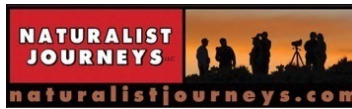
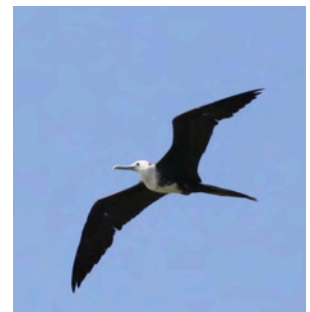


# Belize: Three Great Lodges | Trip Report | Nov. 8-18, 2023 | by James P. Smith

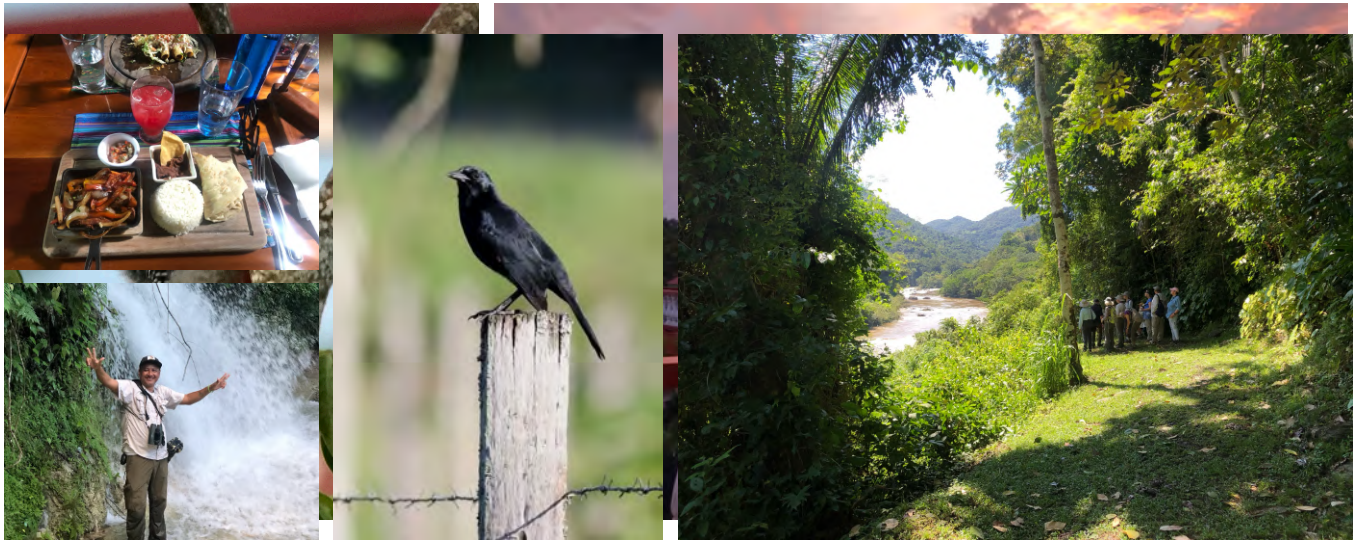


With local guides Isaias and Hob from Black Rock Lodge, Mario and Mike from Jade Jungle Resort, and Steve Choco from Tanager Rainforest Lodge. Our awesome participants were; Buck, Susan, Carne, Deb, Lorna, Maryann, Michael, Karen, Mike, Marie and Jan.



## Wed. Nov. 8 Arrivals | Black Orchid Resort | Black Rock Lodge

Warm tropical air, intensely blue skies and white puffy cumulus clouds greeted our Naturalist Journeys group as we gathered for a 'three great lodge' adventure in Belize. The guides from Black Rock Lodge had divided forces with Isaias picking up early arrivals from the Black Orchid Resort, and Hob awaiting our same day arrivals at Philip Goldson International Airport. After watching a family of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks by the airport, the earlier arrivals headed off along the George Price Highway toward San Ygnacio. Little Blue Heron, Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets were all noted along the way as well as numerous Black and Turkey Vultures. As we headed west through acres of pine-savannah we couldn't help but notice the volume of standing water on either side of the highway. A cold front had stalled over the Caribbean bringing unusually heavy rainfall and major flooding to



many areas of Belize in the days prior to our arrival. Much to our relief the storm gave way to clear blue skies and lots of bird activity just in time for the tour!

