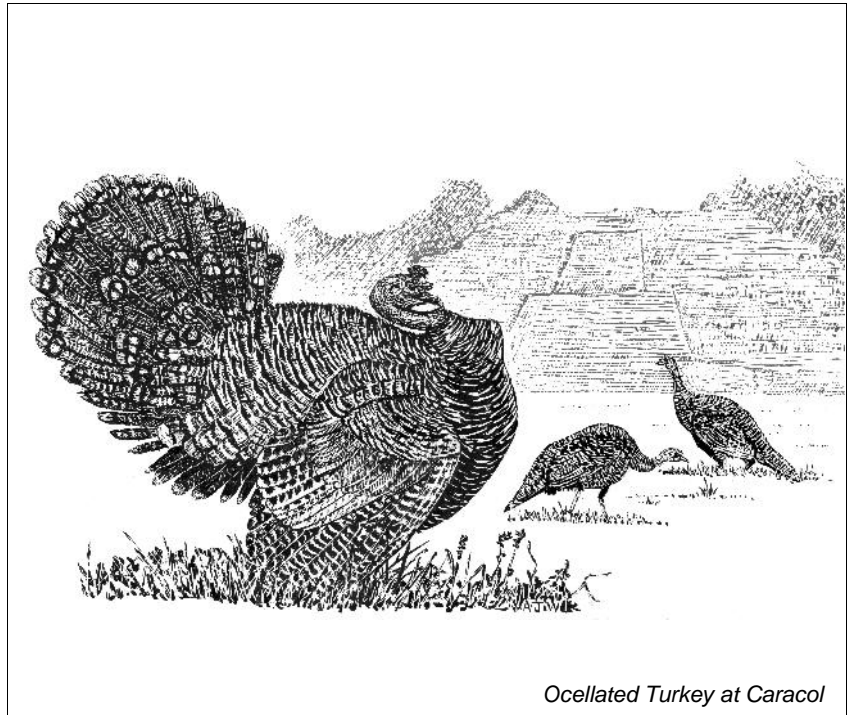
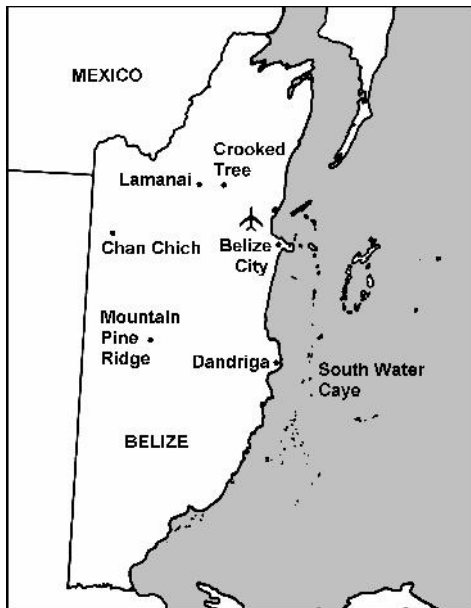


# BELIZE

*luxury in the Selva Maya*



*Ocellated Turkey at Caracol*

This small former British colony has established itself as one of Central America's prime bird and wildlife destinations. From the comfort of some of the world's top eco-lodges we will explore the rich variety of habitats, including the vast Selva Maya rainforest. A low population density coupled with progressive conservation policies have resulted in an incredible 44% of land being protected by way of national parks and reserves. You are surrounded by nature from the moment you arrive to the time you reluctantly leave.

Violence played a huge part in Belize's past; carvings on the Mayan temples tell of human sacrifice, blood letting and wars between rival kings. These cultures finally died out with the arrival of the Europeans, and their magnificent temples were lost to the jungle for 500 years. We will visit the wonderful sites of Caracol and Lamanai, watching toucans, curassows and a multitude of other birds living in the shadow of the monuments to that great civilisation. In stark contrast to its brutal past, this English-speaking country is one of the safest, friendliest and most welcoming places you could wish to visit. Many visitors to Belize return time and again.

