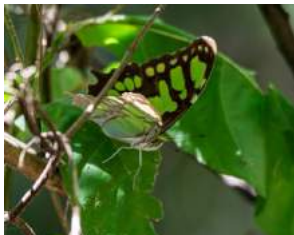


Honduras: Stellar Birding & Maya Ruins

Feb. 11-18, 2024 | Trip Report | by Robert Gallardo



With Naturalist Journeys guide Robert Gallardo, and participants Chuck, Barb, Emily, Bob, Arlana, Arden, Kim, Debra, Tom and Lea.



Honduras: A Hidden Gem

Central America is a relatively small region, but harbors high levels of biodiversity. Although known primarily as a diving destination, it has been shown that Honduras' mainland is rich in flora and fauna. With over 800 species of birds, 1,300 butterflies, 10,000 vascular plants, abundant reptiles and amphibians, this country remains a hidden gem. Add to the fact that parks and reserves receive very few tourists and a visitor often has an entire mountain to oneself. The great pine-oak forests of North America terminate as large swaths across the Honduran landscape where countless numbers of migrants spend the winter.

Sun., Feb. 11 Arrivals | Travel to Lake Yojoa

Today the trip began. Some participants arrived the day before and one more arrived today. We departed San Pedro Sula, and as we approached the lake basin itself, flat agricultural areas gave way to green, forested slopes. We climbed a final hill and arrived at Cerro Azul Meambar N.P. The facilities are run by a non-profit and are nestled on the side of the mountain. The cozy rooms would be 'home' for the next four nights.



Mon., Feb. 12 **Meambar N.P.**

We had our first morning walk on the grounds before breakfast. The haunting calls of two Collared Forest-Falcons echoed from a canyon below. As it got brighter we spotted a Northern Barred Woodcreeper, one of the easier species to identify within this confusing group. A handsome male Collared Trogon also made an appearance. The first of many Lesson's Motmot was seen and would be found during most of the trip. It is believed that motmots originated in this part of Central America and radiated from there. Honduras possesses more motmots (seven) than any other country, and they are seemingly everywhere. A male Hooded Warbler was also foraging at a large woodpile, as they often do on their wintering grounds. It was a nice way to start the morning.

We had breakfast then walked toward the gate. We could hear the tell-tale honking of a prized bird, the Keel-billed Motmot. High in the canopy there were 4-5, apparently undergoing some type of courtship ritual. All we really saw were shadows. So, we went up to a nearby canopy tower to try and get a better view. It paid off. A pair came in and we got great eye-level views of this regional endemic. From there, we also found the resident Golden-crowned Warbler and our first sighting of the stately Squirrel Cuckoo. We would end up seeing this last species virtually everywhere during the trip. A few snazzy, little butterflies were also seen including the Golden Euselasia metalmark.

Near the visitor center we also saw Gartered Trogon, Collared Aracari, Keel-billed Toucan, and Chestnut-headed Oropendola. The trip was off to a wonderful start. During the lunch hour we ate on a covered deck and enjoyed a variety of hummingbirds that came to the feeders. These included the Long-billed Hermit, Violet Sabrewing, White-bellied Emerald, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird.

We had a little downtime after lunch then went for a good hike up into the rainforest. Throughout much of the walk, high-pitched sounds echoed within the forest and were coming from lekking Stripe-throated Hermits. Finding this tiny, brown hummingbird in the dappled light of the understory is a whole different story. The sharp eyes of Bob and Arlana were able to spot a few along the way. We also saw a female Blue-black Grosbeak, a male White-collared Manakin, and a black morph Short-tailed Hawk. The forest was also filled with many species of glasswing butterflies. Our first full day in Honduras went quite well.



Tues., Feb. 13 **Lake Yojoa boat ride**

We woke to cloudy skies and the weather forecast was predicting rain. After breakfast we loaded the bus and made our way down to the northwest corner of the lake. We usually set sail from the southeast corner, but the other side is so much more majestic. The rugged and steep, forest-covered limestone spires drop clear down to the lake's edge. It is somewhat reminiscent of southeast Asia.

It rained on and off during most of the boat ride, but we made the best of it and ended up seeing a wide array of waterfowl. Large flotillas of Lesser Scaup were found in more open water. American Wigeon and Blue-winged Teal were closer to shore. Alongside a pair of Pied-billed Grebe were two Least Grebe, the latter being an odd sighting for such open-water situations. Snail Kites were plentiful and were actively gliding around, plucking apple snails from just under the water's surface. Herons and egrets were also plentiful and we observed so many species, including the impressive Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and graceful Tricolored Heron. Hundreds of Tree Swallows and Northern Rough-winged Swallows were also present. A small flock of Black-necked Stilts were also spotted down a secluded channel. Limpkin and Northern Jacana were also common, and we got several views of the Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture.

