



Belize & Tikal Birding Tour 2022 Trip Report

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January 29 - 30: Belize City & area

Buoyed by the return of international travel, our group of five nature-lovers headed south from Canada to explore the incredible birds, wildlife and history of Belize & neighbouring Tikal in Guatemala. Meeting up in beautiful Belize City, we took a few moments to adjust to a very different “winter” climate and get to know each other before diving right into the birding. The quiet road beside our hotel provided the perfect introduction to many birds that would become as familiar as our new companions over the next few days – Great Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher, Morelet’s Seedeater, Great-tailed Grackle and Tropical Kingbird just to name a few. A pair of Vermillion Flycatchers sallied back and forth in the adjacent field. We encountered neotropical migrants that had recently taken a similar trip to our own – Yellow, Magnolia, and Yellow-throated Warblers along with Baltimore and Orchard Orioles. We also enjoyed great views of several Cinnamon Hummingbirds – the only ones we would see during the trip.



Cinnamon Hummingbird © Jared Clarke



Vermillion Flycatcher © Jared Clarke

After breakfast, we were met by local guide Mario and headed off on our first big adventure. Our very first stops along the highway produced another mix of new and familiar birds, including Northern Jacana, Tropical Mockingbird, and Snail Kite (new!) along with Snowy Egrets, Black-necked Stilts and Solitary Sandpiper (familiar). Especially exciting was our first Morelet's Crocodile of the trip, sunning itself just a few metres from the road and showing off its toothy smile! Arriving

at the Tropical Education Centre, we were greeted by singing Grace's Warblers and eventually spotted several high in the pines. Plain Chachalacas peered down from their perch, Brown Jays chattered away, and a White-browed Gnatcatcher scolded us from the trailside. Other new birds included Brown-crested Flycatchers, Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-throated Vireo and two very secretive (and hard-to-spot!!) Boat-billed Herons hiding beside a small pond. A White-bellied Wren and White-collared Manakin came together to bid us farewell as we headed off to lunch at the zoo. We spent the afternoon exploring the Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary where highlights included two Rufous-tailed Jacamars, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, a very vocal Golden-Olive Woodpecker, some skulky Rufous-breasted Spinetails and a Hepatic Tanager dispatching a big juicy insect for lunch. Pretty amazing for just our first day! We arrived at Pook's Hill in time for dinner and a lovely sunset over the forest.



Morelet's Crocodile © Jared Clarke



Plain Chachalaca © Jared Clarke



Rufous-tailed Jacamar © Jared Clarke

January 31 - February 2: Pook's Hill Lodge

Pook's Hill Lodge, located in central Belize at the feet of the Maya Mountains, was our home for the

next few days. The lodge, with traditional thatch-roof cabanas, is situated on a private reserve and surrounded by lush rainforest - a perfect place to explore and enjoy a diversity of birds and wildlife. Our time here was rewarded with banner birds like Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Lesson's Motmot, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, White-whiskered Puffbird and three species of trogon. Harder to spot, but just as exciting when we did, were forest-dwellers like Northern Bentbill, Northern Schiffornis, Crimson-collared Tanager and Stub-tailed Spadebill. Perhaps the stars of the show, though, were a pair of Spectacled Owl that liked to hang out near our cabins - heard every night, and expertly spotted roosting along the "Butterfly Trail" during one of our morning walks.



Pook's Hill Lodge © Jared Clarke



Spectacled Owls © Jared Clarke



Keel-billed Toucan © Jared Clarke



White-whiskered Puffbird © Jared Clarke

A day trip to Mountain Pine Ridge provided a stark change of habitat, and with it some new and exciting birds. Several Black-headed Siskin, a rare & local species in Belize, were feeding in the pines at our very first stop. Our time scanning for raptors at the famous Slate Creek Overlook paid off with as many as five King Vultures, three White Hawks (what views!!), two Double-toothed Kites and a two Bat Falcons along with the regulars. We shared lunch at the Green Hills Butterfly Ranch with not only hundreds of colourful butterflies, but also eight species of hummingbird at their feeders! Highlights included Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Violet Sabrewing Scaly-breasted Hummingbird and White-bellied Emerald among others. Taking a break of sorts under the hot afternoon sun, we visited the Progressive Mennonite village of Spanish Lookout where we spied gems such as Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers on farm fences, American Kestrel hunting over the fields, and a Laughing Falcon perched high on a dead tree. After saying adios to Pook's Hill, we headed west to Guatemala and the next leg of our birding adventure.



