

Audubon International Alliances Program



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

Belize & Guatemala

Suggested Itinerary

Birding Belize and Guatemala: Forest and Archaeological Tour

Belize is a first class destination for ecotourists. With a wealth of diversity of Mayan and Caribbean cultures, birds and other wildlife and habitats coupled with an outstanding modern field guide, national parks, great lodges and Mayan ruins, this English-speaking country excels in offering an introduction to tropical birdlife along with some highly sought after species rarely found elsewhere. Our itinerary incorporates some of the country's top birding locations where we explore a diverse mix of habitats. The addition of the Petén region of Guatemala to the tour incorporates some of the most outstanding archaeological sites in the Americas. Fortunately, these sites are exceptional birding areas with good forest and opportunities to get close to birds in canopy!

Belize and the adjacent Petén area of Guatemala have special birds found only in northern Central America and the Yucatan Peninsula. Many species are common and readily observed, although



Yaxhá. Photo by Sarah Stewart.

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Ocellated Turkey. Photo by John Sterling.

birding areas that Belize/Guatemala has to offer. Of the **almost 600 species found in Belize and the Petén**, 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. This region 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/or 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.*

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

Belize Audubon Society

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

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This itinerary incorporates something special: the opportunity to make you a partner in helping international conservation. **The National Audubon Society, Wildlife Conservation Society-Guatemala and Belize Audubon Society** have teamed up to train local Belizeans and Guatemalans in several communities to become birding and nature guides. Along with our primary tour leader, we will have their local guiding help throughout this trip, and in turn are helping them make a living while protecting healthy and diverse ecosystem. Birders who choose to take these tours to see and enjoy the natural riches of Belize and Guatemala will have a direct impact on the local economy, 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 Boat-billed Heron** 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, Canivet'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 the oldest village in Belize and the local birding guides will enable us to interact with the local people and their culture.



Yucatan Jay. Photo by John Sterling.

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Scarlet Macaw. Photo by Roni Martinez.

St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park

beautiful 575 acre park situated within the limestone casks system preserves dense forest, a famed blue hole and a cave and more than 200 species of birds. With five miles of trails to explore, we will see a good representation of local forest birdlife including **Ridgway's Rough-winged Swallows** that nest in caves, and possibly **Pheasant Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Nightingale Wren and Passerini's Tanager.**

Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary

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



Northern Royal Flycatcher. Photo by John Sterling.

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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.

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 as such has 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 kingfishers** on ponds and along the Macal River at the Belize Botanical Gardens. 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, aracarís, trogons, honeycreepers, tanagers, euphonias and even raptors and swifts** among the many possibilities.

Paso Caballos

Paso Caballos is a Maya Q'eqch'í community (pop. around 1500) located in a fantastic access point to Laguna del Tigre National Park. This community has signed agreements with the government and **Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)**, to control agricultural fires, impact on the land, and regulation of migration of people from the outside, and prohibition of cattle in the area. In return, the government and

Wildlife Conservation Society

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) started working in Guatemala in 1992 with the mission of conserving the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) as one of Mesoamerica's most important wildlife conservation areas. Our guiding principle is strengthening national and local capacities through accompaniment of technicians, students, and national experts, and also strengthening of Guatemalan Civil Society. To conserve the MBR, WCS-Guatemala works in four areas: 1) Biological investigation and monitoring; 2) Social development and the sustainable management of natural resources by rural communities; 3) Protection and prevention of forest fires; and 4) Governance, including the financial sustainability of the MBR.

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Boat-billed Heron. Photo by John Sterling.

WCS provide technical assistance, education, health and educational infrastructure. As such, the local community is invested in trying to promote ecotourism in their region and some members are being trained as birding guides by the Audubon and WCS.

This is an extremely rich and rewarding area to go birding. On the way to Paso Caballos, we pass grasslands and lowland seasonally flooded forests called tinto forest (locally named “bajos”). In the grasslands, we can easily spot **Vermilion and Fork-tailed flycatchers** and may spot a skulking **Bare-throated Tiger Heron**. In the stretch of road next to the bajos, we will hear and possibly see the **White-bellied and Spot-breasted wrens, Yucatan Jay**

and Yellow-billed Cacique. Access to the Guacamayas Research Station—where we will stay overnight—is by boat along the San Pedro River, as is the trip farther on to the Waka Peru archaeological site. The wetland habitats along the river banks are more extensive than in nearby areas frequented by birders. Along the river, we may see **Amazon and Green kingfishers, Mangrove Swallows and Black-collared Hawk**. Despite serious deforestation in the western Petén, the area of Laguna del Tigre National Park near Paso Caballos and Waka Peru is an area of fantastic lowland tropical forest, a place where a **Crested Guan** may call from the trees, or where a **Great Curassow** may walk across the trail. **Jaguars are here**, although difficult to see. At least **eight species of woodcreepers** are found here, as well as huge **Lineated and Pale-billed woodpeckers**, several species of trogons, **Blue-crowned Motmot** and a myriad of wintering migratory warblers and tropical flycatchers. But the prize bird is the fantastic