## ITINERARY

### CROOKED TREE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

There are no direct flights, nor same day connections to Belize, so we will stay overnight en-route in nearby Cancun, avoiding a transit through the US. We will arrive mid-afternoon and your holiday will start on day one with sightings of frigatebirds and pelicans by the hotel. After a good night's sleep we will explore the area around the hotel, hoping to see wintering warblers such as Black-and-white, Magnolia and Worm-eating. We will then travel the short distance back to the airport for our early afternoon flight to Belize City.

From the airport it is just half an hour to Crooked Tree, one of Belize's best birding sites. A wonderful spectacle awaits us; herons, egrets, storks, waders, kingfishers and other waterbirds provide the easiest birding of the trip, all lining up to be watched or photographed. We have four nights here, allowing us time to enjoy the wetland birds as well as exploring nearby scrub for Yucatan endemics. Many species are very colourful; Olive-throated Parakeet, American Redstart, Hooded Oriole, Vermilion Flycatcher, Ringed Kingfisher and Indigo Bunting are just some of the wonderful species on show. On the west side of Crooked Tree is an area of open pine savannah which we will explore for

Yucatan Woodpecker, Yucatan Jay, Grace's Warbler and Canivet's Emerald. A boat trip on the lagoon should yield Boat-billed Heron, Black-collared Hawk, Snail Kite, Limpkin, Grey-necked Wood Rail, Bare-throated Tiger Heron, American Pygmy Kingfisher and perhaps Sungrebe or Agami Heron. Crooked Tree is a Belize Audubon Society reserve, established to protect the areas most famous bird, the Jabiru, and we can expect to see several during our visit.

### LAMANAI

From Crooked Tree we will set aside one day to visit Lamanai. We will drive to a landing stage and take a boat down a creek to these justifiably famous Mayan ruins. By far the most impressive site in the north, Lamanai was occupied as early as 1500 BC and remained an important centre until the Spanish arrived. The site boasts spectacular temples, a ball court and intricately carved stelae, all surrounded by huge Guanacaste and Ceiba trees which have invaded the extensive grounds.

There are plenty of birds to be seen too, as Keel-billed Toucans and Collared Aracaris gather in fruiting trees. Northern Barred Woodcreepers, Red-crowned Ant-tanagers, Mexican Antthrushes and Grey-hooded Tanagers follow army ant swarms. Black-cowled Orioles take nectar from flowering

banana plants and metallic Blue Buntings move through the undergrowth, occasionally revealing their dazzling plumage. Our local guide has located a regular roost site for Mottled Owls within the grounds. Walking on trails around the ruins we should come across troops of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys, their amazing calls adding to the exotic feel of the jungle.

On day 6 we will then drive south-west through Mennonite lands to the world famous Chan Chich Lodge, situated in the heart of the Selva Maya rainforest.

#### **CHAN CHICH**

Our next three nights will be at this exceptional lodge, surrounded by more than 100,000 acres of privately owned nature reserve. The rooms nestle in the plaza of an unexcavated Mayan site and the birds and wildlife are strictly protected. On the approach road Great Curassows skulk in the undergrowth, while Ocellated Turkeys have become habituated following the ban on all hunting here.

Around the gardens we can watch Slaty-tailed Trogon, Montezuma Oropendola, Black-cheeked Woodpecker and Western Long-tailed Hermit. In the forest there are Great Tinamous, Stub-tailed Spadebills and Black-throated Shrike Tanagers, while handsome White Hawks soar overhead. Chan Chich is one of the best places in the world to see Tody Motmot, and a pair of Ornate Hawk-eagles nest near the lodge. There is a good population of predators including Jaguar, Puma, Ocelot and Margay and we will do spotlighting at night by jeep in both hope and expectation!

#### **MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE**

On day 9 we will head south to the spectacular Mountain Pine Ridge. This upland area is dominated by Caribbean Pines and is very different from the lush tropical forest lower down. Our base for three nights is the luxurious Hidden Valley Inn, located close to Thousand Foot Falls, the largest waterfalls in Central America. The falls are home to a nesting pair of globally rare Orange-breasted Falcons. Spectacular King Vultures patrol the area too, often giving great views.

