

# Best of Belize | Jan. 13 - 21, 2024 | Trip Report | by Drew Haffenden



With guides Drew Haffenden, Ruben and Luis, and participants Richard, Jim, John, Camilla, Deb, Mindy, Greg, Scott, Sharon and Caydee.



We experienced a wonderful, nine-day combination of birding, wildlife and Mayan ruins in Belize where we saw 207 species of birds, 10 species of mammals and numerous reptiles and amphibians. We also had a side focus on butterflies with experts Deb and Caydee. Our local guides had expansive knowledge of their Mayan ancestry, especially Ruben who was born and raised within the Lamanai Temple complex. In addition to learning about Mayan culture, we visited the village where people were moved to when Lamanai became an Archeological Reserve, and even had a lesson in traditional food prep and cooking. In addition to the temples, Lamanai provided the opportunity to explore lowland rainforest, river and lagoon habitats (along with Crooked Tree Reserve) and pine savanna. In Chan Chich, we explored upland rainforest, open fields and small lakes, as well as undeveloped Mayan ruins – the whole lodge area sits on such ruins. Over the nine days, we experienced wonderful wildlife, excellent food and luxurious accommodations.



**Sat., Jan 13**

### **Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort**

Four of us had arrived on Friday with the rest of the group arriving by the afternoon. The Black Orchid Resort is situated on the Belize River with fringing and remnant forest plus open areas. In the morning, I counted 15 species while having coffee including Ringed Kingfisher, Lineated Woodpecker, Red-lored Parrot, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Yellow-throated Euphonia and Montezuma Oriole. A good start to the tour. After breakfast I saw another birder who turned out to be Scott, and we birded together until about 11 a.m. This episode tallied 31 species, adding three species of columbids, Common Pauraque, Green Kingfisher, the ubiquitous Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Social Flycatcher, Brown Jay, American Redstart, four Hooded Orioles and a debated-over Acadian Flycatcher. Thank goodness for good views and photos of its long, scimitar-shaped primaries and large bill. Several Mangrove Swallows, one of the prettiest of the swallows, were flying over the river. Also on the river were rowers practicing in both coxed and coxless quads, though the boats were more of a cross between a true racing scull and more enclosed kayak. As I have not seen this in other Central American countries, I assume it is a relic of Belize's British history. Our full group gathered late afternoon for some quick birding, picking up several of the birds Scott and I had seen earlier. We then enjoyed welcome drinks and an early dinner as we had a very early start the next morning.

**Sun., Jan 14**

### **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary | Lamanai Outpost Lodge**

We rose early for our 5:30 a.m. departure, meeting at the vans in the dark to load up and get underway for our first destination, Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, about 45 minutes away. Crooked Tree covers 16,400 acres with a mix of wetlands, lagoons, broadleaf forest and pine savanna. Under the guidance of the Belize Audubon Society and National Audubon, it was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary by the Belizean government, the first in the country, in 1984. In 1998 it was declared a Ramsar site for the protection of the thousands of waterfowl that migrate here and the resident waders. It was light when we arrived, but a deep fog lay over the water. The small lodge had a breakfast prepared for us with fresh fruit, coffee and tea and baked goods. Birds could be seen and heard as we ate, waiting for the fog to lift so we could start our first full day of birding in Belize.

By the time we boarded our boats, we had tallied 25 species without going more than 20 yards from the building. A few waterbirds could be seen at the edge of the water including Spotted Sandpiper, Northern Jacana, Pied-billed Grebe, a lone Muscovy Duck, Western Cattle Egret and White Ibis. Our first of many Snail Kites was





seen and loud Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were heard and seen. Color came in the way of kiskadees and Social Flycatchers, joined by Vermilion Flycatcher, Lesser Goldfinch, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles and a very cheeky Yellow-throated Warbler finding crumbs on a table. As the fog lifted, Mangrove Swallows could be seen chasing breakfast over the water. We then set off accompanied by Ruben and one of the Crooked Tree guides to explore the wetlands and fringing forest for the next two hours. Very quickly we realized just what an amazing place we were in as birds were everywhere. Interestingly what we didn't see much of was the waterfowl that were an important reason for the sanctuary's existence.

