

# FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

## WESTERN BELIZE: CHAN CHICH LODGE

**JULY 16-22, 2009**

### TRIP REPORT

An expeditionary force of 12 arrived in Belize, seeking treasure. Not quite the apostles, or the dirty dozen, this inquisitive group of educators, medics and erstwhile hangers-on sought total immersion in the interior jungles, searching for the true remote natural experience, unlimited beer and a phenomenal swimming pool. All their hopes, dreams and desires were requited. This was a vacation, after all.

We all met at the Belize International Airport and began a five hour journey across the savannahs of coastal Belize, a relief stop along the New River, bumpy and dusty cut-off through Guinea Grass, August Pine Ridge, San Felipe, to the rice fields of Blue Creek, up the escarpment bordering Mexico, south through Programme for Belize lands and finally into the wilds of Chan Chich. Birds along our path were wonderful, including Vermilion Flycatcher, Snail Kite, Wood Stork, Limpkin, Laughing Falcon, Black-throated Bobwhite, Blue Ground-dove, Groove-billed Ani, Acorn Woodpecker, and Blue-black Grassquit (“Johnny Jump-up”). As dusk and then dark approached, we cruised the long private road into Gallon Jug until somehow, miraculously, the sparkling lights of luxurious Chan Chich Lodge appeared from the inky darkness and we had arrived at our home for the next six days.

The dawn chorus of Red-lored and Mealy Parrots, Crested Guans, Melodious Blackbirds, Clay-colored Robins, Ivory-billed Woodcreepers and Black-headed Saltators filled the air as we rose with the sun. Having arrived at night, no one could believe how beautiful Chan Chich (“little bird” in Mayan) Lodge was. Set in the heart of a Maya plaza, surrounded by ancient burial mounds and Maya roads, the magnificently landscaped and immaculately maintained grounds are breath-taking. Before breakfast each day, we met at the lodge for early coffee and muffins and then went birding with different highly skilled local guides for a couple of hours. Ruben accompanied us the first morning on a tour of the lodge grounds and then the service area, where many of the staff have their small thatched roof homes. A pair of Bat Falcons, on rapid wing-beats, chattered across “their” plaza. In case we had forgotten, Short-billed Pigeons

repeatedly reminded us, “I feel so good”. In fact, we did feel good when a banana-nosed Keel-billed Toucan perched just above us, showing off its impossibly long and colorful proboscis. Spectacularly iridescent, simultaneously beautiful and hideous, Oscellated Turkeys wandered around the compound, often following us down paths. Invisible trogons and motmots called from the deep forest. Golden-olive Woodpecker sounded like running your finger down a comb, while Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers made us laugh with their “rubber ducky” squeeze song. The colony of Montezuma Oropendolas, with its four-foot long pendulous nests, was most impressive as these giant and colorful icterids flew back and forth to the Bullhoff tree that is their home. Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and Long-tailed Hermits probed the tubular red flowers on bushes surrounding the dining deck as we enjoyed our breakfasts. Diminutive White-collared Seedeaters fed on the lawns and sang their beautiful melody endlessly throughout the day.

After breakfast we walked the main road to the suspension bridge over Chan Chich Creek and then returned via the Sac Be Trail. Since this was the rainy season, where afternoon thunderstorms are frequent and heavy, we all expected high water for the trip. However, Belize is experiencing a drought this year and the water was lower than I have ever seen it, with virtually no flow in the river. After a first night’s brief storm, we had no rain and perfect weather for the remainder of the trip. Great for us, not so good for the environment. A Scaly-breasted Hummingbird maintained its territorial domination by singing incessantly just above the road, while off to the side, brilliant Red-capped Manakin males, clothed in black with a crimson *chapeau* and yellow pantaloons, snapped their wings on their lek, or displaying grounds. Dainty Red-legged Honeycreepers, studies in azure, ebony and scarlet, fed on “horse ball” fruits.

