

Belize & Tikal Trip Report (Jan 19 - 29, 2024)

[Link: Belize & Tikal Trip Report \(Jan 19 - 29, 2024\)](#)

In early 2024 twelve keen birders and two guides set off to explore the wilds of Belize and Tikal. Over 10 days and over 250 species later, we have a fine story to tell... After a one-night rendezvous at our hotel in Belize City our next stop was at Jade Jungle, a delightful end-of-the-road lodge nestled in the forest. Our local guide Mario took us under his wing, so to speak, and over the next three days he showed us around some of his favorite habitats. Some of this was in dense terrain where the birds could only be heard; faced with this challenge, the average bird guide uses a complicated combination of phone apps and speakers, repeating the bird's call or song for a few seconds to try to lure them into viewing distance...



Belize birding group

Mario had no need of such trappings. The man has a wonderful ear and is a super mimic, and I will never forget how we all met the Northern Schiffornis for the first time. This drab tityra is famously elusive, but was calling in a densely forested hollow - and Mario worked hard, whistling its song back to it and gradually coaxing the bird closer. Our group of birders did a fabulous job of staying still and silent, and I will never forget the meditative calm that fell over us as we stood motionless for ten minutes, witnessed this lovely duet between man and bird, the curious Schiffornis flitting ever closer to better understand why one of its kind would accompany so many curiously coloured figures in the underbrush... Later, we hopped into the vehicles and Mario showed us around nearby Spanish Lookout, a wonderful Mennonite community nestled in the heart of Belize, where we found

a variety of tanagers and flycatchers meeting their needs in - and amicably sharing! - their winter habitat.



Summer Tanager and Fork-tailed Flycatcher © Joachim Bertrands

Next, our group ramped up its adventure quotient, and ventured into Guatemala, to explore the wonders of Tikal, a fabulous Mayan ruin - and a showcase of mature semi deciduous forest - nestled in the heart of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Tikal shared many marvels with us. A trip to the tropics permits North American birders to visit with old familiar summertime friends, such as Wood Thrush and Kentucky Warbler; and get to meet exotic new friends, such as the Ocellated Turkeys and Russet-Naped Wood-Rails that roam the hotel grounds and permit some really good close-up looks!



Wood Thrush © Joachim Bertrands



Kentucky Warbler © Joachim Bertrands



Ocellated Turkey © Joachim Bertrands



Ocellated Turkey head © Joachim Bertrands



Russet-naped Wood-Rail © Joachim Bertands

One of our focus birds was the Orange Breasted Falcon, an endangered species with an unusual habit. To quote from my field guide: "Eyries are located on high outcroppings, cliff faces - and Mayan temples." One of the high points of the tour came when our entire group, staring up at the

magnificent façade of just such a temple, were thrilled and privileged to hear the clarion call of one of these superb birds as it dashed through the air at falcon speed, coming to rest on its favourite eyrie on –you guessed it! – the Mayan temple. In Tikal, if one grows tired of birds – perish the thought! – One can turn towards the contemplation of the exceedingly deep history of this area, and go in search of the Lost World (really!) as one wanders the archaeological site.



Lost world sign © Gareth Thomson

We had the privilege of touring the fabulous site with Miguel, a gentleman whose Mayan roots connect him to the talented culture who began to build Tikal an astounding 2400 years ago.



Tikal pyramid © Gareth Thomson

The ancient Maya were superb astronomers, famous for their practice of aligning their buildings and streets with key astronomical directions, and there was a definite look of pride in Miguel's eye as he told the story of watching the winter solstice sunrise from the top of one Tikal pyramid – and observing how perfectly the sun lined up with an adjacent pyramid.



Miguel and Solstice © Gareth Thomson

Tikal had one more trick up its sleeve. Late one afternoon the light was fading fast as we exited the ruin site, when we noticed a local peering uncertainly into the bushes at the side of the trail. We had a strong flashlight, and its beam revealed that most mythical and revered of animals - a jaguar! - who strolled unconcerned into the woods as we gaped at it. The animal was spending time in the general area of the Ruin entrance, in search of the plentiful Whitetail deer, coati, and peccaries...



Jaguar in Tikal © Joachim Bertrands

Then it was back to Belize, and the wonderful Birds Eye View hotel on the shore of Crooked Tree lagoon. Our transition was a smooth and seamless one, although one of our guides did earn himself some bemused looks as, forgetting the fact he was back in English-speaking Belize, he launched into a spate of Spanish with the hotel staff! Everybody loves a boat trip, and our group was no exception. Local guy Rudy is an expert boatman and equally expert birder, and our tour of the bird rich lagoon gave us great looks at Black-Collared Hawks and Snail Kites perched obligingly on snags, with the kites soared around our heads in their search for their favourite food, the apple snail.



Boat trip in Belize © LS Crosby



Black-collared Hawk © Joachim Bertrands



Snail Kite with snail © Joachim Bertrands



Aplomado Falcon © Joachim Bertrands

We had a good fortune with much more elusive quarry, too. Everybody birder knows the challenge of viewing members of the rail family, and we had the superb good luck of viewing two famously wary members of that family: the Yellow-Breasted Crake and the Ruddy Crake.



Yellow-breasted Crake © Joachim Bertrands

We had more than just birds to look at, though. On the water, several of us were lucky enough to see the rolling body of a manatee, a shy mammal that divides its time between fresh and saltwater, while on land, the nearby Crooked Tree reserve afforded us some great looks at the Yucatán Black Howler

Monkey. One of the many remarkable things our group saw was how a really good birding guide does their stuff; and at this point our story veers somewhat unexpectedly towards author Malcolm Gladwell and what he calls 'thin-slicing:' one's ability to use limited information from a very narrow period of experience to come to a conclusion. This concept applies to good birders. We've all birded with folk who catch just a glimpse of a part of the head, or just the tail, or a fragment of a call note, and - just like that - they call out the bird's name. The experience is nothing short of mystical. Eagle-Eye Tours hires many spectacularly good bird guides, and my fellow guide, Joachim Bertrands, was one such talent. A keen-eyed man, he once invoked wonder at his optometrist's office, because he could read every letter on the bottom line of the eye chart; and he invoked wonder on the trail, too, due to his 'thin-slicing' birding. I heard more than one muttered "How the HECK did he do that?" from our marvelling group; although the nearby Howler monkey, far more expert in this ecosystem than any human could hope to be, looked unimpressed...



Black Howler Monkey © Joachim Bertrands

[Belize & Tikal Birding Tour species list 2024](#)