gave the best views in brilliant sunlight....it was all happening! The morning became breezy with crisp blue skies, white cumulus clouds and a few darker clouds that looked potentially threatening. Birds were everywhere as we explored the myriad of fields, wetlands and ditches. There was a Wood Stork colony with many active nests, and both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were among them. Anhingas, Bat Falcons, Limpkins, Tricolored and Great Blue Herons and a giant Morelet's Crocodile were just a handful of the notable sightings. Isaías did well to pick out a Zone-tailed Hawk right overhead, a bird that may well have passed unnoticed among the many Turkey Vultures. As we drove out, several White-tailed and Red-tailed Hawks were actively cruising above a tractor and plow, with many Cattle Egrets following on the ground. The morning had been intense, and the midday heat was creeping in. Naturally thoughts turned toward lunch, but the sightings just kept on coming. Isaías was beside himself when he spotted a sizeable flock of Ocellated Turkeys in one of the fields, an uncommon species anywhere away from the Rio Bravo Conservation area. Moreover, the same field was full of Fork-tailed Flycatchers, many of them replete with streaming tail feathers, surely one of the most charismatic flycatchers in all the Americas!

With increasingly threatening rain clouds, we headed into town and the Sisters Café. Our timing couldn't have been better as an incredibly heavy shower was pouring right over Spanish Lookout! The rain came hard and



heavy but thankfully was over in a few minutes, leaving us with the challenge of trying to identify a few of the haplessly bedraggled birds hopping around the café. It turned out to be a great choice for lunch, not only serving sumptuous Belizean food, but also offering three new birds for the trip: Common Tody-flycatcher, Cinnamon-bellied Saltator and Ruby-throated Hummingbird. The afternoon saw us dancing between rain showers while squeezing in a visit to Aguacate Lagoon where, sadly, the hoped-for Tody Motmots could not be found. Mennonite farmers had cleared portions of the forest to make way for an ultimate Frisbee course, not exactly what our local guides had been hoping to find! On the other hand, we couldn't grumble at having great views of a perched Double-toothed Kite, and we thoroughly enjoyed the vibrant chorus of Ruddy Crakes all around the lagoon. A heavy shower expedited our departure, but remarkably, we came across another flock (or perhaps the same flock) of Ocellated Turkeys on the way out, this flock also shadowed by lots of Fork-tailed Flycatchers. Spanish Lookout had been really good, but it was deep into the afternoon and time to start thinking about the run for home. But this remarkable area had one last treat in store as a mysterious group of long-tailed birds could be seen foraging in the middle of the road ahead in the distance. First thoughts were Great-tailed Grackles, but as we got closer, we noted the azure-blue upperparts, black body plumage and bright yellow bill, these were Yucatan Jays! Not just a stunning bird to view, but a regional endemic and a species decidedly uncommon this far southwest in Belize. Spanish Lookout had tooted its horn in the most dramatic fashion, a fitting finale to a brilliant day. All that remained was the safe crossing of the Belize River at Baking Pot by means of a hand-cranked ferry—in itself something to behold! A steady drive along the George Price Highway via San Ygnacio saw us back at the lodge for a delicious supper and a round-up of the day's sightings as another rich, rewarding day came to an end amid tranquil sounds of the Macal River.

Fri., Feb. 10 Black Rock Lodge | Mountain Pine Ridge | Slate Creek | Rio On Pools | Cooma Cairn

We divided forces again, with half the group opting for time around the lodge with Black Rock guide Roque, and the rest heading for Mountain Pine Ridge in search of habitats that would further broaden the range of species to be encountered on the tour. After climbing through the sleepy village of San Antonio, we stopped at the forest reserve entrance where a short walk produced a Gray-throated Chat (near-endemic), flocks of White-collared Swifts and a beautiful White Hawk soaring on the thermals. Indeed, the thermal action inspired a visit