We returned to the boat dock and were ready to get some warm food. Very close by was our restaurant and we enjoyed hot cheese and bean fondues as a starter. Bob spotted a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl perched over someone's yard. After lunch we made our way back to Meambar and stopped along the road to see what was stirring. We spotted the lovely Golden-olive Woodpecker, Green Jay, and both the Buff-throated and Black-headed Saltators. We were scanning some flowering trees below us when a tiny hummingbird came slowly zipping by. Quite likely it was the Black-crested Coquette, but we would never know.

We made our way to the hotel and saw a nice flock of White-collared Swifts go zooming up the river canyon. Although it was a wet day, we ended it with a nice list of birds.

Wed., Feb. 14 **Los Naranjos Archaeological Site**

Today we woke again to cloudy skies and a steady rain. Nonetheless, we boarded the bus and made our way to the archaeological site on the corner of the lake. We hung out at the visitor's center for a bit and when it appeared to be lightening up, we took off. It didn't take long for the rain to return and it didn't let up the entire walk.



Needless to say, we didn't see much other than a few wood-warblers, Wood Thrush, a very wet Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, and Red-lored Parrots. We did get views of a pair of female Red-throated Ant-Tanager. Upon returning to the bus, we went to the nearby town of Peña Blanca and had a delicious BBQ lunch.

We headed back toward Meambar to try our luck up on the mountain. We stopped along the entrance road to check out some young forest and scrub. A Green-backed Sparrow, pair of Barred Antshrikes, and Yellow-billed Cacique all called from a nearby thicket and none wanted anything to do with us. They remained hidden amidst the dense foliage. So, we moved on to the top of a nearby reservoir that had a lovely view of the surrounding forest. A cooperative Yellow-bellied Elaenia landed close by so everyone could get pictures. Numerous Pale-vented Pigeons fed in some distant fruiting trees and a large flock of Vaux's Swifts also came through. The onomatopoeic calls of the Laughing Falcon echoed in the distance, and male and female Morrelet's Seed eaters were feeding along the dike. A few Brown-hooded and White-crowned Parrots passed overhead. We were glad that the rain had let up enough to catch these nice birds before the end of the day.

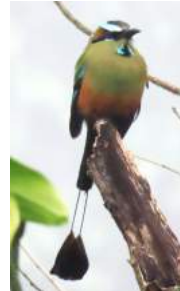
Thurs., Feb. 15 Travel to Copan Ruins

Our brief stay at Lake Yojoa ended today. We had breakfast then boarded our bus and were off to a new destination. We stopped along the entrance road at a couple spots hoping to catch a few new birds before moving on. On a short side road we were able to get a quick glimpse of a Ruddy Crake crossing a path in a weedy field.

We got on the main highway and just before San Pedro Sula we turned west. The government had been working on highway improvements for over a year and today we would get caught up between construction and stretches of old road. It extended our drive, but we stopped along the way to have a buffet lunch before continuing on. We reached the town of Copan Ruins in the late afternoon and checked into our hotel Hacienda San Lucas. It is nestled on a hillside on the south side of the river overlooking the main ruins site. We got settled into our rooms then had a nice sunset cocktail. We were in a very different environment and there for a totally different experience.

Fri., Feb. 16 Mayan Archaeological Site

We woke this morning to different sounds, those of a variety of orioles and different jays. On the grounds we would see three similar-appearing orioles; Altamira, Spot-breasted, and Streak-backed. They would be constant companions during our stay in Copan. The charming White-throated Magpie-Jay would also be a constant



companion. They used to be one of the more colorful, large birds until another one came along. Thanks to the efforts of Lloyd Davidson and his Scarlet Macaw breeding program, this enigmatic bird is making a rebound. For more than ten years, their breeding efforts have paid off and released birds are now breeding in the wild. Once widespread across all of Honduras, this colorful bird had disappeared from most of the landscape due to poaching for the pet trade and habitat loss. There were two nest boxes at San Lucas and at times up to six macaws would come in and vie for who would use them. We would be delighted with their presence many times.

Just below the bar area we found a brushy hillside. A gorgeous male Rose-throated Becard appeared at eye level, adorned with a bright crimson-colored throat. A very melodic member of the vireo family appeared as well; a Rufous-browed Peppershrike, and we got close views. We got brief glimpses of a Cabanis's Wren in a nearby thicket. After our early morning birding we had a tasty breakfast and were off once again. We headed down to the nearby Mayan ruins site of Copan. If Tikal is likened to the New York of the Mayan kingdom, then Copan can be likened to Paris. The well-preserved, intricately carved stelae and glyphs are virtually unmatched in the Mayan kingdom. Having been sculpted in volcanic tuff, much of the artistry has been well preserved for many centuries. After reaching the visitor's center, we met Oscar Lara who would be our guide. We received a two hour walk through the site where Oscar interpreted many glyphs and much of the Mayan history that has been deciphered by many scholars across the globe. The Mayans fate was tied to the misuse of their natural resources and it was apparent then that history does in fact repeat itself. After the guided tour, we entered the Sculpture Museum which had original as well as replica pieces. The centerpiece was the Rosalila Temple, an exact full-size replica of the exquisite structure buried beneath the temples we see today.

