



BELIZE TANTALIZES BIRDERS.

This Central American nation with a Caribbean twist beckons many—from birders new to the tropics, thrilling at a Keel-billed Toucan, to macho listers attempting to add a few notches on the barrel of their binoculars with an Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Gray-throated Chat, or Ocellated Turkey. That's the promise of Belize: beauty and abundance.

My goal was simple enough. I had heard the Spotted Wood-Quail once in my life. In the pre-dawn hours at Palenque in Mexico, an explosion of noise outside my cabaña made me sit bolt upright. The frantic sounds

Mayan reigns collapsed. Old World invaders passed by. But birds have thrived in this small patch of Mesoamerica.

By Victoria Irwin

seemed to be other worldly—and in my groggy state I thought it could be anything, including some discombobulated machine. By the time I was out the door, there was nothing in sight. I was now awake enough to know the noise was a bird, but which species? As a beginner, I was lost. That outrageous racket stayed in my head, though. And when I listened to a tape of birds songs before I went to Belize last fall (I'm now an *advanced* beginner), I was startled to hear that same call: a wild, warning cry—the sort of noise you would expect a Rube Goldberg contraption to make if it could jump off the printed page.

“*That’s it!*” I thought. “*That’s what I heard that morning.*” Right there I made up my mind to see this bird in Belize.

And I did. It’s part of the magic of Belize, a tiny country with some 550 species of birds, both neotropical residents and migrants. It is pretty easy to see the birdlife there. While

BELIZE

deforestation and habitat loss is a real problem, the country seems willing to consider a future of balanced development which includes nature tourism, rather than simply following the siren call of clear-cutting lumber companies or cattle ranches.

I found my Spotted Wood-Quail at Chan Chich Lodge near Gallon Jug in the northwestern part of the country, not far from Guatemala. Though I had gone to Belize with an organized birding tour, this afternoon I was with a local nature guide—Gilberto Vasquez, a Mayan who knows the tangled moist tropical forest literally like the back of his hand. He stopped

frequently on our walk to explain the medicinal uses of a plant, or to point out a troop of coatimundis under our noses.

As our small group rounded a corner and started to climb a hill behind a well-covered Mayan ruin, there was movement in the underbrush along the trail: two birds, gorgeous russet colors with a scruffy, alarmed-looking “hair cut.” We stood very still, and they moved slowly, warily away from the path. But our look was clear. These were Spotted Wood-Quail!

Gilberto didn’t disappoint us as we continued on the wide, well-raked trail through the forest. As we neared another corner, he told us that we might see the coveted Tody Motmot; he often saw a pair in this area as he cleaned the trails in the morning. We looked off into the dense jumble. There, as if on cue, the pair sat, not more than 25 feet off the trail. They eyed us as we eyed them. One bird even turned from facing us to showing us its back, the better to see its entire plumage. Further on we watched the bright beauty of a familiar passerine, the Hooded Warbler, and heard the gentle call of the Slaty-tailed Trogon until we spotted it in the canopy.

My stay in Belize was limited to the Gallon Jug area. But the looks at rarities and

more common birds were more than satisfying. Ornate *and* Black-and-white hawk-eagles sat patiently in tree-tops at different times while we watched in scopes. A Black-faced Antthrush wowed us as it calmly walked across and up a jungle trail. Six species of woodpeckers provided some nice comparisons for our group. Euphonias and elaenias entertained us when we wanted to rest our necks. Flycatchers—ranging from birds from

British colony, large tracts of the country lay undisturbed for centuries. Today conservation organizations like the Belize Audubon Society are working to protect this natural heritage.

“It is unique,” says James Baird, a retired vice-president of Massachusetts Audubon, and former board member of the Programme for Belize, a group now run by Belizeans that has helped purchase and conserve habitat, while creating jobs for local people.

Outside Belize City there are day trips to areas such as the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, home to a nesting population of Jabiru Storks. Inland yields a trove of forest birds, from regionally endemic Furnariidae to migrant wood warblers. The Maya Mountains have broadleaf hardwoods, and pine forests at higher elevations provide different habitat, with different birds.

For birders looking for a first expo-



home (Eastern Wood-Pewee) to the rare White-throated Flycatcher—kept everyone studying guidebooks in the lodge at the end of the day.

