

Belize and Tikal: Backpacking and Birding

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With most of January free, I decided to use that time to travel abroad to somewhere new and do a bit of backpacking. After a bit of research on where I could go that was cheap, logistically simple, with good birding, and preferably safe and English-speaking I settled on Belize as the ideal option. After talking with my friend and college roommate Jon Cogdill a month or so prior I was able to convince him (pretty easily!) to come down for a week to join me in some backpacking and exploring around the immediate region.

I flew down on January 3, with a couple days to devote to intense birding before Jon would arrive on the sixth. Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, home to some of the best birding in Belize, was my destination for these first days. The birding here is centered on Crooked Tree lagoon and the adjacent small village. I caught a local bus north from Belize City and hopped off at the entrance of the long dirt road that leads to Crooked Tree Village from the highway. It's about a three mile haul, but in retrospect seemed much longer. Along with a couple locals I waited at the end of the road for the next passing vehicle going into the village. It turned out to be a pickup truck (driven by an American expat) and we all hopped in the bed and got a free ride into town. Much better than a hot, long walk! I hopped out at the first main junction in the village and hiked another half mile northeast to Crooked Tree Lodge. I'd read online that I could pitch my tent here for \$10/night, which sounded perfect.

I spent the next few days birding around Crooked Tree during the days and hanging around the lodge at night. It was enjoyable to get to know Mick the lodge owner over a few beers in the evenings and I was privileged to hear the fascinating story of how he went from a helicopter pilot in the British military to owning and operating an ecolodge in Belize. I also hit it off with another guest, Andy, who's from Omaha and travelling with his wife and three year old daughter Claudia. We all took a boat ride together into the lagoon one morning where we were treated to nice views of a variety of common wading birds, a couple Black-collared Hawks, several Snail Kites, and a nonplussed Yucatan Howler Monkey. A Boat-billed Heron hidden in a tree was also a nice treat.



Early morning boat ride on Crooked Tree Lagoon

Otherwise, the birding around the village was quite entertaining and I ended the day with over 100 species on foot during each of the full days I spent birding. Walking west from the lodge into the pine flatwoods I was able to find two regional endemics, Yucatan Flycatcher and Yucatan Jay, as well as a variety of wintering warblers and other passerines that were more abundant in this drier upland habitat. While sorting through a warbler flock at one point, I was surprised to put my binoculars on a Prairie Warbler and decided to snap a photo or two as it seemed a bit unusual for one to occur here in the winter. Sure enough, checking eBird later showed only one other inland winter record for Belize (from 2007 staying into 2008) while there were only a few winter records from the coastal mainland and a handful from the offshore islands.



An unexpected Prairie Warbler in Crooked Tree Village

Crooked Tree is known for its breeding Jabirus on the upper end of the lagoon, but in January they can be difficult to see and extremely unreliable. Imagine my delight when one soared overhead one afternoon while I was walking through the center of the village! I made sure to snap a couple photos for documentation. Russet-naped Wood-Rails would skulk in the brushy vegetation along the water's edge, and Belted, Ringed, and Green Kingfishers frequently dotted overhanging branches on the periphery of the lagoon. I was lucky one day to come right up to a perched American Pygmy Kingfisher as I was walking the shoreline just north of the wildlife office. An Alcedinidae pipsqueak, I was clued in to its presence by an odd-sounding call note that I initially passed off as an aberrant Black-and-white Warbler call. Far from it! It was very obliging for photos. Other birding highlights included Laughing Falcon, Barred Antshrike, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Bright-rumped Atilla, and Red-throated Ant-Tanager. Also entertaining were the dozens of iguanas of all shapes, sizes, and colors that would come and bask in the treetops along the edge of the lagoons, soaking up the early morning rays of the sun.



This Jabiru was soaring high over the center of Crooked Tree Village



The miniscule American Pygmy Kingfisher

During my stay in the village I ate my meals primarily at Nora's Restaurant where simple but delicious Creole plates were served up at an unbeatable price in an off-the-beaten-path, open air atmosphere. My last night I decided to eat dinner at the lodge, where I paid considerably more for my meal but enjoyed some great company and positively delicious food.



