

Belize & Tikal Trip Report (Feb 21 - Mar 3, 2025)

[Link: Belize & Tikal Trip Report \(Feb 21 - Mar 3, 2025\)](#)

12 participants joined us in our third Belize and Tikal trip of 2025. Together we enjoyed great weather and the expected spectacular birding that is characteristic of the region. We started by exploring the vast lowland forests around the towering temples of Tikal. Here we encountered representatives of most Neotropical bird families, a few regional endemics and some real stunners including nesting, Orange-breasted Falcons and the bizarre and gaudy Ocellated Turkeys. From here we spent a week exploring a wide array of Belizean habitats from our home bases of Jade Jungle Lodge and Bird's Eye View Lodge. Our time in Belize was highlighted by sightings of King Vulture and White Hawk, multiple close encounters with the lilliputian Tody Motmot and the rarely seen Central American Pygmy-Owl. We followed that up with a wide suite of charismatic wetland birds including massive Jabiru, a family of Agami Herons, and a very cooperative American Pygmy Kingfisher. We rounded out the trip with 279 species while keeping a relaxed pace and enjoying things other than birds.



Our group at Tikal

Day 1

After arriving in Belize City we made the short trip to the Biltmore Hotel for a leisurely dinner and a

good nights rest before the real fun began. There were plenty of birds right on the hotel grounds for those eager to get a jump start and great opportunities to sample some traditional Belizean cuisine.

Day 2

We wasted no time digging into the long and diverse list of birds present in the southern Yucatan peninsula. A pre-breakfast stroll behind the hotel was great introduction to common species like Morelet's Seedeater and Brown Jay as well as providing our only Cinnamon Hummingbird of the trip. After a good cup of coffee and some fresh fruit we loaded the vans and headed after a decidedly more difficult target before leaving Belize City. Arriving at a nearby patch of mangroves, droves of Magnificent Frigatebirds floated lazily overhead as we exited the vans. In the mangroves we ran into flocks of wintering neotropical migrants and the bay-hooded "Mangrove" form of Yellow Warbler. Loud grunting and clucking calls from deep in the mangroves alerted us to the presence of our main target - Rufous-necked Wood Rail. A little bit of maneuvering and we all enjoyed open views of this widespread but elusive swamp dweller, as it crossed an exposed stretch of tidal channel.



Yellow (Mangrove) Warbler © Phil Chaon

Following the success of the early morning we spent most of the day traversing Belize on our way to Tikal in Guatemala. We of course took time to stop for birds enroute and the travel was pleasantly broken up by a pair of Bat Falcons and a very cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Following a few border formalities, we arrived at our lodging in the heart of Tikal by mid-afternoon. While some of us relaxed before dinner, a few of us took a little time to enjoy our first Keel-billed Toucans in the parking lot. It's a rare treat to have a bird this spectacular and iconic as an omnipresent daily companion.



Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl © Phil Chaon

Days 3-4

We spent the next two full days exploring the towering ruins and vast jungles of Tikal. On our first day we focused on birding – both right around the hotel and deep in the forest. After awaking to the roaring alarm clock of a troop of howler monkeys, we started pre-breakfast with a pair of highly sought after targets at known stakeouts. A Northern Potoo maintained sat motionless along the roadside on a favorite perch – a clear frontrunner for “branch impressionist of the year”. A little further along we waited quietly for several gargantuan Great Curassows to stealthily pass through the forest on their way to a morning feeding site. It was incredible to watch such large and ostentatiously adorned birds move through the forest without a sound. The rest of the morning was spent walking a long forest track under cloudy skies before arriving in the heart of the ancient city of Tikal. Along the way we were treated to several mixed flocks, led by the boisterous Black-throated Shrike-Tanager – a vigilant and noisy sentinel species. We tracked down the sweet, whistled song of a Northern Schiffornis and had close views of this frequently heard but seldom seen denizen of the dark understory. Just before leaving the forest and entering the main archaeological site we had spectacular views of Tropical Royal Flycatcher – an oddly shaped bird that hides an outlandish head adornment. Stepping out into the ruins we had our first views of the giant step pyramids that make this site a world-renowned attraction. And sitting atop this ancient temple – our first looks at a pair of Orange-breasted Falcons! We enjoyed great scope views of these ornate and globally rare birds of prey before making our way back to the lodge for lunch and an afternoon break.