We had lunch at the nearby cafeteria then went to town. Everyone had the opportunity to do a little sightseeing and souvenir shopping. We then returned to San Lucas for a little R&R. In the late afternoon we returned to town and had a delicious dinner at Nia Lola, a place known for its giant shish-ka-bobs. After some fine wining and dining, we called it a night.

Sat., Feb. 17 Las Sepulturas archaeological site

This morning we awoke to the squawks and squeals of magpie-jays and a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. We had a nice breakfast then headed out in the bus to do some bird watching. The weather was great and we were ready to see



more of our feathered friends. Adjacent to the main Mayan ruins is a sister site where nobles and shaman once lived. It is mostly forested and receives very few visitors, which would be good for us. We arrived there and prepared for our walk. We noticed that a tractor was idling in an adjacent field and had been busy plowing the 'weeds,' quite likely days prior. One small patch of weeds remained and it was close to us. As the tractor came in we noticed a lot of movement. Birds were scrambling to see what the commotion was as their home shrank even further. We saw Magnolia Warbler, Blue-black Grassquit, Common Yellowthroat, Hammond's Flycatcher, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, and a female Painted Bunting. By the end of our walk the weeds were gone, and the birds too had moved on.

We continued on our walk and heard Rufous-naped Wren, which would prove difficult to see well. There, they remain high in the canopy. We spotted a couple of Northern Tropical Pewees working the canopy and sallying out for bugs. A small flock of Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers were foraging in the understory, accompanied by two brick-red males. A pair of Roadside Hawks soared and called high above us and we heard a Gray Hawk. Down by the ruins, a confiding Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl let us get good scope views. Bob spotted a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, representing a northern migrant. A pair of the handsome Chestnut-capped Warblers was foraging in the understory and we got great views of them. The whole time, the canopy was busy with several species of orioles. On the way back to the parking lot, we got brief views of a Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warbler that were foraging together. It was a pleasant morning filled with birds.

We returned to H. San Lucas for a delicious lunch then some downtime. In the late afternoon we took a short drive up a river canyon to the north of town. We were really hoping to spot the prized Great Swallow-tailed Swift which has been known to nest in the nearby cliffs. We didn't see the swift but did find a Crested Caracara which Barbara had been wanting to see the entire trip. A Greater Pewee called from a stand of pines and taunted us but remained out of view. We returned to town and had another tasty dinner at Llama del Bosque, the oldest running restaurant there.

Sun., Feb. 18 **Travel to San Pedro Sula | Departures**

This morning we went out for one last walk before our return trip to the city. H. San Lucas is a large property with a large stand of mostly pine-oak forest with patches of deciduous broadleaf. We walked down a trail and ran into a loose flock of birds foraging. There were Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, orioles, Melodious Blackbirds, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, and Lesson's Motmot. In the ravine there was a much denser forest and

we found a special bird. Two male Elegant Trogons were calling and they eventually moved to a spot where we got great looks at them. The range of this species barely reaches the U.S. in southern Arizona. It is widespread in Honduras, occurring in and around most intermountain valleys. Barbara spotted a male Gartered Trogon perched high atop a wire. It was a great way to end the trip.

We packed up the bus, departed the lodge, and made the return trip to San Pedro Sula where everyone overnighted at hotels.

Trip Highlights Include:

Tom-Rose-throated Becard.

Lea-Violet Sabrewing.

Barbara-Masked Tityra.

Arlana-Chestnut-capped Warbler.

Arden-Scarlet Macaws, Rose-throated Becard.

Bob-Elegant Trogon.

Emily-Elegant Trogon, Gartered Trogon.

Kim-Rufous-browed Peppershrike.

Debra-Turquoise-browed Motmot.

Chuck-Violet Sabrewing.

Robert G.-Elegant Trogon.

Photos: Copan Ruins (Arden Powell - AP), Scarlet Macaw (AP), Elegant Trogon (AP), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (AP), Violet Sabrewing (AP), White-throated Magpie-jay (AP), Malachite Butterfly (AP), Keel-billed Toucan (AP), Pink-spotted Cattleheart Butterfly (AP), Green Iguana (Bob Dunlap - BD), Lesson's Motmot (AP), Keel-billed Motmot (AP), Squirrel Cuckoo (AP), Snail Kite (BD), Pythonides jovianus (BD), Gartered Trogon (BD), Rufous-browed Peppershrike (AP), Boat-billed flycatcher (AP), Honduras Long-nosed bats (AP), Copan Ruins (AP), The Macaw heads of the ball court (AP), Nica flavilla (BD), Scarlet Macaw (AP), Turquoise-browed Motmot (Robert Gallardo - RG), Wilson's Warbler (AP), Dinner (RG), Lesson's Motmot (AP)