



BELIZE & TIKAL Nov 14-29, 2004

A Greentours Trip Report

Leaders and report: Ian Green & Adrian Binns

Day 1 / November 14th To Miami

Departures from Manchester, London, Philadelphia and Virginia saw us all meeting up in Miami around eight in the evening. Our night was spent in 'Comfort' not far from the airport!

Day 2 / November 15th Miami to Belize and the Jaguar Reef

The prospect of walking round a few blocks of urban Miami at first light in the morning proved surprisingly popular with the group and so after a quick breakfast we were out on the streets. Doves were very evident with Mourning, White-wing and Eurasian Collared in backyards and on wires. An stunning male American Kestrel was perched on a telegraph pole and a small pond adjacent to the golf course had a pair of Mottled Ducks, Green Heron, 2 Spotted Sandpipers and a terrapin. Palm Warblers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were common in the Live Oaks that line the streets and numerous Blue Jays, Northern Mockingbirds and a Red-bellied Woodpecker were also found. A pair of Spot-breasted Orioles alighted at the top of a tree, their bright orange plumage very obvious against the green foliage while Monk Parakeets with their blue wings were occasionally seen streaking through the neighbourhood squawking as they go. Butterflies included the White Peacock and the Banded Yellow.

We flew out over Miami city then the Everglades and thence into the Gulf of Mexico, dallying with Cuba for some considerable time before descending towards the Belizean coast over myriad islands and atolls – it was a very beautiful approach. Once on *terra firma* we met up with Charlton and Santos our drivers and really very knowledgeable wildlife people. We headed straight to Belize Zoo where we borrowed their picnic tables for lunch. Needless to say our club sandwiches were interrupted on several occasions. A pair of Lineated Woodpeckers posed better as time went on. Gray Catbirds scolded from bushes- one bush containing no less than seven of them. A superb male Iguana who was flashing his bright orange pelage especially his large dewflap to a proximal female. The really big surprise here was a pair of rare Jabiru Storks which circled amongst Black Vultures overhead.

We headed south along the Coastal Highway, the flat lands covered in scrub and mangrove, though it wasn't long before some little peaky-looking hills appeared. As we started to get amongst these we stopped at the entrance to the Runaway Creek Reserve, a 'Birds without Frontiers' reserve. A track took us down through a most distinctive and unusual tropical habitat – lowland pine forest savannah. As the name implies this is a very open woodland with low bushes and grasses between widely spaced pines. And scenic too with the surrounding low but steep-sided hills. Birds were initially scarce but then we found our first hummer – a lovely Azure-crowned Hummingbird. Then a bird party. Warblers included Black and White Warblers and the local Grace's Warbler. There were Acorn Woodpeckers and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and then there were tanagers. Brilliant male Summer Tanagers were the pick of the bunch and there were several female and immature types too. Two Hepatic Tanagers were also seen.

We headed on towards Dangriga, the hills in the distance getting higher and those limestone outcrops either side of the road were ever more impressive. There was little time to stop now so we passed many interesting looking spots though Adrian's minivan did stop for Collared Aracaris and mine for a large flyby of Montezuma's Oropendulas. Short-billed and Red-billed Pigeons also flew over.

We passed through Hopkins around five and minutes later were pulling into the Jaguar Reef. The thatched cabanas looked very welcoming and were fitted out uncommonly well inside. Very spacious and with air-con or fans and large bathrooms. Out through reception and the dining area and there was the beach – the sun set behind us as we looked out through the coconut palms to the Caribbean. All quite nice!

Day 3 / November 16th Sittee River

We all met just as the sun was rising over the sea in front of the restaurant. A cup of tea or coffee imbibed and we were on our way covering all of a hundred metres before our first stop for assorted common birds – Pale-vented Pigeon, Red-billed Pigeon, Tropical Mockingbird and Tropical Kingbird. We drove very slowly onwards looking for groups of birds to stop for – a couple of Common Black Hawks flew off before we could get put but then we stopped by the river and barely moved for an hour. Initial interest focussed on the Belted Kingfisher sitting next to a Pale-vented Pigeon on a 'snag' but this soon proved to be far less interesting than another higher snag which produced in quick succession Brown Jay, pigeons, a single Red-egged Honeycreeper and amazingly no less than three oriole species – Hooded, Black-cowled and Baltimore. The latter two species also came in for a close look perching on tall sedges along with Yellow Warblers, Collared Seed-eaters and a rather more skulking Common Yellowthroat. There were two passion flowers here, both in flower. The larger pink flowered *Passiflora ciliata* and another small blue flowered *Passiflora* which I failed to check! A Ringed Kingfisher flew downstream and Red-lore and White-fronted Parrots overhead. A little further down the road we stopped for Eastern Wood-pewee and seedeaters and Blue Grosbeak. Iguanas were high in a tree draped with a yellow-flowered vine and nearby were yellow and orange-flowered Hibiscus.

We took a walk down to Jaguar Reef's Iguana Lodge – basically a comfortable landing from the Sittee River. Here were innumerable Red-legged Honeycreepers, perhaps ten in all. Most were males though only one was in full breeding dress – mind you he made up for the rest in sheer colourfulness! There were also Red-eyed Vireo and Squirrel Cuckoo here and on the trees, conveniently 'planted' at eye-level several Belizean Black Orchids, the country's national flower – very beautiful. Onwards we were trying to get to breakfast but birds kept delaying us. There were Masked Tityras and our first trogon – a superb Black-headed Trogon. Sue found a beautiful shimmering blue *Archaeopreona demophon* which sat for us and we also saw the red and black swallowtail mimic *Parides erithalion* and the Long-tailed Skipper. Shining Honeycreeper, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Blue-grey, Yellow-winged, Summer and the extraordinary Golden-hooded Tanager were all in one tree along with Gray Catbirds. It was all we could do to get to breakfast! Toucan Sittee welcomed us with a lovely spread served half the group at a time because of the space available. That meant that we kept looking for fauna and flora the whole time of course! Amazingly at least two and possibly three of the large Slaty-tailed Trogons were joined by two Black-headed Trogons all within twenty metres of the breakfast table. A young Green Iguana did much the same and we also saw a Basilisk (Andy) and several Anole Lizards. An obliging and very much appreciated Bare-throated Tiger-heroin was well photographed on the river edge and there were a scattering of American Redstarts, Northern Waterthrush and Magnolia Warblers in the trees and in the shrubbery some Hooded Warblers. There were some fine white orchids in flower in the garden as well and numerous varieties of hibiscus and ginger both of which attracted Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds though it has to be said that the fluffy pinky-red branch-borne flowers of the large leaved 'Mayan Apple' across the road were even more popular with them. In fact this area produced much the best birding and butterflies of the morning even though it was nearly eleven and very warm by now. Brown Jays and Plain Chachalacas were joined by Ovenbirds, Parula Warblers, Caribbean Elaenias, Dusky-capped Flycatchers, Black-headed Trogons and two really fantastic species – White-collared Manakin (a male in breeding dress) and Royal Flycatcher. Several Roadside Hawks scattered birds before them in here. Butterflies were quite excellent. There were two 'sister' species – *Adelpha cytherea* and *Adelpha fessonia*, the impressively large cream and brown *Catoblepia berecynthia* and the lovely leaf-mimic with the unpleasant name – *Historus odius*. Then it was time to return to the lodge where several Gulf Fritillaries awaited us on the caesalpinias.

It was nice to have a chance to relax in the lodge's pleasant beachfront setting with Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans cruising up and down the shore. Sanderling and Turnstone were noted on the beach and in the mangroves behind were Hepatic Tanager, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and White-eyed Vireo. The lovely red, black and yellow *Heliconius erato* danced above a lantana flower.