to Slate Creek, a majestic overlook gazing out over hundreds of acres of prime, undisturbed forest. Isaías expressed some urgency here and raced down to the overlook, his quarry already in the scope by the time we reached him! It was a beautiful Orange-breasted Falcon, one of the rarest raptors in Central America and a species with an extremely patchy distribution throughout its limited range. The views may have been distant, but we were later treated to views of the male stooping at a White Hawk that had the misfortune to start soaring, something that the feisty falcon didn't like! As it happened, our timing had been crucial. We never saw the Orange-breasted Falcon after that and couldn't help but feel some empathy for the birders arriving afterwards. Other soaring raptors included King Vultures and an adult Broad-winged Hawk, and we had great views of more White-collared Swifts. Moreover, Isaías had worked his magic in finding a Scaled Pigeon perched close to the trail as we walked in and conjured up a male Red-capped Manakin on the way out! Black Rock Lodge went above and beyond with a fabulous picnic lunch set against the incredibly scenic Rio On Pools before we pressed on to the rich Caribbean Pine habitat at Douglas D' Silva Camp. The 'tinkling' calls of Black-headed Siskins were among the first sounds heard, and we found numbers of insectivores such as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Yellow-rumped, Yellow-throated and Grace's Warblers. Prolonged views of a male Hepatic Tanager invited thoughts and comparisons with the numerous Summer Tanagers already seen at lower elevations, and we finished off a delightful walk with close-up views of a stunning pair of Acorn Woodpeckers.

As we drove back towards Hidden Valley, a Squirrel Cuckoo bolted across the road, the light being good enough to provide the first decent views of the species on the trip. Isaías had one last trick up his sleeve, a journey that would take us well beyond Hidden Valley and the entrance to 1,000-foot falls. We passed extensive areas of Caribbean Pine before the habitat opened up, the elevation continuously creeping up. Birds were sparse along this stretch except for a number of Rusty Sparrows zipping across the road that proved to be an incredibly difficult species to see well whenever we stopped for them. The road abruptly ended at Cooma Cairn at an elevation of some 3,200 feet. The Ranger Station, previously a British Army camp, Cooma Cairn was the highest point that we'd reach on the entire tour. The views were quite superb overlooking Chiqibul Forest Reserve, Victoria Peak and the Maya Mountains way in the distance. Birds were few in this habitat and needed careful



encouragement to come out from the surrounding scrub. True to form, Isaias never gave up producing excellent views of Rufous-capped Warbler, Rusty Sparrow and a pair of Cabanis's Wrens. A bold American Kestrel was far more obliging and put on a nice show as it hovered and hunted, looking totally at ease within its lofty domain. A steady drive home saw us return to the lodge for another glorious supper and time to catch up on the day's bird list. It turned out that the rest of the group had a fabulous day around the lodge, with Roque finding (among other things) Common Pauraque, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Tropical Pewee, Amazon Kingfisher and Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle!

Sat., Feb. 11

Black Rock Lodge | Green Hills Butterfly Ranch | Pook's Hill Lodge

Departures from Black Rock Lodge weren't easy. Leaving such a magical spot was always going to be difficult, especially with major distractions like an obliging Squirrel Cuckoo near the parking lot! The goal was to reach Pook's Hill Lodge by mid-afternoon, and we had a generous amount of time to achieve that. We stopped by some lowland fields near Corozalito, not far from Maya Flats Airport. For an intense spell of 25 minutes or so, we experienced birding mayhem. But by carefully sifting and sorting, we ended up with a really fine selection; Yellow-throated, Olive-backed and Scrub Euphonias, vocalizing Couch's Kingbirds, a small flock of Bronzed Cowbirds, amazing looks at Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Blue-black and Yellow-faced Grassquits, Red-legged Honeycreepers, multiple Morelet's Seedeaters and Baltimore, Orchard and Black-cowled Orioles. A Roadside Hawk flew over, a Laughing Falcon was perched in the distance and a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl called continuously from the village, but alas, wouldn't come any closer. Even so, what an amazing warm up to the day! Next up was Green Hills Butterfly Ranch where we enjoyed an interpretive tour including live exhibits of the butterfly life cycle and the deeply important conservation work being carried out by the ranch. It also happened to be an exceptional birding site, especially for the hummingbirds swarming the ranch's feeders: Violet and Wedge-tailed Sabrewings and White-bellied Emeralds were all new to the trip. Afterwards, Isaias led a casual walk around the grounds where we observed several Russet-naped Wood-Rails, four Black-headed Trogons together(!), Clay-colored Thrush, a male White-collared Manakin, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, a couple of Gray-headed Tanagers, Yellow-bellied and Least Flycatchers, Hooded and Chestnut-sided Warblers and Green Kingfisher. Overhead, a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk, several Vaux's Swifts and a migrant Purple Martin graced the skies. A rewarding morning culminated with another fabulous picnic lunch provided by Black Rock



