

Belize 17th Jan – 01 Feb 2019 – Eirik Grønningseter

This is just a quick note on a short birding trip to Belize. Most of the reports out there are fairly old, so this is just meant as a small update for those independent travellers out there. This trip was not a pure birding trip, but was more a combination of birding and relaxing. That said, the first week was devoted purely to birding, while the second week was more a combination of good snorkelling, some beach life and some birding in the mornings. Belize has some interesting birds in common with Central America and also host quite a few of the 15 Yucatan endemics. My itinerary gave me a chance to tick off all but the 3 (1 probably extinct) Cozumal island endemics in Mexico and the Yucatan wren on north shore of Yucatan peninsula. That said, if you really want to expand your bird list on Yucatan peninsula I would consider combine some sites in Belize and the popular Maya site Tikal in Guatemala just across the border together with some sites in Mexico that it easily combined as there are both boats and busses going regularly to the Mexico border from Belize city and only takes a few hours. In a 2-3 weeks trip you should be able to tick off all the endemics and a lot of other interesting species.

General information

Belize International airport is a small one, situated about 15 minutes outside Belize city. Since there were two flights arriving at the same time, I spent almost 1 hour to get through passport control and customs. Outbound it was no problem, and everything went smooth. No airport or departure fees to be paid when leaving the country. Taxi fare from airport to Belize city bus terminal or Belize city ferry terminal was at a fixed rate USD25. Taxis seem not to use a meter, so make sure to agree on a price before jumping into the taxi.

Money:

I didn't use ATM, but brought with me some US dollars. You can use US dollars to pay with but you will be given Belize dollars in change currently at the rate 1:2 (USD1 = 2 Belize dollars). Most restaurants accept major credit cards, but will put on a small charge if purchased amount is less than 20 Belize dollars.

Transportation:

I didn't go to a whole lot of different places, so I should be careful to give too much advise. But in general, even bus and ferry terminal in Belize city is very small and easy to navigate. Buses seem to go to the major tourist destinations and Mexico fairly regularly and seems easy to organise on the day of travel. To the many islands and some towns there are also fast (ish) passenger boats going from the ferry terminal in town. I used it to get to Caye Caulker where I spent the last week of my trip, but also to San Pedro and some other places are easily reachable.

I rented my own car for the first week as it seemed a bit difficult to get connection from the airport to Lamanai lodge. I didn't drive a lot around, but the main roads seem to be in good standards (just look out for steep speed bumps normally signposted in each village) and the occasional pot holes. The road from Tower Hill to Lamanai is a dirt road. Seems to be normally easy even for a normal sedan cars but can get very muddy and more like a 4x4 track if heavy rain. I would suggest a car with high clearance and preferably 4x4 if you are driving to Lamanai just to be on the safe side.

Lamanai Outpost Lodge 17 – 22 January

Lamanai is one of the largest Maya ruin sites in the world. There is evidence of community here since 1500 B.C. The ruins are somewhat younger from different stages of this civilisations, and it is indeed an impressive surrounding for your birding. The Outpost Lodge is situated at the water edge approximately 1 km from the famous Maya ruins and is therefore excellent place to stay when birding this area. At least 3 full days should be spent here to give it any justice. The Maya ruins is also popular with tourists. Luckily the tourist crowds only seem to concentrate around the reception garden (which is very good for birding) area and some of the main trails between the ruins. If you wander a bit further away on the trails, you will be having them all to yourself. It is a nice set of trails but there are no trail maps given at the reception as the normal thing to do is to go with a guide from your lodge. I like to bird on my own, so I used a guide only some days. Since signs are virtually non-existent as well just be careful not to get too lost. Bring some extra water so that you don't start to struggle too much if you end up going a few extra km because you get a bit lost on your way. The area has a nice forest, about 100 years old and attracts a lot of nice birds. It is arguably the best forest birding in Belize. At Lamanai Outpost Lodge you can organise boat excursions both day and night to the lake and its mangrove system. I saw Northern Potoo, Yucatan nightjar, Russet-naped wood rail and no less than 4 Agami herons on a night drive to the mangroves. The nocturnal drives also give a chance to watch the impressive Fishing Bats fishing over the lake. They are impressive both in size and the fact that they actually manage to catch fish with their hindlegs in the dark! On the afternoon day trip I saw my long wanted Sungrebe as well as Boat-billed herons, Limpkins and both Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers. There is also a site for Least Bittern we tried briefly but didn't succeed.