As I had experienced on the Gulf Coast at home, duck migration was nearly a non-event this year, and it was the same in Belize. The growing consensus is that increasingly warm winters are keeping water open further north, and with food available, the ducks don't need to travel as far south. We saw just two Muscovy Ducks and one Lesser Scaup, however, there was no shortage of other birds. Raptors included four Ospreys, three Black-collared Hawks, 10 Snail Kites (likely an undercount), one Great Black Hawk, one Roadside Hawk and an Aplomado Falcon. Not a bad haul. Parrots included the ubiquitous Red-lored, a single Yellow-lored and eight of the threatened Yellow-headed Parrot, another victim of the pet/collector trade. Wetland birds included a Russet-naped Wood-Rail, Purple Gallinules, Limpkins, 28+ Northern Jacanas, Anhingas, Neotropic Cormorants, Bare-throated Tiger-Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Green, Little Blue and Great Blue Herons and Snowy and Great Egrets.

Land birds also made their appearance with five species of flycatcher including two Fork-taileds, Barred Antshrike and Bright-rumped Attila heard in the brush, four species of the oriole family including both Black-cowled and Yellow-tailed Orioles and of course Montezuma Oropendula and a Yellow-breasted Chat. Several species of warblers, Morelet's Seedeater and a Cinnamon-bellied Saltator also put in appearances. There were a number of large, male Green Iguanas, though they were in their rusty hue as it was breeding season, and they wanted to establish just who they were. They sat very exposed on branches for all to see, especially females and younger males, the former to be attracted and the latter repulsed. A couple of smaller, green-colored females were seen as well. By the time we turned around at about 8:30 a.m., we had recorded 56 species, plus another two on the way back. Wow!

Back at the lodge, we did a little birding with coffee and took a short walk along a road adding Green-breasted Mango and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, two Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures including one posing in a tree right



at the lodge, Killdeer, Wood Stork, White Ibis, Northern Parula, Palm Warbler and Summer Tanager to the list. We then clambered into our vehicles for the short drive to where our boat waited to take us to Lamanai Outpost Lodge. It wasn't yet noon and we had 82 species on our list for the day.

Once at the small dock, we boarded our boat for the 75-minute ride along New River to the lodge. Colorful bags with our lunch were handed out, with two of the best sandwiches I have eaten in quite a while, drinks fruit and cake. Sitting comfortably in a boat on a calm river watching the forest go by, stopping for birds along the way, is an ideal way to travel to a birding lodge! Some of the birds were familiar from Crooked Tree, but Jabiru, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Ringed Kingfisher, both White-tailed and Short-tailed Hawks, a Bat Falcon, Black-headed Trogon which was only heard at Crooked Tree, and a photogenic Lesser Nighthawk roosting on a branch overhanging the water were all new. By the time we arrived at Lamanai, around 2 p.m., we had 90 species for the day under our belts. As it had been an early start, we were taken straight to our rooms to clean up and relax for a bit, then regrouped at the main lodge for a welcome drink and orientation for our next few days here. Lamanai has separate cabins dotted about on the slope leading down to the New Lagoon, all surrounded by dense vegetation. Sitting on the small porch and the rustic chic vibe of the cabin made one feel relaxed immediately. Early evening we sat in the lounge area and did our first checklist, tallying 91 species. Belize has recorded 621 bird species and we had seen more than 14 percent of them on our first day. Then it was time for a delicious dinner and bed.

