

# Petén, Guatemala

July–August 2018

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This short trip report details a week spent in northern Guatemala, based at **Las Guacamayas Biological Station** and **Tikal National Park**. The latter is extremely well known as a quality birding site but the former seems not to be nearly so established; however, it certainly deserves a lot more attention. Birding was superb at both sites, with a wide range of interesting species, and the forests birdy and busy much of the time.

**Overview and Logistics** We accessed both key sites in the area from the small, friendly lakeside town of Flores, staying there on the first and last nights. Accommodation in Flores was booked via [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com) with lots of options to choose from. We discovered **Las Guacamayas** ([www.lasguacamayas.org](http://www.lasguacamayas.org); email: [info@lasguacamayas.org](mailto:info@lasguacamayas.org)) simply by reading Lonely Planet whilst planning a trip to Guatemala, where it gets a very favorable write-up in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition (October 2016). We had prompt and detailed replies to emails from the very helpful Cornelio Chablé and had soon booked their 3 day / 2 night package. This was not cheap but included all transport to and from Flores (0800 start; c2½hrs driving plus some decent birding stops, mainly roadside wetlands) and then 30mins on a boat to the lodge. Facilities at the lodge were really fantastic with great food, great views and lots of luxury, plus superb birding and views right from the garden. Cornelio accompanied us on the trip and was an excellent guide with some important species well staked out. There is a biological research station on the site, but no researchers (nor any other visitors) were present during our visit. We didn't see any Scarlet Macaws (a few pairs were still around earlier in July but apparently they move to southern Mexico during the non-breeding season) but **Agami Heron** appeared on cue (eventually) and the back-up cast was genuinely excellent, especially at night. In all, we logged 127 species in a two and a bit days of serious looking.

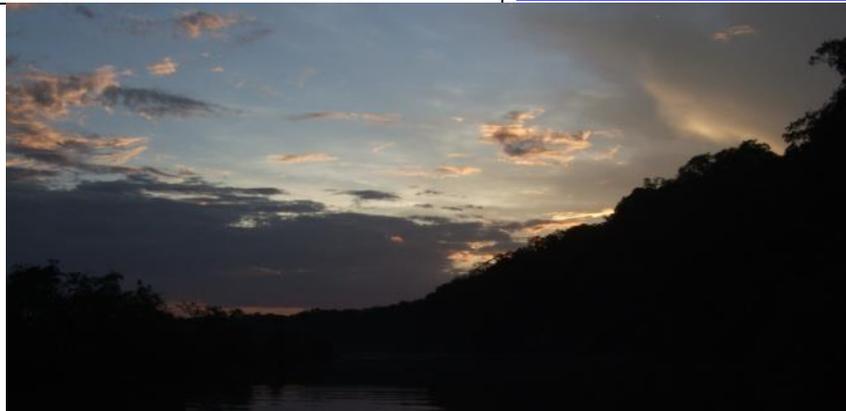
We got to **Tikal** by taking a taxi from Flores, having left Los Guacamayas at 1230 on our last day and then leaving Flores about 1600 to arrive at Tikal by 1730. We got a lot of confusing information about how and where to buy a ticket for Tikal; in the end we stopped at the departure terminal of the airport and visited the ticket booth there. This got us through the initial park gate (c25km before the hotels and entrance to gate the actual archeological site) and then into the archeological site the next day; the hotel had tickets available for us to enter the archeological site on the following day. On the third morning, before leaving at 1500, we visited the open access secondary forest along the crocodile pond trail, running along the linear track past Tikal Inn. We stayed at the Tikal Inn (also booked via [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com)), located a little to the right as you arrive and just a few hundred metres from the entrance to the archeological site.

There were two other nearby, similarly slightly faded (but otherwise pretty much OK) hotels (although none were great value by Guatemalan standards, unless you factor in the location). However, being able to walk into the forest at dawn, well before the coach crowds arrived, take a midday siesta and return to stay right to the end of the day was fantastic. A few small restaurants in the same area as the hotels were pretty acceptable for a few days. The hotel was easily and cheaply able to book us on their last bus (1500) back to Flores on our final afternoon. In all, the Tikal area yielded 90 species.

**Gear** Weather was warm and sunny, but not oppressively hot even in full sun; we had heavy showers each afternoon and then rather still, duller conditions afterwards, sometimes with drizzle until dusk. Mosquitoes were definitely present in shady areas, especially at Los Guacamayas but not too bad at Tikal and nowhere a patch on the hordes, and the bloody coffee flies, we had encountered earlier on the trip at Volcan Los Tarrales. A scope was useful but not essential for scanning at Los Guacamayas. I didn't do much photography, electing not to lug round my SLR and big lens for a month in Guatemala. The recently published book linked [here](#) was a pretty decent and very clear field guide. Some sound recordings made on this trip are available at [this link](#) whilst all birds recorded ended up on eBird checklists. The lists can be accessed from the links tabulated in the table that follows:

27-Jul	Road from Flores to Paso Caballos	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47488494">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47488494</a>
27-Jul	Boat trip Paso Caballos to Los Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47488325">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47488325</a>
27-Jul	Biological Station Las Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47488269">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47488269</a>
28-Jul	Biological Station Las Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509072">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509072</a>
28-Jul	Waka Peru trailhead, from Biological Station Las Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509632">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509632</a>
28-Jul	Biological Station Las Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509454">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509454</a>
28-Jul	Rio Sacluc	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509604">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47509604</a>
29-Jul	Biological Station Las Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555996">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555996</a>
29-Jul	Rio Sacluc	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555987">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555987</a>
29-Jul	Biological Station Las Guacamayas	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555905">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555905</a>
29-Jul	Boat trip Los Guacamayas to Paso Caballos	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555897">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555897</a>
29-Jul	Laguna Peten Itza - Bridge to San Benito & San Andres	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555881">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555881</a>
29-Jul	PN Tikal - parking area	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555759">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555759</a>
30-Jul	PN Tikal - archeological site	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555766">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555766</a>
30-Jul	Hotel Tikal Inn	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555836">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555836</a>
30-Jul	PN Tikal - archeological site	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555848">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47555848</a>
31-Jul	PN Tikal - archeological site	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47575992">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47575992</a>
1-Aug	PN Tikal - Crocodile Pond	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47595413">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47595413</a>
1-Aug	PN Tikal - camping area	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47595456">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47595456</a>
1-Aug	Isla de Flores	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47595597">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47595597</a>
2-Aug	Tayasul	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47607239">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47607239</a>
2-Aug	Tayasul	<a href="https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47629134">https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S47629134</a>

***Rio San Pedro at sunset***



## Birding highlights

### A Los Guacamayas

**1 Getting there** Having come from western and highland Guatemala, there were plenty of interesting birds as soon as we hit the road and left Flores behind for a 65km drive WNW, most on reasonable roads. Most bird logged were fairly widespread species of the lowland, open-country tropics of central America but included the likes of **Violaceous Trogon**, **Fork-tailed**

**Flycatcher**, **Roseate Spoonbill** and **Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture**. We stopped and tried at a few places for **Ruddy Crake** and **Blue Ground-Dove** but they were easier to hear than see; Pinnated Bittern should be possible at least sometimes. The west end of Lago de Petén Itzá has a bridge where the road passes close to some extensive flooded fields and marshes to the west (with the main lake to the east) and was a nice place to scope for a bit and rack up plenty of birds; pretty pleasant after a week or two of creeping round in forests.

Once we made it to Paso Caballos, things improved further with some decent forest appearing on the north side of the Rio San Pedro and **Plumbeous** and **Swallow-tailed Kites** suddenly very obvious.

**2 Around the Lodge** Lots to do here, with great views over the river and floodplain on the south bank and some very good forest right behind the station, easily accessed by a couple of short trails, one leading to a fantastic raised tower for a view back over the San Pedro to the south. Lots of good birds here; I made several visits over three days with the most interesting species being **Slaty-breasted Tinamou** and juvenile **Ocellated Turkey** (both very close to the track less than 250m from the station), **Purple-crowned Fairy**, **Collared Trogon**, **Lesson's Motmot**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**, **White-whiskered Puffbird**, **Mayan Ant-thrush**, **Sepia-capped** and **Yellowish-olive Flycatchers** and **Stub-tailed Spadebill**, **Northern Royal Flycatcher**, **Northern Schiffornis**, **Tawny-crowned Greenlet** and **Green-backed Sparrow**.

There were lots of birds in the garden too, with **Wedge-tailed Sabrewing** and **White-bellied Emerald** nearly permanent fixtures on the verandah feeders (also **Buff-bellied** and the inevitable **Rufous-tailed Hummers**, plus erratic **Long-billed Hermits**) and noisy **Black-headed Trogons** in the garden in the early morning. **Yellow-tailed Oriole** was present along the river and final mentions go to **Sungrebe** (crossing the San Pedro) and **Black-collared Hawk** (over the meadows), both viewable from the room.

**3 On the river** We did three trips in all on the river; twice up the Rio Sanluc, a narrow and shady tributary to the main river, navigable for several km and starting just across the San Pedro from the lodge. We also completed a sunset and then night cruise along the main river. **Agami Heron** is the must-see here; we failed on the first two trips but on the third, along the Sanluc and after several hours of painstakingly scanning the deep shade along the banks we finally found two **Agami Herons**, seeing the first OK and the second amazingly closely. We then emerged back onto the



San Pedro to find an adult in full sunlight 100m from the lodge jetty. Plenty of other birds whilst digging out the herons; these included **Muscovy Duck**, **Boat-billed Heron**, **Russet-naped Wood-Rail**, no shortage of **Sungrebes**, **Crane Hawk**, flyover **Scaled Pigeon**, amazing looks at **American Pygmy Kingfisher** and **Pale-billed Woodpecker**.