Amigos Restaurant near Monkey Bay provided an opportune break for lunch and the first of many tasty Belizean meals. Set amid agricultural fields and meadows we enjoyed views of the Maya mountains clearly visible to the west, a delightful backdrop for open-air dining. Isaias showed off his snake-handling skills as he caught a young Brown Vine Snake and we could all take a closer look. The birding started in earnest here with a Yellow-throated Warbler in the palms and Wood Storks soaring overhead with the Turkey Vultures, and there was even a Vermilion Flycatcher in the parking lot!

After lunch, the west bound journey was neatly punctuated by an abrupt but welcome stop at the Orange Gallery near Georgeville. Isaias spotted a Zone-tailed Hawk right over the road, not a common bird in Belize and certainly worthy of the stop. As it happened, the gallery also offered clean restrooms, souvenirs for purchase and for coffee fans, some of the best frozen coffee to be had anywhere in Belize!

We continued, bridging over the Macal River and then through the bustling town of San Ygnacio before arriving at the first of several miles' dirt roads. Isaias weaved his vehicle between the puddles before our watery adventure began with gusto! A dry riverbed had become a deep, swollen, fast moving torrent cutting off the only access road to Black Rock Lodge and was obviously impassable to vehicles. At the same time, the whole group suddenly came together as Hob arrived at the scene with Jan, Lorna, Maryann, Karen and Michael, all freshly arrived from the airport.

The exceptionally well-drilled Black Rock Lodge staff shuttled the entire group by canoe, two persons at a time, across the creek all masterfully handled. It was a seamless operation and all members of the tour (and the luggage!) made it to the lodge dry, unscathed and thrilled to be there. The adventure brought home a real sense of remoteness as we sipped refreshing welcome drinks and enjoyed a brief orientation before being shown to our well-appointed, spacious casitas. For those in no rush, the feeders around the lodge were heaving with White-bellied Emeralds, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias while the



sound of a heavily swollen Macal River raged below. The evening meal was a delight, and the wait staff kind and courteous and we got to meet new friends around the dinner table before retiring to our cozy cabanas for a solid night's rest.

## **Thurs., Nov. 9                      Black Rock Lodge trails and access road**

Yucatan Black Howlers were vocal before first light, their weirdly unearthly growls resonating around the cabanas in the cool, refreshing pre-dawn air. Coffee was being served at the restaurant balcony from 6am as we gathered overlooking the fast-flowing Macal River, admiring the first feeder birds below. There's nothing quite like the first morning at a new lodge as Yellow-winged Tanagers, Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias and Collared Aracaris all put in appearances, and a lucky few in our group spied a dazzling, Crimson-collared Tanager! Isaias was full of energy and keen to keep things moving. Coffee mugs were promptly abandoned as we moved off towards the staff quarters where Collared Aracaris scoffed on bananas, a Tropical Pewee perched up and Masked Tityras appeared in the canopy. Wintering migrants such as Wilson's and Magnolia Warblers, American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, Gray Catbird and Wood Thrush all appeared and having been in North America just a few months prior. Short-billed Pigeons gave great views as they perched and called from the cercopias and Isaias produced some nice residents; Ivory-billed and Olivaceous Woodcreepers, and Red-throated Ant-tanager.

Bird activity increased dramatically with the sunshine, and we enjoyed local species such as a perched Gray Hawk, a fast moving Stripe-throated Hermit, and a Morelet's Seedeater. Isaias walked us along a low track parallel to the incredibly picturesque Macal River. A magnificent White Hawk soared high above the canopy on and, in the same moment, there was a sudden cry of "duck" quickly followed by "scaup!". We all watched as an adult male Greater Scaup, replete with broad white wing stripe, flew downstream at fairly close range offering excellent eye-level views. There is some discussion over the identification as Lesser Scaup would be far more likely in Belize but given the storms of the previous few days, Isaias thought it quite likely that the scaup had been grounded just a few miles upriver above Vaca Dam. Either way, it was a pretty rare sighting and an intriguing way to start the trip. And, just to add a touch of the bizarre, we then spotted a partly leucistic *empidonax* flycatcher showing blotchy white and lemon-yellow markings around the head and upper body. Visual identification of *empidonax* flycatchers is far from easy and those with plumage aberrations probably best left unidentified but we thought this one was most likely a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, or perhaps an Acadian?!