From 10:00 AM to about 3:30 PM, things get mighty quiet in the warm and humid forest, so we repaired to the screened pool to cool off, enjoy a refreshing dip and a drink before lunch at the dining room, followed by siesta, a wonderful tradition in the hot and steamy tropics. Once awake from our various levels of stupor (or “stupid”, as the case may be), we climbed onto the open truck for a ride around the Gallon Jug property to see what we could find. We drove around the pastures, looking for the mountain lion that had killed a deer the night before. No luck. Then up toward Laguna Verde and Sylvester Village, where we encountered Gray Hawk, Bare-throated Tiger-heron, White-tailed Kite, Roadside Hawks along the roadside, Vaux’s and Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts, Red-throated Ant-tanager and best of all, an adult male Great Curassow, jet black and sporting head curls with a yellow face. Very hip. We returned to the pleasantries of the bar (The Looter’s Trench - named after the thieves who broke into the Maya tombs by digging side trenches) to do the daily checklist. Dining with the group at a long table indoors (to avoid evening bugs) was most pleasant, sharing the day’s adventures and enjoying the good food and especially the exceptionally friendly service. There may not be another place where everyone who works there seems so happy to see you at every encounter. The menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner (desayuno, almuerzo, y cena) were so impressive that several participants got copies of all three to take home as souvenirs. Some of the items read better than they tasted, but it was a valiant effort nonetheless, albeit somewhat over the top.

Our third day started early, with Gilberto as our guide. Gilberto is the dean of Chan Chich's guides and has trained all the others. At 67 years old, he not only helped clear the land and build the lodge, it appears that he fathered everyone else who lives there (Just kidding. Put down your machete, Gilberto.) We walked the road to the bridge, but it was fairly quiet there with a few great highlights: Green Kingfisher on the river, Dusky Antbird in the thickets, Collared Aracari in the cecropias, Pale-Billed Woodpecker giving its "bop-bop" drumming and Cinnamon Becard tending to its nestlings. Walking back, Ben spotted an amazing Ornate Hawk-eagle stared at us from its perch deep among the jungle vines. After breakfast, we walked the Temple area and then the Bajo/River Trail, finding few birds, but encountering a troop of Black Howler monkeys at the rear of the compound as we came up the hill from the river. Loud and amazing to watch, there seemed to be one dominant male who lowered his throat to the tree branch for greater resonance and how can I put this, howled. Deafening, when they get going at close range. It not only makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, it blows them right off. Makes a great ring tone. A huge Lineated Woodpecker completed the performance.

Given how hard we had been working (not) all day, we decided to take the afternoon off and try and use up as many Belikin beers at the pool as we could find. We did an amazingly good job and surprisingly, no one drowned. Somehow, they keep the pool temperature in the low 80s, so it is always refreshing. The best sighting of the day occurred after dinner, when, to the relief of all participants, my prodigal luggage found its way back home.

Based on the wishes of the participants (I swear), the next day we started at 5:15 AM, to better enjoy the morning bird activity. It worked. Going out with Marvin, our guide, we again covered the service area and Sylvester Village Road, where an incredible thing happened. A troop of howlers was in the trees above us, just cruising and snoozing. Two teenager monkeys decided to pay us a visit. A close visit. By the time the young male (of course) had finished sliding down the vines, prehensile tail and all, he came within 8 feet of us! Totally curious as we were, he watched us as carefully as we watched him, until he finally retreated back up into the canopy. A completely unique and amazing experience. After breakfast, we returned to the temple area for an archaeological tour with Marvin, who demonstrated his extensive knowledge of the Maya civilizations that lived here for 1500 years. During the course of the morning, the birds were pretty amazing as well: Plain Chachalaca, perched Brown-hooded Parrots, Squirrel Cuckoo, good looks at ALL FOUR SPECIES OF TROGONS: Black-headed, Violaceous, Slaty-tailed and a female Collared, which I had never seen before. We also finally got great views of the highly vocal (hoot-hoot), but also highly secretive and hard to see Blue-crowned Motmot. The beautiful and rare Emerald Toucanet put in a long appearance, surrounded by many Black-cheeked Woodpeckers.