At least as good as any of the above (bar the Agamis...) was an hour or two after sunset, trying for owls. **Mottled Owl** was calling very close to the lodge, but wouldn't appear. Never mind: we had far more luck with **Black-and-White Owl** at a spot that Cornelius found a few months previously. **Yucatan Poorwill** was calling over the river here and, in between the two sites we found two **Northern Potoos** perching up on large, exposed stumps over fields along the bank – easy to find given very strong eye shine from their massive eyes.

**4 Secondary forest** We accessed some of this via a trail that runs, ultimately, to El Peru (Waka) ruins. This trail starts a short boat ride along the San Pedro from the station. The range of species was rather different here and included several notable ones: **Grey-throated Chat** near the start and **Yucatan Woodpecker** a bit further along, for example. Other species included flyover **King Vultures**, **Dusky Antbird**, **Ivory-billed Woodcreeper**, **White-collared Manakin**, **Northern Schiffornis** showing brilliantly, **Tawny-crowned Greenlet** and **White-bellied Wren**. What was surely **Blue Bunting** was glimpsed. An early returning (and very welcome) **Louisiana Waterthrush** gave amazingly good views feeding round puddles on the trail; another was at the station jetty the following day.

## **B Tikal area**

**1 Archeological site** Set in pristine rainforest, this is a fantastic place to go birding. Although the middle of the day was a bit quiet, unless you chanced on a flock, the first few hours each day were quite magical, with species such as **Crested Guan** very obvious in the forest and viewing the Gran Plaza and forest edge alongside from Templo II, the ultimate canopy tower, really great. The place was pretty empty (of tourists) for the first few hours, but then started to fill up by mid-morning. Heading for the shady forest trails at that point was a good tactic.



Species of particular interest, among many others, included **Short-billed Pigeons** in a fruiting tree, regular flyovers from **Vaux's** and **Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts**, **Purple-crowned Fairy**, **Plumbeous** and **Swallow-tailed Kites**, three species each of **trogon** and **toucan** (**Emerald Toucanet** at unexpectedly low elevation), **Olivaceous**, **Tawny-winged** and **Ruddy Woodcreepers**, **Eye-ringed Flatbill**, **Northern Royal Flycatcher**, **Bright-rumped Attila**, **Tawny-crowned Greenlet**, **Louisiana Waterthrush**, and **Black-headed Shrike –Tanager** (several males and a group of initially confusing females with **Xenops** and **Ant-tanagers**).

The all-important **Orange-breasted Falcons** (a pair) finally appeared on the morning of the second day, using perches in the forest just behind Templo I and were present here both early morning and again in evening. They were also seen perching on Temple IV, but only from a distance and quite invisible from the actual Temple itself. A scope would have given rather improved views of this species, but wouldn't have been much use elsewhere at Tikal. The regular gang of **Northern Rough-winged Swallows** in the Gran Plaza area were quite peculiar and seemingly a good match for 'Ridgeway's'.

Open areas by the comedors and ticket booth were great for habituated and hence very tame **Lineated** and **Pale-billed Woodpeckers**, **Russet-naped Wood-Rail**, **Limpkin**, **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron** and, of course, **Ocellated Turkey**. The

garden of the Tikal Inn had a **Northern Royal Flycatcher** attending a nest right over the path to the most distant rooms, plus **Mottled Owl** very vocal and quite easy to see one night (but oddly silent the other nights).

**2 Track to crocodile pond** Going through secondary forest, this gave a rather different range of species to the much taller and more open primary forest around the archeological site. In all, I managed 18 species seen here but not elsewhere in the Tikal area and several of these were very decent birds, at least for me: **Thicket Tinamou** close to the trail and visible (at least temporarily), **Blue Ground-Doves** (5) seen very well, great views of **Northern Bentbill** and **Yellowish-olive Flycatcher**, both **White-collared** and **Red-capped Manakins** (including a male of latter), **Northern Schiffornis**, a noisy group of **Mangrove Vireo** and at least six **Blue Buntings** (female and juveniles feeding on the track edges). In addition, **Green-backed Sparrow**, **Carolina Wren**, **American Pygmy Kingfisher** and a **Common Parakeet** on the trail in full light were all pretty pleasing. Bird activity was high all morning and, in the low forest, everything was close and easy to see.

### **C Around Flores**

We spent the last day relaxing in Flores, making a short trip across the lake to San Miguel and then completing the short walk to the beach at Tayasul beyond the Mirador. There was some reasonably shady secondary forest along bits of this path. Species seen included **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**, **Black-headed Trogon**, **Keel-billed Toucan**, **Streak-headed Woodcreeper**, **Yellow-olive Flycatcher** and both **Grey-headed Tanager** and **Red-throated Ant-Tanager**. For both evenings we were there, there was an amazing roost of **Grey-breasted Martins** (and at least some **Purple Martins**) in the streets of Flores, with thousands of birds congregating on wires not far above head height.

*Classic Tikal vista from Templo IV*

