

Audubon International Alliances Program



Keel-billed Toucan. Photo by Juan Carlos Vindas—www.juancarlosvindasphoto.com.

Belize

Suggested Itinerary

Birding the Tropics in Belize

Belize is a first class tropical destination for ecotourists. With a wealth of diversity Mayan and Caribbean culture, of birds and other wildlife and habitats coupled with an outstanding modern field guide, protected areas, great lodges and Mayan ruins, this English-speaking, multi-ethnic country excels in offering an introduction to tropical birdlife along with some highly sought after species rarely found elsewhere. Belize has both a Mayan and Caribbean flair expressed in its food and culture. Our itinerary incorporates some of the country's top birding locations and can accommodate (with minor adjustments) groups with an interest in archaeology including visits to the incredible site of Caracol or Xunantunich. There will be ample opportunities for photography, and perhaps swimming or boating at a few locations.

Belize has special birds found only in northern Central America and the Yucatan Peninsula. Many species are common and readily



Crooked Tree. Photo by Belize Audubon Society.

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Orange-breasted Falcon. Photo by John Sterling.

observed, although a very few are shy and difficult to see well. Special birds that we will search for on this tour include **Aplomado and Orange-breasted falcons, Jabiru, Boat-billed Heron, Agami Heron, King Vulture, Stygian Owl, Tody Motmot, Violet Sabrewing, Yucatan Jay** and many others. Our tour combines the best of five distinct regions, each with its own special birds, to provide participants some of the best

birding areas that Belize has to offer. Of the **almost 600 species found in Belize**, many of the great birds we will be seeking are difficult to find anywhere in their ranges, some of which are restricted to Belize and adjacent countries. Belize also sits within the migratory or wintering range for **many migratory songbirds and waterbirds**. Here we will watch them in their wintering habitats and see how different their ecology is compared to their mainland breeding grounds in the United States and Canada. *Our shared struggle to conserve these migratory birds becomes obvious and immediate, and through birding tourism we take a small step to making a statement of the value of bird habitat as a business opportunity. As shade grown coffee has made an impact in migrant bird conservation, so will birding tourism.*

This itinerary incorporates something special, and that is the opportunity to make you a partner in helping international conservation. **The National Audubon Society and Belize Audubon Society** have teamed up to train Belizeans in several



Tody Motmot. Photo by John Sterling.

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areas of the country to become birding and nature guides. Along with our primary tour leader, we will have local guiding help throughout this trip, and in turn are helping them make a living from a healthy and diverse ecosystem. Birders who choose to take these tours in order to see and enjoy the natural riches will have a direct economic impact on the local people, help to preserve Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) and develop a vibrant ecotourism industry.

The Birding Sites We Visit

Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary

This **44,000 acre preserve** around a small village has a mosaic of wetland and upland habitats and its bird list reflects this great diversity as one of the top birding spots in the country. In the wetlands, **Jabiru and Northern Boat-billed Heron and Snail Kite** can be found while searching through the myriad of **herons, ibis, storks, spoonbills and waterfowl**. Along the forest and savanna trails, **Aplomado Falcon, Yellow-lored and Yellow-headed parrots, Cavinet's Emerald, Yucatan Woodpecker, Yucatan Jay, and Rufous-browed Peppershrike** are among the many species that we will seek out. Being around what is considered to be the oldest village in Belize and the local

birding guides will enable us to interact with the local people and their culture.

Mountain Pine Ridge

This montane area is a bit cooler than the lowlands and provides a chance for many species restricted to higher elevations. The cliffs and steep canyons provide good opportunities to view **King Vulture, Orange-breasted Falcon, Swallow-tailed and Plumbeous kites and other raptors** that take advantage of favorable updraft wind currents. Sadly a drought-induced outbreak of pine bark beetles hit the pine forest in 2000, but

The **Belize Audubon Society** is a non-profit organization tasked with managing seven protected areas including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and world heritage sites. It has more than 40 full time staff as well as many volunteers dedicated to conservation, community outreach, environmental education as well as supporting research and monitoring biodiversity including jaguar pumas and bird populations in Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary insect community studies, and marine research at Lighthouse Reef Atoll.



Yucatan Jay. Photo by John Sterling.