## **Mon., Jan 15**                      **Lamanai Outpost Lodge**

After waking to the calls of Yucatan black howler monkeys, we gathered in the main lodge for coffee, tea and freshly baked pastries at 5:45 for some pre-breakfast birding with Ruben. We quickly started seeing birds typical of northern Central America and southern Mexico. Plain Chachalaca were calling a little ways off and finally came out for us to see the group of three. Rufous-tailed Hummingbird activity had started, and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were heard and seen. The morning was busy, and on the short walk of just over 300 yards we tallied 31 species including Black-headed Trogon noting its white eye-ring and solid blocks of white under the tail, two features separating it from the very similar Gartered Trogon. Other notable sightings included Collared Aracari, a pair of noisy Barred Antshrikes, Masked Tityra, a tiny Northern Bentbill, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, two Couch's Kingbirds, a Lesser Greenlet, Brown Jay, Spot-breasted Wrens, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Yellow-billed Cacique, Melodious Blackbird, Blue-gray and Summer Tanagers and both Buff-throated and Black-headed



Saltators. Some of our own warblers, Gray Catbird, a Ruddy Ground-Dove on the road and the usual suspects in this area rounded out our list. It was then time to return for a filling breakfast.

Our destination for our morning outing was the Lamanai Archeological Reserve, a large and important site for the Maya from 1600 BC to 1700 AD. Ruben led us on the loop though the site, the main buildings being the Mask, Jaguar and High Temples, and naturally the ball court. Ruben had an expert's knowledge of these buildings having spent his early childhood living on the site and later helping the original excavation team. He pointed out where his family's house was located until they were moved when the site became a reserve. He grew up listening to stories, growing some of the same food as the original population and fishing in the same lagoon. The history of the site is also his own personal history, as it was for other descendants of the original population we met at the lodge and in the adjacent Indian Church Village.

Though seeing the ruins was the main aim of the outing, we were birding as well. Many of the birds we saw were those from earlier this morning, but we picked up a few new ones as well. On the lagoon we saw Brown Pelican and Osprey, and in a reedy area by the small dock we picked up Ruddy Crane, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Tricolored and Little Blue Herons and Northern Jacana. A Short-tailed Hawk flew over. The forest provided more tropical beauties including Lesson's Motmot, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Collared Aracari and Keel-billed Toucan. White-crowned, White-fronted and Red-lore Parrots were visible flying over thanks to the open areas of the site. We added three new flycatchers: Ochre-bellied and Great-crested Flycatchers, and Yellow-bellied Elaenia, the most common Elaenia in most of Central America. A White-eyed Vireo was making unusual vocalizations, probably a first winter bird that hadn't perfected its song yet. We found several warblers including Northern Waterthrush, with the usual discussion of how to separate it from Louisiana, plus Black-and-white, Hooded, Magnolia and stunning Black-throated Greens and a male American Redstart. A Summer Tanager was calling and eventually seen, and a single Red-legged Honeycreeper delighted us all. Fortunately for us, we had Deb and Caydee along, both good butterflyers, who identified what we were seeing. The numerous zebra longwings, rapidly spreading in the U.S. southeast, weren't difficult, and some, like the West Indian mangrove buckeye could be approximated – a buckeye! – were seen at the Archeological site later. But others, like the many skippers we encountered, required their expert knowledge to identify. It was near 1 p.m. when we returned to the lodge dock where we saw a group of howlers lazily feeding in a tree. It was our turn to feed too, and after dropping off gear we headed for the dining room. As would be the pattern, lunch was fresh and very





tasty, and there was plenty of it, including dessert. This was not going to be a weight-loss tour. After lunch we had the usual siesta/free time before our afternoon walk, and most of us took advantage of both options.

At 4 p.m. we gathered for our afternoon outing. The midday heat had cooled a little and more activity could be heard. We set out along the same road we birded in the morning, headed for the village to bird the more open area and adding Red-billed Pigeon and White-winged Dove to our growing list, plus Yellow Warbler. A target was the regionally endemic Green-backed Sparrow, one of a group of four look-alike sparrows in the genus *Arremonops* that includes the Olive Sparrow that reaches into Southeast Texas. Ruben duly found one for us. A Tropical Kingbird called for us, usefully giving us a lesson on the difference with Couch's which we also saw. It was a nice birding outing, and walking around Ruben's village was a good way to connect more with Belize.