After a late lunch we drove inland and just a little uphill right to the base of the Maya Mountains at Mama Noots on the fringes of the newly gazetted Mayflower Bocawina National Park. En route we stopped for a fine pair of Aplomado Falcons perched in a roadside tree. We spent the remainder of the afternoon pottering around their grounds which back onto a fine forested region. Though a good solid shower and a couple of

cups of tea delayed us we still managed to see a number of birds. Streak-headed, Ivory-billed and Tawny-winged Woodcreepers were all seen as we walked towards a group of Groove-billed Anis that decorated a heap of sticks. In the trees above were White-crowned and Yellow-lored Parrots. Leaf cutter ants were very busy around the property's perimeter removing foliage at a frightening rate! We saw little in the way of butterflies this afternoon though the large owl butterfly *Caligo eurilochus* was found down by the stream. It was down in this area that a superb bird party went through. Almost every bird seemed to be different to the next. There were numerous 'wood warblers' such as Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Black and White, Black-throated Green and Tennessee. There were flycatchers too in the shape of Tropical Pewee, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Caribbean Elaenia, Least Flycatcher, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher and the amazingly named Northern Bentbill. Golden-fronted Woodpeckers seemed to be in most trees though one did hold a pair of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers. White-collared Manakin, Green Honeycreeper, Yellow-throated Warbler and both Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias were all in the same tree. House Wren and Yellow-rumped Warbler hopped about the cut field. Olive-throated Parakeets and Brown Jays passed through and overhead were numerous *Chaetura* swifts and several large White-collared Swifts. Eventually dusk descended and the second minibus awaited darkness hoping for an owl or two or perhaps a mammal on the approach road. Sadly no luck on either though we did see a number of Pauraques though the earlier returners also saw these and it was still light enough for them to see a Laughing Falcon too!

Day 4 / November 17th Man O'War Caye, Tobacco Reef, Whale Shoal & Cockscomb Reserve

Weather conditions prevented the boat from getting to us on time so we left about forty minutes late. Albert seemed keen to make up time as we sped east across the waters in the direction of the cayes! The jolting was really quite something but for the most part the crossing was just fast. Occasional terns, gulls and frigatebirds flew past but there was little to see until we reached the inner reef and its fringing mangroves and as burst through a little gap in this we saw a round islet ahead us with birds swirling over it. A few more minutes and we were at Man O'War Caye and enjoying a true wildlife spectacle. Dozens of these huge piratical birds hung in the air just over the boat and hundreds were sitting on the low mangroves. Many of the males had their red throat sacs filled with air so that it looked like a large red balloon was attached to their throat. Several were sat together their heads thrown back and bills skyward clacking loudly. It was a noisy energetic place with many white headed females watching the males antics and amidst them all perhaps forty or so Brown Boobies which also breed here. One frigatebird appeared to be in trouble its movements suggesting that it had a broken wing or that it was stuck on a snag but as we commiserated with it it suddenly flew off to all out relief. A Great Blue Herons stalked in the mangrove and Double-crested Cormorants flew off. We departed this magical scene as a male and female frigatebirds chased each other in a tremendous advert for stunt flying.

We made the short trip to Tobacco Cay, an idyllic (aren't they all!) looking spot, and anchored up a half kilometre along the reef from the island. Little waves broke over the

seaward side of the reef but on our side the water was quite calm and there was little current unless you went near on of the little breaks in the reef. So we all got kitted out and by various means virtually everyone got in the water and most were able to get a look at the magical underwater world below. Alfred and Abraham did sterling work with those of us who were a little unsure in the water and also with respect to finding some choice items. They pointed out a deep Green Moray and Alfred actually lifted up a Yellow Stingray for all to see and promptly swam off with it on his arm! There were bright yellow and blue squadrons of French Grunts and Blue-striped Grunts holding position in the lee of large purple gorgonian or sea fans. The bright yellow and white Porkfish had twin black bars across the face, the Spotfin Butterflyfish just one. Most impressive were all the 'forms' of Stoplight Parrotfish though the so called 'terminal' stage adults in the brilliant green pink-purple shot livery with yellow and red marks on the tail were really special. Gray Angelfish were an impressive size though the two (just two - where were the others??!!) Barracuda hanging around in the open water were rather less awesome! Yellowtail Sapper and Yellow Goatfish were admired as were the iridescent Blue Tangs. It was a very pleasant introduction to the areas reefs but was nothing compared to our next port of call – Hales Shoals. This seemed to be in the middle of nowhere though Albert drove us straight to it. The water was incredibly clear and the coral head here contained a very impressive selection of fish. A flotilla of Atlantic Spadefish sailed past – these found only here in this region. A large dark Southern Stingray eventually sailed from his hidey-sand. Blueheads guarded little coral heads and on one we saw the diminutive baby wrasse. Amongst the more beautiful fish were French Angelfish, Rock Beauty, Indigo Hamlet, Spanish Hogfish and Blue Chromis. The strange Honeycomb Cowfish sailed past and there was also the much smaller Spotted Trunkfish.

Eventually we had to leave this lovely spot and return to the Jaguar Reef for lunch. After lunch one or two of us potted across the road and saw Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and the butterflies Eastern-tailed Blue and *Heliconius erato*.

Late afternoon saw us on the road up to Cockscomb which not surprisingly at this time of day was quiet. Yellow-bellied Flycatchers and Dusky-capped Flycatchers were in evidence. Yellow-winged Tanager, White-collared Manakin and Summer Tanager added splashes of colour. Very fresh footprints of Jaguarundi were on the road. Late afternoon turned to dusk and then it was night as we got the torches out. We didn't see a great deal though Kinkajou, Common Opossums, Pauraques and a Spectacled Owl were amongst the better species. On the way back we found Blue Crab and a couple of Yellow-crowned Night Herons.

Day 5 / November 18th Cockscomb Reserve and Jaguar Reef

A fine sunny morning was welcome and it stayed that way for much of the morning at Cockscomb with just a brief rain shower but otherwise little cloud. We had as usual not gone far from the Jaguar Reef before a stop was called – two fine Aplomado Falcons sat in the bright sunshine. Then it was on to Cockscomb stopping only for roadside Laughing Falcons and Vermilion Flycatchers and to sign in at Maya Center. Toucans, dives and saltators flew backwards and forwards across the road as we drove up the

entrance road. A stop along here fielded a marvellous display by a male White-necked Jacobin – a very pretty white, blue and green hummingbird. Also here were Cinnamon Becard, Blue-winged Warbler, Dot-winged Ant-wren, Slaty-tailed Trogon and the beautiful Crimson-collared Tanager.

We parked up by the visitor's centre and took the wide and easy-going Riverside Trail. This was followed by the Rubber Tree Trail and then Curassow – a total distance of almost exactly one kilometre though it took us four hours to cover it! The mornings interest was largely with the birds and to an extent the forest and its vegetation. Butterflies were conspicuous by the absence – especially in such fine conditions – and all morning we saw only a 'Blue Cissia' *Chloreuptychia sericeella* on the walk and by the visitors centre the almost white riodinid *Leucochimona lagora* and the pretty *Catonephele numilia*. Mammals too were not visible with only Deppe's Squirrel seen. Howler Monkeys were heard in the distance but it was the signs of mammals that was particularly interesting – there were clearly plenty about! Best of course was the Jaguar footprints – nice and fresh and not far short of the river. We later found more older ones. There was a lovely clear Ocelot too and opossums, armadillos and peccaries had all left their marks. Santos showed us some of the forest plants and told us a little about their uses – how could anyone forget the downy-leaved *Melastomacean* which he solemnly declared was the foresters 'tissue'! Fungi were well represented with some choice clusters and ferns too – the Tree Ferns were especially nice. At the base of one tree we watched tiny odd-looking bees at the entrance to a wax tube which went down into their hive. Termite nests were impressive and so too were the leaf cutter ant trails which were well worn. Down by the river we watched these same ants carrying innumerable tiny flowers down from the canopy of a tree.