The forest:

Unfortunately the Lamanai Maya site doesn't open before 08:00. It is only closed by a simple gate which you can easily walk around. The 1km entry road to the reception area is also worth birding as there are some decent forest along the road. I had some nice bird waves here and saw 4 Black-crowned Tityaras and 2 White-necked Puffbirds here. Entry is payed at the reception and costs 10 Belize dollar pr. entry. Just behind the reception there is a trail going off signed "to Sugar Mill". The sugar mill is some remains after the Spanish had a big sugar plantation here early late 1800s. Today's forested area are forest regrown since then. Some Proboscis bats are roosting inside the big "wheel house" overtaken by a massive tree. I also saw Ivory-billed and Chestnut-coloured woodpecker at Sugar Mill. If you come from the reception, take Sugar Mill trail for only 30 meters before it forks off to the right. This trail is only 300m long before it ends up in one of the main Maya ruin temples (jaguar temple). From the fork towards the left turn is an excellent site for White-collared Manakin and Tody Motmot. At open areas around the Maya ruins is a nice place to look for various raptors soaring overhead when the sun starts to heat up. Also the surrounding trees is nice for Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Red-lored parrots Laughing Falcon. To explore the trails of Lamanai Maya site is indeed very nice and even if birding is tough at times (as forest birding often is) the rewards are great when luck strikes. Adding to the birds is the chance of Jaguar on the trails. I only saw tracks, but managed to see several groups of Black Howler Monkeys, which is also impressive if you happen to be close as they start their territorial calls (howling). Two Tiras (a giant weasel like animal - the size of an otter) also crossed my roads as did many Agoutis (a forest living mini version of Capybura) and several Gray foxes and a few very approachable White-nosed Coatis.

Another area worth exploring is a trail (road) that start off just behind the Lamanai Outpost Lodge. Go down towards the lake and take trail nearest lake leading out of the Lodge property (towards the right when looking out towards the lake). The first part is actually a small road leading to the airport

(Yes – you can fly into Lamanai with either helicopter or small aircraft if you prefer). Instead of walking up to the right towards the grassy runway, you take left. The first part is small bushy thicket habitat and a few larger trees. I saw a pair of Bat falcons and Golden-Olive woodpeckers every morning in these trees. The dense thicket is great for various seed eaters that will test your id-skills. Continue a couple of hundred meters and the trees start to get bigger. 50 meters in there is a smaller dirt road that goes off to the right. Very good for Wood Creepers – with Ivory billed being the most common. But also had excellent views of a rare Northern Barred Woodcreeper feeding on an ant swarm here. Several Royal flycatchers and Worm-eating warblers as well as a nice selection of Nearctic warbler in the canopy – Magnolia warbler being the absolute most common. Howler monkeys and Agoutis also being seen here. I saw the Rose-throated tanager (Yucatan endemic) twice on this trail.

Night spotting trips. The walks are mostly for insects and spiders, and very rarely do they see anything bird wise. Rather put your money in a night spotting boat trip. This gives you a very good chance to see Agami heron, Yucatan nightjar, Northern Potoo, a lot of Paraques and Morelets Crocodiles. At the jetty there is a big tree where a pair of Barn owls breed. My guide George told that sometimes Mottled owl comes into the camp to hunt under the floodlights. I never saw this.

Lamanai Outpost Lodge is a very nice place to stay which is normally way out of my budget. But the fact that there are very few other alternatives if you want to start early, and its excellent location in one of the top birding sites in Belize makes it indeed worth the money. Great location. The food was absolute superb (cost about USD30 for dinner and USD20 for lunch). There are several guides, some are more specialised in birds than others, but most of them have good knowledge and training in where to find the birds in the area. Unless you specify on before hand, a guide will be assigned for you and stay with you for the whole stay. You choose yourself how much you want you use the guide. For a morning (2-3 hours) birding excursions it costs about USD45.

Accommodation itself costs about USD200/night for a cabin with a fridge, fan and well protected against insects with mosquito nets on all the open air windows. There are no shops or restaurants nearby, so eating all your food at the lodge is a must. There is purified water available for free. You can also buy all sorts of drinks in the bar from the friendly staff.

How to get there:

From the airport take the entrance road out of the airport (I actually had American Bittern in the road ditch along this road) and then a left in the first junction onto the N1 highway (also called Northern Highway). This isn't a highway in European standards, but a decent road. Through the small village where you can find a couple of gas stations, some shops etc. This is last shopping opportunity I found. After about 40 minutes you will pass the signs towards Crooked Tree. Continue straight until Tower Hill. Just before the bridge are a sign to the boat jetties if you have arranged to go with boat to Lamanai (takes about 45 minutes along New River, with a chance to do some birding along the way). If this is your option, you need to pre arrange with the lodge. Just after the bridge are the turnoff to the left (signposted Shipyard). From the turnoff from N1 it is a 50 minutes drive on dirt road which can vary a lot in standard. I saw some damages done by an earlier rain storm and part of this road might be difficult to navigate without 4x4 just after heavy rain. Drive through Shipyard, which is a village of Mennonites – a religion/way of life that uses minimum of modern equipment. They have their own culture and apparently also an agreement with the Belize Government that they can have their own rules and “government” in the villages and their own schools etc. They pretty much live in a self sufficient way and independently from the rest of the country and society. A bit scary in many ways if you ask me. After about 30 minutes through farmland country you come to a T-junction. Take