The morning had flown, and we were ready for breakfast, the classic 'Belizean breakfast' being a popular choice. Afterwards we received word that the Black Rock access road was still flooded and would make leaving the lodge impossible. The scheduled visit to the Belize Botanic Gardens was off for the time being but that did open the opportunity for an entire day spent on foot around the lodge and exploration of the many trails was going to be no hardship!

We set off for a morning walk along the Vaca trail. The day filled up with warm sunshine and raptors such as Double-tooted Kite and Broad-winged Hawk rose high above the valley on the thermals. Mike spotted some good birds including a Crimson-collared Tanager and a male Red-capped Manakin while the rest of the group enjoyed close-range views of flycatchers including Dusky-capped, Yellow-bellied and Acadian as well as a Slaty-tailed Trogon. The Vaca trail overlooked the lodge's organic farm and was notably good for Lesser Greenlets and unheard-of views of a foraging Worm-eating Warbler!! A Brown Basilisk was a cool non-avian feature and Isaias did well to spot a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, and a male Rose-throated Becard.

By noon we were back at lodge and ready for lunch. Fajitas (beef, shrimp or chicken) and a variety of other dishes were on the menu after which we elected for some 'downtime' in the heat of the day, some choosing to rest and others relaxing by the spring-fed pool.

The afternoon walk was simply outstanding starting with a Bare-throated Tiger-heron on the Macal River viewed from the balcony. As we walked down the steep entrance road Gartered Trogon, Stripe-throated and Long-billed Hermits and a group of Black-crowned Tityras put on a show. Isaias spotted a fast-moving raptor and was able to somehow track it until it perched! It was an immature Ornate Hawk-Eagle and scopes were duly lined up on this scarce and much sought after rainforest raptor! As it that wasn't enough, we then came across a feeding flock of at least four Golden-crowned Warblers, White-browed Gnatcatcher, several Ivory-billed Woodcreepers and a Purple-crowned Fairy feeding high in the canopy. We finished off the evening enjoying raging waterfalls tumbling off the cliffs and watched five King Vultures heading to roost majestically winging to the safety of the cliffs high above the valley.



An exceptional first day had come to a close and we wrapped up the day with another delicious Black Rock dinner and the day's checklist before heading off to our cozy cabanas for a well-deserved night's rest.

## **Fri., Nov. 10                      Maya Flats | Spanish Lookout | Mennonite Community**

The new day brought exciting news at breakfast. Black Rock Road was once again open, and the flood waters receded. We'd been given the green light to proceed as planned, a full day out in the expansive areas of agricultural land and wetlands surrounding Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. This a prime destination for birders and a unique habitat for this tour. The drive was punctuated by some exceptional birding along the way, indeed it was difficult to move away from Maya Flats and Corazalito, just six miles from Black Rock Lodge as an impressive array of really good birds appeared one after the other; Keel-billed Toucan, Groove-billed Anis, Red-billed Pigeon, Scrub Euphonias, Plain Chachalaca and incredible views of Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. Just as we 'tried' to leave an intriguing raptor drew attention and perched in some palms - a Crane Hawk! Though quite widespread in Belize, Crane Hawk is quite scarce and retiring but this particular had the courtesy to fly right by the group offering great views!

We pressed toward Spanish Lookout driving through (literally) the Belize River which was seriously swollen after all the heavy rain. Isaias and Hob skillfully negotiated the crossing, and we swung by the Mennonite Town Hall to secure permits for entry into the farmlands and from there, permits in hand, we headed through a gated entrance and into the fields of Spanish Lookout. Blue Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings and other seed-eaters were noted with the first major stop producing close-up views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, Crested Caracaras, Peregrine and Aplomado Falcons and a huge kettle of Black Vultures. Impressive numbers of immaculate Fork-tailed flycatchers were scattered over the fields while the next stop, a flooded meadow, was full of surprises, none more so than an American Bittern (quite rare in Belize) that flushed at close range and dropped down into the sedges. Pied-billed and Least Grebes, Green and Little Blue Herons were here too and the raptor theme continued apace with White-tailed and Short-tailed Hawks, White-tailed Kites, and several Northern Harriers. Isaias brought us to a more permanent wetland where we enjoyed Anhinga, Osprey, really good views of Bare-throated Tiger-heron, Pale-breasted Ground-Doves and the highly localized and scarce White-throated Flycatcher, all seen very well and photographed. Yellow-bellied Elaenias called and showed very well along a



hedgerow and for butterfly enthusiasts, Banded Orange Heliconia and Queen settled on the milkweed for great views. A thrilling morning was drawing to a close and the midday heat and humidity was beginning to creep in. Thoughts, quite naturally, turned toward refreshment as we headed into town and the Sisters Café. Unlike previous visits, Sisters Café turned out to be something of a comedy of errors! After a long wait only three out of the 14 meals ordered had been served to the group and Isaias made the decision to take our chances elsewhere, actually just down the road at the Midway Café where we greeted with the usual Belizean friendliness and efficient service.