Also by the river were a variety of flycatchers. Yellow-olive and Ochre-bellied were two forest flycatcher species here. A pair of Passerini's Tanagers, the male brilliant red and black were joined by a Grey-headed Tanager. Wilson's Warblers and Magnolia Warblers perused riverside trees for a tasty morsel and so too did Green Honeycreepers. A little group of Red-throated Ant-Tanagers passed through – we heard them many times during the morning. A Spot-breasted Wren also showed itself well though briefly. On the trails we saw Swainson's Thrushes, Clay-coloured Robin and a Gray-cheeked Thrush that caused a deal of discussion and just a little disagreement. Ivory-billed was the only woodcreeper and amongst the woodpeckers we saw Yellow-Olive and Black-cheeked. Santos found a Yellow-tailed Oriole by another river opening. Manakins were really quite common with the White-collared much more obvious though we did see at least two female Red-capped Manakins. Perhaps star bird of the morning has to be those giant arboreal turkeys, the Crested Guans – very impressive birds indeed. Then it was back to the carpark and visitors centre and a well-earned cold juice. We stopped briefly on the way back to the coast at the Maya Center's main shop and took a look at the carvings, jewellery etc that was on sale there before two bus loads of school children caused us to beat a hasty retreat.

The afternoon saw us walking a couple of hundred metres down the road and spending the rest of daylight hours in the small bit of savannah amidst the mangroves and

marshes out back. Both Cinnamon Hummingbird and Canivet's Emerald were seen and flycatchers were well represented again with Least Flycatcher, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Tropical Pewee and Common Tody-Flycatcher. Roadside Hawks sat obligingly for us. On one dead tree we watched a succession of birds that included Black-cowled and Baltimore Orioles. Red-ored Parrots came in and landed briefly and we also watched Yellow-throated Euphonias and Blue-Gray Tanagers. An area of sandy soil held a colony of diminutive earthstars whilst by the 'foggy' roadside pools Adrian found the blue Ceraunus Blue roosting with the previously noted Eastern-tailed Blue.

After dinner several of us went back up to Cockscomb. Though conditions seemed pretty good and the moon was largely hidden behind clouds, we managed to see only one mammal – a Common Opossum. Birds however were rather better. One a walk round the Riverside and Rubber Trails we found a Woos Thrush roosting quietly well up in a tree. Pauraques later provided some entertainment – one allowing us to within touching distance. Then there was the evening's surprise package – a superb Northern Potoo sitting on a roadside fence post – brilliant!

Day 6 / November 19th Gales Point

After a somewhat more leisurely breakfast than of late we were on the road by a little after eight thirty. We drove through a lively looking Hopkins where final preparations for the day's big events were taking place – for today is Garifuna Day, a national holiday, but in particular an important one for the local Garifuna people.

We drove north along the Coastal Highway. Suddenly a large bird was spotted in a tree – a superb adult King Vulture complete with garish face and bill pattern. This large bird has an amazing olfactory capacity in that it came detect rotting meat even under the rainforest canopy. Down by the nearby river were Collared Aracaris and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. A little further down the road a Gray Fox appeared. Then it was on to the village of Gales Point which straggles along a narrow two mile peninsula which juts into the Southern Lagoon. The village is one of those very relaxed places typical of Belize's Caribbean coast and it was clear that doing not a lot was considered a good thing here. Mind you, it was a national holiday! We pulled up at the very last building at the end of the spit – the Manatee Lodge. The gardens here contained a number of rather pretty orchids as well as Hooded Oriole and Yellow-throated Warbler.

We all joined John the boatman in his boat and were soon whisked off to the 'Manatee Spring' – an underwater spring where warm water rises to the surface – something the Manatees enjoy particularly during the winter months. Today there was a little light wind which ruffled the surface of water that was decidedly murky – a result of the recent rain, so viewing conditions were not ideal. The Manatees however were there and there were plenty of them – probably more than a dozen animals, though counting them was rather guesswork. For the most part all we saw was a snout with nostrils above the water for a couple of seconds but as time wore on we managed a few better looks as they surfaced in twos and actually lifted their heads part way out of the water. There was a little baby present and also one with a radio antenna attached to its tail base which gave its

underwater presence away easily enough! During one brief spell of calm when they came particularly close to the boat we could just about make out their shapes below the water. There were also a number of Tarpan below the surface – these included a number of really quite large fish. Above the water a few Royal Terns and a Sandwich Tern flew past. Then John took us off through some channel exploring the mangrove between the lagoon and coast. Red Mangroves with their stilt roots lined the channels and behind Adrian pointed out the Black Mangroves with their vertical thin aerial roots. Birdlife was not prolific but included a good selection of wetland species – especially amongst the herons and egrets. As well as the more usual Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets there were a number of Little Blue Herons, at least two Tricolored Herons, several Snowy Egrets and some Yellow-crowned Night Herons. We saw some fine adult White Ibis and spent awhile following some dingier youngsters down the main channel. Neotropic Cormorants were perched in mangroves and several Anhingas were seen flying about. Ringer Kingfishers called loudly from the river edge and two Yucatan or Red-vented Woodpeckers flew past us. Ospreys were reasonably common and out on the coast we saw Black-bellied Plovers, Spotted Sandpipers and Brown Pelicans. Under the water's surface were Bonefish, what was probably a Houndfish (like a Needlefish) and just outside the estuary, a Southern Stingray glided along under the front of the boat.

We returned to the Manatee Lodge and took lunch there. The fried chicken, french fries and coleslaw was very good – though we were a bit thrown by the fried biscuit and large watermelon slice that went with. There was also a bucket of lime juice though it tasted more like pineapple. Just down the road we saw Black Iguana, Middle American Ameiva lizards and two Amazon Kingfishers.

Then we headed back to Hopkins. Inevitably an unscheduled stop produced an array of birds. There were little flocks of Orchard Orioles and with these were Common Tody Flycatcher, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Yellow-bellied Elaenias, Red-eyed Vireos and a Yellow-throated Warbler. The bright orange and black striped butterfly could have been either *Heliconius ismenius* or *Melinaea ethra*. We stopped by a forest cloaked hillside and heard a cacophony of sound as Yucatan Black Howlers let rip – truly impressive. Sadly we couldn't locate the animals themselves though we did see several Keel-billed Toucans perched high on the hill and at the bottom Yellow-throated Chat and male Hepatic Tanager. There were plenty of nice flowers here including a bush with tiny yellow flowers surrounded by immense white bracts and another passion flower with pinky-purple flowers – *Passiflora urbaniana*.

As dusk was approaching we drove back through Hopkins which was now heaving. The party was just starting and there were people everywhere with a large marquee where the PA was just winding up the centre of attention.

Day 7 / November 20th Glover's Atoll

Another fine sunny morning! Jaguar Reef was a little groggy this morning and it took a while for things to get into gear – the result of last night's festivities in Hopkins. Some of the kitchen staff had managed an hour's sleep before coming in!

We sped out over a smooth sea, the bumps of the previous trip barely discernible until after Tobacco Reef. We spent ten minutes oggling the Magnificent Frigatebird colony on Man O'War Caye. The bright sunshine certainly brought out the best in the males as they displayed their red balloons vigorously. There were even several males taking on a bit of airborne red balloon hanging. Spectacular stuff. Below the waters a Yellow Stingray was seen and 'grunts' hovered amongst the eel grass. Freda and Chris had elected to spend their olden Wedding anniversary on the idyllic Coco Plum Caye and with Andy playing Gooseberry we left them all to it and headed out to Glover's Atoll eighteen miles and forty five minutes east. Now we were in pretty much open sea and there were waves however the sea was 'longer' out here and so the effect of the bouncing was only occasionally uncomfortable! Nothing much happened during the eighteen miles except for a couple of eruptions of Mirror-wing Flying Fish from sea. These glide phenomenal distances on their outstretched pectoral fins – one did at least a hundred metres.