Lodge. The drive towards Pook's Hill saw the tour pass east along the George Price Highway before turning south at Teakettle and onto the dirt roads along the way the lodge. Small numbers of Killdeer could be found in the flooded meadows, and a Least Grebe showed on a tiny cattle pond. The terrain became increasingly rugged as we approached the lodge, and just before we arrived, Isaias spotted a Hook-billed Kite soaring with several Black Vultures. A lengthy pause by the road found more Vaux's Swifts overhead and a Tawny-winged Woodcreeper in the woodland right next to the road. Arrival at Pook's was greeted by welcome drinks served by Vicki, the site owner. It was also time to bid farewell to Isaias and Roque our guides from Black Rock, duly thanking them for their stellar efforts over the previous four days. They were going to be missed. The day was far from over and most were keen to explore new surroundings and meet our new guide, Mario. The afternoon walk got off to a great start with King Vulture, Double-toothed Kite and about 40 White-collared Swifts soaring right over the lodge. New passerines included Buff-throated Saltator, Blue-black Grosbeak and a Kentucky Warbler. We dropped down to the meadow by the Roaring River finding a Long-billed Hermit working a flowering *Erythrina* tree and enjoyed watching Pale-billed and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers while Barred Antshrikes called in the background. Later we gathered in the lodge's communal area, catching up on the day's sightings before we settled down for a delicious buffet supper...it sure felt good to be back!

Sun., Feb. 12 Pook's Hill Lodge and Forest Reserve

Pook's Hill Lodge is nestled within a 300-acre private forest reserve. Guests have a wealth of trails to explore, all through pristine woodland habitat. With this in mind, the plan was to have a human-powered day on foot, saving the vehicles for the long transfer the following day. As always, coffee was available at 6 a.m. and a small group gathered by 6:15. A cold front had moved through overnight bringing heavy rain and a sharp drop in temperature during the predawn hours. Barb, John and James, and later Kathy and Julie, joined Mario for the pre-breakfast walk, enjoying Black-cheeked and Pale-billed Woodpeckers, Collared Aracari, Keel-billed Toucan, Red-lored Parrots, White-whiskered Puffbird and fantastic views of a Black-headed Trogon foraging in a palm by the staff quarters. Breakfast at the lodge was more than enough to fuel our bird walk to follow. We began down in the meadow where a pair of copulating Bat Falcons got things off to an auspicious start! A spectacular Crimson-collared Grosbeak, and a couple of skulkers in the form of Mayan Antthrush and Band-backed Wren,



were also found and seen by a lucky few. We fared a little better with a Squirrel Cuckoo that gave the most satisfying views to date, as did a Tropical Pewee and several Groove-billed Anis before we entered the more heavily wooded portion of the trail system. Dusky Antbird and Dot-winged Antwren were both present, but required some patience to see, though we did rather better with those than the male Blue Ground-Dove that called throughout the morning but would remain unseen. Overall, a massively successful walk was rounded off by nesting Amazon Kingfishers at the Red Cliff, nesting Golden-olive Woodpeckers and a pair of roosting Spectacled Owls, all before lunch! Most of the group, along with other lodge guests, joined Vicki and Mario for a post-lunch, archaeological walk and talk on the Maya site around which Pook's Hill Lodge is built. Mario later led an afternoon bird walk along the main access road, though after a long day on foot only a few felt inspired enough to attend. John, Phyllis, Mike, Thea, Norm and James tried their luck, and while the birding was a little on the quiet side, it did include several key species that proved to be new to the trip or had only been seen poorly before: Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Northern Schiffornis, Red-throated Ant-Tanager and a calling Northern Bentbill. A White Hawk perched across the valley, which we later enjoyed in flight, watching it soar over the magnificent forest reserve. We met before dinner to go through the day's bird and wildlife sightings, finishing off with a fabulous supper of roast beef, potatoes, sautéed veggies and syrup cake for dessert, the latter being every bit as sweet as it sounds! The day had been long and full, and we retired to our thatched cabanas to the wild, liquid calls of Common Pauriques.