Despite the mishap with lunch we still had to time to squeeze in a visit to Aguacate Lagoon in the heart of the Mennonite Agricultural lands where we found Ruddy Crakes and their trilling vocals surprisingly loud and active in the middle of the afternoon. Isaias even managed to coax a couple into view for some of the group. We had less success with Lesson's and Tody Motmots, both of which called frequently throughout our visit but simply refused to show as did a Rufous-tailed Jacamar. We fared better around the boat dock in a different portion of the lagoon where up to 10 Yellow-crowned Night-herons could be seen as they roosted in dense vegetation around the fringe of the lagoon and it was clearly a sweet spot for kingfishers with Ringed, Amazon and Green all noted. Isaias spotted high-flying Aplomado Falcon overhead, our third of the day, as well as perched White-crowned Parrot looking resplendent in late afternoon sunshine.

The weather had been kind and despite the build-up of dramatic shower clouds we never really got wet. Indeed, the clouds produced the most inspiring sunset as Isaias simultaneously outdid himself spotting three Ocellated Turkeys in the fields just as we departed Spanish Lookout. With Roadside Hawk, calling Eastern Meadowlarks, Baltimore and Orchard Oriole all in the same fields it was a fitting finale to a brilliant day!

## **Sat., Nov. 11**                      **Belize Botanic Gardens | Night Drive on Black Rock Road**

After a night of heavy rain it seemed unclear how the rest of the day was going to go but after an excellent Black Rock breakfast were soon on our way to the Belize Botanic Garden heading back down the Black Rock access road. A couple of random stops were highlighted by fine views Cinnamon-bellied Saltator, Red-throated Anttanager, Bronzed Cowbird and a very cooperative Yucatan Flycatcher. Much like then Ocellated Turkeys the



previous evening, the flycatcher was a Yucatan endemic and a species rarely encountered on our southern tour. The day was off to a wonderful start!

Arrival at the Belize Botanic garden was greeted by sunshine, increasing temperatures and very muggy air. Showers featured during much of our guided walk around the grounds as Harry escorted us on a first rate interpretative tour of the gardens including a fine introduction to the many orchids of Belize especially the Black Orchid, the national flower. We also found an abundance of avian riches within the gardens and danced between the showers finding Keel-billed Toucans, Golden-olive Woodpeckers, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and lots of wintering migrants including Kentucky and Hooded Warblers. And, on this visit were treated to actual views of both Lesson's and Tody Motmots, the Lesson's in particular showed so well as it dried off in bright sunshine after a heavy downpour. By lunch time we were back at the lodge just as the rain came down hard and heavy. An afternoon break seemed appropriate and an opportune time to catch up on the previous day's checklist.

After another delicious Black Rock supper we all embarked on a scheduled night drive with the hopes of finding a range of crepuscular and nocturnal species. Over the next two and a half hours along Black Rock Road we enjoyed stellar views of not one but two perched Mottled Owls, Northern Potoo, Gray Fox, Common Opossum and perhaps most impressive of all, a Fer-De-Lance which posed for several minutes along the side of the road. While it may be the most venomous snake in Central America it also happens to be one of the most beautiful and finding one is always thrilling! Back at the lodge, the resident Yucatan Black Howlers did not approve of our late and noisy return, and greeted us with a chorus of growls emanating from the inky darkness.

## **Sun., Nov. 12                      San Antonio | Mountain Pine Ridge & Slate Creek | Green Hills Butterfly Farm | Jade Jungle Resort**

Sadly it was time to leave Black Rock Lodge and move onto Jade Jungle Resort (formerly Pook's Hills Lodge). The drive would take us to higher elevation at Mountain Pine Ridge and its expensive areas of Caribbean Pine. The journey, however, was rather sweetly interrupted by at least half-a-dozen roadside Green Jays just above the village of San Antonio and the 20 minutes spent there proved to be time well spent as we found another Ferruginous Pygmy Owl plus Northern Barred, Tawny-winged and Olivaceous Woodcreepers – wow! Just a little farther up the road a beautiful Laughing Falcon sat out in the open and a Mangrove Vireo called by the road. A



quick pit stop at the reserve entrance found a singing Bright-rumped Attila and a number of aerial species including Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned Hawks, and three fast moving swifts that Isaias somehow managed to photograph! Subsequent study of the images showed them to be White-chinned Swifts, a species only recently discovered in the Belize though possible overlooked.

