

BELIZE JAN 25 – FEB 4, 2011  
Robbie Fischer

Joe Morlan and I visited three lodges in the jungles of Belize. We made arrangements through [Caligo Tours](#) adding on Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary to the beginning. We began our trip with a transfer from the Belize airport to Bird's Eye View Lodge at Crooked Tree the afternoon of Jan. 25. Carlos, a bird guide at the lodge, picked us up. One of the first birds we saw was a lifer for me, two Limpkins, looking ungainly, perched in a bare tree. Fork-tailed Flycatchers, Great Kiskadees and a Roadside Hawk reminded us we were in the tropics.

A Jabiru stork nest was our first stop, a short distance off the main road (Northern Highway) to Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. One adult was incubating and we had only poor views from below, not even a glimpse of the bill. At this stop we also saw White-fronted and Red-ored Parrots, very richly orange Hooded Orioles and a few Brown Jays. As dusk approached we headed over the causeway to the lodge for a nice buffet dinner with Parmesan Chicken and a Shrimp Casserole. We planned to stay three nights at [Bird's Eye View](#), a pleasant place, with good food, situated on a long lagoon.

Wednesday morning Joe and I set off on our own to walk the Limpkin Trail along the lagoon and return through the small village. The vegetation was mixed palms, mahogany, blooming logwood trees and a few large bullet trees, used to make docks. American Redstarts and Northern Waterthrushes were abundant, along with other eastern warblers. We saw Yucatan and Linneated Woodpeckers as well as a pair of Barred Antshrikes. At the end of the boardwalk not far from the lodge, I spotted an immature Agami Heron. This bird is not usually seen well until later in the season when water levels are low. Little Blue, Tricolored and Green Herons were much more obvious. From the causeway Joe photographed a perched Bat Falcon while Ringed and Green Kingfishers hunted.

After lunch we birded around the lodge where Vermilion Flycatchers were abundant. One of our favorite birds was the Gray-necked Wood-Rail. Along the shore White Ibis, Least Sandpipers, Killdeer and Snowy Egrets were feeding while Mangrove Swallows kept the insect population in check. We had been warned that Belize can be very buggy so had treated our clothes with Permethrin. In fact, we had very few insects to contend with the entire trip.

We spent most of the next day birding the trails between Bird's Eye View and Crooked Tree Village. White-collared Seedeaters and Blue-black Grassquits were common in the fields. We encountered a lovely pair of Rose-throated Becards and saw lots of Groove-billed Anis, a Worm-eating and Hooded Warbler, Mangrove Vireo and Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher. At 3PM we took a ride with Rudy, one of the bird guides, to return to the Jabiru nest. This time we were awed by both parents standing on the nest, turning the eggs and then one flew off to feed. A Coatimundi ambled up the road while a flock of Black-crowned Tityras fed in a fruiting tree. We had good looks at Yellow-tailed and Baltimore Orioles along with a couple Yellow-throated Euphonias. Rudy was thrilled by

a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, uncommon in this area according to him. Joe promised to email him a photo.

Before breakfast on the 28<sup>th</sup>, we joined Rudy and other lodge guests for a boat tour of the lagoon and creeks. Many Green Iguanas were sitting high in the trees lining the lagoon catching the morning sun. The large males turn bright orange in the sunlight, while the smaller females remain green. Rudy took us by a Boat-billed Heron roost and perched high along the creek I noticed a pair of gorgeous Black-collared Hawks with their white heads and rufous bodies glowing in the early morning sunshine. We also saw Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Gray-necked Wood-Rails and about 50 Neotropic Cormorants along with five Anhingas. We were reluctant to leave Crooked Tree but had a rare treat on the road through the village when our driver spotted a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron in a small marshy area on the side of the road.

We arrived at Tower Hill dock in Orange Walk district about 1:30PM for our boat transfer to [Lamanai Outpost Lodge](#). The trip was in a fast boat along the New River. Comfortable accommodations were in thatched cabanas overlooking the river. After dinner we took a spotlight cruise with our guide, Ruben, who grew up in Indian Church Village, right outside the lodge. He showed us a Northern Potoo, Yucatan Nightjar, both lifers, and an adult Agami Heron. Morelet's Crocodiles are common but shy so swimming in the river is not a problem. We saw a few Fishing Bats, with their 18 inch wing span. It was a beautiful evening with thousands of stars in view.