That evening we met for the checklist (with a few beverages from the bar) followed by a delicious, three-course dinner. However, our birding wasn't over yet. After dinner, we went down to the dock to go night birding along the New River, something we were all looking forward to. We slowly worked our way along a channel, Ruben both driving and spotlighting at the same time, though the boat was stable enough to steer itself at times. First up was a Yucatan Nightjar sitting on a branch, a regionally endemic nightjar with a restricted breeding range of the Yucatan Peninsula, though some migrate south to the northern coast of Honduras. Ruben then found a Russet-naped Wood-Rail that allowed a close approach and excellent photos. Next up was a Northern Potoo, perched in its typical pose, bolt upright on a post. Another was seen a little later. Proboscis Bats were hanging on the side of a tree in their usual fashion. A Green Kingfisher was catching some shut eye until we woke him up, but a Mangrove Vireo remained tightly curled up in a ball. We also caught the eyeshine of a few Morelet's crocodiles. We got back to the lodge around 10 p.m. and retired.

## **Tues., Jan 16                      Lamanai Outpost Lodge**

Once again, we met for coffee and pastries before heading out at 6:15 accompanied by the calls of howler monkeys. We took the same route as yesterday but walked a bit further in the open area. Our 90 minutes resulted in 40 species. For some we had better looks and reinforced our ID memory, but we also picked up several new ones. One of the first, heard only, was a Collared Forest-Falcon. Appearances by both Lineated and Pale-billed Woodpeckers allowed us to compare these two similar species, particularly noting the white on the face of Lineated, something Pale-billed lacks. A Bat Falcon, a favorite of many birders when visiting the American tropics, posed nicely on a bare tree for us. An Ivory-billed Woodcreeper allowed us good views and a photo



opportunity. Fortunately, the similarly large-billed Strong-billed Woodcreeper only occurs in the south of Belize, near the Guatemalan border, making the ID easier. Olive-backed Euphonia was another new one, as was a Kentucky Warbler seen by Ruben and a couple of others. True to a Kentucky Warbler's usual style, it did not reappear for the rest of us after the initial sighting. Skulkers! Our first Yellow-winged Tanager was seen as well as a handsome Rose-throated Becard that also posed for photos and may have been a second-year bird as the pink on the throat was not extensive. Finally, two Cinnamon-bellied Saltators gave us closer views than we had at Crooked Tree and gave us a clean sweep of all three of Belize's saltators on one outing. John found a large elephant beetle, one of the neotropical rhinoceros beetles. After this good early morning birding we returned for a very welcome breakfast.

Our main activity for the rest of the morning was visiting with Indian Church Village women at the Community Center for some kitchen experience. Before we left the lodge grounds, we stopped at the coconut station where green coconuts were opened with a machete and a straw was inserted. The sweet water was delicious, and we also tried some of the soft meat, which tasted quite different from the hard, dry coconut bought at supermarkets in the U.S.

We spotted Squirrel Cuckoo and Blue-gray Tanager on our walk through the village was, and Red-lored Parrots landed in a tree. Butterflies were moving in the warmth of the morning, and Deb got some nice photos of a red postman, widespread in Central America; a delicate, pale green cross-barred white and a large pale owl butterfly, also called the snake-head-winged butterfly. We timed our morning well as heavy rain started to fall just as we arrived at the center. Our instructor, Ana, showed us how to combine the corn kernels, which had been soaked in water mixed with lime, using a stone rolling pin called a manos, not round but rather with a rounded-edge square cross-section, on a curved flat stone called a metate. A particular flick of the wrists was the secret to the method to make the dough. Then a few of us tried our hand, starting off with Camilla, who decided not to give up her day job to become a tortilla maker, though her son John probably could. Ana flattened some of the dough she made and cooked the tortillas on a traditional metal plate, offering us the freshly cooked treats with her own salsa. Delicious. Then banana leaves were spread out, pre-cut into squares, and we each picked a ball of dough to flatten, into tortillas. We then added salsa and folded the banana leaf neatly into a tamale. Overall, most looked pretty well done. These were later taken to the lodge to be cooked at





dinnertime and brought to our table. We then were served a lunch of a traditional soup, of course with tortillas. This was a wonderful experience, sharing knowledge and laughter together. After lunch we headed back to the lodge for some down time, though for many this meant getting out to look for more birds and butterflies.

