

# Southern Belize: Pristine and Wild | Trip Report

February 19 – March 1, 2019 | Written by Bob Meinke



## Tuesday, February 19 | Early Arrivals, Transfer to Crooked Tree

Bob, Kelly, Joe, and Isaac arrived a day ahead of the official start date for the pre-tour extension and were met at Philip Goldson International Airport by our driver from Crooked Tree Lodge. It was mid-afternoon, and we were soon on our way to the small, rural settlement of Crooked Tree, situated about an hour's drive northwest of Belize City. Crooked Tree is believed to have been the earliest inland settlement in Belize (known at the time as British Honduras), originally established for timber exporting. Great-tailed Grackle, Tropical Kingbird, Black and Turkey Vultures, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and Cattle Egret were among the first species we spotted as we drove out from the airport.



Our accommodations in Crooked Tree were split between Crooked Tree Lodge and the nearby Beck's Bed and Breakfast, both small, well-kept establishments with nicely appointed rooms, comfortable public areas, and very obliging staff. Our activities (including all meals, birding, and social time) were being coordinated and hosted by Crooked Tree Lodge, and those of us staying at Beck's (Bob and Kelly) were shuttled over to the lodge each morning to spend the day with the rest of the group.

Village residents today chiefly subsist on fishing, farming (mostly cashews, oranges, and mangoes), and tourism, the latter largely based on the wildlife viewing and outstanding birding available in the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (CTWS), a mosaic of lagoons, channels, wetland-savannah, and pine and broadleaf woodlands that surrounds the local area. Encompassing about 25 square miles, CTWS was established in 1984, and was the first government-sanctioned wildlife sanctuary in Belize. Despite its status as a world-class birding destination, we were pleasantly surprised to have the area largely to ourselves during our stay (except for the local residents, of course), with very few other outside visitors present and minimal traffic on the roads.

After a glass of juice (or two!) and getting settled in, we were anxious to explore the immediate area near Crooked Tree Lodge. The lodge compound abuts a secondary tropical hardwood forest, and also features littoral habitats that line the edge of the lagoon fronting the property. Joe quickly pointed out a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture circling overhead, and we soon picked up Ringed and Green Kingfishers sitting attentively at a nearby pond. Along the margins of the lagoon were Spotted Sandpiper, White Ibis, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, and Limpkin (whose quavering wail would be heard repeatedly, especially at dawn and dusk). Easily observable resident birds on the lodge grounds were Great Kiskadee, Tropical Mockingbird, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, and Social Flycatcher, while the first migrant species we noticed were American Redstart and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.

As the afternoon light waned, we spent a few minutes more birding the hedgerows near the lodge entrance, where we heard (and eventually located) Common Tody-Flycatcher, White-bellied Wren, and Morelet's Seedeater, and also observed several Groove-billed Anis as they settled in for the evening. We would shortly be



doing the same, and after a pleasant family style dinner at Crooked Tree Lodge, we all got better acquainted with our quarters and were soon fast asleep.

## **Wednesday, February 20 | Crooked Tree: Local Birding at the Lodge, Beth and Cindy Arrive**

Joe and Isaac were up early and birding the lodge property ahead of Bob and Kelly's arrival for breakfast, eager to add to our growing species list. Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Little Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Snail Kite, and Glossy Ibis were all busy along the edge of the lagoon, and Gray Catbird (very common), Clay-colored Thrush, White-tipped Dove, Magnolia Warbler, and Northern Waterthrush were stirring under the trees. Bob and Kelly soon popped in, and after some highly anticipated coffee and an excellent breakfast (English, but with plenty of fresh fruit!), we headed out on foot with our local guide (Rubin) for our morning birding foray.

It looked to be a warm day ahead, but our planned early start would help to mitigate that. Acorn Woodpeckers were busy, flocks of Olive-throated Parakeets whisked overhead (along with occasional pairs of beautiful Yellow-headed Parrots), and Green-breasted Mango (females), Common Tody-Flycatcher, and Mangrove Vireo were all active in the low brush as we departed the lodge grounds. We followed a meandering course away from the lodge, along quiet village roads, spending the better part of the morning walking among flowering orange groves and cashew orchards, and stopping now and then in residential gardens.

The number of North American migrants along our route was especially noteworthy, and it's always fascinating to see so many of these species here together as they get ready for their journeys north to their temperate nesting grounds. Often in mixed flocks, most of the migrants were already in, or approaching, full breeding plumage. Included were Baltimore, Hooded, and Orchard Orioles, Summer Tanager, Gray Catbird, Yellow-throated Vireo, Wood Thrush, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Parula, American Redstart, and Magnolia, Black-and-white, and Tennessee Warblers. The always vocal Melodious Blackbird was a common resident species throughout Crooked Tree, as were Bronzed Cowbird, Gray-breasted Martin, Yellow-throated



Euphonia, Tropical Pewee, and a Central American subspecies of House Wren. We also had quick looks at Golden-fronted Woodpecker, an immature Roadside Hawk, and a stunning Lineated Woodpecker as we walked.

Towards the end of our stroll we stopped for some shade in a lovely garden at the home of our guide, where Rubin showed us a range of fruits and vegetables he was growing (including some excruciatingly hot peppers!), as well as several beautiful orchid and cactus species. It was a classic Caribbean garden, complete with an enormous Mango tree that concealed several squabbling Plain Chachalacas and a shy Keel-billed Toucan. Further scrutiny revealed Blue-gray Tanager, a pair of Black-headed Trogons, both Yellow-throated and Scrub Euphonias, Couch's Kingbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Red-lore Parrot, plus several of the warbler species we'd seen earlier. We could have watched that tree all day!

With a very productive morning under our belts, we returned to the lodge for lunch, and most of us then took the opportunity to relax and cool off. Kelly however, largely immune to the effects of heat and humidity, went wandering the grounds and soon spotted our first endemic of the trip, the diminutive Yucatan (or Red-vented) Woodpecker, balancing out on the ends of slender twigs (much as our Downey Woodpecker does at home)! Always good to nail down a target species so quickly! Meanwhile, Cindy and Beth, the last of our 6-person contingent on the Crooked Tree extension, arrived at the lodge mid-afternoon. They were understandably in need of a break from traveling, so stayed behind to decompress a bit, as the rest of us took Mick (the lodge owner) up on his kind offer to drop us for a short hike along the lagoon a couple miles to the south.