Unlike other Mesoamerican countries, the ravages of overpopulation and habitat loss have not yet taken a great toll in Belize. Populated by Mayans during the height of that civilization, the area once had nearly one million inhabitants. Since the Mayan collapse, the territory has been sparsely populated. As a backwater former

“There are only 200,000 people in Belize,” Baird explains. “In El Salvador, there are seven million in the same land area. That’s the difference.”

The country has several distinct zones for birding. The coast harbors seabirds such as Red-footed Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds. Coastal cays have specialties like Black Catbird, Mangrove Vireo, and Mangrove Warbler.

The Keel-billed Toucan is found cavorting in tree-tops throughout Belize. Its range extends from Mexico to South America.

sure to New World tropical species, “Belize is the place to start,” says Dale Delaney, noted nature tour leader. The number of species, the ease of finding them, as well as the comfort of travel, put Belize at the top of the list. “It almost spoils you.”

An advantage of birding in Belize for these birders is that the genera of several families are represented by only one species. For example, there is one



Chestnut-colored Woodpecker

Celeus woodpecker, the Chestnut-colored. There is one toucan (Keel-billed), one toucanet (Emerald), and one araçari (Collared).

“It’s not an overwhelming number of species, but a wonderful cross-section,” says Delaney. Birders visiting Venezuela, by contrast, will have far more to sort through.

For advanced birders, Delaney adds, Belize offers species that are rare or uncommon in other parts of their range. One of the most obvious is the Occellated Turkey.

“A seen bird is a dead bird,” in much of the turkey’s range, says Delaney, because it is greatly prized for its meat. But in the 200,000 acres where hunting is forbidden near Gallon Jug, the birds thrive. Tom Harding, who with his wife Josie runs the Chan Chich Lodge, said that on his first visit to the area, he found piles of dead turkeys under trees. Hunters came into the area with guides during the night, and with spotlights fixed on roosts, blasted away. They killed more turkeys than they wanted to take.

Today in places where it is protected, like Chan Chich or Tikal in Guatemala, it is difficult to imagine the large birds as wild. They stroll the grounds like barnyard fowl.

The list of interesting birds also includes Chestnut-bellied Heron and Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. Bicolored

and White hawks are not hard to find. The King Vulture is not a rare bird, but it isn’t easy to see in the northern part of its range. Our group saw it several times, including once from above as we flew back to Belize City.

The Great Curassow can be seen in the trees near Chan Chich, along with Crested Guans; Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts are active in the skies over the Mayan plaza on which the lodge sits. Last November, a feisty pair of Bat Falcons stood guard over the plaza.

The White-whiskered Puffbird is not rare, but is it uncommonly encountered. It is a very regular sighting at Chan Chich. A regional endemic is the Rufous-breasted Spinetail. It has been seen on the Belize City Christmas Bird Count.

Woodcreepers are a specialty in Mesoamerica, and Belize can offer exciting glimpses of these somewhat plain, but captivating singers. The Strong-billed Woodcreeper was seen or heard every day of my visit; a pair was roosting in the cavity of a tree right outside the lodge.

The Gray-throated Chat is a regional specialty. We saw it on two days; once a banded male entertained us for nearly 10 minutes as he bounced through the low canopy above us.

The Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, whose range extends to Nicaragua, is easily found in Belize. Its habitat, primary forest, is disappearing rapidly in

other parts of it range. It is often found in mixed flocks foraging through the forest, and its unmistakable call can mean good overhead birding while the flock passes through.

The Jabiru is found along the inland lagoons, particularly at Crooked Tree Reserve. While the South American populations of this stork appear to be healthy, the Mesoamerican Jabirus face the threat of massive habitat loss. The Belize population is one of the largest in the region.

“The Jabiru population is doing very well, indeed,” says Lydia Waight of the Belize Audubon Society, which runs the reserve. “Their population is on the increase.” Also at Crooked Tree are the Black-collared Hawk and,



Greenish Elaenia

along the road leading to the lagoons, the Aplomado Falcon.

Farther south at Mountain Pine Ridge, the Orange-breasted Falcon can be found. The very rare Keel-billed Motmot has been reported in southern Belize near Caracol.