On reaching the plateau we parked and embarked on the one mile walk through the delightful and productive forest to Slate Creek Lookout. While the species list may not have been a long one, it was full of quality as we found Smoky-brown Woodpecker, Northern Schiffornis, Hepatic Tanager, Grace's Warbler and Black-throated Shrike-tanager along the way. We enjoyed stunning views of a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle from the lookout as well as a pair of Bat Falcons, a full adult King Vulture and a large group of White-collared Swifts!

As lunch time approached, we dropped down from Mountain Pine Ridge to Green Hills Butterfly Farm where we enjoyed an excellent guided tour of the butterfly lifecycle and the impressive conservation work being carried out by the farm staff. Isaias and Hob served a fabulous buffet lunch put together courtesy of Black Rock Lodge! If the lunch had been impressive, so had the hummingbird show as we enjoyed seriously close-up views of White-necked Jacobins and White-bellied Emeralds, as well as Wedge-tailed and Violet Saberwings, both new to the tour.

A steady drive through thundery showers saw us arrive at Jade Jungle Resort in late afternoon where we received a warm welcome from Keren and Mario and said our goodbyes to Isaias and Hob who'd been excellent, enthusiastic guides throughout. After a brief orientation under the thatched communal area and bar we were shown to our rooms before heading back out for a late afternoon and rather soggy bird walk with Mario. Vaux's Swifts appeared overhead in numbers and we heard a Central American Pygmy-Owl calling, both species being new to the tour.

Dinner was something to behold, a four course meal; Broccoli/Cashew Salad, Cauliflower soup, Chicken Picante with sliced roast potatoes, and homemade Lemon Cake or Oreo Cheesecake for dessert. All was served by the talented and enthusiastic head of kitchen, Tanya. For most in the group it was the best meal of the trip thus far. As the rain fell heavily outside we caught up on the checklist and reflected on another exceptionally interesting day.





## **Mon., Nov. 13                      Jade Jungle Resort and Forest Reserve**

Jade Jungle Resort nestles within a 300 acre private forest reserve and, as guests at the lodge, we had a wealth of trails to explore through pristine wooded habitat. A ‘human-powered day’ on foot was going to be most welcome after the long, bumpy transfer the previous day.

As always, coffee was available at the lodge from 6am and a small group gathered by 6:15 am to join Mario for a short pre-breakfast walk along the entrance road. A whole selection of new species showed up; Black-headed Trogon, Blue-black Grosbeak, Buff-throated Saltator and Black-cheeked Woodpecker while Slaty-tailed Trogon, Crimson-collared and Yellow-winged Tanagers showed well and allowed some in the group to catch up on species missed earlier at Black Rock.

Breakfast at the lodge was both substantial and tasty with at least two types of quiche, home-made guacamole, bean dip, home-made bread, soursop juice and much more among the delights on offer. The air was heavy with moisture as we set off for a roughly three hour walk with Mario and Mike on the resort’s myriad of trails. A perched Gray Hawk offered great views for us but less so for the Brown Jays that mobbed it incessantly until it eventually flushed. Despite the ‘heavy’ atmosphere we enjoyed some excellent close views of a number of rainforest and scrub dwelling species, Dusky Antbirds, Barred Antshrike, Band-backed Wren, White-collared Manakin and Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher and Mario excelled himself when he managed to coax a pair of Little Tinamous in for views – an uncommonly seen ground-dwelling denizen of the deep forest.

Most of the group joined Mario for a post-lunch archaeological walk around the Maya plaza on which the lodge is built. Being Maya himself, Mario shared his knowledge with great enthusiasm and humor, and his talk was regarded as a trip highlight.