We walked through a dense patch of secondary forest and mangrove, which included a convenient boardwalk, and quickly located two more winter resident migrants, Prothonotary and Blue-winged Warblers – both real beauties! We then managed to coax a recalcitrant Spot-breasted Wren into the open, seldom an easy task. But the most memorable episode of the afternoon came soon after, when a Jabiru Stork materialized out of nowhere, soaring up and over the vegetation directly in front of us, only to immediately swoop down to just a few feet above our heads as it focused on a landing point somewhere to our rear. The stork's flight plan was evidently locked in as it came over the mangroves, and the bird appeared as stunned as we were when it saw us standing in the way. Isaac tried to swing his camera into position, but sadly to no avail, as the Jabiru quickly corrected course and vanished. Another unforeseen photo op gone like a puff of smoke!

As we wandered back along the trail, we picked up our first Northern Jacana. And then while waiting for our ride to the lodge, Joe drew our attention to a Tricolored Heron rising from the edge of the lagoon's northern causeway, while a lone Green Heron was seen skulking nearby. We were soon back at Crooked Tree Lodge for dinner and happy hour, where we went over our group species list for the first time, and got better acquainted with Beth and Cindy, all while congratulating ourselves on a fine, first full day in Belize. And there was plenty more to come.



## Thursday, February 21 | Amphibious Birding on the Lagoon, Additional Birding Around Crooked Tree Lodge

After a comfortable night, our group (now complete) gathered at 6:00 AM for coffee and breakfast. Today we would be out on the water, always the highlight of a stay at Crooked Tree. Our guide from the previous day, Rubin, would be with us again, and we were soon down at the dock

ready to embark. A superlative guide on water as well as land, Rubin quickly had us slipping through the placid lagoon to see what we could find. First up were Black Vultures congregating along the shoreline, and a Black-cowled Oriole in the trees, a beautiful resident species (we had seen three migrant orioles the day before). Its bright yellow plumage was a bit reminiscent of Scott's Oriole in the U.S. After a Yellow Warbler and a flyover Pale-vented Pigeon put in appearances, we had unexpectedly good looks at American Pygmy Kingfisher, an exquisite, sparrow-sized species that typically sits just above the water, often semi-concealed in dense brush. Seldom expected, it's always a pleasure to run across one.

It should be pointed out that although our boat was powered, for much of the time Rubin declined to use the motor, and instead *poled* us silently through the shallow water. With six people plus himself on board, it was a bit of an effort, but this brought us within close range of species like the kingfisher, which otherwise would have been difficult to see well. We really appreciated it. This also permitted detailed study of the many aquatic plants on the water surface, a number of which were in flower. Although we didn't cover as much area as we might have otherwise, the slower pace allowed for a much better look at the biodiversity of the lagoon.

Continuing along, we came across several flocks of ducks, the only large aggregations of ducks we would see on the tour. It was a mixed gathering of Fulvous and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, the former species, in particular,





not common in Belize (and the coloration of the Black-bellied is just stunning). Mangrove Swallow, Neotropic Cormorant, and Snail Kite were common here, and Osprey and Caspian Tern were fishing nearby. And although not as dramatic as the previous day, we also got reasonable looks at a Jabiru, which allowed us to attempt a few photographs (albeit from a distance). Amazon Kingfisher was also spotted on the far side of the lagoon (near the Jabiru), as well as a wide array of waders, most of which we had previously seen close to the lodge.

We completed our cruise by late morning, allowing time to relax, check e-mail, etc., before lunch. The afternoon was then on our own. Bob took anyone who might be interested around the lodge grounds, hoping to relocate the Yucatan Woodpecker previously observed by Kelly.



No such luck on the woodpecker, but we did briefly hear a Barred Antshrike well off the trail on the far side of the property, a bird most of the group had never seen. Barred Antshrikes will sometimes respond to playback, but as with other species the question always arises, when should you use it? In this case, we were nearing the breeding season for Barred Antshrikes in Belize, so we decided to be judicious and play just a few seconds. The calling bird was deep in the underbrush and initially seemed unresponsive. But as we were about to move on, a beautiful male settled in immediately above our heads. And it would not shut up. It scolded us at close range for a good 15 minutes before, apparently satisfied, finally returning to the bush. About that time a female Barred Antshrike showed up to see what the fuss was about, then quickly flew off. So, while

we did get fantastic views of both male and female, it was a good reminder to consider when and if playback is a suitable option. For whatever reason, we clearly exceeded the comfort level of these particular birds.

Moving to another area, we continued to take advantage of the shade, and picked up a nice array of forest birds, including Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Black-headed Saltator, Rufous-browed Peppershrike (we had brief but clear views of this generally reclusive canopy species), and yet more Gray Catbirds. It was late afternoon by this point, and we soon convened back at the lodge for our species list review, some conversation, and dinner. Tomorrow would be our last day at Crooked Tree.

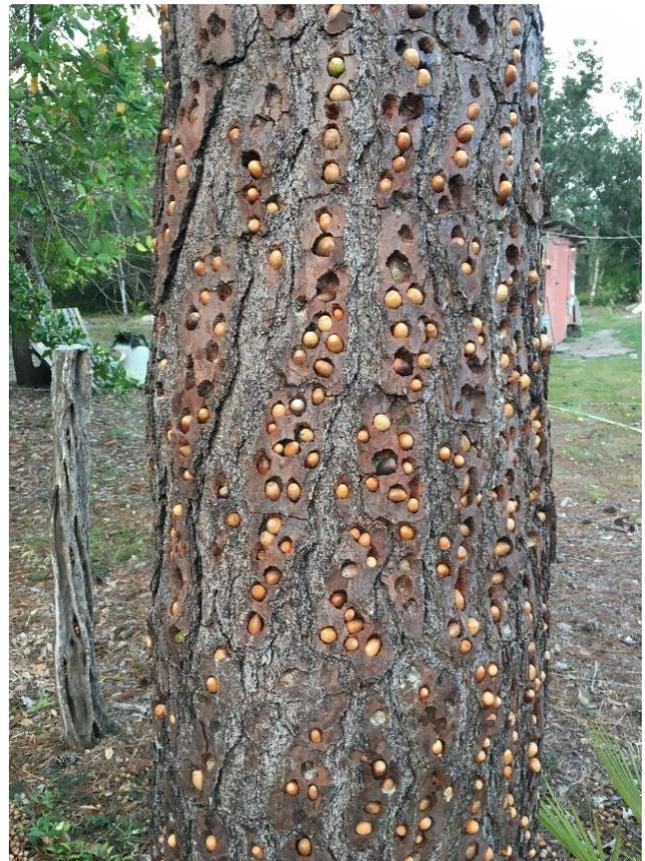
## Friday, February 22 | Pine-Oak Savannah Birding, Transfer to Hidden Valley Inn and Mountain Pine Ridge