Cayes appeared in the distance and then a reef in front of us. Roy and Terry manoeuvred us carefully through the fringing reef into the coral atoll and then we sped away towards the south and Long Caye. We dropped anchor in a sandy spot amidst the corals and were soon in the water. It was fabulously clear and the corals were exceptional. Great green Brain Corals mixed with purple Gorgonians and tubular grey corals. The fish were truly exceptional and during the next three hours, most of which was spent in the water, just some time out as we moved a few hundred metres, we saw an incredible variety. Blue Tangs sailed around the corals in numbers and there were groups of Grunts and Ocean Triggerfish. Pairs of Four-eyed and Spotfin Butterflyfish were scattered over the corals and we found the odd pair of Banded Butterflyfish and Reef Butterflyfish. Grey and French Angelfishes were seen again. The stunning Fairy Basslet a luminous violet and yellow occupied sheltered sides of tall corals. What was quite extraordinary was the sheer number of juvenile fish. Adult Blueheads were certainly here and there and so two Yellowhead Wrasse but their young were so abundant that they almost got in the way! Parrotfish in contrast were not so common though we did see a few more Stoplight and a number of Redband. The pretty and elegant Striped Wrasse was common. Back to the small fish – brilliant yellow and blue Cocoa Damsel fish and Beaugregory were evident and all the stages of Yellow-tailed Damsel fish were too – the juveniles have stunning electric blue spots. Some impressive Great Barracuda were keeping an eye on us from the reef edge – some looked to be four feet in length. Crevices were the haunt of Squirrelfish and Longspine Squirrelfish. The amazing Redlip Blenny sat guarding his brain coral. The eyes are on top of the head and they follow you as you drift over and then the redlips makes a dart for you before making a hasty exit to a hole in the coral! The beautiful large Queen Triggerfish sailed past. Indigo Hamlet, Spanish Hogfish Sergeant Majors were joined by Blue Chromis and Yellow Goatfish – it was a colourful show. The large Hogfish was in adult form over the sandy bottom and in the more spectacular blotchy intermediate form near coral. Groups of Bermuda Chubb kept their distance and so too did Ocean Triggerfish. Looking closely at coral heads revealed juvenile parrotfish and wrasse and the tiny Neon Goby.

Temporarily sated we landed on nearby Long Caye for lunch. Needless to say a run around the island (entirely possible in ten minutes) revealed much wildlife amid the shacks and dive places. Black or Spiny-tailed Iguanas were common with many little ones as well as the butch big ones. There were also Brown Anoles and another unidentified species of Anole. On the beach Turnstones and Sanderling, out on the reef Amazon Kingfisher, Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans, and in the trees White-crowned Pigeon and a bunch of Warblers including Tennessee, Yellow-rumped, Palm, Magnolia and the pretty Prairie. We walked back along trails lined with old conch shells and headed to the west reef for a spot of more snorkelling.

This was a shallow area with much grass and scattered but very fish-iferous coral. However it all started with a turtle. We were all pleased to see a turtle in the weather near the boat but then the alarm bells started ringing – it was tiny and in fact looked like a terrapin and this is exactly what it turned out to be – a very lost and rather exhausted Meso-American Slider – some thirty miles from its nearest fresh water. We put it in the boat and Roy and Terry later released it in a river. Sue was lucky enough to see a real turtle minutes later – a Green Turtle. And so to the fish... Initially it didn't look too hot for fish but amongst the shallow corals there was in fact an abundance – and indeed very many juveniles. All ages of Blueheads were common and little coral heads each had a pair of Cocoa Damselfish and/or Beaugregory's, their brilliant blue and yellow scales lit up by afternoon sun. Impressive Queen Angelfish sailed along – their colours more varied than the startling orange and deep blue Rock Beauty which was also here. There were a number of Wrasse and Parrotfish and also the spotted Coney and the large Tiger Grouper. It was already getting late so we sped back to the Jaguar Reef as the sun dropped down towards the Maya Mountains right behind the lodge –an arresting sight.

Day 8 / November 21st Blue Hole National Park and Sittee River

Those foolhardy enough to get up at three and drive to Cockscomb saw very little – only the Northern Potoo again in the dark and once light Slaty-tailed Trogon and White-necked Jacobin up in the reserve and an Agouti as we passed Sittee River on the way back.

After breakfast we took to the main road via Hopkins. Just as we reached tarmac we found a Scorpion Mud Turtle on the roadside. This is one of the terrapins that can close its shell completely something it duly did before eventually coming out for a walk. Another stop was made by a bridge where some Amazon Kingfishers had posed briefly for us. These soon disappeared but recompense was there in the shape of Olive-backed Euphonias, Northern Parula and Common Tody-Flycatcher. After a brief stop for a pair of Hook-billed Kites we arrived at Blue Hole.

A line of caesalpinias in the carpark attracted a couple of Rufous Hummingbirds though this was all the evidence we were to see of any reason behind then Hummingbird Highway's moniker. Some lucky gent discovered a really rather large spider living in the loo roll dispenser in the loos! Santos took us on a path through then forest (my apologies everyone!) which could kindly be discovered as undulating and perhaps a

little slippery underfoot. It wasn't too bad in itself but the abundant mosquitoes – the worst we'd come across – made for an uncomfortable walk. Compensation was there in the beautiful forest – it was extremely lush and seemed to be very varied vegetatively. And in the beautiful fungi which offered more variety than we'd seen anywhere. There were some very fine red cups and also some elegant parasols. Butterflies were more or less absent from within the forest – with the exception of the orange and black striped *Lycorea cleobaea* and a strange *Pierella* with red bases to the hindwings. Outside was a different story with swallowtails flying past and the black and yellow *Heliconius charitonus* fluttering about. Various sulphurs sped past and much more sedate was the weak flight of *Euremas nise* and *albula*. Birds were extremely quiet to start with only the odd Sulphur-rumped Warbler to keep us going but as the walk progressed we started finding more and more. White-bellied Wood-Wren was followed by a fine little bird party which contained half a dozen Dot-winged Ant-wrens, a Royal Flycatcher, both Olivaceous and Northern Barred Woodcreepers, Tawny-crowned Greenlet and a Blue-winged Warbler. More ant-wrens were to follow and we also saw Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Blue-Black Grosbeak and Gray-chested Dove. Perhaps the most unusual bird was the uncommon Swainson's Warbler.

We moved back to the Blue Hole but found our way barred by an extraordinary little group of warblers. There were no less than ten species and most were represented by singles! Blue-winged, Blackpoll, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Wilson's, Hooded, Kentucky, Black and White, Nashville and American Redstart were here too. There were also other birds – more ant-tanagers and woodcreepers, the latter including both Olivaceous and Streak-headed.

We headed back to the Jaguar Reef for lunch with a brief stop to photograph the Hurricane Shelter sign next to the dilapidated shack and also to take a look at the epiphyte-laden citrus trees – there were ferns, orchids and bromeliads growing on them. After lunch it was a free afternoon. Some relaxed by the pool or the beach, others went in to explore Hopkins and Adrian took a number of people down to Toucan Sittee. Ian and Andy cycled over to Iguana Lodge (and several other points west!) and took kayaks down river. We explored the cut through to Anderson's Lagoon and then continued on down river a little before returning at dusk. No sign of any Manatees or crocs but there were a few birds. White Ibis were flying in to roost over the lagoon. Common Black Hawk and Roadside Hawk were in trees. In the undergrowth were Northern Waterthrushes, Kentucky Warblers and Gray Catbirds. A Bat Falcon caught a dragonfly above us and a Muscovy Duck flew upstream. Belted Kingfishers were seen several times and a superb large male Green Iguana gripped a tree tightly. Adrian's group saw White-winged Becard and Keel-billed Toucans amongst other species at Toucan Sittee.