A late afternoon bird walk was wet yet again, but spirits weren’t dampened, far from it as we had an excellent selection of species to round out the day. A large flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks filtered through the canopy and



we had great views of Yellow-throated and Wilson's Warblers. Overhead, in the heavily overcast skies, huge numbers of swifts gathered including Lesser Swallow-tailed, Vaux's and White-collared Swifts of those we could identify. Mario pointed out a Rainforest Toad, and a Central American Pygmy-Owl tooted as dusk crept in and a totally random flock of about 45 Red-billed Pigeons flew South-west probably headed for a roost site.

Tanya, once again, served an awesome dinner with Greek Salad, Broccoli and Cheese soup, Chicken Masala, and Coconut/Pineapple Cake more than satisfying the appetite after a long, full day in the field.

## **Tues., Nov. 14                      Blue Hole National Park | Hopkins Bay Resort | Tanager Rainforest Lodge**

A long day of travel lay ahead, a day that would see us start in Cayo district, have lunch in Stann Creek district and ultimately reach our final destination (Tanager Rainforest Lodge) in Toledo district. The rain and showers from the previous day continued and the pre-breakfast bird walk with Mario was admittedly a little quiet though the small group that did show up were treated to Black-headed Trogon, White-collared Manakin and a huge flock of White-crowned Parrots flying over.

Tanya sent us on our way with another scrumptious breakfast and after goodbyes to the lodge staff we were soon on our way towards the coast passing through the Capitol, Belmopan, before speeding along the Hummingbird Highway and heading south-east towards the Caribbean Sea. We had time to stop at Blue Hole National Park, first walking the trail to St. Herman's Cave which just happened to be very birdy! Great views of White-breasted Wood-wren, Hooded Warbler, Great Antshrike (wow!), Dusky Antbird, Yellow-throated Warblers and a Tropical Pewee were among the highlights. A few in our party ventured down the steps towards the cave itself before the local pesky mosquitoes chased us away! But the great birding continued as a Cinnamon-bellied Saltator was spied upon leaving the parking lot and the next stop, the Blue Hole itself had Blue-gray and Crimson-collared Tanagers on view as soon as we arrived. On the downside there was to be no 'blue hole' as such. After days and days of rain in Belize, the famous blue hole was closer to a churning torrent of chocolate brown water. On the upside, the leaf litter around the picnic area was ripe with ground dwelling warblers and we enjoyed wonderful views of Ovenbird, Kentucky and Hooded Warblers, Wood Thrush and Clay-



colored Thrush. And, just before leaving Mario spotted a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker foraging in a tangle of vines – surely one of the most beautiful and prized woodpeckers in all of Central America!

We pressed on along the Hummingbird Highway towards the coast through rolling countryside and expansive areas of forest. The Sleeping Giant Mountains were heavily shrouded in moody gray clouds and the heavy rain showers which became more intense as we arrived on the coastal plain, and a welcome 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 with Sanderlings, Spotted and Least Sandpipers, and Willet feeding along the shoreline. The resort’s lush gardens and flowering plants provided great habitat for locally resident Cinnamon Hummingbirds, a few of which were glimpsed though the ubiquitous Rufous-tailed Hummers were far easier to view.

Lunch was also our appointed time to meet up with Steve Choco, our guide for the next four days. After lunch it was time to bid farewell to Mario and Mike who’d been wonderful guides and field companions - their presence would be missed. And so began the long drive along the Southern Highway towards Steve’s family home in Big Falls. The clouds, rain and general air of gloom stayed with us until we reached Bell Vista when the weather suddenly began to improve. A general brightening over acres of pine-savannah habitat brought Roadside Hawks, American Kestrels, Cattle Egrets and the occasional Little Blue Heron into view.

Remarkably, arrival at Tanager Rainforest Lodge was greeted by blue skies and a very warm welcome from the new site manager Cathy Choco, Steve’s sister! After a quick orientation and welcome drinks we were shown to our new quarters and then gathered in the cozy, family-run atmosphere of the lodge where we learned that Janet had seen an Orange-billed Sparrow just before darkness fell! Dinner was a delight, prepared on site by Steve’s wife Cordelia!

## **Wed., Nov. 15                      Tanager Rainforest Lodge | Big Falls | Dump Rice Fields**

The day began with crisp blue skies and birding from the main lodge deck, coffee and muffins in hand. We were in for a beautiful day at Big Falls and the birds and birding responded accordingly! A Collared Forest-Falcon called incessantly during the pre-dawn hours and a pair of Russet-naped Wood-Rails strutted between puddles



in the maintenance area. Steve escorted us on an easy paced walk around the lodge and the birds came thick and fast, several of which were new to the trip and highlighted by a male White-winged Becard above the casitas as well as a Scarlet-rumped Tanager over the pool, Buff-throated and Black-throated Saltators, Black-cowled and Baltimore Orioles at the feeders, and a whole host of warblers including Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Parula, Black-throated Green and Tennessee Warblers.