We were still missing some important Yucatan endemics, and our goal this morning was to try and locate one or more of these before leaving Crooked Tree today. Switching things up, Cindy, Beth, Isaac, and Joe joined Bob and Kelly for coffee at Beck's Bed and Breakfast, which is surrounded by a sandy, pine-oak savannah habitat. The area is characterized by Caribbean Pine (*Pinus caribaea*), Encina (*Quercus oleoides*, a type of white oak), Craboo (*Byrsonima crassifolia*), and Calabash (*Crescentia cujete*), and supports a somewhat different assemblage of birds than the hardwood-mangrove scrub near Crooked Tree Lagoon.

Bob had asked Robert at Beck's B&B to serve as our morning guide. Before leaving for our savannah birding, we took time to watch the feeders at Beck's, where we spotted both Cinnamon and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Green-breasted Mango, White-winged and White-tipped Doves, Brown Jay, Black-cowled Oriole, and Chipping Sparrow (the latter a Central American resident subspecies that is partial to the Caribbean Pine savannah). Two additional North American breeding warblers that only spend their winters in Belize (Black-throated Green and Hooded) were also briefly observed as we left the property.

We were soon out walking the trails with Robert, and quickly located Grace's Warbler in the pines. While also a breeder in the pine forests of the Southwest U.S., these birds represent a disjunct resident population of the species in Belize. Both Golden-fronted and Acorn Woodpecker were working the oak trees (the latter responsible for some amazing acorn caches on the trunks), Vermillion and Fork-tailed Flycatchers were perched prominently nearby, and groups of White-fronted and Yellow-headed Parrots were observed calling loudly overhead.

Our first real breakthrough of the morning came soon into the walk, when we heard several noisy Yucatan Jays (picture on front cover page) moving between the trees just off the trail. The birds eventually came closer in, and we had excellent looks at several of them, including at least one white-headed juvenile. This was high on our wish list of endemic species. Moving further into the oak scrub, we found several warblers we had seen previously, additional Vermillion Flycatchers, and a mottled, first-year Summer Tanager. In the sandy soil we could see tracks of Coati and White-tailed Deer. Our second target species for the morning appeared when a *Myiarchus*-type flycatcher was spotted, hawking for





insects along a fallen log. After some careful consideration, we identified it as the endemic Yucatan Flycatcher, largely based on the rich rufous crown and the call, and Robert agreed. We were fortunate to pick up this range-restricted species just minutes before the end of the walk!

We then returned for an early lunch at Crooked Tree Lodge and departed mid-day to connect with the four members of the group who were joining us today for the start of the main tour. We met up with Richelle, Nancy, Lenore, and Harold at a rendezvous point north of Belize City, and transferred to their vehicle, which was owned by Hidden Valley Inn (our next destination, located high on the Mountain Pine Ridge of south-central Belize). Our time at Crooked Tree was very well-spent, and the facilities and staff there were outstanding. Now we looked forward to the next phase of the trip.

We drove directly to Hidden Valley, requiring about three hours on the road, save for a quick stop at The Orange Gallery (a roadside souvenir shop not far from our turnoff into the mountains) for a restroom break and cold drinks. The

flowering trees out front are always good for Olive-throated Parakeets this time of year (picture on front cover page), and Lenore broke out her long lens to get some shots. A couple Baltimore Orioles added some color, but we were quickly back on our way, glad to arrive at Hidden Valley before dark.

Set along the crest of the Mountain Pine Ridge, Hidden Valley Inn is truly a quality lodge, literally in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by lush ferns, epiphytes, and Caribbean Pine. We met the staff in the main lodge building soon after arriving, enjoyed a welcome drink and a quick introduction to what was in store for us, and were soon checked in. The cottages are superb, with hardwood floors, stylish furnishings and a fireplace (yes, you can occasionally need them here on cool evenings), and there is a beautiful pool just a few steps away. We looked forward to Hidden Valley Inn serving as our base for the next three nights. Once settled, most of us couldn't help taking a few minutes to scan the grounds before dinner. In no time we'd spotted Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Boat-billed Flycatcher, and a stunning Green Jay. A nice start!

With the sun setting, we soon convened in the dining room, where we met staff guide Marvin Ramirez, who would accompany us for the next three days at Hidden Valley. Hidden Valley Inn has a well-regarded kitchen, and our dinner was, as always, excellent. The skies were crystal clear as we walked back to our rooms, and with virtually no light pollution, the starlight was intense. We had a full day planned for tomorrow.

## **Saturday, February 23 | Morning Birding at Hidden Valley, King Vulture Overlook and Thousand-Foot Falls**



Hidden Valley Inn manages a large, private reserve (originally set up to facilitate the conservation of Oregon-breasted Falcon and other vulnerable species), which includes an extensive trail network that accesses the Caribbean Pine habitat surrounding the lodge complex. This allows for excellent birding very close to the rooms. The natural landscaping right on the lodge grounds also attracts a great number of bird species and other wildlife.

So, it was not surprising that most of the group was up and birding before breakfast. Yellow-tailed and Yellow-backed Orioles, two new species for the trip, were located in the trees near the cottages, as were Red-billed Pigeon,

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Clay-colored Thrush, Melodious Blackbird, Indigo Bunting, Hepatic Tanager, Black-headed Saltator, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. Ruddy Ground-Doves and Gray-chested Doves claimed the areas below the feeders, while Plain Chachalacas and Brown Jays made a mess of the fruit trays the minute they arrived. Smaller passerines such as Yellow-faced Grassquit, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher darted through the brush.

After an outstanding breakfast spread, with too many options to describe, we loaded up for a series of short jaunts today within the confines of Hidden Valley Reserve. Our first destination was a small reservoir about a mile from the lodge, a good place to check, considering it's one of very few open bodies of water in this area of the Mountain Pine Ridge. Two pairs of Least Grebes were swimming there, as well as a pair of Blue-winged Teals. The most peculiar find was an Anhinga, a coastal species that Marvin had never heard of occurring in the mountains before. It looked rather forlorn. In the scrub around the lake were a couple Yellow-bellied Elaenias, a Rusty Sparrow, scattered Tropical Kingbirds, and a Social Flycatcher, and soaring overhead were several elegant Swallow-tailed Kites, which had only recently arrived from their wintering grounds further south.