White Hawk © Jared Clarke



White-necked Jacobin © Jared Clarke



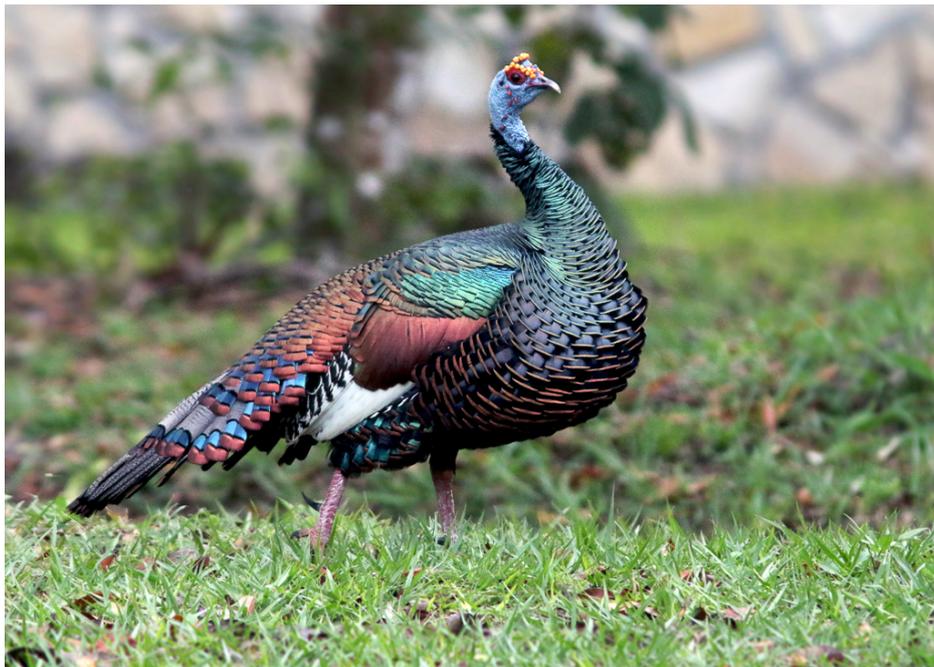
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher © Jared Clarke

February 2 - 4: Tikal National Park, Guatemala

The next stop on our journey was the incredible Tikal National Park in Guatemala. The park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, preserves one of the most important archaeological sites in the Americas — the ancient Mayan city and temples of Tikal. One of the largest cities of the Mayan Classical period, it was inhabited for nearly a millennium until its abandonment ~900AD and had a peak population of nearly 100,000 people.



While it may be most famous for its ancient Mayan ruins, Tikal National Park also protects a huge swath of pristine rainforest and is one of the best birding destinations in Central America. Strolls along the park's many trails produced great looks at prized species such as Bright-rumped Attila, White-necked Puffbird, Collared Aracari and Chestnut Woodpecker among many others. A strange mix of bizarre and beautiful, Ocellated Turkeys are a regional endemic that is found quite easily in and around Tikal. Crested Guans were a little more elusive, but persistence paid off as we enjoyed views of a pair foraging in the dense foliage not far from the ancient city's Grand Plaza. We also discovered a Northern Potoo roosting quietly in near our lodge - incredibly camouflaged as part of the tree itself. Orange-breasted Falcon is one of the most anticipated birds of this trip, and Tikal is among the most reliable places to find it. We were fortunate to spot a male sitting atop one of the ancient temples during our history tour with local guide Henry - an iconic and very memorable encounter with such a special bird! Among the other wildlife of Tikal National Park, Central American Spider Monkeys were by far the most endearing. Troupes of these social critters were often spotted swinging through the trees, at times right above and around our cabins in the park. Other non-avian highlights included Black Howler Monkeys, White-nosed Coati, and Collared Peccary.



Ocellated Turkey © Jared Clarke



Northern Potoo © Jared Clarke



White-nosed Coati © Jared Clarke

Heading back to Belize, we spent the last few days of our adventure at the Birds Eye View Lodge in Crooked Tree. This lovely Creole community is surrounded by a large lagoon and expansive wetlands - and at this time of year (especially) is abounding with birdlife. Boat tours of the lagoon and creeks are always a highlight here, and we enjoyed two! We spotted more than a dozen Jabiru at one point, along with hundreds of Wood Storks, Limpkins, White Ibis, herons, egrets and other waders that

were feeding in the shallow waters around Crooked Tree. Black-collared Hawks and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures were among the numerous raptors we encountered. With ebbing water levels at this time of year, Crooked Tree can be a great place to look for the scarce and very secretive Agami Heron. We were fortunate to spot three foraging in the waterside tangles — certainly one of the most handsome herons in the world. A hike through the nearby pine-oak savannah was also very productive, including regional specialties such as Yellow-lored Parrot, Yellow-headed Parrot, Yucatan Jay, and Yucatan Woodpecker. What a wonderful place to clue up our visit!



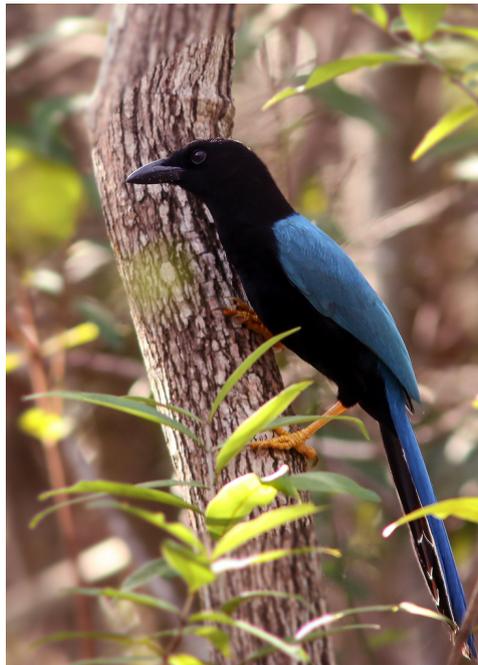
Crooked Tree boat tour © Jared Clarke



Jabiru © Jared Clarke



Agami Heron © Jared Clarke



Yucatan Jay © Jared Clarke



Belize birding group

The sun set on another fantastic Eagle-Eye Tours adventure. Our group had an excellent time, finding ~250 species of birds and plenty of other wildlife along the way. Added to the mix were the incredible ruins at Tikal, great food, amazing scenery and lots of great people!