Northern Schiffornis © Phil Chaon

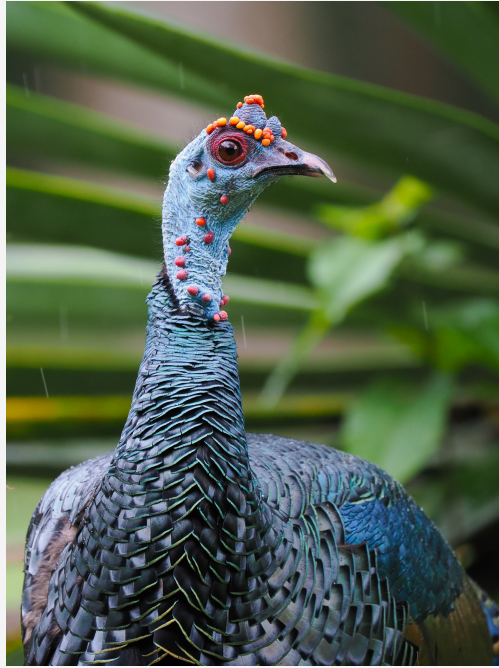


Tropical Royal Flycatcher © Phil Chaon



Keel-billed Toucan © Phil Chaon

A few hours of well deserved afternoon rest was perfectly timed to avoid a midday rain shower and cooled things off before an afternoon foray to a small and secluded wetland. Before heading into the forest we spent some time with a group of Ocellated Turkeys patrolling the grounds. An otherworldly Yucatan endemic, Ocellated Turkeys are one of the most spectacular galliforms on the planet, and there is nowhere better to see them than at Tikal! Walking through some drier, scrubbier forest we tracked down a few more Yucatan endemics - notably Rose-throated Tanager before arriving our destination - a small pond that is home to a sizeable colony of Boat-billed Herons. Normally quite shy and nocturnal, seeing these comical herons feeding, displaying, squabbling and tending to chicks was a real treat. The afternoon was only improved by the sudden appearance of the tiny, gemlike American Pygmy Kingfisher which put on a great show.



Ocellated Turkey © Phil Chaon

The following day we shifted our main focus from birding to exploring and learning about the history of Tikal. Local guides and historians augmented our time among the ruins, giving wonderful details about the growth and history of the city, Mayan culture, and the use and significance of the incredible structures that remain there today. We took some birding breaks enroute as well for a variety of trogons and parrots, Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, and Northern Emerald Toucanet. A large fruiting fig in the main plaza was a great place to spend some time as Yellow-winged Tanagers, Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias and a few Geoffroy's Spider-Monkeys took advantage of the abundant food. The high tops of the pyramids were built to bring Mayan priests closer to the gods but also work well for bringing a group of birders closer to canopy species. Heading up to the tops of two different pyramids we enjoyed breathtaking views of vast and unbroken forest, and close views of Orange-breasted Falcons, Red-lored Amazon and White-crowned Parrots.



Spider Monkey © Phil Chaon



Olive-backed Euphonia © Phil Chaon

After a long morning, we spent most of the afternoon relaxing and birding closer to the hotel grounds where bustling mixed flocks kept us entertained as dozens of birds mingled in the treetops.



Gartered Trogon © Phil Chaon

Day 5

Our final morning of birding at Tikal was spent tracking down a few tougher targets. Following a half an hour playing hide and seek, we were able to watch a Pheasant Cuckoo displaying on the forest floor, an intimate glimpse into the life of a reclusive and rarely seen species. Lined Forest-Falcon and a Russet-naped Wood Rail building a nest provided a few last highlights before we began our journey to Jade Jungle Resort – our home base for the next few days, back in Belize.



Russet-naped Wood-Rail © Phil Chaon

In the afternoon we turned off the highway and down a small dirt road that wound its way up into the hills. Emerging from the forest we had our first views of Jade Jungle Resort. The beautiful grounds were surrounded by tropical rainforest and loaded with birds. Enjoying a refreshing drink and a brief orientation it was hard to not be distracted by the White-necked Jacobins that buzzed all around us. After settling in we walked slowly up the road to try for Tody Motmot – a bird we had searched for extensively and unsuccessfully at Tikal. With the sun getting low, we were thrilled to hear on calling less than 5 minutes from our rooms! Some excellent teamwork and group cooperation resulted in everyone getting extended views of this lilliputian wonder – a major highlight of the trip for everyone! The day still had a few more delights in store namely a remarkably delicious dinner – the food at Jade Jungle Resort is some of the best to be had on any birding trip. Following dinner we headed off to bed but not before we were stopped by a Spectacled Owl calling from an open cecropia branch under a starry sky. The owl was cooperative enough that we not only got to have walk away looks but were also able to share it with other guests at the resort – a great spark bird for a few potential future birders.