We then drove over to King Vulture Overlook, a precipitous vantage point above a steep gorge, not far from the lodge. This is one of two reasonably reliable sites for Orange-breasted Falcon in the area, one of the rarest falcon species in the world. Marvin was indeed able to point out falcons perched on a cliff face not far from where we could safely stand, but the angle was definitely not the best. While it was tempting to try and work your way out to get a better look, no one really wanted to make the headlines as the American tourist who plunged into a chasm while teetering on one foot, trying to spot a bird. With that in mind, we made do with the views we had, which weren't terrible, by the way, just not optimal.





We then turned our attention to the namesake species for the site, the King Vulture. Far across the gorge, near an extensive area of seeps visible with our binoculars (generously referred to as a waterfall), were two or three perched vultures, really only visible due to their bright white plumage. Marvin set up his scope, but even with that it was difficult to see much detail. We hoped we could do better with this species later on in the trip. Meanwhile, as we struggled with concealed falcons and distant vultures, Kelly tried to draw our attention to a nearby flock of Black-headed Siskins, just behind us! Few of us saw them, however, but perhaps we'd have another chance.

After lunch we took a short break, then ventured out again mid-afternoon to Thousand Foot Falls, the highest waterfall in Central America. The name is inaccurate, as it turns out, but perhaps Thousand Foot just has a better ring to it than Sixteen-Hundred Foot Falls, which is the actual height. Orange-breasted Falcon was here, as well, but once again the views weren't particularly good. We did have nice looks at White-collared Swift, however, and a singing Rusty Sparrow. And on the way back, we stopped briefly at a trailhead and ended up agonizingly close to seeing a Royal Flycatcher, which was vocalizing very close to us in the understory. Unable to get a visual after considerable effort, we had to settle for its song.



We returned to the lodge in time for happy hour and a review of our steadily expanding species list, and then met with Marvin to discuss our options for the following day. We would have two vehicles and two choices: (1) take an all-day excursion to the renowned Caracol Mayan site, roughly two hours southwest of Hidden Valley along the Guatemalan border, or (2) drive to Barton Creek Cave, about 60 minutes to the north, for a chance to explore the cave by canoe. Both trips would include birding along the way and at the site. Either trip was tempting, and we would give it some thought. Meanwhile, dinner was ordered, and soon after we were relaxing in our rooms.

## **Sunday, February 24 | Caracol Mayan Ruins and Birding, Green Hills Butterfly Ranch and Barton Creek Cave Canoeing**

After sleeping on the difficult choice for today's activity, exactly half the group (Isaac, Lenore, Harold, Richelle, and Nancy) elected to go down to the historic ruins at Caracol, while Joe, Cindy, Beth, Kelly, and Bob chose Barton Creek Cave. You really couldn't go wrong either way, and it was nice the group split so evenly, which then allowed for plenty of room in each vehicle. Both vans



departed about 7:00 AM, and were soon headed in opposite directions, but not before we spotted a brightly plumaged Rufous-capped Warbler just beyond the lodge entrance.

*[Note: The author of this report could only be in one place at a time, so the description of today's events, by default, will mostly focus on the Barton Creek Cave group that he accompanied.]*

As luck would have it, the Barton Creek Cave group was in for an unexpected bonus. When we were first driving up to Hidden Valley the day before, Bob noticed a truck belonging to the Green Hills Butterfly Ranch along the road. Green Hills, an anticipated birding stop for many years, had ceased operations sometime earlier, and to our knowledge (and disappointment) was no longer accepting visitors. But after spotting the truck, Bob checked with Hidden Valley staff, and they confirmed that Green Hills had, in fact, just recently re-opened for business. This was great news, and we arranged to stop on the way to the cave.

Green Hills offers the chance to see a number of eye-catching butterflies being raised, which are ultimately sold to schools, artisans, biological supply companies, etc. There are mixed opinions on the suitability of trafficking in native butterflies, even farm-raised, though at the very least, this approach allows for sustainable harvest and avoids the collection of specimens from the wild. That said, it's sort of hard to complain about what they do. And of course, the other reason to stop here is the birds. In addition to the butterfly operation, the ranch property is also a preserve, dedicated to managing the biodiversity of roughly 100 acres of largely untouched tropical forest. And they also just happen to have by far the best hummingbird feeder array in the area—so when Green Hills closed, it was a significant loss to birders.

So, yes, we had a peek at the butterflies. But for the most part, the birds took front and center for our group. Fifteen species of hummingbirds have been recorded here over the years, and the Green Hills website suggests that seeing six species is often possible during any given stop, either at the feeders or in the forest. *We found ten.* Included were White-necked Jacobin, Long-billed Hermit, Purple-crowned Fairy, Green-breasted Mango, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Violet Sabrewing (*the most striking hummingbird in Belize*), White-bellied Emerald, Azure-crowned Hummingbird (surprising, since these are usually higher in the mountains), and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. A very nice total.

Satisfied with the hummingbirds, we headed out on the trails to see what else we could find. Several more North American breeding species were in evidence as they readied for migration, the most common being Chestnut-sided Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Ovenbird. A pair of beautiful male and female Slaty-tailed Trogons were also seen, as well as a male Black-headed Trogon. And passing a shallow, damp depression under a break in the forest canopy, we spotted an American Pygmy Kingfisher perched in the open on a dry twig! An unexpected species deep in the forest. Red-throated Ant Tanagers (male and female) were also seen working in the understory, Dusky-capped and Brown-crested Flycatchers were heard (and seen) in the subcanopy, a Lineated Woodpecker was drumming, and several Red-legged Honeycreepers were quite active. As we broke

out into the open along the forest edge, we also spotted Tropical Pewee, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Boat-billed Flycatcher, and a Black Hawk-Eagle! A very productive walk.

Just before leaving Green Hills, Joe and Bob spotted a confused Grayish Saltator engaging in combat with its reflection, in the side mirror of an old truck, behavior that's also been reported for Pyrrhuloxia in Arizona (maybe we need a study on the role of abandoned vehicle mirrors in the reduction of breeding efficiency for certain male birds). And we all had a clear view of a first-of-season (for Marvin) Plumbeous Kite, as it flew above us across the car park, flashing its distinctive gray and cinnamon plumage. It was so fortunate that Green Hills had reopened, we'll hope to visit it again on future trips.