Day 9 / November 22nd Cockscomb and Silk Grass Shrimps

We set off for Cockscomb shortly after seven. Adrian's group stopped by the Sittee bridge and enjoyed Black Phoebe and several obliging Mangrove Swallows and on the way up to the reserve they had good views of Collared Aracaris. They saw the tour's first snake – dangling from the bill of a Double-toothed Kite! Ian's group made a couple

of entrance road stops for little bird parties. One had Dot-winged Ant-wrens and an elusive Spotted Woodcreeper. By the entrance gate itself was a good mixed bird party with Brown Jays, Masked Tityra, Passerini's Tanagers and Blue-Grey Tanagers as well as several warblers and flycatchers. We had great views of Olive-backed Euphonias and both manakin species.

Adrian's group took the Tinamou Trail where little was to be seen so from there they tried the River Trail and the Waterfall Trail. Amongst many goodies along these were Pale-billed Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Dusky Antbird. Ian's group took the onward trail towards Victoria Peak – the signpost helpfully telling us that it was a mere 27km away! We then did half the Wapo Loop before returning to have our picnic under the thatched shelter in the carpark. We'd only managed a few yards before Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and then a succession of birds around the campsite stopped us. A superb male Green Honeycreeper fed on shocking pink flowers and Bananaquits in another tree. A male Canada Warbler hinted that a clean sweep on the warbler front was a possibility especially as Adrian had seen Worm-eating Warbler. Onwards we watched dragonflies, butterflies including the lovely *Heliconius erato* and the pretty stripy Two-banded Satyr and lizards such as the tiny Brown Forest Skink and the well-camouflaged Smooth Anole. Mammals were as usual out of sight though we again found plenty of evidence in the shape of armadillo, opossum and small cat tracks. There were Baird's Tapir tracks in a number of places including one set that were probably less than an hour old! The birds started slowly but got better as the morning went along. Passerini's Tanagers flashed their luminous scarlet rumps at us on several occasions. White-winged Becard formed part of a bird party which included several warblers whilst nearby was Gray-chested Dove. There were more Dot-winged Ant-wrens and some difficult to see Stub-tailed Spadebills. Black-cowled and Yellow Oriole were seen and there were a few red birds in the shape of Red-throated Ant-Tanager and Summer Tanager. Down by the water's edge we saw Rufous-breasted Spinetail as well as vultures and Ringed Kingfisher. Overhead was a superb King Vulture and rather more distant Black Hawk-Eagle. Down by an ox-bow we saw a White-lipped Mud-Turtle. Just prior to lunch June and Ian visited the start of Tiger Fern Trail. Here was beautiful thick forest and the bird life was correspondingly slow to start with but then after a mere ten minutes we watched a bird party go through that contained Stub-tailed Spadebill, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Plain Xenops, Red-throated Ant-Tanager and Orange-billed Sparrow.

After a picnic by the HQ we travelled to the Shrimp Farm near Silk Grass (Trenches?) where we met up with some more of the group. We entered the main gate and drove down the side of the obviously fairly recently (four years) made pools. It didn't look too productive and in fact we were only seeing a few egrets, a Belted Kingfisher and the odd Royal Tern when the manager turned up. Having been ticked off about not checking in with them (we were supposed to have done so) he then showed us where he said there would be many birds. He wasn't wrong! Down at the far end of the pools the mangroves and swamp stretched away to the sea with open water here and there and channels lining a track. Some of the finest birdwatching of the trip was to be had along here. We started with a bunch of waders in a dry pan – numerous Least Sandpipers,

Killdeers and Spotted Sandpipers as well as a Greater Yellowlegs and a few Semipalmated Plovers. On the other side was a pool which had a veritable who's who of herons and egrets with Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Great Blue and Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Heron and a Reddish Egret 'in-between' plumages. There was even a Roseate Spoonbill and in the distance a Wood Stork. Walking down the track further we passed some drowned woodland where Green Herons were very common. They noisily erupted from cover as we walked. One escaping *Ardeid* was considerably larger and luckily flew up onto an open branch right in front of us - a superb Bare-throated Tiger Heron. As the marsh again opened out we could see numerous Anhingas and plenty more egrets and herons. There was even a Black-crowned Night Heron and, glory be, a huge Jabiru Stork! Andy decided to stay in this area and film. Once we'd all moved on he started to get some close ups of various species and whilst sitting quietly during this he saw a small rail – but what species! The rest of us walked down the track bagging plenty of birds. There were our first Northern Jacanas and also plenty of Yellowthroats, Gray-crowned Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers. A young Yellow-crowned Night Heron posed beautifully for the cameras. Eventually we had to wander back to the vehicles passing a little Morelet's Crocodile on the way. As we left Slaty-breasted Tinamous started calling from the nearby forest.

After dinner several of us went to look at the area where we'd found the Puma footprints but to no avail. Sue and Simon did see some eye-shine but of a smaller unidentified mammal. We also checked out the Cattle fields near Kendal and had a brief view of a Gray Fox. There was little else other than lots of Pauraques at both ends.

Day 10 / November 23rd Mayflower & Southern Highway, South Water Caye & Tobacco Cut

Our last full day at Jaguar Reef began inauspiciously with rain some of it heavy, around breakfast time. This continued for much of the next hour or so but on shortly after our arrival at Mayflower, having braved a potentially difficult road. It stopped. On the way up we'd seen Keel-billed Toucans, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings and a Plain-breasted Ground Dove.

Mayflower is perhaps not the most inspiring archaeological site but it is certainly in a most beautiful location sitting at the foot of the Maya Mountains and surrounded by forest. The area around the raised mounds that allegedly cover the foundations of Maya Houses is dotted with old forest trees giving an almost park-like atmosphere. Certainly the birds liked it for though sunshine would have brought out plenty more we still managed some good birds. None better than the Beautiful Cotinga which was seen briefly down by Silk Cotton Stream and then later by everyone as it sat atop the tallest tree in the site. A rare and rarely seen bird (as opposed to the Jabiru which is rare but relatively easily seen) the only down side was that it was a female and not the gaudily attired male. Nonetheless she had a distinctive and unusual plumage all of her own. Suddenly she departed and half a second later a Hook-billed Kite took her place. Another star bird of the morning was the Bright-rumped Attila that sat glaring in a low tree. The long hooked beak is ideal for coping with large insects and this bird was

clearly hungry! Other fine birds here were Violet Sabrewing, Willow/Alder Flycatcher, Northern Bentbill, Wood Thrush, Blue-Black Grosbeak and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper. A White-nosed Coati exited its tree hideout with indecent haste. Butterflies included the lovely black and red *Parides erithaleon* and large numbers of *Anartia fatima*. Down by the stream we found a most remarkable vine. An *Aristolochia*, related to *gigantea*, it had huge flowers six inches across of typical 'tropical' birthwort design but with an eighteen inch long attenuated lobe from the front of the lip.

We all gathered for lunch back at the Jaguar Reef to hear each other's tales as Adrian's minivan had taken the Southern Highway for a spot of sightseeing. New birds from them included Solitary Sandpiper and Mangrove Vireo and they had cracking views of Keel-billed Toucans and Laughing Falcon.

At one-thirty we boarded a boat and sped out across the Caribbean. The weather by now was bright and sunny and was almost windless. It made for a very smooth crossing to South Water Caye and for ideal snorkelling conditions. We dropped Andy, Freda and Chris off at South Water Caye and then headed along the reef, oh, a couple of hundred metres, before dropping anchor and snorkelling. The water here was clear and without current and there were abundant fish about. After nearly an hour's happy exploration we moved half a mile to the wall side of Carrie Bow Caye and did a little drift snorkel where Roy held the boat in front of us as we snorkelled along the reef edge. This took us over some extraordinarily beautiful coral and being quite deep water – basically 2-35 feet deep – there was a great difference in the species of fish present. Then we picked up the landlubbers – who'd mostly been in the water anyway – and headed over to Tobacco Cut a ten minute boat ride away. This was different again with more turbulent water with rather poorer visibility but what an excellent place for rays and flounder. The range of fish on show at all these sites was very good but put them together and the diversity was really impressive and in largely still and mostly very clear water – a wonderful afternoon's snorkelling. Rays were perhaps the pick of the bunch with a few of both Yellow and Southern Stingrays seen by most but it was the large Spotted Eagle Rays with their pale dotted wings and amazing long thin tails that really took the biscuit. The sight of two of these gliding along, each five foot across the wings, is one of the most beautiful sights in the reef. Other big fish included Barracuda with several large specimens shimmying by and the Cero, a Barracuda look-a-like.