Nora's in Crooked Tree

The next morning I caught a ride with Mick to the bus stop by the main highway and soon thereafter hopped on a bus bound for Belize City so that I could meet Jon at the airport. The bus was packed with locals, standing room only with about six or seven people already standing in the aisle before I got on. I hopped out of the back door of the bus at the airport turnoff and hiked about a half a mile up the road before hitching a ride the last quarter mile to the airport. Jon's flight got in right on time at 12:30 and after he cleared immigration we caught a cab to Belize City. Our first destination was Caye Caulker, where we spent the next two nights exploring the island, swimming, and meeting people at our hostel while enjoying the local backpacker social scene. Magnificent Frigatebirds would constantly soar overhead while we were swimming with some new friends off a nearby dock and enjoying some local beer. Many of the locals on the island were incredibly aggressive in their sales tactics towards tourists, particularly towards women, and commonly required a very strong and stern "no" to back off. Drugs, particularly marijuana and edibles, were dealt pretty openly on the island. For the most part though, everyone here was laid back and friendly and it was a relaxing scene.

Battling the after-effects of a late night, we hopped a mid-morning ferry on January 8 back to the mainland and Belize City where we then caught a bus heading west to Flores, Guatemala. We were to spend the next two days in Flores and visiting Tikal. After managing to catch a bus at the hectic San Pedro Express waterfront bus terminal we headed west. As luck would have it, we were two of only five people aboard an entire full-sized coach bus and had it mostly to ourselves. The ride through Belize was uneventful and we enjoyed watching the countryside and small villages rolling by out the window until we got to the Guatemalan border and had to disembark. To my eye, the border crossing here seemed to be set up inefficiently and it was possible to exit the Belize side and totally miss the Guatemalan immigration station if one wasn't careful.

Belize charges a \$20 USD exit tax when leaving the country via land, and Jon and I both came prepared with the required cash on hand. However, the English-speaking gentleman in line behind wasn't quite as prepared; he and his wife were three dollars short. After giving the very grateful man three dollars we began chatting and hit it off quickly. Joe and Kim, as it turned out, were from Toronto and also heading to Flores. He was insistent upon finding me in the coming days to repay me the three dollars, to the point that it seemed past the standard courtesy and more a sense of personal pride for him. I think he would have chased me to Argentina to give me my three dollars if he needed to. We made loose plans to catch up with them again in the village within the next couple days.

Along with a middle-aged Brazilian couple we transferred in San Benito to a Nissan Xterra driven by a local friend of the bus driver. I presume he partnered with the bus company and at least one hostel and tour company in Flores. Jon and I already knew where we wanted to stay, the well-known Los Amigos Hostel, and managed to resist the immense pressure of our new driver to stay at a different hostel. One where he would presumably get a commission for referring us. I probably came off as rude and blunt when conversing with him, but with my

Spanish still lackluster I did the best I could. From where he dropped us off, we had only a short walk up the hill to Los Amigos.

Luckily, there were several beds left and we checked in without a hitch. They don't take advance reservations so any attempt to stay there has the possibility of being unsuccessful. We got settled in and decided to wander around the town to find an ATM and a bite to eat for dinner. There were apparently two ATMs in the town- one in the lobby of a hotel which we somehow could not find, and one in a corner convenience market. That's where we ended up. Lo and behold, upon walking in we ran into Joe and Kim. We ended up eating dinner with them at a local "Italian" restaurant (obviously catering to tourists, as most places in Flores do) and chatting for quite a while. Joe worked in real estate in Toronto and his wife Kim was an independent yoga instructor. They spend several months travelling and backpacking each winter to escape the Canadian cold and tend to visit somewhere new each year. Also, Joe made sure to repay me the three dollars I had lent him!



The lush, eclectic interior of Los Amigos Hostel

Our time in Flores coincided with an annual nine-day street festival that occurs on the island involving activities such as live music, food, parades, arts, etc. One parade we watched was consisted largely of men dressed as women and one guy even had on a physically massive Donald Trump mask (not sure how that was relevant?). These weren't parades in the organized American sense, more of a large, themed group of people wandering the streets and making lots of noise. Fireworks were also an integral part of the daily festivities and were going off 24 hours a day. This made sleeping slightly more difficult than normal.



The narrow, cobbled side streets of Flores wound through rows of jovially-colored houses and shops.



If one wanted to cross the peaceful waters of Lake Peten Itza from Flores then boats like this would make it possible.