We met again at the dock where several people had been relaxing, watching the birds and a large Morelet's crocodile that lazily paddled past. Tonight, would be an easy sunset cruise with snacks and drinks on board, not our usual boat trip! We pushed off and gently headed downriver, finding kingfishers, cormorants, osprey and the like, but new for our Lamanai stay was a Limpkin. A beautiful sunset was a fitting farewell for our last night here. After another excellent dinner I led a night walk with an ultraviolet light. Many lichens fluoresce under UV, looking very different to the grays and washed-out greens we are used to seeing. Walking along one of the paths the UV light showed quite a lichen spectacle, with rocks, pieces of wood and tree trunks lit up in yellow, gold, blue and sheets or filigrees of red. Even the dullest of living things can have a hidden personality under the right circumstances.

### **Wed., Jan 17                      Lamanai Outpost Lodge to Chan Chich Lodge**

After an early breakfast, we walked to the dock one last time, crossing the river a little way down and heading up Dawson Creek where we entered the pine savanna, very different habitat to what we'd experienced up to now. In our three-hour walk, we found 49 species, a third of which were new for the tour. New birds included Black-throated Bobwhite, Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, Acorn, Ladder-backed and Yucatan Woodpeckers, the Yucatan endemic Yellow-lored Parrot, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Yucatan Jay, Long-billed Gnatwren, Botteri's, Grasshopper and Chipping Sparrows and two cooperative Gray-crowned Yellowthroats. Quite the haul. One thing none of us had seen before was an arboreal termite nest that was being used by Acorn Woodpeckers to store acorns. We returned to the lodge at about 10, with time to pack before lunch for our drive to Chan Chich Lodge situated in the uplands close to the Guatemala border. Lunch was, as usual, fresh, excellently cooked and nicely presented. We had a little time as we waited for the vehicles to be packed, and Deb was busy photographing butterflies including a pretty white-tipped longtail, orange banner and an Esmeralda longtail with an iridescent blue back. She also found a coati wandering along a path.

We met our guides and drivers from Chan Chich and bid a very fond farewell to Ruben, then set out for Gallon Jug, the 30,000-acre farm and reserve the lodge is situated in. Much of our travel was through Amish farmlands,





who have an agreement with Belize to provide a permanent food supply for sale within the country in exchange for roads, electricity and land. The roads we traveled in their area were superior to any others we had driven on, and the landscape positively bucolic. These were not the Amish of steep tradition, as was obvious in the store we visited that had shelves full of what you see in any Walmart in the U.S. including wine, beer and liquor. Not what we were expecting. Nor was there a horse or cart to be seen, rather nice cars, and motorbikes.

We also looked for birds along the way, making incidental lists as we went. Groove-billed Anis were reasonably common, and there were several Eastern Meadowlarks in a field, which I found interesting as on some birds the yellow of the throat extended over much of the malar, usually a sign of the Western species. The barring on the tail was variable though, and the back, while not as rich as many Easterns, was not as pale as typical Westerns. Three Plumbeous Kites swooped across the road and disappeared behind us for a very quick look. Roadside Hawks were less common than usual, probably because of the well-manicured fields, and a few American Kestrels were dotted about. All flying vultures were checked, but none had barred tails....