As we'd dropped anchor off South Caye a Brown Booby had sailed past, banked sharply and looking straight at us, had glided in and landed, Oh, a couple of snorkel lengths off the boat. It paddled round for a while and as got our masks and fins on and laughed at the thought of jumping in and comparing feet it was off again!

Back to the fish! A large school of Gray Snappers patrolled the entrance to the cut with a few Mahogany Snappers. Out in deeper water we saw a large group of Cottonmouth Jacks schooling near the surface of the very clear water. Two largish Houndfish also sailed along just below the surface. The large coral 'ridges' out here proved excellent places for parrotfish and wrasse with Graysby, Queen Parrotfish and Clown Wrasse all

new to the list. Pairs of exquisite midnight Black Durgons with white based fins were an unusual sight.

On the way back we stopped off at Man O'War Caye. The sun was low in the western sky now and so the light on the island's breeding colony of Magnificent Frigatebirds was really amazing. The large balloons of the males positively glowed – one could never tire of atmosphere and sites around this extraordinary place.

Adrian and Andy popped out in the evening and found Northern Potoo again, though a different individual, along the fences outside Sittee River.

Day 11 / November 24th To Tikal

Ian went to Cockscomb well before the crack of dawn and saw Virginia Opossum and Gray Four-eyed Opossum as well as Mealy Parrots.

After breakfast we said farewell to the Jaguar Reef and headed inland. It was a bright sunny morning and already hot in the shade so it was perhaps not surprising that raptors were a major feature of the journey. No less than five King Vultures joined throngs of their brethren in the skies and we also saw Gray Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Great Black Hawk, and once we'd reached Guanacaste Reserve there were also Short-tailed Hawk and a pair of Black Hawk-Eagles. At Guanacaste we split into two groups and did a trail each. Adrian's Guanacaste Trail group saw a number of warblers and also Green and Amazon Kingfishers. Ian's group saw Lineated Woodpecker and a pair of Bananaquits at the nest. Back at reception there was a Black Orchid in flower twenty foot up a tree and somewhat further up were Summer Tanager and Scrub Euphonias.

We drove west towards the border passing through villages with a bizarre series of names – Tea Kettle was followed by Blackman Eddy, by Ontario and thence to Esperanza. After the larger town of San Ignacio we were almost within sight of the border when we stopped at Clarissa Falls a small water fall on the Mopan River. We took out lunch here in the privately owned ranch. The grounds proved attractive to butterflies with several *Eurema* species being common along with the Nymphalids Vesta Crescent and the related *Thessalia theona*, Common Mestra and the pretty Crimson Patch. In the trees were a few warblers one of which obligingly pointed out our first Ferruginous Pygmy Owl of the trip – the second to follow a little later. Down by the river were various egrets and Anhinga.

After lunch we drove a few minutes to the border and there said our farewells to Charlton and Santos who had done such an admirable job looking after us. Ricardo from the Hotel Tikal Inn was there to meet us as appointed and we were soon on our way across the Guatemalan countryside. The landscape in Belize had already changed to one of largely farmland and across the border the theme was continued, however this was more extensive rangeland with very little of the rather manicure pasture found in Belize. There were large wet areas and scrub and forested areas and as we nearer the giant Lake Peten Itza the landscape became increasingly forested and several lakes appeared. We took the turning to Tikal and drove through farmland until the entrance

gate from where we traversed about twenty kilometres of forest – superb – especially all the signs up warning of Jaguar, snake and turkey crossings!

We arrived about four o'clock and spent the rest of the afternoon settling in, enjoying the garden which came complete with hummingbirds, toucans and parrots, the swimming pool, a few G & B Ts or in the Adrian's and my case, checking out the track to the Mirador. The airfield track had a few butterflies such as *Dryas iulia* and Swallowtail Cattleheart still flying even as dusk approached. The path to the Mirador was a little rough and the climb up to the platform by a near vertical wooden ladder so we decided it would not be for general use! From the top it was already just about sunset but we still saw toucans, Red-lore Parrots and Gray-breasted Martins. Then back to the lodge for our first encounter with Guatemala's chickens – the Hotel Tikal Inn's first preparation a fine effort! An after dinner potter about the grounds yielded calling Mottled Owl and two White-tailed Deer which seemed quite sanguine about having their evening ruminations interrupted by the bright torch lights!

Day 12 / November 25th Tikal National Park

We awoke our first morning in Tikal National Park to the wonderful sounds of a tropical dawn chorus consisting primarily of Montezuma's Oropendula, Brown Jays, Red-lore Parrots, Collared Aracaris, Keel-billed Toucans and Melodious Blackbirds all of which were very much in evidence on our pre-breakfast walk. As we assembled on the hotel grounds we watched a pair of Agoutis scurry along the woods edge and cross in front of us and head in the direction of the ruins. This was the first of seven mammal species we would see today – Gray Fox; Yucatan Squirrel; White-nosed Coatis that seems to be very attracted to Andy; White-tailed Deer; Howlers and Spider Monkeys. Not a bad start considering the tough times we had spotting mammals in Belize! Walking on the water lettuce at the reservoir were very confiding Gray-necked Wood Rails which eventually came within ten meters of us; a lone Purple Gallinule; a family group of Northern Jacanas that showed off their bright yellow wings every time they ventured from one side of the pond to the other; Green and Little Blue Heron rounded out the water birds while small groups of Social Flycatchers and Boat-billed Flycatchers as well as the odd Tropical Kingbird or two would create attention in the trees around the ponds, while a Spotted Sandpiper worked the edges. Along with the constant stream of Red-lore Parrots flying overhead the occasional Brown-hooded would pass by and White-crowned Parrots we spotted perched atop the canopy trees. Black Vultures were present in small numbers and Oscillated Turkeys in their colourful plumage roamed the grounds no doubt just as they did a thousand years ago when the Mayan were present. The trees that lined the road between our hotel and the ponds were full of activity with a wide variety of passerines - Blue-winged, Yellow, Black & White and Palm Warbler, American Redstart, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Palm and Yellow-winged Tanager and a beautiful male Baltimore Oriole added to the spectacle before we had to tear ourselves away for breakfast.

After breakfast we took the main track (G) from the hotel to the Grand Plaza which was surrounded by Temple 1 and 2 and the North Acropolis. Once in the forest it was very evident how beautiful this primary forest was. The paths were wide, well kept and above

all the lower vegetation was open making it a great deal easier to see into than the secondary forest that we were accustomed to at Cockscomb. Though the silence of the forest was shattered with the drumming of a Lineated Woodpecker, it took a short while before we actually saw a bird! We came across a large army of ants, at least a foot wide, crossing the path in both directions. Patiently we waited for what we hoped would be a bird party that would follow the insects that were being kicked up by these ants. We were rewarded with a Ruddy Woodcreeper that flew to within 6 feet of Ian's head. A steady stream of birds followed... a Grey-headed Tanager that sat for a long time on a thin stalk at eye level and was joined briefly by a Little Hermit. While we were excited to be getting great looks at these birds we ignored a gentleman, who was some twenty meters down the trail, and his weak plea for help in identifying a large bird above him in the canopy. We mistakenly thought it was a Black Vulture just by the size of his gesture. It turned out to be a King Vulture right out in the open. No sooner than we spotted it, it flew! A little further ahead a Pale-billed Woodpecker was tapping away on the edge of the track, and shortly after White-crowned Parrot, Ovenbird and Wood Thrush were seen well. This was just the appetizer, as the main course just before we reached the Grand Arena included Black and White Warbler, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Ivory-billed and Olivaceous Woodcreeper, and a nice troop of nine Spider Monkeys moving through the canopy above our heads.