After a well-timed breakfast we were back out for more reveling in Steve's enthusiasm and skills. Gray and Broad-winged Hawks soared over the lodge and Janet and James simultaneously spotted a fine male Black-crowned Tityra. We walked the forested section of the access road seeing or hearing Long-billed Gnatwren, and Mayan Antthrush, Bright-rumped Attila, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Spot-breasted Wren, Barred Antshrike, and the most sought-after of antbirds, the Bare-crowned Antbird which, alas, was only heard this time around.

We ventured off-site in mid-morning stopping at the Uno Gas Station which, inadvertently, turned up soaring species; Wood Stork, Common Black Hawk and a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle, the latter being a good species for the Big Falls area! A brief visit to the dump was a little quiet aside from good views of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures before heading to a traditional lunch spot, Miss Pearleen's in Big Falls, a buffet of Indian and Caribbean influenced dishes plus ice cream for dessert! But our luck with clear blue skies was over and within minutes there was great deluge, a classic, heavy tropical downpour. Not surprisingly, the hoped-for Spot-breasted Orioles did not appear and we headed back to the lodge to relax and dry off until the downpour was over.

Around 3:30pm we drove back over to the Dump Rice Fields where lots of Ruddy Crakes could be heard trilling and a number of other wetland birds showed well with several Little Blue Herons, a couple of Wood Storks, Limpkin and one mighty, impressive Jabiru! The area was busy raptors too with more Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, Gray and Roadside Hawks, Laughing Falcon and a cooperative Merlin. Towards dusk, hundreds of swallows filtered across the rice fields as they headed off to roost with Mangrove, Tree, Barn and Northern Rough-winged Swallows among the species identified. We even found a close male Ruby-throated Hummingbird, quite easily overlooked here and proving to be the only one of the tour.

As the sun set behind the Maya Mountains another brilliant day was coming to a close, neatly rounded off with the bird list and another delicious dinner back at the lodge.



## **Thurs., Nov. 16                      Red Bank Village | Nim Li Punit**

The day dawned crisp clear and sunny, somewhat deceptive to say the least as we learned that the Rio Grande River had burst its banks overnight and cut off two of the lodge's outer most casitas! For Carne and Janet, the day started off with more than a little drama as they had to be 'rescued' from their cabins and given a piggy-back rides over the rising flood waters. Thankfully the water never reached the cabins and receded entirely by the evening.

Despite the drama there was still time for coffee and muffins at 6:15 am after which we began the steady drive north to Red Bank Village about an hour north of Big Falls. The roads were pretty quiet at that hour but as we passed by the Monkey River a couple of sparring raptors vied for attention, actually a pair of Aplomado Falcons mobbing a Crested Caracara. Pulling over to observe these beauties was a must and we enjoyed wonderful views of a family of four Aplomados resting in the Caribbean Pines. The pine savannah habitat along Red Bank Road was awash with flood water, puddles and channels but it was still drivable as we watched the first of several Acorn Woodpeckers along the route before we reaching our breakfast spot at the Scarlet Macaw B & B. The lush gardens here attracted White-winged Doves, lightning-quick Cinnamon Hummingbirds, and several migrant Red-eyed Vireos.

After breakfast we thoroughly birded the forest along Red Bank Road finding White-collared and Red-capped Manakins, Golden-hooded Tanagers, Lesson's Motmot, Northern Bentbill, Red-legged Honeycreepers, Chestnut-sided, Kentucky and Worm-eating Warblers. There was no sign of the hoped-for Scarlet Macaws however, though we did have some compensation in the form of a superb sub-adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle!

We returned to the lodge in the heat of the day and enjoyed a relatively light lunch of Tuna Sandwiches, Beef Tostadas and Salad. After a little 'downtime' we made a short journey north to the Maya Archeological site at Nim Li Punit. Steve had enough local connections to gain entry into the site after closing hours and then delivered an excellent summary about this fascinating ancient site. The birding just happened to be very good as well with fine views of Montezuma Oropendula, Pale-billed and Lineated Woodpeckers, Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes, Wood Thrush, Masked tityra and a pair of Wedge-billed Woodcreepers. After a fabulous dinner



back at the lodge we dutifully did the bird list and then listened to a Mottled Owl calling as we walked back to the cabanas.

