Eagle-Eye Tours



Belize & Tikal Trip Report (Jan 28 - Feb 7, 2024)

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Guides: Jared Clarke & Alexander Alvarado Eleven excited birders took part in our second Belize & Tikal adventure this year, along with leaders Jared and Alex. Throughout our eleven days together (Jan 28 – Feb 7) we explored amazing and diverse habitats, hiked beautiful mountain trails, strolled ancient Mayan cities, experienced nature at its best and shared a wealth of wonderful birds and other wildlife.

January 28-29: Belize City & area

Our group met for dinner in beautiful Belize City and took a few minutes to 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 – Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, Morelet's Seedeater, Great-tailed Grackle and Tropical Kingbird just to name a few. We also encountered neotropical migrants that had recently journeyed south just like us – Northern Waterthrush, Yellow Warbler and Yellow-throated Warblers along with Wood Thrush and Orchard Orioles. We also enjoyed great views of several Cinnamon Hummingbirds – the only ones we would see during the trip. Before heading out of the city, we stopped to look for a very special and hard-to-find bird. Rufous-necked Wood-rail not only has a restricted range, it is also a tricky bird to spot as it skulks and sneaks through the dense mangroves – so we were thrilled when our persistence paid off and one stepped into the limelight for a few short seconds. A lifer for the entire group!



Rufous-necked Wood-Rail © Jared Clarke

Lunch at Black Rock Lodge was as notable for the birds as it was the great food. The fruit feeders were busy with colourful birds like Yellow-winged Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper and both Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias. Two White Hawk sat atop the ridge overlooking the lodge, while an Ornate Hawk-Eagle soared briefly overhead.



Yellow-throated Euphonia © Jared Clarke



Yellow-winged Tanager © Jared Clarke

Crossing the border into neighbouring Guatemala, we made our way to Tikal and our home for the next few days. We started birding that very night, enjoying a Mottled Owl as it popped in to check us out right on the hotel grounds.

January 30 – February 1: Tikal National Park

Tikal National 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 millenium until its abandonment ~900AD and had a peak population of nearly 100,000 people.



Birding in Tikal National Park © Jared Clarke

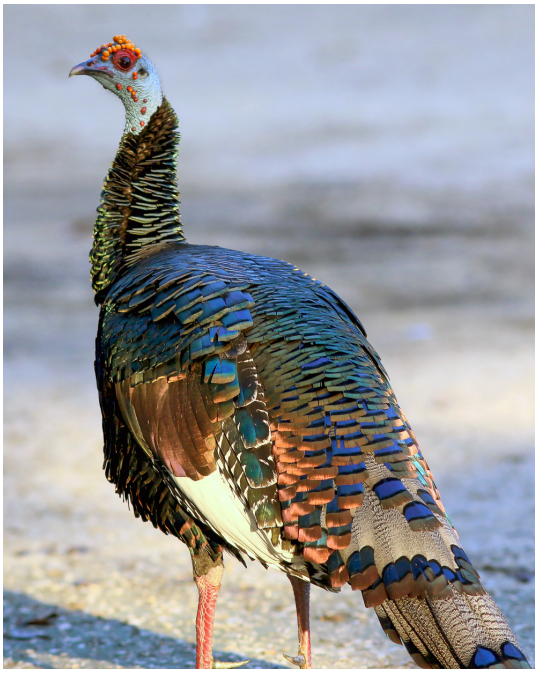
While it may be most famous for its ancient Mayan ruins, Tikal National Park also protects a huge swath of pristine rainforest and is one of the best birding destinations in Central America. Strolls along the park's many trails produced great looks at prized species such as Great Curassow, Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Red-lored Parrot, Slaty-tailed Trogon, White-necked Puffbird, Mayan Antthrush, Gray-throated Chat and Black-throated Shrike-Tanager 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. We also discovered a Northern Potoo roosting quietly 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 Miguel – an iconic and very memorable encounter with such a special bird!