A pair of Bat Falcons occasionally screaming welcomed us to the Grand Arena – and what a sight this was. At its peak Tikal covered some 50 square miles and supported an estimated Mayan population of 62,000. The Grand Plaza is part of what is now known as central Tikal, a mapped area of about 6 square miles, with over 3000 separate constructions and stone monuments, some of which have still to be unearthed, dating back over 1200 years. At one end Temple I, towering some 170 feet above the plaza and opposite it Temple II, the Temple of the Masks, a mere 140 feet in height and between them to the north, the Acropolis with a base covering about two and a half acres.

Heading back to lunch along the track to and from G we took our time stopping for Great Crested Flycatcher, a family of Violaceous Trogons, and a small bird party that included Plain Antvireo, Plain Xenops, several Tawny-crowned Greenlets and both Ivory-billed and Streak-headed Woodcreeper.

After a slight siesta, we joined Ricardo for a walk to Complex Q the un-excavated site with its vine covered and tree-infested temples, Complex R and finished at the North Acropolis in the Grand Arena, where he explained the intricate wheeling and dealing of the Mayan world. On the way in we came across Veery, Ovenbird, Kentucky and Hooded Warbler, a very loud group of 4 Howler Monkeys, White-nosed Coati, and by the time we reached the Grand Plaza at sunset Crested Guans had settled into an open twenty foot tree to roost giving us extraordinary views as noisy Mealy parrots flew overhead. As we approached the hotel a Gray Fox was roaming around the entrance, no doubt up to no good, while White-tailed Deer were seen on the grounds and a Mottled Owl was calling behind our rooms.

Day 13 / November 26th Tikal National Park

Three am was Ian and my appointed time to meet Challos and his trusty tracker to track down the elusive Jaguar. The rain that began at dinner several hours earlier had let up, but this was to be only for a very short time. By the time we were ten minutes into the walk it was obvious Challos was not happy with the weather as the rain picked up. This was not the conditions that they would need to hear, smell and sense our prey target. By the time we reached the pond, where a lone crocodile was seen, Challos decided to call it a night, and we all agreed that we would give it another shot..... in 23 hours.

The usual suspects were at the reservoir after breakfast and the walk towards the ruins produced Mealy Parrots, a very close look at an Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Violaceous Trogon, and numerous Wood Thrushes. In the open area just before Complex G Ian found a Campbell's Forest Toad and a Ghost Anole while on the exterior wall of the complex we got a brilliant flash of white, which surely was a Purple-crowned Fairy. Ian and Heather ventured into the woods (that doesn't sound right, but they did) picking up Chestnut-colored Woodpecker and Rufous Mourner while the rest of us followed a calling Stub-tailed Spadebill along the edge of the forest as it kept coming close to us before retreating and returning. Continuing on towards Temple V we witnessed a small party of birds included Golden-crowned Warbler, Kentucky and Hooded Warbler, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, two Rufous-tailed Jacamars and an Olivaceous Woodcreeper. At Temple V we were drawn to two young women who were taking photos of a small object in one of their hands. It turned out to be an as yet unidentified very small and pretty gecko that had been found on top of one of their heads! The surrounding area produced good looks at another Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, more Sulphur-rumps, a Hooded Warbler, Olivaceous Woodcreeper and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher - without a doubt the most common *empid* of the trip. One of the trees we walked past was suffering from mid to advanced stages of strangulation from a Strangler Fig - very fitting for a Mayan site! A number of butterflies were about but mainly comprised of three species, Banded Peacocks, "temple toppers" better known as Crimson Patches and Mimosa Yellows. Rounding out the mornings walk with a visit to the Lost World and returning via Temple IV where a Bat Falcon was seen streaming above the complex; Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were very conspicuous; a Worm-eating Warbler worked its way along a large moss covered log only to be followed closely behind by a Hooded Warbler; our first sighting of a Great crested Flycatcher; Dusky-capped Flycatcher occasionally calling; and a Bright-rumped Attila that Joy and June managed to pish in to a few feet.

Late afternoon we headed towards the pond but were waylaid by the profusion of butterflies that were around the grasses and composites on the old airstrip and the *lantana* a little further down the track - Zebra Longwing, Banded Peacock, White Peacock, Julia, Orange-banded Peacock, Gulf Fritillary, cattlehearts, skippers and what seemed like an army of Soldiers.....making for a wonderful photographic opportunity. Needless to say we did not get far birding though we heard a Collared Forest Falcon being mobbed by Brown Jays, saw Black-headed Saltators, White-eyed Vireo, a beautiful scope view of a Scale Pigeon, Gray-breasted Martins and Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift. While June and I turned back early and caught Orchard and Baltimore

Orioles, Yellow-throated Euphonias and numerous parrots around the car park, Ian, Sue and Simon made it to the pond where Wood Thrushes were abundant and a Black and White Owl put in an appearance on a large limb of a tree on the far side of the bank at dusk. Little Tinamou and Slaty-breasted were heard on the way back.

Day 14 / November 27th Tikal National Park

The now daily ritual of arising before three am was becoming old hat, as was the fact that we were not seeing anything! Though it was not raining, the mist was pretty thick and condensation dripped through the canopy giving us the impression of drizzle. Several of us were ready and waiting but alas Chalco failed to show, so we ventured as far as the "Tapir" pond but couldn't even muster up a croc. Our only consolation was a doe and calf White-tailed Deer in the gardens.

At five am Ricardo pulled in on his trusty moped and those who were already awake were joined by four others to head for sunrise at the Lost World (not on his bike but by foot). We later found out that there was miscommunication between the receptionist and Chalco. The later calling to confirm that he was taking us out, only to be told, Ricardo was taking us out. What the receptionist did not know was that there was two groups and two times arranged for two different trips with two different leaders! The forty-minute trek being punctuated by a stop to listen at a lone Howler waking the forest up; a Black and White Owl calling from deep behind Complex G and a pair of Blue-crowned Motmots on the south side of the excavation site. Reaching the Lost World we climbed the 140 steps of the temple and were enveloped in a shroud of mist, through which the occasional oropendula or parrot would scream by. Coffee not tea, sweet cake and a bun were produced from Ricardo's backback and we proceeded to take in the sights and sounds of the forest from above canopy level (though we couldn't see anything) while enjoying the light breakfast.

Occasionally Mealy or Brown-headed Parrots would fly over or a Red-lored would perch close enough to see, but it was the dawn chorus that was most memorable with the occasional Lineated Woodpecker drumming and Crested Guan honking. We took the long way back venturing deeper into the forest, but other than good numbers of Tawny-winged Woodcreepers and the occasional Golden-crowned Warbler, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher or Lesser Greenlet and a Gray-fronted Dove we had a hard time locating birds. At one point a troop of Spider Monkeys were above us, scratching and swatting the mosquito's around them, much as we had been since day break, and peering down at us telling us to move on. We didn't, so one of them proceeded to bombard us with excrement. It did not do much good as it missed its target and we stayed around, laughing, before they moved on.

Around mid day Ian checked out the conditions on the Mirador track, as the broken boardwalk was in a state of disrepair, and came across three wren species, Carolina, White-breasted and Spotted Breast Wood Wren as well as a male Black-headed Shrike Tanager and Great Tinamou, though he may have gotten the most excitement from the Mexican (Bronze-backed) Parrot Snake that was along the main path back.