## **Fri., Nov. 17                      Tunich Ha Ecological Center | Punta Gorda Hawkwatch | Ixcacao Maya Chocolate Farm**

Coffee and cinnamon rolls were available at the lodge from 6:15 am before we set off for the morning adventure in glorious sunshine to Tunich Ha Nature Reserve and Ecological Center close to the outskirts of Punta Gorda. Two of Steve's close friends, Nick and Jessica, run the reserve and also host counters for the Belize Hawkwatch based just down the road at Cattle Landing. Jessica prepared a fine breakfast after which we birded from center's balcony and the reserve grounds. Fine views of locally rare Black-crowned Antshrike and Mistletoe Tyrannulet, as well as Dusky Antbird, and several hummingbirds feeding on the native flowers including long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits were enjoyed, and we also managed to find the only Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet and Philadelphia Vireo of the tour.

As the day's warm air thermals increased raptors could be seen soaring over Tunich Ha with King Vulture, Common Black Hawk and Hook-billed Kite being visual cues that it was time to head for the Belize Hawkwatch just a few miles down the road at Cattle Landing. On arrival we received a warm welcome and orientation from lead hawk counter Philip Balderamos and also learned that our timing was good as they were on course for over 600 raptors by noon! Most of them were Hook-billed Kites, a key migrant raptor for this particular site and a species of special interest for the Belize Hawkwatch, now in its 11<sup>th</sup> season of operation. Luckily, we had a taste of the Hook-billed Kite migration ourselves with over 40 kites passing through in an hour along with a few Broad-winged Hawks and Ospreys. There was an equally impressive, constant stream of hundreds of migrant Tree Swallows heading south along the coast and over the town. The local birds garnered just as much interest as the raptors as Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised overhead and Yellow-crowned Night-herons roosted in the beach side mangroves. We also heard the fluty songs of an oriole which Steve quickly recognized as a Spot-breasted Oriole and before long we were marching across a playing field toward the cercopias and palms where the birds had been calling. Sure enough we found two beautiful Spot-breasted Orioles, along with Black-cowled and Baltimore Orioles and a couple of Black-headed Trogons. And with that we headed north and then west along a bumpy dirt road for lunch at Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate Farm. Henry was a superb guide and proudly



explained the process of growing cacao, the science behind chocolate and the history of their family business in San Felipe. Juan's wife prepared a delicious Belizean lunch including their famous chocolate chicken and house-made hot pickle and samples of varieties of chocolate and drinks prepared at Ixcacao. Souvenirs were quite naturally snapped up from the gift shop for the journey home!

Cordelia's farewell dinner was every bit as delicious as our previous meals with Pork Tenderloin or Baked Fish with Sauteed vegetables on the menu and watermelon sorbet for dessert. Steve and his seemingly limitless energy had one last trick up his sleeve and then escorted us a night drive where we had spectacular views of a Striped Owl as well as three Common Pauragues! The tour had finished on the most incredible high. Striped Owl is rare in Belize, a bird so rare in fact that it didn't even appear on our bird lists!

## **Sat., Nov. 18**                      **Departures from Punta Gorda**

After breakfast we thanked Steve, Cathy and Cordelia for a wonderful time at the lodge and then began the first of two shuttle runs to Punta Gorda airport en-route to Belize City. The "Three Great Lodges" tour had been a wild adventure of memorable bird and wildlife experiences, and the group camaraderie on this tour had been a joy to be a part of. Thank you all for making this trip so enjoyable.

*Collared Aracari (James P. Smith - JPS), Crimson-collared Tanager (JPS), Mottled Owl (JPS), Black-headed Trogon (JPS), Magnificent Frigatebird (JPS), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (JPS), Melodious Blackbird, White-throated Flycatcher, Bare-throated Tiger-heron, Little Blue Heron, Yucatan Flycatcher, Tody Motmot, Collared Aracari, Russet-naped Wood-Rail, Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle, Laughing Falcon, White-collared Manakin, Northern Schiffornis, Black-faced Grosbeak, Red-billed Pigeons, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Jabiru at dusk, Yellow-olive Flatbill, Social Flycatcher, Masked Tityra, Black-headed Trogon, Spot-breasted Oriole, Striped Owl*