The Inn's 12 cottages are located on a 7200 acre private reserve and we will have exclusive access to their network of trails through pine woods and tropical forest. Red-lore Parrot, Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, Green Jay, Ovenbird, Hepatic Tanager and Yellow-backed Oriole are a few of the birds expected. In the pines there is the regionally endemic Rusty Sparrow. An evening foray will give us an excellent chance of the rarely seen Stygian Owl.

On one day we will make an early start to Caracol, Belize's most spectacular Mayan site. On the journey we might spot a Jaguarundi, a Tayra or a band of White-nosed Coati. Caracol is located in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve, a vast area which is home to Harpy Eagles and Jaguars. Our more modest quarry includes Keel-billed Motmot, Grey Hawk, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Louisiana Waterthrush, Chestnut-coloured Woodpecker and Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner. Over 36,000 structures have been found at Caracol, and it is believed it was once a thriving town of some 120,000 Mayans.

#### **DANGRIGA**

On day 12 we will head back to the coast, and being a small country, this three hour drive will be the longest on the trip. We will spend our last three nights at Dangriga, visiting the world's first jaguar reserve as well as the idyllic cays.

On day 13 we will visit Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve. While sightings of this apex predator are rare, the bird diversity is high and includes many new species such as Crested Guan, Plain Chachalaca, Yellow-headed Parrot,

Collared Trogon, Barred Antshrike, White-collared Manakin, Thrush-like Schiffornis, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Passerini's Tanager and Orange-billed Sparrow.

The Great Maya Reef, second only to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, lies close offshore and we will spend our last full day visiting this spectacular natural wonder. After just half an hour by boat we will arrive at Man-o-War Caye, home to hundreds of pairs of Magnificent Frigatebirds which will be displaying at the time of our visit. The island is also home to numerous Brown Boobies and Brown Pelicans. Nearby South Water Caye is an idyllic desert island situated right on the reef. The facilities at our hotel's sister resort will be at our disposal, and we can relax in a hammock, wander around this beautiful island or snorkel just off the beach. It is possible to swim with majestic Spotted Eagle Rays, and colourful fish such as angelfish, groupers, grunts and triggerfish.

#### **CLIMATE AND PACE**

Our visit is at the best time of year, when rainfall is at its lowest and temperatures are at their most comfortable. It will be hot and humid in the middle of the day, but there is often a breeze on the coast. Siestas are made all the easier as our hotels are very close to the birding sites. Breakfast will usually be taken at 7am. Basic fitness is all that is required. The terrain is mostly flat and the walking is easy.

#### **ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD**

Full-board accommodation is provided, with one night at the Hotel Hacienda near Cancun, four nights at Birds Eye View, Crooked Tree, three nights at Chan Chich, three nights at Hidden Valley Inn, and three nights at Pelican Beach Resort, Dangriga. The first and last of the Belize hotels are very comfortable. The other two are simply outstanding; world class. All rooms have en suite bathrooms. Lunches will normally be at the hotel.

#### **PRICE INCLUDES .....**

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader and local guides, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 7<sup>th</sup>, ending with breakfast on 21<sup>st</sup>), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, local transport by mini-bus, boat trips, site entrance fees, international flights.

#### **WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED**

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

#### **INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS**

Flights to Cancun from London Gatwick, using the scheduled services of British Airways, then to Belize City using Tropic Air. Outbound flight departs mid-morning; return flight arrives back early morning. **Domestic flights from other UK airports are available on this tour. See booking form for details.**

<b>15 nights</b> including one overnight flight:	<b>7<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016</b>
<b>Principal leader:</b>	<b>Andy Woodall</b>
<b>Local guide:</b>	<b>Nathan Forbes</b>
<b>Maximum group size:</b>	<b>10 clients with one leader and a local guide</b>
<b>Cost with discount (if you book before 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2015):</b>	<b>£4970 per person sharing (£690 single supplement)</b>
<b>Full Cost:</b>	<b>£5120 per person sharing</b>
<b>Deposit:</b>	<b>£600 per person</b>