Gray-headed Tanager. Photo by John Sterling.

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Orange-breasted Falcon. Photo by John Sterling.

Scarlet Macaw, not common in the Petén, yet this is one of the best areas to find it at certain times of the year.

Yaxhá

This is an important archaeological site and is considered the third largest ancient Mayan city in the region after Tikal and Uaxactún. Although first described in 1904, and mapped in the 1970s, restoration

of the site did not begin until the 1980s. The city comprised more than 500 structures, including nine temple pyramids. Nearly as important and large as Tikal, fewer structures are excavated here, giving the impression that you are discovering the site as you visit! There are no crowds as in Tikal, so the birding is much more intimate and the solitude is certainly advantageous for birding. On the quiet trails, you may run across one of the **four species of tinamou—Great, Little, Slaty-breasted and Thicket**—or perhaps the hard-to-find **Pheasant Cuckoo**. Goodies like **trogons, toucans and Blue-Crowned and Tody motmots** may be found here. In the mornings or evenings, from the top of the pyramids one can see a **great flight of parrots, with flocks of Red-lored, White-fronted, White-crowned and the less common, Mealy parrots**.

Tikal

Birding Tikal is magical. You will be at the premier site of classical period Maya, one of the most mystical and important cultural sites in the Americas and a UNESCO World Heritage Site! Some of the pyramids are over 200 feet tall, and yes, you can climb them. During your climb, you may get close views of **Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys, Keel-billed Toucans, Montezuma Oropendolas, Laughing Falcons** or maybe a **White Hawk** soaring overhead. The unique **Ocellated Turkey**, one of the most fantastically plumaged American birds, is common here. Tikal is now an historical site, but imagine that at one time about 90,000 people lived there. Tikal's political and mili-

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tary influence extended through a large portion of what is now Central America. It certainly is one of the most spectacular Mayan sites. This is a wonder of the world, but fortunately for naturalists, there is forest with many birds and so much other wildlife. Picture **mornings with flocks of parrots flying by** and stopping to sit in big emergent tree. They could be **Olive-throated (Aztec) Parakeet, Brown-hooded, White-crowned, White-fronted, Red-lored, or perhaps Mealy parrots**. There is amazing diversity here including **tinamous, motmots, aracaris, jacamars, puff-birds, leaf-tossers, antthrushes, and the odd Northern Royal Flycatcher**. One specialty is the **Orange-breasted Falcon**, a rare tropical falcon that over time has chosen to nest in one of the Mayan Temples. These fantastic raptors are not only gorgeous; they are rare and endangered. They require large tracts of forest to find food, and cliffs (or temples) to nest on. We will concentrate on finding a wide variety of birds while here, specifically the Orange-breasted Falcon, and of course we will take time to learn about the site, the Maya and the history of this amazing place. An experienced archaeological guide will accompany us.

Uaxactún

Uaxactún is a relatively small archaeological site of astronomical importance located in the middle of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, less than one hour north of Tikal. Although few tourists venture past Tikal, this area promises to have some interesting species due to its distinct habitat

Physical Requirements & Pace

In order to maximize birding both Belize and the Peten of Guatemala in such a short amount of time, there will be **some days with several hours on the road traveling between sites**, a few one night stays at hotels or lodges, and some early mornings to get us into the birding areas when activity is high. There are **post-lunch rests** during low bird activity and late afternoon birding when activity picks up again. **Most of the hiking, especially in the dense forest habitats, is slow and easy**, where we listen carefully for birds; however, **most of the terrain is limestone, so a good pair of boots and a walking stick is recommended** for potentially slippery areas and for those who are not sure-footed. **There are options for more difficult hikes**, including climbing up some of the ruins and the option to hike to the Waka Peru site in the Paso Caballos area. **Weather can be warm, especially from the late spring to early fall and mosquitos can be present** depending upon the time of day, location and season. **Bring a lightweight hat, long-sleeved shirt, pants 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**.