We continued on to Barton Creek Cave, stopping briefly along an open field where we spotted Blue-black Grassquit and Variable Seedeater foraging for grass seed. Joe and Bob decided to forego the canoe ride into the

cave and opted for more birding instead. As it turned out, it wasn't a well-considered choice. The mouth of the cave is a nesting site for Ridgway's Swallow, a unique, endemic subspecies of Northern Rough-Winged (considered by some to warrant full species status), but not much else was stirring. It was hot (Joe and Bob were now reconsidering their decision to skip the comforts of the cave), and birds were not very active. A Black Phoebe was seen, several unusually active Groove-billed Anis (typically known for their unhurried lifestyles) were busy pillaging a grassy field for insects, and there was also a nice King Vulture flyover. But after that, the prudent choice was to grab a Coke and sit under the trees and watch a couple of Brown Basilisks as they lounged creekside.



As Kelly, Beth, Cindy, and Marvin exited the cavern, it was clear they had a great time. Extolling the virtues of subterranean canoeing, they described the silence and refreshingly cool conditions in the cave, and the Mayan artifacts that were visible as they paddled along. Joe and Bob once again wondered about their choice for the afternoon, as they gratefully climbed into the air-conditioned van. Driving back up to Hidden Valley we got a nice look at a Gray Hawk, and also saw a Solitary Sandpiper (alone, appropriately enough) near a farm pond.

Arriving at the lodge, we met up with the Caracol group, who all had a

wonderful time at the ruins, which collectively comprise the most impressive Mayan site in Belize. A bird list was not kept, *per se*, but several interesting species were tallied, the highlight being Scarlet Macaw, really a nice find in the Caracol area. Other species of note included a probable Gray-headed Kite, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Mealy Parrot, Montezuma Oropendola, and Giant Cowbird (the latter an aggressive brood parasite known to lay their eggs in oropendola nests). Overall, an amazing day for both groups.

## Monday, February 25 | Herman's Blue Hole National Park, Transfer to The Lodge at Big Falls

Today we departed Hidden Valley for The Lodge at Big Falls, roughly four hours (driving time) to the south. After a final Hidden Valley breakfast (you really had to pace yourself with these, or you'd never manage lunch), we paid our bills (bar, laundry, etc.) and loaded up. Saying good-bye to us were our Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl friends that nest on the lodge grounds, as well as an unexpected pair of Crested Guans in the tree right by the van! We had to drag our cameras back out for those two!

While we could have conceivably squeezed the entire group into a single vehicle, Hidden Valley (whose staff would be driving us to Big Falls) kindly provided a club-cab truck for luggage, as well as a large van. Consequently, there was room for three passengers in the truck, allowing us to stretch out a bit in the van. This would be our longest day on the road, and to help break it up, we planned to stop at Herman's Blue Hole National Park. The park is located in the mountains along the Hummingbird Highway, normally about 90 minutes driving time from Hidden Valley. We were on the road by 8:00 AM, and with a couple breaks along the way (and a little road construction) arrived at about 10:30, just as a light rain came in.

We had time to walk to the "Blue Hole," the scenic swimming basin below a waterfall for which the park is named. Afterwards, we scattered along the park trails to bird, or relaxed at sheltered picnic tables where lunch (chicken, rice, and beans provided by Hidden Valley) would soon be available. A Giant Red-winged Grasshopper (*Tropidacris cristata*), at nearly four inches long one of the largest grasshoppers in the world, greeted us at our picnic shelter. Their hind legs are reportedly powerful enough to propel these enormous insects up to 20 times their body length. Astounding.

Nearby, the birding continued, as a Keel-billed Toucan slipped into the canopy, Black-cheeked Woodpeckers attended nest holes, several Red-ored Parrots cooperatively perched in the trees, and we finally got reasonable looks at a Squirrel Cuckoo. Our first Lesser Greenlets were here, as well, i.e., tiny vireos that we separated from the similar-appearing Tennessee Warblers that were also present, and a Worm-eating Warbler wandered the picnic area with a Northern Waterthrush. Overhead a single Broad-winged





Hawk flew by, a Wedge-tailed Sabrewing perched out on an open branch (once the sprinkles ceased), and Olivaceous and Wedge-billed Woodcreepers, the two smallest woodcreeper species in Belize, scurried up the tree trunks.

So, despite the showery conditions, the birds were quite active. In the deeper forest we found Red-throated Ant-Tanagers (male and female) sticking to the shadows, and Kelly and Joe located a motionless White-whiskered Puffbird on a vine. Kelly later nailed a Stub-tailed Spadebill, a tiny forest tyrannid with a distinctive facial mask, and Bob pointed out an Eye-

ringed Flatbill, another inconspicuous subcanopy flycatcher, known for its unremarkable plumage except for the conspicuous white eye-ring. And just before lunch, Marvin called us to a mixed species flock that included a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens (a sexually dimorphic species, with jet-black males and deep rufous females), White-eyed Vireo, and a furtive Long-billed Gnatwren. With patience, most of the group saw all three species.

We were back on the road by 1:00 PM, expecting to arrive in Big Falls well before dark. Big Falls is a tiny, simple village on the Southern Highway, about 30 minutes northwest of Punta Gorda. The Lodge at Big Falls is set off the highway along the Rio Grande, a slow-moving river which encircles the property. Driving down the unassuming dirt track and into the lodge for the first time, you're unprepared for the setting—a large, manicured central lawn, a secluded pool to one side, beautifully constructed cabañas on the other, and a centralized main lodge building, all surrounded by tropical hardwood forest full of birds. A much different setting than Hidden Valley, yet every bit as charming, with lovely accommodations and an enthusiastic staff.

After check-in, we settled into chairs on the verandah overlooking the lawn, and watched Central American Agoutis pilfer fallen fruit from the bird feeders. The last of the Blue-Gray Tanagers, Clay-colored Thrushes, Buff-throated Saltators, and Northern Waterthrushes were settling in for the night, while a Blue Ground-Dove cooed in the distance. Following some refreshment and a species list discussion, we headed inside for dinner. There was eventually some debate over which lodge (Hidden Valley versus Big Falls) served us the best meals, and most were in agreement that it was essentially a dead heat (in other words, both were outstanding).