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Plumbeous Kite. Photo by John Sterling.

the pines are growing back and pockets of tall forest survived where **the rare Stygian Owl** can be found. These pines harbor an odd community of birds, with **Red Crossbills and Acorn Woodpeckers** foraging in the same pines with **Hepatic and Golden-hooded tanagers**, **Black-headed Siskins**, and both **Couch's and Tropical kingbirds** for close comparison. In the dense grass and fern understory, the large **Rusty Sparrows**, **Yellow-faced Grassquits** and **White-collared Seedeaters** abound.

Pook's Hill

This 300-acre private reserve abuts the 6,741-acre Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve that is closed to tourism. There are well-maintained trails through Pook's Hill especially along Roaring Creek. The lodge area has **excellent birding with feeders** and a deck for viewing the forest and clearing.

Macal River Valley

This picturesque river valley has several outstanding lodges that cater to birders and a collective list of **over 350 species**. There are well-maintained trails through secondary forest and well-groomed lodge grounds that often host large numbers of birds with many **doves, woodcreepers, antshrikes, flycatchers, trogons, tanagers and hummingbirds**. We may find **Amazon and Green**



Chestnut-colored Woodpecker. Photo by John Sterling.

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kingfishers on local ponds and along the Macal River. Birding is often excellent from the decks of these lodges that have feeders full of fruit with close views of excellent forest trees and a few maintain **hummingbird feeders**. During an afternoon relaxing on the deck or during lunch, one may see **toucans, aracaris, trogons, honeycreepers, tanagers, euphonias** and even **raptors and swifts** among the many possibilities.

St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park

This beautiful 575 acre park situated within the limestone casks system preserves dense forest, a famed blue hole and a cave with more than 200 species of birds. With five miles of trails to explore, we will see a good representation of



Blue-gray Tanager. Photo by John Sterling.

local forest birdlife including **Ridgway's Rough-winged Swallows** that nest in caves and possibly the **Pheasant Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Nightingale Wren** and **Passerini's Tanager**.

Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary

This 128,000-acre sanctuary, set near a Mayan community, was formed in 1990 as a preserve for a **large population of Jaguars, over 330 species of birds and other biodiversity**. Fortunately, the forest has well maintained trails that allow us entry into a world



Gray-headed Tanager. Photo by John Sterling.

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of dense lowland forests. Many birds can be found in the clearing around the headquarters and we will look carefully for **Crested Guans, Northern Royal Flycatchers, Golden-hooded Tanagers** and others. Because of the high biodiversity associated with lowland rainforests, we have a chance to see a great number of tropical species restricted to this habitat. Especially exciting are the mixed species flocks that can exhilarate and overwhelm us at the same time. **Standing in the middle of the path of a flock is a highlight for many birders.** Most of the



Swallow-tailed Kite. Photo by John Sterling.



Green Honeycreeper. Photo by John Sterling.

trails start at the headquarters and loop back thereby allowing us to take several different trails during our stay. Being around the Mayan village and the local birding guides will enable us to interact with the local people and their culture.

Itinerary for Belize

Day 1 – ARRIVAL IN BELIZE CITY. Please book flights to arrive into Belize City in the afternoon. Staff will be waiting for you at the airport. From there we will transfer you to Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary and the Bird's Eye View Lodge. We will have time to look for birds along the way and at the lodge. Overnight at Bird's Eye View Lodge.

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Day 2 – CROOKED TREE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. Today we will bird the extensive waterways of this **44,000 acre RAMSAR** site where we hope to see a **mix of herons, ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, Northern Jacanas, Boat-billed Herons and Jabiru.** After lunch we will explore the Pine Savannahs where we hope to find the near-endemic **Yucatan Jay, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Yellow-headed and Yellow-lored parrots, Aplomado Falcon, Canivet's Emerald, and Yucatan Woodpecker.** An evening walk will be available for those who hope to catch up with a **Common Pau-raque, Mottled Owl or Yucatan Night-jar.** Overnight at Bird's Eye View Lodge.

Day 3 – CROOKED TREE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY AND MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE. We will spend the morning



Collared Aracari. Photo by Dirk Francisco.