Mon., Feb. 13 Pook's Hill Lodge | Blue National Park | Hopkins Bay The Lodge at Big Falls

The day began with an early breakfast. We had a big day of travel ahead that would see us traverse three Belize districts beginning in Cayo, then lunch in Stann Creek before reaching our final destination, Big Falls, in Toledo district. The cool, cloudy theme from the previous day continued as we left Pook's Hill just after posing for group photos at the Maya site that formed the center piece of our stay at the lodge. The drive out was bumpy, but neatly cushioned by a few birds along the way, notably an adult Little Blue Heron, Blue-winged Teal, several Killdeer and another sighting of the cattle pond Least Grebe, much to Norm's relief. While the coast would



ultimately feature in our plans, we did have time to stop at Blue Hole National Park, pausing at the entrance to St. Herman's Cave where a staggering male Vermilion Flycatcher put on quite the show in the parking lot. Further along the lowland trail, a female White-whiskered Puffbird was equally approachable, so close we could easily make out the white, bristly plumes at the base of the bill, and the lores for which the species is aptly named. The same trail also offered up a close encounter with a singing Nightingale Wren, which sadly wasn't seen, but was close enough to thoroughly enjoy the remarkably fluty, fragmented song at close range. The cave picnic area was a little quiet though a Bright-rumped Attila was present, but we couldn't conjure up the Lesson's Motmot seen earlier by a visiting birder. Next up was the Blue Hole itself, a natural, deep-water pool formed by the collapse of a limestone cave and fed by fresh water. It's a big attraction for local and visiting bathers alike, and Thea and Julie elected to take a dip during our visit. The area also happened to be very birdy, and we came across several furtive forest species that proved surprisingly easy to see, especially near the picnic area. Dot-winged Antwren, White-breasted Wood-Wren and a stunning Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher all came into view as well as wintering migrants such as Blue-winged and Black-and-white Warblers, and multiple Wood Thrushes. We pressed on, driving towards the coast and passing rolling countryside with expansive areas of forest. Gazing back towards the Sleeping Giant Mountains, Mario teasingly mentioned that Scarlet Macaws could sometimes be seen in the woodlots close to the highway. The heavy veil of cloud and drizzle became more intense as we passed through the coastal plains, so we skipped the Hopkins Wetlands in favor of having lunch under cover at Hopkins Bay Resort. Brown Pelicans, Royal and Sandwich Terns and the odd Laughing Gull could all be seen from the resort's beach front as we waited for lunch. The lush gardens provided winter habitat for numerous Yellow-rumped and Yellow-throated Warblers, but the resident Cinnamon Hummingbirds were far more difficult to see...anyone who managed to get binocular views of this fast-moving little sprite was deserving of praise and perhaps a beer from the bar! Lunchtime also came with an air of sadness as it was time to bid farewell to our local guide Mario, and to Tom and Thea who'd been excellent, engaging travel companions during the first half of the tour, their presence would be missed. Mario handed over guiding duties to his cousin, Steve, keeping this particular tour firmly within the Choco family! And so began the long drive south along the Southern Highway towards Steve's home in Big Falls. The clouds, rain and general air of gloom remained for the rest of the day, as we passed acre upon acre of pine-savannah habitat as well as numerous Roadside Hawks, American Kestrels and Cattle Egrets. Arrival at the Lodge at Big Falls was greeted by improved weather and a warm welcome from new site manager Cathy Choco, Steve's sister. After an orientation, we gathered in the cozy, family-run atmosphere of the lodge and settled down for the bird list and dinner.