During dinner we met Steve Choco, the staff guide at Big Falls, who would work with us during our visit, and Rob Hirons, the lodge owner (and passionate birder), who moved to Belize from the UK years ago, to open his ecolodge in perhaps the best area for birds in southern Belize. Steve, recipient of the Bird Guide of the Year award from the Belize Tourism Board two years earlier, reviewed our schedule for the next three days. We were then off to our rooms, followed by the eerie calls of Common Pauraque and Black-and-White Owl as they echoed across the lodge compound.

## Tuesday, February 26 | Local Birding at Big Falls, Birding Riparian Forest Near Blue Creek Village

With a new environment to explore, most of the group was up early to walk the areas outside their cabañas or venture out on one of the short trails that wind toward the nearby Rio Grande. Spot-breasted Wren and White-breasted Wood-Wren were among the first birds to begin calling, and a brilliant Scarlet-rumped Tanager was an early visitor to the fruit feeder. As the sky brightened, Red-lored Parrots and Short-billed Pigeons swarmed the trees, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds commandeered the feeders, and Brown Jays and Plain Chachalacas moved in from the forest edge. Everything was coming out at once, but coffee and breakfast were ready and waiting. We'd be back out birding with Steve very shortly.

For the rest of the morning, we would explore the lodge grounds with Steve Choco. As far south as we now were in Belize, we were sure to see a number of birds we hadn't yet encountered. Steve was excited to start looking immediately for Bare-crowned Antbird, a cryptic forest-edge species that is occasionally seen on the lodge property. It is one of Belize's major rarities, and when Belizean bird guides want to find Bare-crowned Antbird, Big Falls is where they come. It had been spotted on site within the previous week, and Steve was confident. A distinctive species that stands out when seen well, both males (black) and females (a rich rufous and gray) are characterized by a bright blue patch of bare skin covering much of the face and crown. Steve tried a little playback, but there was no response. However, just as we moved ahead, a male bird abruptly appeared in a nearby thicket. Steve tried to get us into position, but regrettably, it never slowed enough for decent looks, and only a few in the group got a peek.



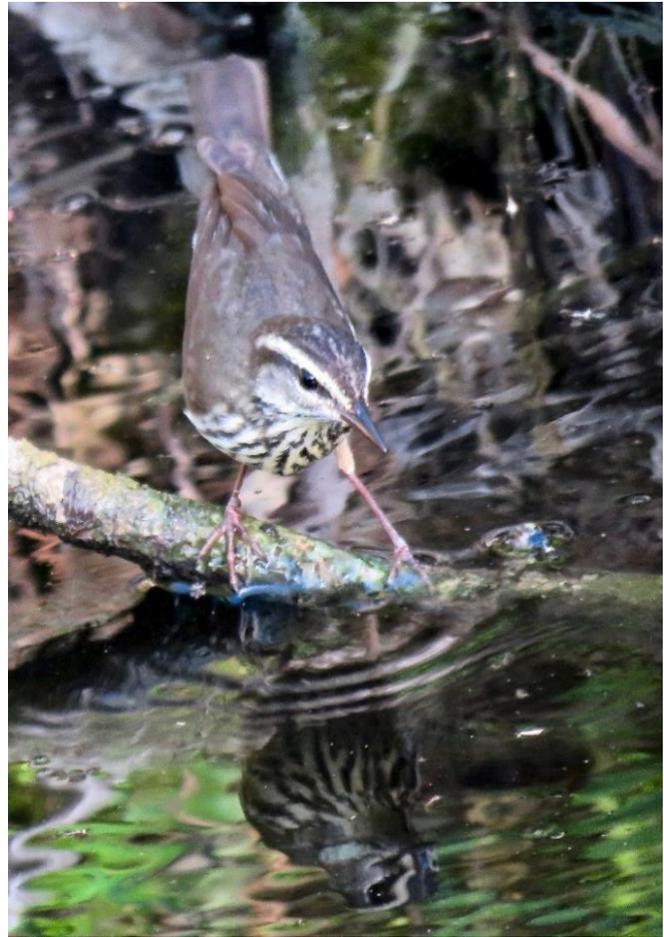
Just as the antbird left the scene, we all had lengthy looks at White-winged Becard, which had settled into the low canopy directly overhead – a nice consolation prize! More cooperative than the antbird, photographers in the group had an opportunity for close-up shots of the becard. We then set off across the lodge compound, skirting the forest edge and probing the understory as we went. Of particular interest were Black-headed Grosbeak, Yellow-winged Tanager, a lone Merlin sitting atop a snag, male and female White-collared Manikins, a beautiful Bright-rumped Atilla, a multi-colored pair of Golden-headed Tanagers, and Yellow-billed Cacique in the low brush. We also followed a vivid Crimson-collared Tanager, a close relative of Scarlet-rumped Tanager, as it moved between the trees.



Our afternoon was spent walking the forest along Blue Creek, a 40-minute drive south of Big Falls. After stopping for a perched Bat Falcon as we left the village, we spent a few minutes on the Southern Highway before turning off and following a gravel track to Blue Creek Village, traveling through tropical scrub and open pastureland along the way. Familiar birds such as Cattle Egret, Great-tailed Grackle, Tropical Kingbird, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Morelet's Seedeater, and Social

Flycatcher were common in this habitat, and we also caught glimpses of Eastern Meadowlark (a subspecies that is resident in Belize), Least Flycatcher, Collared Aracari, and a perched White-tailed Kite (thanks to Richelle's sharp eye!).

Arriving at Blue Creek, we slowly hiked up the riparian corridor, birding as we went. Both Amazon and Ringed Kingfishers were spotted patrolling the creek, and Long-billed Hermit, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, and White-bellied Emerald frequented areas of dappled sunlight along the trail. Blue Creek is known for its wintering populations of migratory warblers, and we spotted Chestnut-sided, Worm-eating, Hooded, Tennessee, and Magnolia Warblers here, as well as Louisiana Waterthrush and American Redstart. Overhead in the canopy we also managed to see Black-faced Grosbeak, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Masked Tityra, and Black-headed Trogon, while Tawny-crowned Greenlet and Ochre-breasted Flycatcher flitted through the understory. Despite it being mid-afternoon, our quiet walk along Blue Creek was ultimately quite productive.