On Saturday, the 29<sup>th</sup> we joined four folks from Utah and Ruben for a three hour tour of the nearby Mayan city of Lamanai. The Mayan ruins were impressive and Ruben was very knowledgeable about their history. Slaty-tailed and Black-headed Trogons put on quite a show. We saw four species of woodpeckers and my first Olivaceous Woodcreeper. About a dozen Magnolia Warblers barely outnumbered the Northern Waterthrushes and American Redstarts. As we were admiring a White-whiskered Puffbird, a cooperative Tody Motmot caught my eye. A Golden-winged x Blue-winged Warbler hybrid, likely a Brewster's backcross, gave us brief looks in the canopy. As we returned to the dock, Ruben shouted "King Vulture" as one glided high over the New River.

Late in the afternoon Joe, Ruben and I planned to take a long walk inland around Indian Church Village. Before we left the lodge we were thrilled by a male Black-cowled Oriole singing above the dining room. Two Couch's Kingbirds called, allowing us to positively identify them. We saw a couple of Keel-billed Toucans and Collared Aracaris. Near the ultra light plane hangar Ruben pointed out a gorgeous male Blue Bunting and a Green-backed Sparrow, both lifers for us. It was a lovely way to end the day.

On Sunday at 6AM, Joe and I joined Ruben and the four folks from Utah for a walk out the main road through the village into the fields beyond. It was sunny and warm, as it was most days of our trip. A Blue Ground-Dove posed briefly near the Ruddy Ground-Doves. White-fronted and Red-lore Parrots, Olive-throated Parakeets, Great Kiskadees and Social Flycatchers were all easily heard and seen. We had great looks at a pair of

Rose-throated Becards. Joe and Ruben discussed the subtle differences between Least Flycatchers and Tropical Pewees, which had more eyering than we anticipated. Although we were half a mile or so inland from the river, a Black-collared Hawk flew over the main road as we made our way back to breakfast. Ruben spotted a White-necked Puffbird perched above the lodge. It was a “big finish”.

After lunch I hung out on the dock while Joe went birding and photographing on the small road to the Mayan ruins. I was interested to see two large families of Mennonites come to relax on the dock, as it was a Sunday afternoon. There is a large Mennonite community in the Orange Walk district, largely engaged in farming.

After a fish dinner (the lodge posts the menu each day and will honor dietary requests) we enjoyed another spotlight tour with Ruben. This time we saw an immature Agami Heron, two Snail Kites and two Northern Potoos as highlights. How Ruben is able to spot a sleeping Northern Waterthrush is a mystery!

Monday the 31<sup>st</sup> was our last morning at Lamanai. Joe and I opted for a dawn canoe trip with Ruben and his nephew each paddling our canoes. We had been looking for American Pygmy Kingfisher since we arrived in Belize. We came upon two separate individuals, a male and a female, making us very happy. We also saw Yucatan, Boat-billed and three Fork-tailed Flycatchers. We had an obscured view of two Ruddy Crakes in the underbrush on the bank but on our return along Dawson’s Creek, a canal built by the Mayans, we were just feet from a Ruddy Crake building its nest right in the open. Amazing!

After lunch, Luis, our driver and bird guide from Chan Chich, drove us about three hours from Lamanai to Gallon Jug and on to the lodge. Early in the trip Joe spotted an unfamiliar mammal crossing the road. It turned out to be a Greater Grison, a rarely seen carnivore in the weasel family. As we entered the reserve, we stopped to photograph a Laughing Falcon perched in great light. White-tailed Deer became abundant, providing food for the elusive Jaguars that live in the jungle. At dinner we were pleased to see Karen and Steve Williams again, our companions for part of our stay at Crooked Tree. The views of the grounds from the outdoor dining area are so relaxing and the small water feature attracted warblers, flycatchers and other species.

At 6AM on Feb 1<sup>st</sup> we took a walk with our guide, Marvin. At Chan Chich four is the maximum number for a bird walk and it was often just Joe, myself and a guide. We toured the small enclave of houses for lodge staff, seeing in one tree Masked Tityra, Black-faced Grosbeak, Bright-rumped Attila, Brown-crested Flycatcher and Yellow-throated Vireo as highlights. We then took a small path through a swampy area to another service area and were rewarded with lovely views of a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, just beautiful in the sunlight. After breakfast Joe and I birded along the main entrance road. As we were returning to the lodge, a Great Tinamou crossed not far ahead as Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds vocalized in the trees.