Tues., Feb. 14

The Lodge at Big Falls | Belize Spice Farm | Dump Rice Fields

The day began with birding from the main lodge deck watching the fruit feeders. Coffee and muffins were available from 6 a.m., but most of our group opted for an easy start to the day, with a relatively small group gathering for pre-breakfast birding. A Black-and-white Owl had been heard calling during the night, last heard at about 5:30 a.m. just as the roosters from the neighboring village started to get warmed up. A thin veil of mist hung over the lodge and the surrounding woodland, but the sun was already poking through, and the clouds and rain from the previous day gave way to a beautiful day at Big Falls! Steve was full of enthusiasm, calling out birds from the deck including Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Clay-colored Thrush, Black-headed Trogon, Yellow-winged Tanager, Black-headed Saltator and lots of Brown Jays. We walked the wooded section of the access road with mixed success, hearing plenty of sounds including Long-billed Gnatwren and Mayan Antthrush, but also seeing Bright-rumped Attila, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Rose-throated Becard and Smoky-brown Woodpecker. After a traditional Big Falls buffet breakfast, we returned to the access road, this time with a larger group finding a similar range of species, but also adding good views of Barred Antshrike, Blue-backed Grosbeak, a nesting White-bellied Emerald, Plain Chachalacas and a displaying Black Hawk-Eagle. The latter completed the set of all the possible hawk-eagles in Belize, in all of Central America in fact! We'd completed the hawk-eagle trifecta with several days in hand! Clear blue skies and sunshine filled the morning hours, and it was beginning to get warm. A pair of Wood Storks and an Osprey rose on warm air thermals above the lodge as we made an impromptu decision to visit the Belize Spice Farm, just a 15-minute drive north along the southern highway. On arrival we enjoyed a trolley tour complete with an excellent commentator who provided an interpretive tour showcasing imported crops such as Cardamom, Cinnamon, Black pepper and Clove. We also toured the botanical garden itself including several aquatic features with lotuses and giant water lilies, and they'd even begun constructing new air-conditioned guestrooms and a recreational pond! We also found striped basilisk and black spiny-tailed iguana in addition to several Montezuma Oropendolas.



We had lunch at Pearleen's, in Big Falls, a café boasting a buffet of Indian- and Caribbean-influenced Belizean dishes, and ice cream for dessert. The hoped-for Spot-breasted Orioles, however, did not appear, and with that we headed back to the lodge to relax and cool off, some opting for siesta and some for the pool. Around 4 p.m., we drove over to the Dump Rice Fields, stopping for a fabulous perched Crested Caracara along the way. Though essentially a wetland site, it was quite tough to see any open water in the overgrown rice fields, though wetland habitants were clearly present as we heard Least Bittern and dozens of crakes, mostly Sora and Ruddies, and also saw several Little Blue Herons and a stunning Roseate Spoonbill in perfect afternoon light. The area was busy with raptor activity too, with an approachable Common Black Hawk, good views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, White-tailed Kites and a rather distant pair of Aplomado Falcons. Passerines included several oriole species seen together plus skulking Rufous-breasted Spinetails, several Scarlet-rumped Tanagers and dozens of Blue Grosbeaks, the latter filtering across the rice fields at dusk as they headed off to roost. Another brilliant day came to a close with the bird list and dinner at the lodge. We also met Steve's lovely wife, Cordelia, head of the kitchen and the mastermind behind all the delicious meals served at the lodge - bravo Cordelia!

Wed., Feb. 15 The Lodge at Big Falls | Red Bank Village & Roseville Nim Li Punit

After coffee and muffins at 6:00, we began the steady drive to Red Bank Village, about an hour north of Big Falls. It was quiet at that hour, punctuated only by a few Roadside Hawks and Brown Jays, but that all changed when we entered the pine-savannah along the sandy entrance road to Red Bank. A covey of around a dozen Black-throated Bobwhites spilled onto a small trail, giving the most fabulous views, surprising for such a skittish gamebird. The day was off to a racing start and we celebrated with breakfast at the Scarlet Macaw B & B where the lush gardens filled with more birds including lightning-fast Cinnamon Hummingbirds, several Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Golden-hooded Tanagers. Steve received a tip on where Scarlet Macaws might be found, and the resulting drive took us through rolling countryside on red dirt roads and across the Swasey River before we entered the Mennonite community of Roseville, with its lush meadows and wet fields. Cattle Egrets and Groove-billed Anis seemed to be everywhere, and one flooded meadow held several Northern Jacana, Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs and the first Solitary Sandpipers of the trip as well as passerines such as Eastern Meadowlark and