We departed for Big Falls by 3:00 PM and briefly stopped at a wetland on the way back, listening for rails or crakes, but were greeted with nothing but silence. Not really a good time of day. However, as we pulled back on the road, we did see a Northern Harrier coursing over the marsh, which admittedly most of us initially shrugged our shoulders at. Whatever, right? But not Steve! He reminded us that this is a rare migrant species in Belize, and seldom seen in the south of the country. Local guides certainly have a way of helping you look past the obvious sometimes.

We had a couple hours of free time before dinner, and the pool looked pretty good to many of us. Others relaxed with a book or worked on their photos. As the temperature dipped and the shadows lengthened, Joe and Bob took a brief walk in the forest to end the day. It was shaping up to be uneventful until a small collection of ants, discovered underfoot near the entrance to the lodge property, soon morphed into a horde of thousands. And where there are Army Ants there are generally birds! Sure enough, as Joe and Bob shook their boots and quickly backpedaled, several species attracted to ant swarms swept in, including Tawny-winged and Streak-headed Woodcreepers, both Red-throated and Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers (not very often seen together), and a possible Dot-winged Antwren and Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher. Last, but definitely not least, a male Bare-crowned Antbird crept in at ground level, allowing clear, unobstructed views of the target species that had frustrated us earlier this morning. It was very unexpected, and a shame the rest of the group missed out!

After dinner we wandered over to the forest margin by the pool, where a Black-and-white Owl had been calling earlier. After briefly watching a Common Possum scramble up a tree, the owl coasted in and we had excellent spotlight views, courtesy of Steve Choco. An intriguing species, with its horizontal pinstripes and coal black eyes, it continued its cat-like mewing each night for the duration of our stay.

## Wednesday, February 27 | Early Birding at Nim Li Punit, Lunch at Coleman's Café, San Felipe Hills Birding

We were up early today for birding at the Nim Li Punit Mayan site, a 15-minute drive from the lodge, and were fortunate to have access to the site by 7:00 AM (ahead of its regular opening time). Nim Li Punit is a small and well curated site, but due to its location in southern Belize, it gets far less visitation than sites near the country's main tourist areas and population centers further north.

Except for the bird chatter and an occasional Deppe's Squirrel, Nim Li Punit was quiet during our visit, giving Steve the opportunity to provide an overview of the site and discuss the historic significance of the various structures present. The habitat here consisted largely of tall, old-growth hardwoods, with open understory near the monuments, and brush and tangles in other areas. We quickly spotted Rose-throated Becard, Golden-olive Woodpecker, and Gartered Trogon (our third species of trogon for the tour) and had a close view of a soaring Short-tailed Hawk as we stood at an overlook. Later, we spent time watching two Lineated Woodpeckers (our best views of the species on the trip), Ivory-billed and Streak-headed Woodcreepers, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Black-headed Saltator, Wilson's Warbler, and several Red-lored Parrots.



Nim Li Punit provided a nice morning with several new species, and we broke off a bit early to come back to Big Falls for lunch at Coleman's Café, a popular noon-time eatery not far from the lodge. With buckets of ice-cold limeade and an ample buffet, Coleman's is always a lunchtime highlight. Typically, a beef, chicken, rice, and vegetable affair, Coleman's was also offering Gibnut during our visit, a native, nocturnal rodent loosely related to Agouti, which is considered a local delicacy. Now unless you're reasonably familiar with the anatomy of large rodents, it's never really clear just what the pieces represent when you peer into a Gibnut pot. It's interesting how culturally attached one can get to recognizable cuts of meat...

After lunch we retired to the lodge for a couple hours during the mid-day heat, and then left for some afternoon birding in the San Felipe Hills, a short drive from Big Falls. We parked along a forest road and ventured past a gate and down a shaded path, and with the day still pretty warm, frankly didn't expect a lot of birding success. But we were pleasantly surprised when we heard and then actually had decent looks at a Black-faced Antthrush, a secretive, ground-dwelling species that's seldom seen well. A



great start! White-breasted Wood-Wren was next. We'd heard it's call emanating from the vines and tangles during much of the trip, and it finally made an appearance here. Yes!

We were now two-for-two on difficult-to-spot species! The Greenish Elaenia was next up, but sadly this bird wasn't having it, and despite its incessant (and perhaps mocking) vocalizations, only a couple of us managed to glimpse it as it stayed well hidden in the canopy. Yellow-olive Flycatcher, another new species for the trip, was then located nearby, as well as Ivory-billed Woodcreeper (for those who missed it at Nim Li Punit), White-whiskered Puffbird (for those who didn't see one at Blue Hole National Park), Montezuma Oropendola, and several Lesser Greenlets. It turned out to be a very pleasant walk with much to see.

Returning to the lodge, some of the group once again took advantage of the pool, while a few retired to their verandah with a cold beverage. A few others took an optional side trip to the nearby Belize Spice Farm and Botanical Garden. In addition to the many fascinating plants on the farm, they also spotted a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, sitting on a large nest! Wow!



And just before heading home for the evening, Steve suggested a spur-of-the-moment walk along his "antbird trail," a narrow forest path he first blazed at the lodge several years ago, which facilitates access to shy understory birds that are often heard but rarely seen. Unfortunately, our group had scattered by this point, so just four of us joined him. The path winds about a quarter mile through tangled brush and downed tree limbs near the lodge's riverfront, and initially we simply soaked in the sounds. Eventually, Spot-breasted Wren was one of the first birds we heard (and saw), and soon, as we very quietly moved forward, we also ran across Dusky Antbird, Green-backed Sparrow, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Great Antshrike, and Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher! Steve's trail clearly made it

easier to get close to the birds, especially with a small group. And although there were admittedly only narrow windows of visibility, with patience, we all had clear views of each species. This is a really nice addition to the lodge's birding options.

After dinner this evening we had a unique opportunity. Nancy had a device with her on the trip called an Echo Meter Touch 2 PRO Handheld Bat Detector, manufactured by Wildlife Acoustics (WA). WA describes the device as a "combination of hardware and software that lets you listen to, record, and identify bats in real-time, on your Android or Apple iOS device." Amazing! After recording the bat vocalizations (inaudible to our ears, of course) above the main lawn at Big Falls, and inputting the data, Nancy's Bat Detector recognized the sounds of



Sinaloan Mastiff Bat, Lesser Dog-like Bat, and Thomas' Shaggy Bat. Astounding! What an innovative way to document the bat species in an area.