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compared to Tikal. Many of the trails around the village and ruins through primary forest are void of humans and yield tropical goodies such as **oropendolos, toucans, trogons, and woodpeckers**. The quiet trails are also good for seeking out tough birds, like the **Mexican (Black-faced) Antthrush, Barred Forest Falcon, Blue-black Grosbeak and White-collared Manakin**. Apart from primary and second growth woodlands both within a few minutes of the village and ruins, there is a short tintal forest slightly farther afield, with specialties such as the **Yucatan Jay, Rose-throated Tanager and Gray-throated Chat**. We will also spend some time with residents of Uaxactún who will tell us the history and current operation of this community-based forestry concession where they harvest the Xate palm, gum, allspice and wood. The local village depends on the ecological value and, thus, the conservation of the forest.

Itinerary

Day 1 – ARRIVAL IN BELIZE CITY. Please book flights to arrive into Belize City. From there we will transfer you to Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. Overnight at Bird's Eye View Lodge.

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 Savannas 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 Pauraque, Mottled Owl or**



Tody Motmot. Photo by John Sterling.

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Yucatan Nightjar. Overnight at Bird's Eye View Lodge.

Day 3 – CROOKED TREE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY/ ST. HERMAN'S AND BLUE HOLE NATIONAL PARK. We will spend the morning birding at Crooked Tree by boat if water conditions allow. After lunch we will travel to St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park, with a stop at Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to look for the **rare Blue and Slate-colored seedeaters**. Late afternoon/evening birding at the national park. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.

Day 4 – ST. HERMAN'S BLUE HOLE NATIONAL PARK AND COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. After birding along the trails for **Pheasant Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, various hummingbirds, woodcreepers, flycatchers, Nightingale Wren, Green Shrike-Vireo, 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 and late afternoon birding at lodge grounds. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.

Day 5 – COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. We will spend all day in the sanctuary as there are many trails to choose from, with each leading through open and forested habitats. With **over 330 species**, there will be **plenty of new birds** to see. Overnight at Bocawina Rainforest Resort.

Day 6 – COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY/POOK'S HILL. We will spend the 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. In the afternoon we will drive to Pook's Hill for late afternoon birding. **An optional night walk may yield Black-and-white or Spectacled owls.** Overnight in Pook's Hill.



Green Honeycreeper. Photo by John Sterling.

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Red-legged Honeycreeper. Photo by John Sterling.

Day 7 – POOK’S HILL. In the morning we will explore the trails on the 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 explore the Belize Botanical Gardens and trails at duPlooy’s Jungle Lodge along the Macal River Valley. Overnight at duPlooy’s Jungle Lodge.

Day 8 – DRIVE TO PASO CABALLOS. This morning, after a **morning bird walk** around the lodge, we will have a long drive to Paso Caballos in the Maya Biosphere Reserve of Guatemala’s Petén region. Leaving Belize and driving across the Petén gives a disheartening view of how cattle ranching has transformed the landscape from a lush tropical forest to pasture. The area around Paso Caballos and Laguna del Tigre is a relatively new birding destination, **home to over 260 species of birds, including the Scarlet Macaw.** To access the Biological Station we shall be transported by boat on a 20 minute trip along the San Pedro River. An optional night excursion may allow for observations of the Morrelet’s Crocodile. Overnight at Las Guacamayas Biological Station.

Day 9 – PASO CABALLOS. Within Laguna del Tigre National Park, we will bird the Guacamayas Biological Station and may have an opportunity to visit El Peru archaeological site. **Great, Thicket and Little tinamous** may be heard in



Collared Aracari. Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.

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the forest, and with luck we could find one of these skulking birds. Tropical specialties abound here, such as **Collared Aracari, Keel-billed Toucan, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-whiskered Puffbird**, as well as good populations of **parrots, forest dwelling flycatchers, Red-capped Manakin** and plenty of other **resident and migrant land birds**. Overnight at Las Guacamayas Biological Station.