Yellow-bellied Elaenia close by. Steve had a spot in mind, and we pressed on for a few more miles until it seemed like we could drive no more. And there, set against the magnificent backdrop of wooded hillsides in the Maya Mountains we found macaws, two or three at first but after some time it became clear there were 20 or more Scarlet Macaws feeding and flying around! The macaws seen flight brought raptors into focus too as the crisp blue sky filled with vultures, at least eight King Vultures among them. Aerial insect feeders included Northern Rough-winged and Tree Swallows and a couple of highflying Gray-breasted Martins. Heady with success and wary that the heat was starting to have an impact, we headed back to Red Bank, retracing our passage over the Swasey River before stopping in a wooded area just before the village. Steve's sixth sense helped us get onto a Lesson's Motmot calling from the far side of the valley, and with a little effort this long tailed beauty was coaxed in for excellent views, and the tour nemesis was no more. More Scarlet Macaws gave deep, resonant squawks at they flew overhead, and this particular spot boasted an abundance of orioles with Baltimore, Orchard and Black-cowled Orioles all on view. Our time at Red Bank concluded with fine views of a Short-tailed Hawk and several Acorn Woodpeckers working the utility poles along Red Bank Road. The relaxed confines of the lodge provided an ideal spot to unwind during the heat of the afternoon with post-lunch activities on offer including kayaking and tubing down the Rio Grande, lounging at the swimming pool, or a relaxing siesta...all were eagerly snapped up! After some downtime, we took the short drive up to the Maya archeological site at Nim Li Punit. Steve had local connections to get us into the site after closing hours and we enjoyed a nice mix of birding while learning about this fascinating, ancient civilization. According to Nathaniel, our site host, Nim Li Punit was discovered quite recently, in 1976, by an oil company worker. The birding happened to be pretty good too with fine views of Pale-billed Woodpecker and Louisiana Waterthrush as well as a number of forest species that had eluded us to date: Orange-billed Sparrow, Northern Bentbill and Wedge-billed Woodcreeper. A fabulous dinner back at the lodge closed out yet another spectacular day.

Thurs., Feb. 16

The Lodge at Big Falls | Tunich Ha Ecological Center Punta Gorda | Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate

Coffee and muffins were once again available in the morning, and we spent some time birding from the deck before setting off. Poolside highlights included great views of Golden-olive Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Yellow-breasted Chat, Black-headed Saltator and Blue-gray Tanager. From there we drove south, nearly reaching



Punta Gorda before turning off the main road and entering Tunich Ha Reserve and Ecological Center, a private enterprise run by two of Steve's close friends, Nick and Jessica. Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised overhead clearly indicating we were close to the sea. We'd barely stepped out of the vehicle when the birds started coming thick and fast – Greenish Elaenia, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and a dazzling male Green Honeycreeper! Overhead, White-collared and Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts joined the frigatebirds, and we had a great view of a soaring Broad-winged Hawk. Jessica prepared an excellent Belizean breakfast after which we explored more of the grounds, finding both Red-capped and White-collared Manakins, Black-headed Trogon, Masked Tityra and Stripe-throated Hermit.