At two pm we met the local expert bird guide Luis Figueroa, a golly nice chap with a superior knowledge of where the birds were. We gave him a list of target birds consisting of species that had eluded us as well as some that some of the group had missed and we set out for the next four hours walking paths we had not taken before and returned down the main track from Temple IV. As we searched the underbrush and trees for Great Curassow, a sighting of which eluded us, Mangrove Vireo, White-collared Manakin, Eye-ring Flatbill, Keel-billed Toucan and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher were all seen well. Luis' imitation of their call paid off when a male responded for about five minutes, but it never seemed to get any closer than the estimated 30 meter distance, and we never got to see it. A Greenish Eleania was also heard and we watched a Worm-eating Warbler take a considerably long bath in the hollow of a tree. This was followed by quick views of Sulphur-rumped and Great Crested Flycatcher. Walking up a rise into a gravel pit we came face to face with the bird of the trip. With good light filtering through the canopy the flash of purple iridescence on the crown of a male Purple-crowned Fairy was simple stunning as it kept dipping time and again into a small depression filled with water. Simply brilliant! It's hard to top that but we followed it with a Red-capped Manakin sitting at head height less than ten meters from us. Just inside the forest edge a Thrush-like Shiffornis followed us for a moment and a Long-tailed (Long-billed) Hermit made a brief appearance in front of Simon and Sue before vanishing into the forest. Mealy Parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets were seen well, the former right above us on one occasion cracking open fruit and dropping the cases around us. A complete surprise was a beautiful male Collared Trogon that was first heard calling then spotted in the open, giving us a wonderful scope look. A mixed flock of warblers including Magnolia, Redstart, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Black and White were bouncing about several trees at Complex P and a Rufous-tailed Jacamar was heard calling behind the un-excavated mounds. Luis soon tracked it down and everyone who still needed a BVD (better view desired) certainly got it. We finished with what could be described as the perfect ending - a pair of Orange-breasted Falcons roosting near the top of Temple IV in perfect light. Guatemala's rarest breeding bird - only this one pair.

Upon our return an extraordinary sight in the car park was a roost of what could have easily been several hundred Montezuma's Oropendulas in several small trees.

Day 15 / November 28th Tikal to Crooked Tree; Crooked Tree boat ride

Today we had to transfer from Tikal to Crooked Tree (north west of Belize City) via van. Our last chance for Jaguar slipped by without a sighting, not even one on a road warning sign. Andy was hoping to photograph all the animal warning signs along the road as we left the park, but only managed a snake and a deer. Obviously the animals only crossed the road from east to west! The 2 ½ journey to the border was broken up with a few brief stops, though these were mainly for the drivers benefit - a pineapple drink; a quick visit into his home (just after the van in front of ours clipped a few tail feathers off one of his chickens that was trying to cross the road); and since he did finish that drink off quickly, to drain his bladder, but at least this just happened to be right next to a roadside wetland, about half way to the border. There was a plethora of white egrets and waterbirds including Common Moorhen, American Coot, Pied-billed Grebe,

immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and 4 kingfisher species – Ringed, Amazon, Belted and Green in order of size from largest to smallest. Only the smallest species Pygmy American was to elude us on this trip. The return border crossing into Belize was relatively painless, though we did not hang around to find out exactly what all the fireworks (at mid day!) or gunfire was that drew a small crowd just behind the border building. Sam Tillet and Alvin met us on the Belizean side and in no time we were on our way, shortly after 10 am. Just outside Teakettle (yes, that is the name of the village), Ian, somehow still awake despite little sleep over the previous 72 hrs, spotted a 'different' black raptor high amongst the vultures. Waking most of the group from a kip, we piled out the vehicles and picked out the Black Hawk Eagle circling high above a copse showing its long tail, long rounded wings and underwing pattern. We pulled into Crooked Tree a small village on the edge of very large lagoon at 12:15 pm and got situated into Sam's quaint hotel.

Soon after lunch Ian found a gorgeous three foot Speckled Racer in his room, so that caused a lot of excitement! Presumably because of its beauty no one seemed too perturbed. It was gently coaxed out the door and slithered into a hole along the edge of the building. Frieda was assured it would not climb up to her second floor room.....and they all lived happily ever after.

Within a stone's throw of Sam's place we split up into two boats and spent the better part of 3 hours on Crooked Tree. The rains had been good this year and this was the end of the rainy season and the lagoon was full. Full of birds too. Though we had the full sun beating down on us it was a most enjoyable and relaxing way to spend the afternoon. Jacanas, some with babies only a day or two old, were walking over the masses of water lilies that covered a vast amount of water, and taking off flashing their yellow wings anytime we encroached their comfort zone. Snail Kites, mainly males, quartered the shallower areas in search of apple snails. We saw many snail eggs just above the water line on the vegetation and on several occasions watched as a kite dropped to the water to pick a snail up in its talons and fly to a perch, where its sharply curved hooked beak is just the perfect tool to extract the snail from its shell without breaking it. Ospreys would hover but we never did witness a perfect strike. At one stage a Great Black Hawk rose from the edge shrubbery and flew up river, but it was the Black-collared Hawk, actually about 8 of them, that was the most striking of all the 'water' raptors. Perched on a snag on the edge of the water we manoeuvred the boats to within 15 meters of the birds. Its stunning rusty body and black collar contrasting with an off white head. Simply a stunning raptor. A Southern Lapwing, a first for Belize, that had been around for a few months was most obliging as she feed along the waters edge. Other highlights included numerous Limpkins; Green-breasted Mangos; a Yellow-headed Parrot perched in perfect light; a White-necked Puffbird; an elusive Mangrove Cuckoo and a small group of bizarre-billed Boat-billed Herons.

Day 16 / November 29th Crooked Tree savannah

It was six am for a few hearty souls (Joy, June, Sue and Simon) on the deck for coffee, tea and a bunch of bananas before spending two wonderful hours (before the real breakfast) walking the shrub and pine savannah around Crooked Tree with Sam Tillet.

Leaving the village behind, a small family of Least Grebes along with a pair of Pied-billed Grebes were on a small wetland pond, while a Snail Kite did not take too kindly to us and flew elsewhere. White Ibis and a lone Black-bellied Whistling Duck flew over. The adjacent shrubs held a Grayish Saltator, Black-headed Trogon, Spot-breasted Wren and the first of this mornings many White-eyed Vireo's. Ruddy Ground-Doves and Vermilion Flycatchers were about in good numbers darting between the many small trees that dotted the landscape and a Northern Cardinal failed to show despite calling several times. In the pines we were amused by the antics and comical facial features of Acorn Woodpeckers as well as getting stunning views of noisy Yellow-lored Parrots as they perched and made short sorties around us. A Ladder-backed Woodpecker called and flew into view briefly before flying on, as did a Red-vented Woodpecker, though we did get to hear it drumming for a while. Several Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers gave us a 4-pecker morning. An immature Yucatan Jay showed well and was eventually followed by about a dozen family members. Flycatchers were very much in evidence with Yellow-bellied Eleanias, Tropical Pewee and a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet seen very well. There was no shortage of warblers either with Northern Parula, Yellow-throated, American Redstart, Magnolia, Black-and-White and Yellow-rumped flittering about. A House Wren showed briefly before dropping out of sight and a nice find was three Olive Sparrows at head height in a shrub and great looks at a Buff-bellied Hummingbird nectaring 20 feet from us.

Back at Sam Tillet's breakfast was waiting along with a Gray-necked Wood Rail, Little Blue Heron, jacanas and a Veined (Pepper) Tree Frog (Belize's largest) that a visiting gentleman bought in to show us. Following breakfast we packed our bags and made the forty-five minute journey to the airport and eventually onto Miami and beyond.....a truly wonderful trip with a wide variety of wildlife seen including 314 species of birds, fabulous fish and reptiles, amazing Mayan sites and all in a lovely part of the world.