## **Thursday, February 28 | Boat Trip along the Monkey River for Birds and Howler Monkeys, Lunch at Monkey River Village, Farewell Dinner**

Our last full day in Belize started with an early breakfast, and we then set off with Steve Choco for Independence, a village and port area north of Big Falls. Other than an easily recognized Fork-tailed Flycatcher, it was difficult to spot many birds along the way, traveling along at highway speeds as we were. We drove straight through for about an hour and reached the marina where we boarded a small boat for our trip to Monkey River. Leaving Independence, we motored past the beach city of Placencia (on the opposite peninsula) and headed south along the picturesque coast, passing Harvest Caye and the mouth of the Sennis River.

Staying in the boat, we did a little birding around the Sennis River cayes, where Double-crested Cormorant, Magnificent Frigatebird, Anhinga, Royal Tern, and Brown Pelican were busy fishing. And bobbing in close to a tiny islet, we had close-in photo ops for Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, and a family of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons among the mangroves. We then left for Monkey River Town, to pick up a local guide for our trip to the Yucatan Black Howler Money sanctuary. The sandbars at Monkey River Town supported a flock of Sanderlings and a lone Spotted Sandpiper, and surprisingly little else. There were also Yellow-throated Warblers visible in the town gardens, many Great-tailed Grackles, and several Belted Kingfishers posing on the docks.

After a quick pit stop, we slowly cruised up the Monkey River, with Common Black Hawk, Osprey, White Ibis, Montezuma Oropendola, and Wood Stork passing overhead. Yellow-tailed and Orchard Orioles were spotted in the canopy, while Great Blue and Little Blue Herons, Great Egret, and Anhinga were wading in the shallows, or balanced on low branches. Both Black Spiny-tailed and Green Iguanas, as well as Brown Basilisk, sat sunning among the leaves, a friendly (appearing) Morelet's Crocodile was lounging on a log (picture on front cover page), and Mangrove Swallows flew around the boat our entire time on the water. Of particular note were a pair of Thick-billed Seedfinches foraging among some vines, sort of an unexpected find in the dense riverside vegetation. We also located a small colony of Proboscis Bats, tucked in for the day, on the undersides of some large, overhanging tree limbs.





We soon reached the reserve for the howler monkeys. A loop path (about half a mile) starts from the point where visitors step ashore, and meanders through various tropical hardwoods and enormous patches of *Guadua* bamboo. Accompanied by our sanctuary guide and Steve Choco, we listened for the sound of Long-billed Hermits, which have a continuing lek at this location. Several were seen, although the males did not seem particularly active. Wood Thrush was a common migrant species here, as well as Kentucky Warbler, which was the last of the warblers we felt we should be seeing (but had yet to actually spot). Despite this bird being very vocal, we never got a good look. On a more positive note, the distinctive song of Northern Bent-Bill was heard frequently, and with patience most of the group ended up seeing this very elusive understory

flycatcher. A Black-crowned Tityra was then spotted high in the canopy, and we also had marvelous close-up looks at a very striking (and confiding) Ruddy Woodcreeper.

About this time the roaring hoots of the howler monkey troop had increased, and we were soon seeing families of these primates directly above. The loudest mammal in the Western Hemisphere, howlers can be heard over a distance of three miles, and when standing directly below them the sound is impressive. We had nice, but neck-craining, looks at young and adult monkeys, and then made our way back to the boat for the return to the village. A large Morelet's Crocodile greeted us at the dock at Monkey River, and we then enjoyed a tasty fish and chicken lunch (with rice and beans, of course) before our trip back.

As we neared Harvest Caye on our return to Independence, Steve kept watch for signs of West Indian Manatee, which frequent the eelgrass beds near the island, but often remain hidden. A whiskered snout soon appeared, and while that would have been enough to more than top off the day, we ultimately saw an estimated half dozen or more manatees, including juveniles and adults swimming in family groups. We spent a good hour slowly circling the area and had many close views. Manatee sightings are unpredictable, and we definitely had luck on our side today. We gathered this evening for our final happy hour and species list discussion, and a farewell dinner at The Lodge at Big Falls. We were joined by Steve and Ron Hirons, and spent the evening recounting the many high points of the trip. After that, it was time for packing and a good night's rest. Tomorrow we were heading home.

## **Friday, March 1 | Transfer to Punta Gorda, Tropic Air Flights to Belize City, Connecting Departures from Belize City Airport**

Our Tropic Air commuter flights from Punta Gorda's tiny airport departed as scheduled, and we were on the ground in Belize City in plenty of time to catch our international flights for home. From Crooked Tree to Hidden Valley to Big Falls, it was a trip surely worth remembering. Hopefully there will be many more similar adventures in everyone's future!

### **Photo Credits:**

Morelet's Crocodile (*Isaac Aronow-IA*); Olive-throated Parakeet (*Lenore Atwood-LA*); Green Iguana (IA); Yucatan Jay (IA); Couch's Kingbird (IA); Ruddy Ground-Dove (IA); Typical breakfast, Crooked Tree Lodge (*Robert Meinke, RM*); Acorn Woodpecker (RM); Immature Roadside Hawk (IA); Northern Jacana (IA); Shoreline with Black Vultures, Crooked Tree Lagoon (RM); Jabiru Stork (RM); Barred Antshrike (female) (IA); Acorn Woodpecker cache tree (RM); Caribbean Pine woodland, Mountain Pine Ridge (LA); Yellow-faced Grassquit (LA); Tropical Kingbirds (LA); Scoping at 1,000 Foot Falls, Mountain Pine Ridge (RM); Shelter at 1,000 Foot Falls, Mountain Pine Ridge (RM); Nectar feeder, Green Hills Butterfly Ranch (RM); White-necked Jacobin (RM); Caracol Mayan site (RM); Giant Red-winged Grasshopper (RM); Cabañas at The Lodge at Big Falls (RM); Plain Chachalaca (LA); Black-headed Saltator (LA); Louisiana Waterthrush (LA); Birding at Nim Li Punit Mayan Site (RM); Montezuma Oropendola (IA); Bare-throated Tiger-Heron on nest (LA); Immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (IA); Royal Terns (IA); Green Iguana in tree (IA); Great Egret (LA); Trip participants (clockwise from upper left: Beth Leibowitz, Isaac Aronow, Cindy Hammontree, Kelly Amsberry, Nancy Rascher, Harold and Lenore Atwood, Richelle Harris, and Joe Seneca) (RM); Orchids (IA)