Keel-billed Toucan © Jared Clarke



Mayan Antthrush © Jared Clarke



Ocellated Turkey © Jared Clarke



Collared Aracari © Jared Clarke

We also took advantage of the beautiful evening weather to do some after-dark exploring. Dusk at a nearby pond was especially exciting as dozens of Boat-billed Herons squawked and squabbled in preparation for their nocturnal forays, a Bat Falcon entertained us as it swooped and dove at dragonflies right in front of our faces, and a much anticipated Agami Heron appeared out of nowhere and sat for incredible views. With lots of patience, we were even able to glimpse a very

secretive Middle-American Screech Owl along the very dark trail.

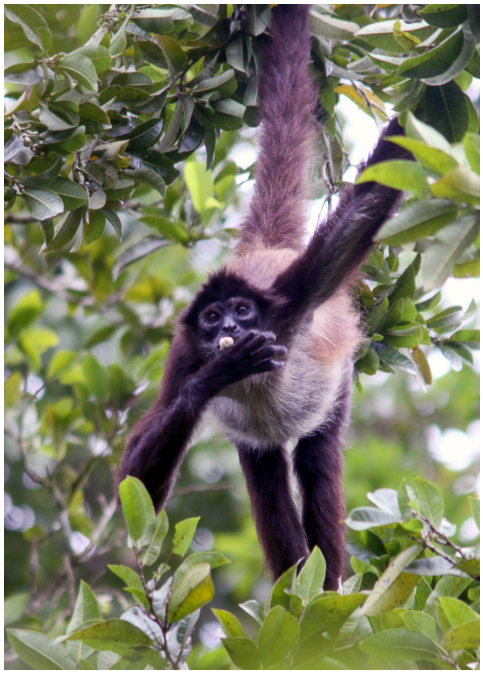


Boat-billed Heron © Jared Clarke

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 and at times even dropping fruit on our heads. Other non-avian highlights included Morelet’s Crocodile, Black Howler Monkeys and White-nosed Coati.



Morelet's Crocodile © Jared Clarke



Spider Monkey © Jared Clarke



Coati at Tikal © Alex Alvarado

February 2-4: Jade Jungle Lodge

Heading back to the border, we stopped at the Melchor wetlands which were alive with birds. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Blue-winged Teals, American Coots, Common & Purple Gallinules, Limpkins and herons & egrets galore were dotted throughout the ponds and marshes. We spotted our only Roseate Spoonbill of the trip sitting atop a tree, and a secretive Sora skulking along the waters edge. Back in Belize, our home for the next few days was Jade Jungle Lodge (formerly Pook's Hill) in the foothills of the Maya Mountains. 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 Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Band-backed Wren, Blue Ground Dove, Crimson-collared Tanager and three species of trogon. Harder to spot, but just as exciting when we did, were forest-dwellers like Northern Bentbill, Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Dusky Antbird and Stub-tailed Spadebill. Perhaps the stars of the show, though, were a pair of Spectacled Owl that liked to hang out near the lodge – heard every night, and expertly spotted one morning along the newly constructed canopy walk. We also heard Central American Pygmy Owl taunting us from the treetops, but were never able to spot this tiny hunter.



Gartered Trogon © Jared Clarke



Red-capped Manakin © Jared Clarke



Birding on Canopy Walk © Jared Clarke



Spectacled Owl © Jared Clarke

Those who came out after dark to enjoy some night walks were thrilled to find critters such as Mexican Tree Porcupine, Red-rumped Tarantula, Black Scorpion and Vaillant's Frog among others. Several beautiful species of snake were encountered including Cat-eyed, Milk (False Coral), Parrot and Black-tailed Indigo Snakes.