left and follow until signposted Lamanai. Take another left here and Lamanai Outpost Lodge is at the very end of this road just after the gate towards Lamanai Maya Historical sites. Lamanai Outpost Lodge didn't come up on Google Maps, but Ebird is a good way to find your way or use Lamanai Historical site as reference. Google Maps didn't want to suggest a route for me there either, but it was pretty straight forward finding the place. The lodge and the Maya ruins are pretty close, and everyone in the area should know where to guide you towards the Maya historical site if you need help. From Airport to Tower Hill is about 1 hour drive, and then another 50ish minutes from Tower Hill to Lamanai Oupost Lodge. Tower Hill was just a very small village without any gas station or shopping as far as I could see. But apparently there are a couple of accommodations possible there, but I don't know much about them.

Crooked Tree

Crooked Tree is a well known birding site in Belize. Mostly for wetland birds. It is very different from Lamanai, as Crooked Tree is an island (named after the trees that are very bent in shape and a good landmark for fishermen) in a lake and has a much drier soil and therefore vegetation and selection of bird species is very different. I stayed at Bird's eye view lodge. A reasonably priced (about USD70/night) place with a view over the lake. There is also a camp site 100m from the lodge. There are some trails in the area that you can either walk by yourself or book a guided trip at the reception. You can drive all the way to the lodge as there is a causeway over the lake from the mainland. This is a place owned by Chinese, but with local staff. Everything here is set up around birders and birding. A must here is to book an early morning boat trip on the lake to one of the creeks to look at the Mangroves and the wetland birds. In general a lot of egrets and herons, including Boat-billed heron and a decent chance of Agami heron and even Sungrebe. Bare-throated tiger heron relatively common and there is always a chance for the giant Jabiru Stork to show up – although this depends on season. On my visit the water level was still a bit high, and the jabiru storks had yet started to come down to the open wetland marshes around Spanish Creek. They were in the area but not as predictable as another 2-3 weeks out in the season. Which birds you will see, depends on the water level. Too late in the season and boat trips are impossible but the place is probably better for waders. Snail kites, Pied-billed grebes, Little blue Heron, Limpkins and Northern Jacanas were all very obvious and common on my visit. I also flushed a Wilson's snipe just in front of the lodge one morning. Pygmy kingfishers were seen during the boat trip as was a young Agami Heron and a Sungrebe flushed by our boat. No jabirus although I heard they were seen in the area and apparently a new nest had just been found, but the road there was still too flooded to go with a car.

Pine Tree Savanna

Another place, that offer quite different birds than the area around Birds Eye View Lodge is Pine Tree Savanna. I birded this myself, without a guide to help me. There is a small garden area cultivated for birds it seems, that is locked off and is only accessible with a guide. What you see here compared with the area around I don't know. Pine Tree Savanna is dry sandy soil with mostly pine trees and some other succulents. Acorn woodpecker very conspicuous. As was endemic Yucatan jay. It is also a site for the sought after Yellow-fronted parrot, but I missed out on this bird but got both Yellow-lored parrots (Yucatan endemic) and White-fronted parrots in this area. Grace's warbler common in the pine trees.

To get to the Pine Tree Savanna from Birds Eye View Lodge it is best to drive back towards the village. Continue straight in the junction where you could take right past over the cause way across the lake (towards N1 highway). Passing the causeway, then take first small dirt road towards left. Then follow this between the houses more or less straight for about 10 minutes until you have an orchard on

your left side and something that reminds me of a horse race track on your right side. This is the Pine Tree Savanna. There are several tracks in the area that you can follow through the forest. Make sure not to get lost as everything looks very similar here once in the forest and it is easy to lose sense of direction.

Wetland about 1000m south of Pine Tree Savanna.

Another great place to check out is a huge wetland marsh that you reach by not stopping at the Pine Tree Savanna but continue this road for another 1-2 kilometers. The road then goes straight across a huge wetland that I can imagine also might be good for Jabiru and other wetland birds. I went here twice. Didn't see Jabiru but on my first evening visit I found several Tiger herons and a Pinnated Bittern! The morning after I went again – still no Jabiru storks but this time no less than 3 Pinnated Bitterns next to the road. This is accordingly to the book a rarely seen species.