We eventually left the agricultural area and forest appeared once again. More birds started to be seen, including an immature male Blue Grosbeak that was photographed by Jim, and a Gray-headed Kite perched in a tree just off the road. Roadside Hawks were present too. We passed through the checkpoint for the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area, a private reserve owned by Program For Belize, a Nature Conservancy partner and part of a million-acre corridor that is key to biodiversity conservation in Central America. Gallon Jug's 27,000 acres of protected area adjoins this corridor and the reserve. It didn't take long to find one of our target species here: Ocellated Turkey! One of the most stunning and colorful birds in the world, with multiple iridescent colors shing from bright blue neck to tail tip. We made a quick stop, of course, but we would see many more in the days ahead.

We also saw Squirrel Cuckoo, Plain Chachalaca, Great Curassow and Keel-billed Toucan among others. We finally arrived at the lodge and were greeted with cool drinks and warm hand towels. We checked into our rooms and admired the beautiful grounds surrounding our large, thatch-roofed cabins full of polished wood, tasteful fittings and excellent artwork. The next four nights were going to be very comfortable! We met for drinks and the checklist in the bar, and then had dinner at a large table in the dining room. While we all loved the food at Lamanai, the local and talented chef clicked things up a notch – at the end of our stay we asked him to come out of the kitchen and we gave him a standing ovation!



**Thu., Jan 18**

## **Chan Chich Lodge & Nature Reserve**

There was a nice spread of coffee, tea and pastries for early risers. After some fortification we started birding the grounds at 6:30. The lodge is built among Mayan ruins, providing a measure of protection to the site. We walked through the staff quarters where an Ocelot had been seen recently, but not by us. Birds included a few new for the tour such as Black-cheeked and Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers, Louisiana Waterthrush and Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, the latter a particularly handsome bird. A Wedge-billed Woodcreeper crept up a tree trunk. WE saw a few old friends including Bright-rumped Atilla, Masked Tityra, Montezuma Oropendola, Yellow-winged Tanager, Olive-throated Parakeets and Collared Aracari. A group of three white-tailed deer watched us without much worry as they groomed. We then returned for a good breakfast outside on the dining room verandah with a steady coming and going of hummingbirds: Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobins and Long-billed Hermits.

After breakfast, we birded the road from the lodge down to a bridge, about half a mile with rainforest on each side. It was quite birdy, and we found several new species. Short-billed Pigeons were the more common pigeon here rather than the Red-billeds we had seen at Lamanai and Corkscrew. A nice find was two White-necked Puffbirds near the bridge. A group of Dot-winged Antwrens fussed around, allowing nice looks. A Red-capped Manakin was a new sighting for the tour, though one had previously been heard. Also new were Northern Schiffornis, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher and Tawny-crowned Greenlet. Two Green Honeycreepers, striking birds, showed well along with Red-legged Honeycreepers. Two Golden-hooded Tanagers and a Chestnut-sided Warbler were also added to our total before a light rain began to fall. But that just meant we could take advantage of the seats on the verandah where Yellow-winged Tanagers, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, White-necked Jacobins, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and Long-tailed Hermits were all busy, along with a Magnolia Warbler. Even Melodious Blackbirds joined in the show. Soon it was time for another excellent meal served on the verandah.

Our afternoon outing was by vehicle, heading out along the entry road to the more open farming areas, including a coffee plantation, and ending at Laguna Verde, a beautiful small lake. We traveled in open-air tour vehicles, modeled after the African safari Toyotas. Great for birding. Along the road we found a Black-headed Trogon, a new-for-the-tour White-whiskered Puffbird, who kindly posed for photos, and Masked Tityras. Once we reached the open area, different birds prevailed. Many Ocellated Turkeys (we listed 25 but a little low), Western Cattle Egrets, a White-tailed Kite perched on a dead branch, three Roadside Hawks and an American Kestrel. In a field a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron provided everyone with a great photo opportunity. A flock of





Keel-billed Toucans flew from tree to tree, making their way closer to us, which allowed Scott to get a great flight photo. The usual gamut of yellow flycatchers was seen, Great Kiskadee, Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers and Tropical Kingbird. A Dusky-capped Flycatcher added to the bunch.