Tody Motmot

Day 6

We got an early start. After another delicious meal we headed up into the higher elevations of Mountain Pine Ridge. A short walk took us to a broad vista. From the shade of the pines we waited for the morning to heat up and the parade of raptors to begin. From our strategic vantage point we managed to observe Double-toothed Kites, Gray Hawks, Swallow-tailed Kites, Bat Falcons, Broad-winged Hawks, and best of all several magnificent King Vultures and White Hawks. During the raptor bonanza we were called away by our local guide Mario who had spotted a distant Lovely Cotinga which we all had scope views of before it disappeared back into the forest. From here we continued deeper into the mountains stopping to bird an open pine savanna high on the ridge. More Swallow-tailed Kites swirled overhead while a rambunctious group of Acorn Woodpeckers livened up the quiet forest. Further searching produced great views of Grace's Warbler and a sudden visit by some Black-headed Siskins and an Azure-crowned Hummingbird. Following a picnic lunch, we headed down the mountain and to a nearby butterfly farm with a fantastic hummingbird feeding

station. We alternated between enjoying clouds of colorful butterflies and observing a constant parade of jewel-like hummingbirds. Over the course of an hour we had great encounters with Green-breasted Mango, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird and the impressive Violet Sabrewing.



Green-breasted Mango © Phil Chaon

With the afternoon running on and plenty more to see we moved down the road to agricultural fields around the community of Spanish Lookout. While we had seen Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture in flight, a cooperative individual feeding on a roadkill Central American Indigo Snake gave us our first close study of this colorful species. The fences were dotted with brilliant Vermillion Flycatchers and occasionally and elegant Fork-tailed or Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. The highlight of the afternoon was a Laughing Falcon that gave us great roadside views, flying directly over our heads before perching nearby. After a long day, we capped things off with a stop at a local ice cream parlor before heading back to Jade Jungle Resort for the night.



Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture © Phil Chaon



Laughing Falcon © Phil Chaon

Day 7

While yesterday took us on a whirlwind tour of the area, today was spent exploring the extensive forest and trail system surrounding our lodging. Before breakfast we birded the area immediately around our rooms which produced great looks at Northern Emerald Toucanets and a large flock of

Black-faced Grosbeaks. We also made another (successful) attempt to see Tody Motmot in better light.



Black-faced Grosbeak © Phil Chaon

After a quick meal we moved on to a large meadow maintained in the middle of the forest. The open edge and several fruiting trees provided an great spot for us to stand and let the birds come to us. A steady stream of Slaty-tailed, Black-headed and Gartered Trogons fed on suriname cherries while Black-cowled Orioled drank nectar from flowers overhead. A mixed flock moved through and we picked up Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet and White-whiskered Puffbird in the flurry of activity. Our primary target still lay ahead of us as we continued into the forest. After a brief stop to enjoy a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, we found ourselves in a palm grove that has been hosting a pair of Central American Pygmy Owls. We heard them calling before we even arrived but it took a few minutes before we were able to locate one high up in the canopy. Thankfully, it was very comfortable there and allowed us all walk away scope views and plenty of time for photographs.



Slaty-tailed Trogon © Phil Chaon



Central American Pygmy-Owl © Phil Chaon

Following an rest during the hottest part of the day we headed to a different section of the reserve for the afternoon. Before exiting the forest we encountered ANOTHER Tody Motmot- the most any of us have ever seen on a single trip. Our main focus for the afternoon was an open area of riverine habitat dominated by tall grass, bamboo and scattered trees. This habitat was perfect for a few skulky species that performed well including Rufous-breasted Spinetail and Ruddy Crake. The open

country was also a good place to look for Yellow-tailed Oriole, with five perching nearby at eye-level. Back in the forest we had brief glimpses at a tiny Stub-tailed Spadebill as it darted through the lower levels of the forest, always dancing just out of reach. As the sun grew low we wandered back through the meadow where over 100 Montezuma Oropendolas flew low over head on their way to roost – an impressive way to end a nice day on the grounds.



Barred Antshrike © Phil Chaon

Day 8

We had one more morning at Jade Jungle. Some of us opted to take it easy and watch the hummingbirds around the lodge while the rest of us headed back down to the meadow for some more time with Northern Emerald Toucanet and trogons, as well as our first Gray-chested Dove of the trip. There was still one more treat for us here as a pair of White-necked Puffbirds appeared above us as we were packing up the vans.



Northern Emerald-Toucanet © Phil Chaon



White-necked Puffbird © Phil Chaon

On our way to Crooked Tree we stopped to look for Jabiru in some roadside wetlands and quickly found one feeding out in the tall grass, even at a distance it appeared gigantic, dwarfing nearby egrets and herons. Our looks were satisfying but we all still hoped for better in the extensive wetlands at Crooked Tree Lagoon. Arriving at Crooked Tree with plenty of time to bird we began to explore the area surrounding our lodge. A large flock of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks squeaked

behind our rooms while Russet-naped Wood Rail fed a fluffy chick by the pool. Mangrove Vireos joined a nice mix of familiar warblers including Yellow-throated, Magnolia, and Tennessee. Walking down the road turned up a couple massive Ringed Kingfishers, a flock of Indigo Buntings and a cooperative Rufous-browed Peppershrike. We capped off the day with an open air dinner that featured a lovely breeze and a few large frozen daquiris or margaritas.