And, of course, neotropical migrants can be seen all over the country. We saw nearly 30 “birds from home” during our week’s stay in November. It is fascinating to see them in such different habitat, and to study their behavior and plumage in the tropics.

The boom in nature tourism caught some Belizeans by surprise. Tom Harding came to Gallon Jug in 1986





Blue-crowned Motmot

at the invitation of Belizean entrepreneur Barry Bowen, who owned much of the property in the area. While there was damage from hunters, looters at Mayan ruins, and marijuana farmers, there was also a lot of beauty.

“We were so enchanted,” recalls Harding of his first visit. “We thought that if a hotel or lodge were here—a presence of some kind—it might deter the devastation.”

Harding says he and Bowen didn't know there was such a “species” as birder at that time. But a visit by some North Americans opened their eyes. Harding was astounded at the interest—just as the birders, including Dale Delaney and James Baird, were



Crested Guan

astounded at the birdlife.

Today 40 percent of Chan Chich visitors are hard-core birders. Another 40 percent are natural history buffs who want to see both nature and the local Mayan ruins. Twenty percent have never seen a tropical forest up close before. Many had visited the Belizean coast, and tacked on a trip to the interior out of curiosity.

Since it became clear that Belize's nature bounty could yield money, small lodges and tour operators have opened throughout the country. While Belize is considered a model for “ecotourism,” some local conservationists are reserving judgement.

“The Belize Audubon Society wants

to make sure that the influx of visitors does not put too much pressure on these small reserves,” says Lydia Waight. “We have wardens, visitor centers, and education programs. But we need to ask how much is enough, and how much is too much?”

At places such as Chan Chich, for example, night birding has been banned because the numbers of nocturnal animals around the lodge has dropped. And there are other concerns about exploitation of the country's vast natural resources.

“We recently discovered a group that intended to rustle 600 mahogany trees—400 in the Programme for Belize property and 200 in Guatemala,” says James Baird. “They had cut the trees, but they hadn't been able to take them. Conservationists must be vigilant.”

It is a fragile treasure, this turquoise and green paradise. Critically important for resident birds and neotropical migrants, whose homes and wintering grounds are being decimated in nearby Mexico and parts of the Peten in Guatemala, Belize is still “whole” enough to preserve a significant area of tropical habitat.

And it offers birders the chance to see a fascinating variety of birds—while supporting a country's efforts to conserve its natural resources for future generations. ➤



Tody Motmot

A Birder's Baedeker

Getting There To enter Belize you'll need a valid passport. Major air carriers are American and Continental, with daily flights to Belize City from Miami and Houston. International carriers include Tan-Sahsa of Honduras and Taca of Costa Rica.

Travel in Belize Small towns are served by Tropic Air, Maya Airways, and Island Air. Many visitors travel by boat along the coast. Unpaved inland roads can be tough to negotiate, especially during the rainy season. Four-wheel drive vehicles can be rented.

Money The U.S. dollar is accepted throughout the country. Credit cards are accepted by large hotels and by an increasing number of tour operators that cater to foreigners.

Climate Belize is a subtropical nation. Winters (December through March) are mild and humid, with little rain. The rest of the year, particularly June through September, is hotter and damper. Trade winds make the coast more comfortable, though subject to storms. Hurricanes threaten Belize June to November. Rainfall varies from 65 inches annually in the north to 170 inches in the south.

Other Essentials English is the official language, but Spanish is spoken widely outside Belize City.

Organized Tours Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (1-800-328-VENT) specializes in birding trips; natural history buffs are welcome. International Expeditions (1-800-633-4734) has led trips to Belize for 12 years.

Resort Sampler

Chau Hiix Lodge, Crooked Tree:
1-800-765-2611
Chaa Creek Cottages, Cayo:
011-501-92-2037
Chan Chich Lodge: 1-800-343-8009
Rum Point Inn, Placencia:
1-504-469-0769
Hidden Valley Inn, Mountain Pine
Ridge: 1-800-334-7942

Books

Peterson's Guides to Birds of Mexico by Peterson and Chalif.
The Birds of Costa Rica by Stiles and Skutch
An Introduction to Tropical Rain Forests by T.C. Whitmore
Belize: A Natural Destination by Mahler and Wotkyns
Belize Handbook by Chicki Mallan