One field obviously had a good supply of larger insects as a group of 23 Eastern Meadowlarks flew about feeding. To add a bit of noise to the outing, Red-lored Parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets flew over. White-tailed deer were common on the grassy areas next to forest. After about two hours we set out for Laguna Verde where drinks and snacks were waiting for us, a beautiful way to end our day! We then returned to the lodge for another wonderful dinner. But the day wasn't yet over. About half our group climbed aboard our birding vehicle for a nocturnal spotlighting tour (the other half would go the following evening). We covered both the entry road and the forest edge in the open area. Nocturnal birds seen were seven Common Pauragues flushed from the road, a Yucatan Poorwill hidden in the leaves of a bush, two Northern Potoos and a Mottled Owl. A hunting Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and a sleeping Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. We also saw a gray fox on the side of the road, and with binoculars we could see that it caught a meal. Another excellent day and night of birding and wildlife!

**Fri., Jan 19**

### **Chan Chich Lodge & Nature Reserve**

Our day started once again with early birding after our mini breakfast. No Ocelot, but plenty of birds, including a Scaled Pigeon, somewhat boring looking at a distance, but quite handsome at close range revealing the patterned plumage its name derives from. The usual parrots and flycatchers were about, and two Collared Aracaris enjoy a fruiting bush along with the tanagers and Masked Tityras. A Least Flycatcher caused some debate that was settled by its very short primaries, then it sang to confirm. An Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and Bright-rumped Attila added to the morning's flycatchers. A Laughing Falcon sat high in a tree surveying its realm and a Northern Waterthrush sashayed past. A young Magnolia Warbler hunted for insects while a nearby Black-cheeked Woodpecker concentrated on hollowing out a large, tropical fruit. We had three less common birds as well, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Blue-black Grosbeak and a beautiful Blue Bunting, shining from its perch in the grass. A flock of Ocellated Turkeys wandered unconcernedly through the village. We also learned that the birding vehicles were not just for birding, they were also the local school bus, as we watched one trundle past us loaded with kids. Eventually breakfast was served, and we heeded the call.



After breakfast, we walked along the entry road and part of the road to the village, but rain intervened and we headed back to the lodge, which turned out to be a good decision as it would be a lengthy and heavy shower. We did see a few birds on our short walk, including Dot-winged Antwren, Spot-Breasted Wren, White-necked Jacobin and Black-headed Saltator. For our afternoon walk we drove out to Sylvester Village, the cluster of houses and buildings around the runway, finding nothing new. Continuing along the escarpment, with its stunning view across the reserve, we enjoyed very good snacks and drinks as the sun waned. We met two researchers using game cameras to detect jaguars, ocelots and margays along with other wildlife. They were happy to talk about their studies and we invited them to share our snacks and drinks. And no, although their camera traps had photographed cats, neither had seen a jaguar in their six or seven combined years of study. After dinner those that had not gone spotlighting the night before did so, seeing many of the same birds: 11 Common Pauragues, Yucatan Poorwill and Yellow-crowned Night-heron, but also a flying Barn Owl and a nicely posed Middle-American Screech-owl in full view on a low branch.

**Sat., Jan 20**

## **Chan Chich Lodge & Nature Reserve**

Our early morning walk was very productive today with 25 species seen including Great Curassow, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, two Gartered Trogons, Slaty-tailed Trogon, White-crowned Parrot, three Mealy Parrots and a Cinnamon Becard. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher joined our lengthening list of flycatchers, and two White-browed Gnatcatchers were also new. A male Hooded Warbler posed nicely for photos. Very nice light showed a Clay-colored Thrush to be a very delicately colored bird.

After breakfast we once again split the group as our main outing was to the poorly named Laguna Seca, a charming, small lake half-filled with bird-hiding reeds and surrounded by forest. As the boat held just six, the rest of our group would go in the afternoon, exploring one of the main ruins next to the lodge, including a tunnel that leads inside. In the afternoon, the two groups would swap adventures.