How to get to Crooked Tree.

It is very easy. From Belize airport. Follow the access road until T-junction. Take left and follow this road (N1 highway) for about 40 minutes. Then you will see signs to Crooked Tree towards left. From the main road to Crooked Tree is about 10 minutes. To get to the Birds Eye View lodge that is situated at the water edge just take left after been driving over the lake. Follow this road to the end and take left again and the lodge is at the end of this road. White and green building that is actually visible from the cause way over the lake.

Caye Caulker

Caye Caulker is a back packer infested island just outside (32km) Belize City. Easily reachable with fast boats going once an hour from the main ferry terminal in Belize (about 20 minutes with taxi from airport). Many come here to experience the fantastic coral reefs either through snorkelling (many operators and you can rent all gear there, costs about 65USD for about 4 hours trip, or slightly more for a little bit longer with a lunch stop in San Pedro included in the price). Or you can also dive some of the spectacular sites. Personally I am not a scuba diver, but enjoyed very much the snorkelling. Although it can feel a bit crowded and you are obliged to keep in the group and follow the guide's instructions – that will some places go in the water with you and point out the many fish and coral species. A big attraction on the snorkelling trips is a stop at the Shark and Ray Alley – where some fishermen used to come and clean their fish. The Nurse sharks in the area learned this and came over every time a boat came to feed on the scraps. Today, there is no fishing here since the reef is protected, but the tourist industry feed the sharks with fish so that tourists can swim with these sharks. You also see some sharks at some of the other snorkelling stops, but when not fed they tend to avoid you and keep their distance. Also large Eagle rays to be seen, as well as both Green and Loggerhead turtles. Sometimes also Manatees are spotted although I didn't have luck with these. My timing was a bit off season for them, but they are apparently anyway seen in the area from time to time. You can also organise specialised Manatee tours both from Belize city and from Caye Caulker that takes you to a nature reserve, but here you are not allowed to jump in the water with them. I have been snorkelling many places around the world, and must admit that Caye Caulker reefs are probably some of the most rich places I have ever been. Probably due to the fact that it is protected and well managed despite the high number of tourists.

Birding:

Caye Caulker doesn't really have a lot of bird species, but they do indeed have some that are very hard to get on mainland such as Black catbird (Yucatan endemic), Clapper rail and Rufous-necked woodrail as well as Caribbean flycatcher, White crowned pigeon, Yucatan warbler and Reddish egret during right season. Also, due to its location far out at sea, it is a place where migrants and vagrants turn up and you can get a real surprise if you are lucky. I saw Yucatan woodpecker and a female Trogon which I didn't manage to id safely. Both rarities out there, and apparently the first trogon since 10 years on the island. The main habitat to do birding is a mixture of Mangroves and gardens. There is unfortunately still a lot of properties being built up and the amount of Mangrove forest is still decreasing – making it harder to be a bird out here. This also happens in the area around the small airport which in general is best for birding. Despite this, it is still possible to see some very high quality birds here that is very hard and even absent from the mainland. There are a few birders living on the island, and one of them offers guided bird tours around the island to see the specials. I went both on my own and together with the excellent and charming bird guide Cory Young. Despite her fairly recent interest in birds – she has a very good knowledge about the local birds and where to find them. On an outing with her I got to see Yucatan warbler, Clapper Rail, Rufous-necked woodrail, Mangrove warbler, Black catbird, Roseate spoonbill, White-crowned pigeon to mention a few. Well worth the money of USD50 for an early morning walk. She and her husband is running a dive shop together called Black Durgon which is easy to find on the main street on Caye Caulker.

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On the island there is a lot of options in various price ranges for accommodation as well as plenty of restaurants to choose from. However, as the island is so popular with tourists it is well worth arranging accommodation on before hand.

There are only very few cars on the island, but many golf carts. There are also bicycles for rent but the island is small enough to just walk around. The south island's length from one end to another is about 3 kilometers and it is about than 1000m wide.

Most of the restaurants accept major credit cards. There is also a bank and ATM available on the island.

Getting there

From the main ferry terminal in Belize there are fast passenger boats going each hour between 06am to about 21 pm. It takes about 1,5 hours from Belize ferry terminal out to the Caye Caulker. Prices seem to vary with which company you choose as I payed USD30 outbound but only payed about USD10 on my way back. There are also regular departures from San Pedro. Tickets are bought at the ferry terminal and are easy to arrange on the spot. There is also possible to fly to the island with small local planes. Some are operated from Belize international airport, which is convenient if you anyway arrive or depart the country.

Enjoy your Belize birding!

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