As the day warmed up, the sky continued to fill with more White-collared Swifts, another Broad-winged Hawk, a displaying pair of Common Black Hawks and a Black Hawk-Eagle. A great morning was neatly capped off with fine views of Black-crowned Antshrike, Dusky Antbird, Squirrel Cuckoo and a few more Green Honeycreepers. The heat was beginning to have an impact on the day, so we bid farewell to Nick and Jessica opting for an air-conditioned drive to the coastal town of Punta Gorda. At one of the jetties, we found Brown Pelicans aplenty plus Laughing Gulls, Royal, Sandwich and Terns and many Magnificent Frigatebirds cruising overhead or chasing terns around the bay. The delightful breeze blowing off the Caribbean brought welcome relief as Steve's sharp eyes picked out a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. A more concerted effort revealed seven or more roosting night-herons in the harbor side mangroves as well as a giant male Green Iguana. Punta Gorda also gifted us a few new birds for the trip, both of which would barely receive a second glance at home: Double-crested Cormorant and House Sparrow! And with that we headed north for a lunch date at the Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate Factory. What a treat it was with Juan Cho and his son proudly explaining the process of growing cacao, and the history of their business in San Felipe. Juan's wife prepared a delicious Belizean lunch including their famous chocolate chicken and house-made hot pickles. Afterwards we sampled many different varieties of chocolate and drinks prepared at Ixcacao, souvenirs being duly snapped up from the gift shop.



It was mid-afternoon by the time we arrived back at the lodge, but to his credit, Steve was willing to offer one last afternoon bird walk before nightfall. The few who joined him had made an inspired decision as the lodge's trail system delivered some of the best forest birding of the whole tour with Little Tinamou (heard), Great Antshrike, Mayan Antthrush, Rufous-breasted Spinetail and amazing views of the rarest of all – Bare-crowned Antbird. The latter is something of prized species in the Big Falls area, found only in southern Belize where it's both rare and local. The atmosphere was grand at our farewell dinner where we had the chance to thank Steve, Cathy and Cordelia for all their efforts and warm hospitality. Steve and his seemingly limitless energy then escorted a small group to the pool where he successfully called in the resident Black-and-white Owl for wonderful spotlight views. What a brilliant finale it was, and testament to all of Steve's hard work over the previous four days.

Fri., Feb. 17 The Lodge at Big Falls | Departures from Punta Gorda

After a relaxed breakfast, we again thanked Steve and Cathy for a wonderful time at Big Falls and then began a steady sequence of departures involving three different flights from Punta Gorda to Belize City. Most would be heading home on international flights, but Mike and Phyllis were fortunate to spend a few more days in beautiful Belize. The country had been so kind to us, and the "Three Great Lodges" had more than lived up to their reputations, each unique and full of character, and each coming with its own highly professional local guide. Finally, the group camaraderie and humor on this tour was a joy to be a part of and special thanks go out to everyone involved. Until next time...

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (James P. Smith - JS), Scarlet Macaws (JS), Spice Farm Trees (JS), White-whiskered Puffbird (JS), White-necked Jacobin (JS), Red-
lored Parrot (JS), Storm Clouds over Plane (JS), Guest Huts (JS), Maya Ruins (JS), Golden-olive Woodpecker (JS), Fog over Canopy (JS), Chicken Quesadillas at
Black Rock (JS), Black Orchis (JS), Gartered Trogon (JS), Belize Botanical Garden (JS), Purple Gallinule (JS), Coffee & Birding at Black Rock (JS), Hidden Pond (JS),
Rainbow over Spanish Lookout (JS), Yucatan Jay (JS), Morelet's Crocodile (JS), Hand-cranked Car Ferry (JS), Ocellated Turkeys (JS), Waterway Scenic (JS), New
Friends (Kathleen Pasierb - KP), Butterfly (KP), Scoping (KP), Scenic (JS), Butterfly (John Trezise - JT), Violet Sabrewing (JS), All Smiles (JT), Checking out the
local flora (KP), Crimson-collared Grosbeak (JS), Spectacled Owl (KP), Yellow-olive Flycatcher (JS), Pool Deck (JS), Vermillion Flycatcher (JS), Huge Leaf (JS),
Road Scenic (JS), Big Falls Group (JS), Spice Farm (JS), Bright-rumped Atila (JS), Scarlet Macaws (JS), Crested Caracara (JS), Scenic (JS), Group Hike (JS), Striped
Basilisk (JS), Pier (JS), Black-crowned Antshrike (JS), Punta Gorda (JS), Brown Pelican (JS), Bare-crowned Antbird (JS), Strolling the grounds (JS) Great Antshrike
(NJ Stock)*