The drive to the lake produced another Great Curassow, a White-tailed Kite, a Roadside Hawk and, of course, turkeys. Once at the lake, some impressively wide and buttress-rooted trees asked to be photographed (we obliged) then we boarded our small boat and made a slow circuit along the bank. Over the next hour or so, we slowly covered all the open water, seeing and hearing birds, butterflies and dragonflies. A Great Tinamou called in the distance, Great Egrets stood among the reeds and Turkey Vultures cruised overhead. Mangrove Swallows perched on dead branches over the water, alternately flying about. A pair of Bat Falcons screamed across the





lake from their high perches and a Social Flycatcher and Tropical Kingbirds hawked for insects. On shore a Russet-naped Wood-Rail searched among the leaves and mud. Deb and Caydee were in entomologist mode, calling out butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. One damselfly, a caribbean yellowface, was quite beautiful with its fine, lacy wings, bright light blue body, distal end and head spots, a near fluorescent green stripe down its back and a yellow face. Quite the stunner. After about 45 minutes the cooler was opened to reveal yummy sandwiches and drinks, so we sat back and drifted in the sun while we ate. Indulgence at its best.

John even had a mid-morning Belikin. Driving along the road to the lodge, the vehicle suddenly stopped; a Rufous-tailed Jacamar had been seen by the sharp eyes in the cabin. There were in fact two, and we had great views of them, distinguishing the white-throated male from the buffy-throated female. Back at the lodge, a troupe of spider monkeys found us of interest, pausing just 15 feet above us. But they were kind, and just a few small pieces of vegetation fell around us. Despite the mid-morning heat, we were ready for lunch, though we all ordered the lightest meal we could.

It cooled down a bit by midafternoon when Luis gave us a tour of the temple, describing its construction and use. We saw Pale-billed, Crimson-crested and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, a Bat Falcon and a Central American Pygmy-Owl called from close by, but we couldn't locate it before it retreated to a more distant perch. But our focus, and interest, was the temple. Once we were down at ground level, Luis walked us to where grave robbers had dug a tunnel into the edifice. We were able to walk in and see the structure from within. Quite the privilege. Luis pointed out levels, the floor of the burial chamber and other features including an area still showing the original color it was painted, though a little faded. Being out of the sun had protected it. We went to a small shed where in addition to workers' rubber boots several artifacts were kept. Luis explained each as we handled them, another distinct privilege. Although a very different experience to the exposed and restored temples at Lamanai, somehow this was an equally moving experience.

Tonight was our farewell dinner for both Chan Chich and the tour as we were flying home tomorrow, so a round of drinks was in order. Our final meal was excellent, and interesting, and a unanimous decision was made to ask the chef to come out, which he did, and received a well-deserved ovation. With that we went to our cabins.



**Sun., Jan 21**

## **Chan Chich Rain Forest Lodge | Departures**

We were due to fly out at 11.30 a.m. from the small Gallon Jug Airstrip, but rain and low clouds were starting to come in. Fingers were crossed. Though there was no organized walk this morning, most of us got out for some last-minute birding and photography. Eventually bags were packed and loaded into the vehicles, and we headed for the airstrip. Rain came and went, but the ominously low clouds persisted. Calls were made, fingers were re-crossed. Our initial departure time came and went, but then news came that the plane was in the air and would arrive soon. Not long after the plane landed. We said our final farewells and then took off. After just a few minutes we broke free of the cloud and had a clear and smooth ride to the airport with time to check in and get through immigration.

Both of our lodges were top notch, our guides were outstanding, and we tallied over 200 species of birds and 13 species of mammals plus reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, beetles, dragonflies and damselflies, not to mention a good amount of botanizing. This small country, often overshadowed by surrounding Mexico and Guatemala, has excellent birding and some of the best lodges in Central and South America.