That afternoon at 3 we met the most senior guide, Gilberto, who spent his youth trapping birds for food in and around Chan Chich. His knowledge of the environment was most impressive. We retraced our early morning route and Joe was able to digiscope White-whiskered Puffbird and a couple of Rufous-tailed Jacamars. As 4:40 approached I was beginning to worry that we would not make it to the Ornate Hawk-Eagle nest in time for its expected fly out for a stretch. Gilberto had said it would happen at 4:45PM and he was not far off. The bird was magnificent, colored like no other raptor. It has a black crown and crest plume, rufous nape, neck and breast band, a white throat and boldly barred underparts, including the thighs and tarsi. Joe's digiscoped photos are spectacular. As we wended our way back to the lodge just before dusk, a Black-faced Antthrush, looking like a rail, crossed the trail. We searched the underbrush and caught additional glimpses but my binoculars also picked up a Tody Motmot on a branch. We had a wonderful dinner of London broil followed by Chocolate Pecan Pie, a lovely ending to a fabulous day.

At 6:30AM on Thursday we joined Steve and Karen for a driving tour of Gallon Jug with Luis as our guide. One of the first birds we saw was a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, so close we could see it blink. A fruiting tree held a couple of Yellow-winged Tanagers with their lilac heads. Blue-gray and Summer Tanagers fed there as well. We toured the abandoned cocoa plantation and Luis pointed out a loudly calling Rufous Piha. A stop below some hummingbird feeders on the veranda of one of the large homes yielded White-necked Jacobins, male and female Green-breasted Mangos and a White-bellied Emerald. Feeding in the nearby trees were Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. Saving the best for last, Joe suggested we drive slowly past a field where he had seen Black Vultures circling. In fact, chasing them from a deer carcass was a couple of adult King Vultures. We stopped and watched the show. Eventually we had great views of four adult, one subadult and three immature King Vultures, a digiscoper's delight.

After a great lunch (at Chan Chich you order from a menu) of shrimp ceviche and eggplant pita, we relaxed until our scheduled 3PM walk with Marvin. It was very quiet on the King's Tomb trail but we did see a Purple-crowned Fairy and a Slaty-tailed Trogon. We stopped along the entrance road to try to see the vocalizing Scaly-breasted Hummingbird. On a snag above the service road I spotted what turned out to be a Double-toothed Kite. I guess my years as a hawk watcher for Golden Gate Raptor Observatory helped. It sat posing for a while then dropped out of sight. It flew to another branch and this time it had a hummer in its talons. We're guessing Scaly-breasted as there seemed to be fewer calling. It plucked and ate it while Joe captured it all through the scope with his camera.

Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup> was our last full day at Chan Chich. We began with a 6AM walk to the suspension bridge with Luis. We could hear the immature Black Hawk-Eagle calling for breakfast in the distance. Luis finally located it high in a tree near a clump of bromeliads. A Louisiana Waterthrush and Green Kingfisher flew under the bridge. We saw three of the large Pale-billed Woodpeckers, an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper and Red-crowned Ant-Tanager in the jungle. Howler Monkeys were seen every day; we liked the occasional

Squirrel Monkey and also Deppe's Squirrel, a small, dark brown squirrel with a not very bushy tail.

After breakfast we birded around the lodge and also watched the Long-billed Hermit and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird jousting for position at our feeder. A female Rufous-tailed sat on a nest under the bougainvillea arbor next to our cabana. One Stripe-throated Hermit stopped now and again at the red flowers below the veranda. The water feature attracted Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Warbler, Ovenbird and the local House Wren, which was building a nest in the garden.

Our last morning we went for a walk at 8:30AM with Gilberto. We had hoped to see a Sungrebe and Gilberto had cleared a path along the river with his machete. It was not to be. In October 2010 Belize was hit hard by Hurricane Richard and we saw many trees uprooted and broken in the jungle. It took weeks to reopen roads and trails at Chan Chich and elsewhere. In time the fruiting trees will bear again and more birds will return. Our vacation timing may not have been optimal but we were content with our experience. Gilberto heard a Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, which he called a "leader bird," because it generally portends a mixed flock. Tawny-crowned and Lesser Greenlets, Yellow-rumped Flycatcher, Plain Xenops and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers followed the group. Gilberto heard the whistles of two White Hawks and imitated their call until they were soaring just over our heads. We reluctantly returned to the lodge for lunch before our charter flight in a six passenger plane to Belize airport and home. It was an amazing trip, one we'll never forget. We saw over 200 species of birds, 44 of them life birds for me.