Mexican Tree Porcupine © Jared Clarke



Cat-eyed Snake © Jared Clarke

A day trip to Mountain Pine Ridge provided a stark change of habitat, and with it some new and exciting birds. Our time scanning for raptors at the famous Slate Creek Overlook paid off with as many as five King Vultures, four White Hawks, two Great Black Hawks and a couple Bat Falcons along with the regulars. We shared lunch at the Rio On Pools, where we also lucked into a very cooperative Rusty Sparrow, Grace's Warbler, Thick-billed Seedfinch and Golden-Olive Woodpecker among others. After lunch we visited the Green Hills Butterfly Ranch where we found 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 explored the Mennonite village of Spanish Lookout where we spied gems such as Eastern Meadowlark and Vermilion Flycatchers on farm fences, American Kestrel hunting over the fields, and Ringed & Green Kingfishers in a settling pond. Along the river we spotted Amazon Kingfisher, Couch's Kingbird and mixed flock of warblers including Blue-winged, American Redstart and Northern Parula. The highlight, however, was no doubt our stop at a local (and very well known) ice cream shop.



Birding at Rio On Pools (Mountain Pine Ridge) © Jared Clarke



King Vulture © Jared Clarke



Rusty Sparrow © Jared Clarke



Wedge-tailed Sabrewing © Jared Clarke



Black-throated Mango © Jared Clarke

February 5-7: Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary

Heading northeast, we stopped briefly at a shrimp farm where the dried out ponds hosted a variety of shorebirds including Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet and Western Willets among others. A Northern Shoveler was a surprise find, while two Fork-tailed Flycatchers performing aerial acrobatics was a fan favourite. Our next destination was the Birds Eye View Lodge in Crooked Tree, where we spent the last few days of our adventure. This lovely Creole community is surrounded by a large lagoon and expansive wetlands and simply abounding with birdlife. The lodge and surrounding grounds themselves provided lots of great birding and photography opportunities. Swarms of Mangrove Swallows and Gray-breasted Martins zipped around, four species of oriole (Hooded, Orchard, Baltimore and Black-cowled) were visiting flowering bushes, brilliant Vermilion Flycatchers flitted along the fenceline, and both Ruddy & Common Ground Doves strutted along the roadside. A Canivet's Emerald stood out among several species of hummingbirds, Common Tody Flycatchers skulked in the hedges, and several mixed flocks provided plenty of entertainment as we worked to pick out a diversity of migrant warblers and resident songbirds. There was never a dull moment – *unless* one wanted to sit and relax in this gorgeous setting, which there was also plenty of opportunity to do ;)



Vermillion Flycatcher © Jared Clarke



Canivet's Emerald © Jared Clarke Boat tours of the lagoon and creeks are always a highlight here, and we enjoyed two! We spotted dozens of Northern Jacana, White Ibis, Wood Stork, Limpkin, Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga and nine species of heron as we meandered down the waterways. Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers hunted along the water's edge, and we watched our first Boat-billed Flycatchers of the trip calling from the treetops. Black-collared Hawks and Snail Kites were among the numerous raptors we encountered. Water levels were higher than average for this time of year, meaning that "some" birds were destined to elude us but we were also able to enjoy other species that wouldn't have been possible with lower water. The most exciting of these was a Yellow-breasted Crake - a tiny and very secretive bird that shirked its reputation and stalked into the open for just a few seconds

providing a lifer for the entire group! Keen eyes also spied a Sungrebe sneaking through the mangroves – another exciting find that everyone eventually saw with a little time & patience. Hikes through the nearby pine-oak savannah were also very productive, including regional specialties such as Aplomado Falcon, Yellow-lored Parrot, Yellow-headed Parrot, Yucatan Jay, and Yucatcan Woodpecker. What a wonderful place to clue up our visit!



Boat tour © Alex Alavardo



Black-collared Hawk © Jared Clarke



Yellow-headed Parrot © Jared Clarke



Yucatan Jay © Jared Clarke



Yucatan Woodpecker © Jared Clarke



Yellow-breasted Crake © Jared Clarke

The sun set on another fantastic Eagle-Eye Tours adventure. Our group had an excellent time, finding ~270 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!



Birding group in Belize

Belize & Tikal 2024 species list