We made two different trips to Tikal during our time in Flores. If my visit were primarily a birding trip I would have camped on site at Tikal, but then would have missed the social activities that we enjoyed at Los Amigos Hostel. The first day had an early-morning departure, arriving at Tikal right at daybreak after the hour and half drive. We stuck with our group most of the morning and enjoyed learning more about the history of the site and specifics about each structure, but Jon and I soon ventured off on our own to explore so that we could do so at our own pace without the distraction of the group. We spent the rest of the day our own and meandered through much of Tikal constantly getting distracted by a coati, spider monkey, or new bird species. It turned out that we almost missed our ride back to Flores in the afternoon, or rather we DID miss the van that took our group back but were able to squeeze into another of the many similar vehicles that were shuttling tourists and backpackers back to Flores.

Tikal did not disappoint in regards to its majesty, splendor, and wonder. The site was much larger geographically than I was expecting and held a stunning number of temples and other ancient structures. One must plan on a full-day endeavor in order to explore the whole site- and even then perhaps not satisfactorily. However, for whatever reason I wasn't expecting quite as many other tourists as were there. Near the more prominent attractions, such as Temple IV and the Grand Plaza, it was common to have to wade through multiple groups of people. This was especially the case around lunchtime when tourist numbers seemed to reach their daily peak. However, early in the morning and late in the afternoon the crowds were much sparser. Ignoring the throngs as best as I could, I wandered around trying to put myself in the place of an ancient Mayan. What was the social structure of this community like? What was the atmosphere like when there was a major event in the Grand Plaza? Did I ever feel an aura of a supernatural presence?



A look out over part of Tikal's Grand Plaza.

A large family of Coatis wandered fearlessly amongst the crowd at the Grand Plaza. There must have been thirty coatis in this group. Obviously, they were accustomed to being fed by the tourists and during our time watching them we watched multiple people toss food to them. There are signs posted prohibiting such, and it's unfortunate (though not surprising) that so many people lack a basic respect for rules such as these and any understanding of their ecological significance. Ocellated Turkeys, perhaps one of the most intricately stunning and iridescent birds in existence, also were incredibly tame and would oftentimes approach to within a few feet.



One of the many iridescent Ocellated Turkeys that wandered nonplussed among the Tikal tourists.

One of the avian highlights of Tikal was a pair of Orange-breasted Falcons that had made their home around the Grand Plaza. At one point we even got to see one munching on dinner- a mouse or some other small rodent. Collared Aracaris were pretty common and were a treat up close.



An obliging Collared Aracari from near Tikal's Grand Plaza.

A flock of festive and raucous Montezuma Oropendolas liked to hang out by the main Tikal entrance. Despite birding only incidentally I ended up with a respectable list for Tikal, but of more popular appeal to others in our group were the spider monkeys that were quite common on the site if you were patient and alert, as well as the less-common howler monkeys.

The most impressive spot at Tikal in my opinion was at the top Temple IV. We made two trips up there, once during the day where we sat atop the stairs and looked over the jungle, well above the trees. The next day we went back at sunset with group sunset tour from our hostel. With a guide, we went around the back side of the top of the temple (which is normally closed to the public- it's a little sketchy, plus they can charge an extra few quetzals). Jon, myself, and a

new Australian friend all bought a beer from the “cerveza hut” at the bottom of the temple staircase and enjoyed it atop the world. In US National Parks, you sure don’t come across guys selling beer out of a cooler in the middle of the woods! The sunset was not as brilliant as it could have been and truthfully was a bit anticlimactic. Many people seemed let down, but in my opinion it was still an incredible experience and worth the trip. Equally as wondrous, if not more so, was standing in the middle of Grand Plaza under clear night skies, looking at the massive silhouettes of the temples against the Milky Way galaxy illuminated by an eerie moon.



Me atop Temple IV at Tikal.

Socializing and making new friends at Los Amigos Hostel proved easy to do in their upstairs bar and lounge where amenities included a beer pong table, air hockey table, and sauna. Dozens of people were milling about and we met people from Australia, Iceland, Great Britain, France, Canada, and other parts of the US. Most people were in their twenties, around our age, although a few may have been slightly older. Jon and I developed a beer pong rivalry with two guys from New York, and our final game seemed to drag on forever as our skill level dropped throughout the night.

After our time in Tikal we returned east into Belize where we stopped in San Ignacio, exploring this friendly town set in picturesque mountainside before catching a local bus to Xunantunich, the impressive and popular nearby Mayan ruin. We made fast friends with Jake and Laura, a couple from California only a few years older than us who had the same idea. We ended up palling around with them for the rest of the day at Xunantunich as well as Cahal Pech, a smaller and easily accessible ruin right outside of San Ignacio. To get to Xunantunich we had to take a hand-cranked ferry, manned by a dedicated ferryman, across the Mopan River before exploring the site.