Day 10 – PASO CABALLOS TO YAXHÁ. Not as well-known as Tikal, Yaxhá is an important archaeological site, which is gaining prominence as researchers delve deeper into its history. The area is part of the Yaxhá-Nakúm-Naranjo National Park which protects the archaeological sites as well as a large expanse of forest. Here, **large flocks of several species of parrots** move through the area early and late in the day, including **Red-lored, White-fronted, White-crowned, and (less often) Mealy**. The nearby lake provides habitat for **waterbirds as well as shorebirds** during migration; in open savanna along the shores of the lake, we may find **Yellow-tailed Orioles**. In the forests of Yaxhá, we can find a diversity of **woodcreepers, Slaty-tailed, Gartered and Black-headed trogons, hummingbirds and tanagers**. Overnight in Yaxhá, El Sombrero Ecolodge.



Gray-necked Wood-Rail. Photo by Alvaro Jaramillo.

Day 11 – YAXHÁ BIRD-ING. We will continue to explore the forest, savanna and archaeological sites of Yaxhá, **seeking species that have eluded us** thus far. Night birding is an option. Overnight in Yaxhá, El Sombrero Ecolodge

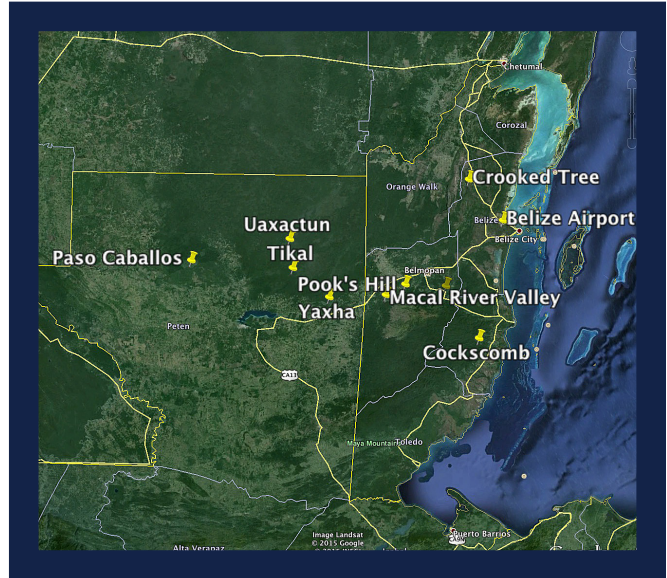
Day 12 – YAXHÁ TO TIKAL. This morning we leave Yaxhá early and we will make our way to Tikal. This is the most famous Maya site, due to its size and the number of large pyramids. To say that Tikal is awesome is

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an understatement, not only for the historical significance, but the expanse of forest and the trail system that allows great access. We will have the opportunity to **visit jungle trails and climb pyramids and temples** at Tikal while enjoying birds, such as the **Montezuma Oropendola and parrots**, which fly by over the vast expanse of forest. Here we may find the rare and **gorgeous Orange-breasted Falcon, the superb Ocellated Turkey** and a great many **other tropical species**, and maybe even **a mammal or two!** Our local guide will also be able to interpret the archeology and history we will see while birding. There will be **optional owling** this evening near our lodge. This is a memorable and magical day! To bird among the temples of Tikal is awe inspiring, to think about the environment, the people who built this city, the civilization that once was here and to see how the forest has reigned over this ruin until re-discovered is all amazing. Overnight in Tikal.



Day 13 – TIKAL TO UAXACTÚN. Today, there are **two options**: some of you may want to spend the day **roaming Tikal**, taking pictures, meditating **or birding at your own pace**. Others, who want to continue the adventure can leave on an early ride to Uaxactún. For those going to Uaxactún, **the pace will be slightly quicker** as we may need to walk a bit to get to the area where the **Yucatan Jay** has been spotted in the mornings. For the remainder of the morning, we will hike the forest trails around the town and ruins to perhaps get a second look at some species we missed, **or better looks at species that have eluded us** during the trip. We will enjoy lunch in the town and a brief cultural tour from a member of the local forestry concession association. Following lunch, in the shade of the forest, **we can visit the ruins** and then return to Tikal to meet up with the group for a final dinner surrounded by the tropical forests of the Petén. Overnight in Tikal.

Day 14 – TIKAL – FLORES – BELIZE CITY. We have **a short time to bird before departure** today and perhaps we shall have time to bird at a site known as Cerro Cahuí where some species may be different from those in Tikal such as the **Gray-**

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throated Chat. We will have lunch on the shores of Lake Petén Itza enjoying the scenery before a long drive back to Belize City. Overnight in Belize City.

Day 15 – FLY OUT OF BELIZE CITY. Transfer to Belize International Airport to take your flight home. Contingent upon flight departure schedule, we will look for coastal and mangrove species near Belize City.