Day 9

We didn't have to go far to get started birding today. A few steps outside our hotel rooms there was a boat waiting to take us out into the vast expanse of wetlands that surrounded us. As the sun rose we found ourselves surrounded by a plethora of water birds - Neotropic Cormorants, Northern Jacanas, Purple Gallinules, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons. We moved slowly, stopping to enjoy this massive assemblage of avian life. Shortly we found ourselves face to face with our first major target - a spectacular Black-collared Hawk warming itself in the early morning sun. Completely unbothered by our presence, this colorful wetland specialist allowed us to approach closely in the boat, giving fantastic eye level views. We continued through the narrowing channels taking time to investigate some passerines, including a Yucatan Flycatcher, as we moved along. As the morning was getting warm and we were considering returning to the dock we spotted something moving in the shadows - the distinctive profile of an Agami Heron! Moving in closer we realized there was not one, but a family of FIVE lurking in the tangled branches along the river. Given the high water levels this year we hadn't had much hope for this gaudy and elusive heron and so we were thrilled to have such a memorable encounter.



Black-collared Hawk © Phil Chaon



Agami Heron

Though things had quieted down on the water by the time we returned, there was still plenty of activity in the forest-lined road leading to the lodge. We took an hour or so to stretch our legs and enjoy some great birds like Yucatan Woodpecker, Bare-throated Tiger Heron and Cinnamon-bellied Saltator. We followed this up with lunch and some time to relax - and maybe take advantage of the plethora of well shaded hammocks on the property.



Yucatan Woodpecker © Phil Chaon

In the afternoon we headed to some nearby Pine Savanna to try for a few localized Yucatan

specialties. Almost immediately we encountered a large flock of Yucatan Jays. We enjoyed watching the noisy antics of nearly two dozen of these large colorful corvids before continuing to look for a pair of difficult to see parrots – Yellow-lored and Yellow-headed Amazon. Large numbers of wintering migrants kept us entertained as we waited at a favored roost site – it is always interesting to see familiar species like Chipping Sparrows and Cedar Waxwings in such a novel environment! Just before dusk – a pair of Yellow-headed Amazons arrived, perching in the open and allowing for good scope views before continuing to sleep for the night. We started and ended the day with a great mix of birds and saw well over 100 species within a few miles of our lodging.

Day 10

For our final full day of the tour we opted to take another morning boat ride around the lagoon. We caught up almost immediately with a target we had missed the night before – Yellow-lored Amazon, perched along the waters edge. We took some time to enjoy more time with many of the birds we had seen the previous day, especially delightful was a family of Northern Jacanas with newly hatched chicks tottering among the floating vegetation. We admired some soaring Snail Kites and a Great Black Hawk as well as a few wild Muscovy Ducks. While many of us are familiar with domestic varieties of this species, it was great to see them in their native range, navigating this vast watery environment. We ended the morning by trying to improve on our views of Ruddy Crake and succeeded magnificently with multiple individuals sitting in the open right alongside the boat.



Northern Jacana © Phil Chaon

With plenty of time left in the morning we set off down the road from the hotel again. Early on in the walk we noticed a Jabiru flying low in the direction of a small wetland in town. Following a tip that it had landed there we quickly headed in that direction and soon found ourselves face to face with this towering wader. While our previous views had been satisfactory, it was certainly memorable to get to see this iconic species at close range before the end of the trip. On our way back to lunch we also enjoyed another great encounter with American Pygmy Kingfisher – another exciting wetland bird, roughly 1/600th the mass of the Jabiru we were admiring a few moments before. With essentially all of our targets in the bag we headed back to relax for the afternoon. A short afternoon outing allowed

us more time to observe Yucatan Jays and several other fan favorites as well as spend some time working on photos for several species.



Jabiru © Phil Chaon

Day 11

For the final morning of the trip we took one more walk down the road from Bird's Eye View Lodge and picked up a few more species for the trip including Fulvous Whistling Duck and Buff-bellied Hummingbird. A quick 70 species reminded the group just how special this little corner of Central America is. In a relaxed 10 days we managed to see 279 species including many regional endemics and global rarities, fantastic ruins and lots of other interesting wildlife to boot. The variety and quality of habitats available in the area make it a true gem for easy, accessible and rewarding birding! [Belize & Tikal eBird list \(Feb 21 - Mar 3, 2025\)](#)