Looking out over the Mayan ruins at Xunantunich.



A look at one of the more impressive ruins at Xunantunich.

The caves of Actun Tunichil Muknal (commonly known as ATM for short) provide a major tourist draw in western Belize. Home to a bounty of Mayan archaeological remnants, it is closed to the public except by participating in established commercial tours. The guides are professional and highly trained in how to protect the integrity of the site and the remains therein. It would be incredibly easy to get lost in this vast cave system if you were not with an expert. In fact, the main attraction of the cave lies about a half mile back from the entrance down a twisting, perplexing maze of passageways. To complicate matters further you also have to swim in through the gaping main entrance. Much of the half mile journey entails wading through at least several inches of water, or where it's dry you can see that water usually tends to flow there seasonally. The deepest water is at the cave mouth where it exceeds head height, even during drier times of the year. We had hooked Jake and Laura up with a discount offered through our hostel for the tours and they ended up joining us.

There's an abundant scattering of pottery shards as well as intact pots strewn about, seemingly in a haphazard fashion but in reality at least somewhat strategic on the part of the Mayans. They would bring in various pottery and stoneware as sacrifices to their gods, at times

purposefully shattering the piece and at times carefully navigating a pot full of vegetables or some other amenity quite a ways back into the cave, careful not to break it, where they would leave it wholly intact as an offering. In addition to these relatively mundane offerings, ATM was the site of multiple human sacrifices which cement its attraction as a major tourist draw. Multiple sets of human bones can be seen strewn about or loosely piled together, but the most unique and impressive display is an intact, preserved skeleton of a teenage girl known as the Crystal Maiden. This is at the terminus of the cave tour about a half mile in, and for me it was a somber experience. Staring at the ancient sacrificed remains of this teenage girl, it was hard not to think about my own mortality.

Jon was due to fly back to the US and we returned to Belize City for a night at a local residential guesthouse before his early morning departure. After an adventurous cab ride which entailed asking six people for directions, more than a dozen false starts and wrong turns, and an incomprehensible level of confusion of our cab driver we finally made it. Our driver was a young and energetic man and took it all in good cheer. As luck would have it, I randomly encountered him again the next morning at the airport as I was hiking back to the bus stop at the end of the road. I hitched a ride with him (no charge!) for about a mile and we exchanged another laugh about the previous evening's adventure.

I stayed in Belize for another week after Jon left. After leaving him at the airport I caught a chicken bus out of Belize City and hopped off at Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, a few miles east of Belmopan. This is a well-known birding spot and I was looking forward to spending a day or two birding the area and hopefully adding some new species for the trip. Camping on site was pleasant and Amigo's Restaurant next door provided cheap and filling meals. The habitat here was slightly different than at other spots I'd birded thus far in Belize and I ended up finding a number of new species for the trip as well as a few new life birds. Great Black-Hawk, White-necked Puffbird, Gartered Trogon, Yellow-billed Cacique, and Yellow-throated Euphonia were only a few of the numerous highlights here, although many of the new species I found I would later see again at Cockscomb Basin. A gruesome sight was a Great Blue Heron that was not long for this earth. It was missing about three-quarters of its bill, presumably snapped off by a crocodile. I'll resist the temptation to include a photograph of the bird due to its macabre nature.



White-necked Puffbird

Leaving Monkey Bay late in the morning on the 14th, I caught a passing bus and stopped over in Belmopan to transfer buses and grab some lunch. I walked across town to a coffee shop owned by friends/family of a girl I met at Caye Caulker and got a delicious glass of Assam Milk Tea. My destination for the evening was the Hummingbird Hotel off the scenic Hummingbird Highway but it proved to be a little harder to find than I expected. The Google Maps location for it was wrong and I mistakenly got off the bus about four miles too far north. To rectify my mistake I up walked over to a nearby police checkpoint and asked them for directions, being pointed instead to an adjacent house where several men were out in the yard making wood sculptures. I introduced myself and explained my situation, and a young woman with them called her boyfriend who coincidentally works on the grounds of the Hummingbird Hotel and agreed to give me a ride. It was a little sketchy as he and several friends pulled up in a loud and dilapidated Chevrolet Suburban with cigarettes hanging out of their mouths and looking generally disheveled. However, they all proved to be quite friendly and I was grateful for the ride.