Physical Requirements & Pace

We have scheduled ample time to explore each of these locations at a relaxing pace. Many of the sites have rolling or hilly terrain, but **hiking is relatively easy at a slow pace while birding.** All sites have roads for walking with a few good trails to get into the forest interior. Early morning birding is always best, but mid-day can be slow, so we will have time to relax or (if coordinated pre-trip) time to visit a Mayan ruin, the reef or a lazy river experience. **Bring comfortable hiking/walking shoes.** Weather can be warm especially from the late spring to early fall and mosquitoes can be present depending upon the time of day, location and season. **Bring a lightweight hat and insect repellent for comfort.** Depending upon the season, rain can be frequent, so **come prepared with a small collapsible umbrella and waterproof protection for camera gear** and other sensitive electronic equipment. Much of the terrain is limestone; so hiking shoes with good support are important and **a walking stick is advised for those who are not sure-footed.** The forest is fairly dense, so we will take our time in that habitat, slowly walking and searching for birds, especially mix-species flocks.

birding at Crooked Tree by boat if water conditions allow. After lunch we will travel to Mountain Pine Ridge, with a stop at Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to look for the **rare Blue and Slate-colored seedeaters,** and also seek out the **Rusty Sparrow and Rufous-capped Warbler** along the way. Late afternoon/evening birding at the

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Red-legged Honeycreeper. Photo by John Sterling.

lodge grounds. Overnight at Hidden Valley Inn on Mountain Pine Ridge.

Day 4 – MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE. We will spend the morning **birding the pine forests and canyons for raptors**, such as the **Swallow-tailed Kite**, **Orange-breasted Falcon**, the rare **Black and White Hawk-eagle** and the very rare **Solitary Eagle**, as well as **Scaled Pi-**

geon, **White-collared Swift**, **Azure-crowned Hummingbird**, **Green Jay**, the local subspecies of **Brown Jay**, **White-winged tanagers**, **Rusty Sparrow**, **Black-headed Siskin**, **Red Crossbill** and if we are lucky, **Stygian Owl**. At the edge of the pine forest, there is a chance for **King Vultures** and the mesmerizing **Lovely Cotinga**. (If arranged it would be possible to go to the Caracol Mayan Site) After lunch, we will stop at the **Green Hills Butterfly Ranch** to view almost a dozen species of **hummingbirds** coming to the feeders such as **Violet Sabrewing** and **Brown Violetear**. We will also take a tour of the **butterfly breeding area** that will provide good opportunities for photographing beautiful butterflies. After birding the area, we will travel to the Macal River Valley and spend the rest of the afternoon resting or **birding the grounds around the lodge**. Overnight at Lodge at Chaa Creek, duPlooy's Lodge or Black Rock Lodge.



Northern Royal Flycatcher. Photo by John Sterling.

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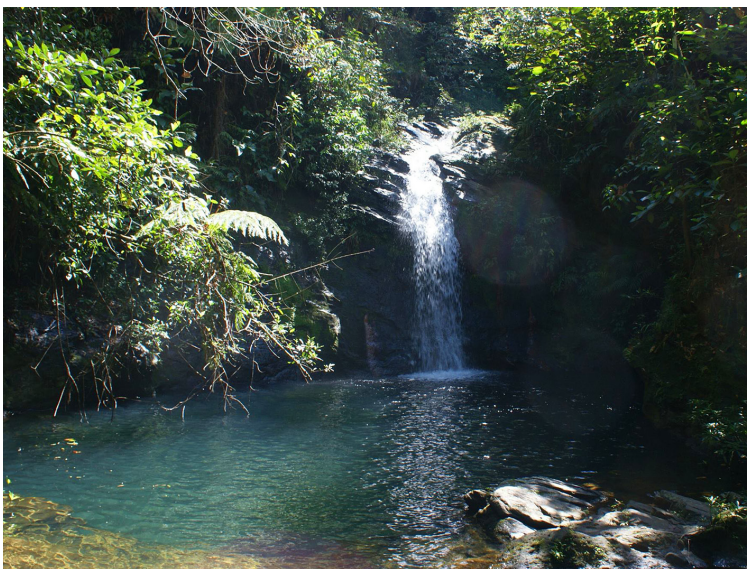
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Day 5 – MACAL RIVER VALLEY. We will spend most of the day exploring the trails in the area that has recorded over 350 species. **Black-headed and Gartered trogons, Yellow-billed Caciques, Collared Aracaris, Keel-billed Toucans, Crimson-collared Tanagers** and others may welcome us at this enchanting valley. In the late afternoon, we will travel to Pook's Hill. An optional night walk may yield **Black-and-white or Spectacled owls**. Overnight at Pook's Hill Lodge.



Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Photo by John Sterling.

Day 6 – POOK'S HILL. In the morning we will explore the trails on this private preserve, looking for **Agami Heron, Pheasant Cuckoo, Tody Motmot, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Northern Royal Flycatcher, Gray-headed and Crimson-collared tanagers** among the many forest species known from the area. After lunch, we will travel to St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park. In the late afternoon and evening, we will look for **Ridgeway's Rough-winged Swallow, White-collared Manakin leks, raptors such as White Hawk, Black Hawk-Eagle and Swallow-tailed Kite**, as well as **Slaty-**



Blue Hole. Photo by Belize Audubon Society.

tailed and Collared trogons, Nightingale Wren and Orange-billed Sparrow and other forest birds. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.

Day 7 – ST. HERMAN'S BLUE HOLE NATIONAL PARK. After birding along the trails for **Pheasant Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, various hummingbirds, woodcreepers, flycatchers, Nightingale Wren, Green Shrike-Vireo,**

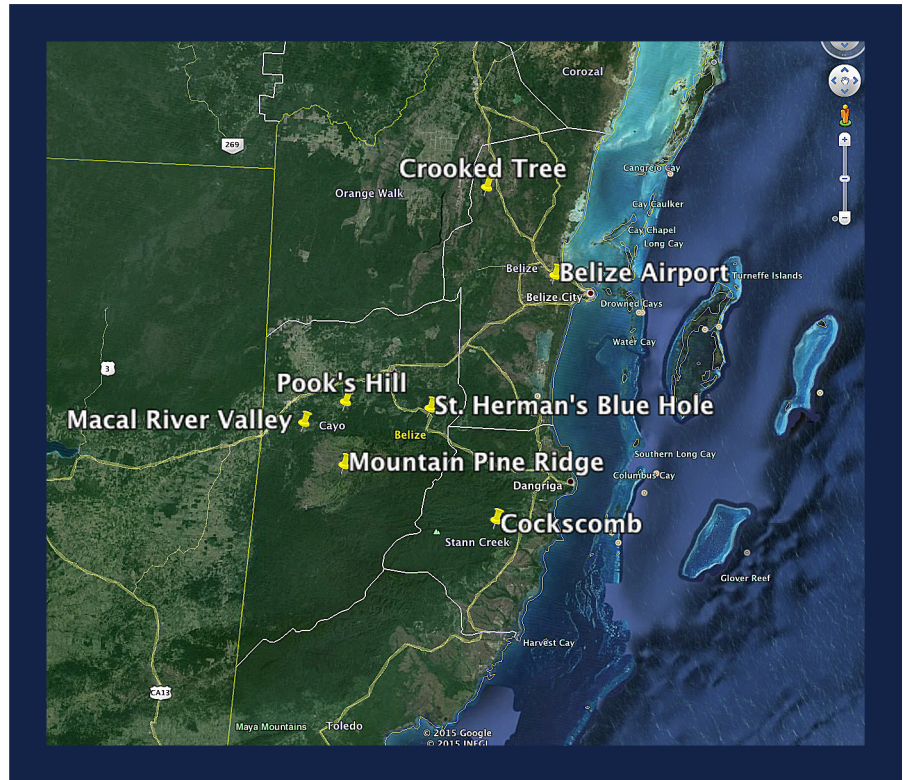
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Green Honeycreeper, White-winged Becard and Passerini's Tanager to name a few, we will embark for Cockscomb Basin with a few stops along the way. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.

Day 8 – COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. We will spend all morning in the sanctuary exploring trails not covered in the previous day. We will focus on **finding new species for the trip and better looks at familiar species** including an afternoon visit to Red Bank to look for **Scarlet Macaws**. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.



Day 9 – COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. We will spend all day in the sanctuary exploring trails not covered in the previous day. We will **focus on finding new species** for the trip and better looks at familiar species. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.



Scarlet Macaw. Photo by Matthew Jeffery.

Day 10 – TRANSFER TO BELIZE CITY. After a four hour drive back to Belize City and contingent upon flight departure schedule, we will look for **coastal and mangrove species** near Belize City. Day for international flights.