That evening I went into the neighboring village with Mario Perez, who helps manage the hotel and is the superintendent of nearby Five Blue Lakes National Park. Also joining us was the only other guest of the hotel, a middle aged woman from California. She worked at the VA and was contemplating retiring to Belize. The village was small with perhaps 2,000 residents, a large number of whom were Salvadoran or Guatemalan immigrants. We went to a ramshackle, open-air restaurant where we got several delicious pupusas made by a gregarious Salvadoran woman. Afterwards, we went up the road a short distance to the local bar where we met the owner of the hotel, Bob, for a few beers. Bob was an older longhair from California who splits his time between there and Belize. Also joining us for a nightcap were two of my wood-carving friends who gave me a ride to the lodge. After a few beers we returned to the hotel and I went to bed.



Late in the afternoon, Keel-billed Toucans became very active around the yard of the Hummingbird Hotel.

The next morning Mario and I ate breakfast together while talking about local socio-political and conservation issues. One of the guys who had given me a ride the day prior had just killed a groundhog in the yard of the hotel and brought it by the kitchen to show it off to us before taking it out back to butcher it and later eat it. He was quite proud and looked like he was

preparing to eat well later in the day. In addition to being a passionate and dedicated conservationist, Mario was an expert on local edible and medicinal plants, was first aid certified and was an excellent overall naturalist. I learned a lot from him during our chat and at one point he began telling me about botflies and how to extract them. Surprisingly, this knowledge turned out to be incredibly useful to me several weeks later back in the US when I noticed a bump on my shoulder that simply would not go away. At first, I thought it was just a pimple but as it continued growing and I noticed a pin-sized hole developing in the top I knew what it was thanks to Mario's intel. After experimenting with several failed ways to extract it I bought a tube of superglue and squirted a generous helping of it into the breath hole. After letting it sit and harden for half an hour I was able to force a pair of tweezers into the hole and pull out the suffocated beast, a larva about a half inch long. It was a completely disgusting, but at the same time weirdly satisfying, feeling to finally have it out of me. I immediately disinfected, sanitized, and bandaged the spot and was thankful to have that taken care of.

After breakfast I walked out to the road to flag down the next chicken bus that came by heading towards Dangriga. I waited about half an hour and eventually one came. My final destination was Maya Center Village which served as the jumping off point to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. It didn't occur to me that it was Sunday and it might subsequently be more difficult to get a ride to my destination. I also didn't have any food, and was planning on spending three nights in Cockscomb. There was a small store in the village but it was closed upon first inspection. A bit disconcerted, I spoke to a man in the village who went and got the store owner for me and who was happy to open up her shop for a few minutes. Sweet bread, chips, and cereal provided the only real ready-to-eat sustenance I could find within the store's very limited selection, but it would do. A pregnant woman who spoke only the local Mayan dialect, I could tell she was glad to have my business. I was also able to get a local taxi into the wildlife sanctuary as well as a heaping, hot plate of lunch at a small restaurant before taking off.

The taxi was a rundown Toyota Corolla that bounced me down the six miles of muddy dirt road. Upon arriving I set up my tent underneath one of the camping canopies and took off down the trails to start birding and exploring. Over the next several days I found well over 100 bird species on site and likely would have found more if I were more experienced and familiar with the obscure call notes of local species. I didn't stumble across anything very unusual, but one of my favorite birds was a gigantic Great Curassow that waltzed across the trail about fifty yards in front of me. White-collared Manakins were incredibly entertaining to watch and I eventually found a pair Red-capped Manakins too. Hiking up the Tiger Fern Trail to a beautiful mountaintop and then to a hidden, isolated waterfall was another highlight of my time here. While atop of the mountain I waited out a passing rain shower with two Belgian gentlemen who had also made the trek.



Red-capped Manakin



Pale-billed Woodpeckers were fairly common at Cockscomb Basin but seldom were very photogenic.

I ended my trip by returning to Caye Caulker for a few days to indulge in sunshine, turquoise waters, new friends, and cold beer once more. I also managed to get my lifer Black Catbird and Yucatan Vireo during my final stop here on the island. Belize has a lot to offer for such a small country and I know that I only got a very broad introduction. Perhaps next time I'll stay longer and visit some of the areas that I didn't get a chance to initially. Mountain Pine Ridge, for example, is an entirely different ecosystem and holds a variety of different and unique bird species. Other cultural attractions and Mayan ruins remain to be explored as well!



The shimmering, turquoise waters of Caye Caulker beckon.