In the afternoon, we had some time to relax and a small group of adventuresome souls, Ben, Gale, Kathy and Marilyn plus myself, decided to take a little walk on our own to get into some different habitat and see what we could find. This walk became fondly known as "The Bataan Death March", but only by those who did not participate, I'm sure from envy. We hustled down to the beginning of the Xaxe Venic Road ("shah'-shay beh-neek'), which heads due west

toward Guatemala, which was only a few kilometers away. Since we had no idea how long a kilometer was, we had no idea where or how far we were going (just kidding). Moving along at a fairly quick (for birders) pace, we stopped only to check out new things and sounds. The vegetation became shorter and scrubbier and the bird calls changed. Excitement. We called in a flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks, then a squadron of Brown Jays, a/k/a the bush police, loudly descended upon us, calling “piom-piom”, their local name, which translates into “village gossip”, since we were the transgressors in their area. Then the fun really started. A group of the strangely built Long-billed Gnatwrens, which resembles a tiny bird stuck on a spit between its long thin tail and needle bill. White-bellied Wren had us confused for a bit, but we figured it out, followed by an up close and personal encounter with the highly vocal, but rarely seen, stub of a bird known as the White-breasted Wood-wren. A Thrushlike Schiffornis sang nearby, its memorable voice still in my ears, and favored us with a close and open look. Finally, the *piece de resistance*. I heard a Barred Antshrike sing in the distance while we were listening to an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper and called it in for a bravura performance. Shaking every feather and bone in its body, the male antshrike quivered like jello every time he sang, right in front of us. Dressed in black-and-white stripes from head to tail, this clown of the forest is one of my favorite tropical species and I was delighted to be able to find and share it with my birding buddies. Then came The March. It was getting late, the sun was going down and we had to get back for checklist and dinner. So we did about a mile and a half at a pretty good clip, covering the rest of the Bajo Trail and the River Trail. Great walk and one of my favorite experiences of the trip!

Not to relax, right after dinner we had our night drive scheduled, during which we were determined to see a plethora of ferocious jungle denizens. We saw: a tree rat, a guan, a tarantula, tons of white-tailed deer, pauraque eyes and a distant gray fox. The headliner had to be turning off the lights and seeing the entire sky filled with stars. Fall into bed.

For our fifth day, we hedged our bets a tad and didn't start until 5:30 AM, meeting with Ruben to bird the temple area. Barbara spotted a family of Great Curassows, with chicks, stunned us as they crossed the Sylvester Road. Ruben carefully led us to the backslope of the temple mounds where we found a pair of the small, quiet and elusive Tody Motmots. A Smoky-brown Woodpecker made an appearance while we were watching a Greenish Elaenia tend to its bromeliad nest. A Red-crowned Ant-tanager sang loudly from trailside and allowed the honor of whistling a duet with it. The first four horsepeople of the apocalypse took off after breakfast for a jaunt through meadows, forest, farm and ruins, including seeing a King Vulture. The rest of us continued our temple birding and then we hooked back up again at the lodge. Wandering around behind my cabana, I came upon a frantically feeding group of woodcreepers and noticed that little things were jumping all over the ground. An army ant swarm was crossing the hill and driving everything nuts! At first, the column was about two feet wide, but it shifted direction and came uphill at me in a path 10 feet across. I quickly abandoned my position and watched in amazement as the ants, moving like a flowing stream, climbed the posts supporting the nearby cabin and quickly covered the deck. I was able to find a few other non-sleeping people to witness this phenomenon.

We relaxed by the pool for the hot part of the day (notice a trend here?) and then went out again with Gilberto at 4:00 PM for a walk down to the bridge and the river, spending some time at the pools along the Sac Be Trail and the new viewing location along the Logger Trail. An American Pygmy Kingfisher dazzled us with its jewel-like colors, perching close by and repeatedly darting into the water for some tiny morsel. Even more amazing was a Purple-crowned Fairy hummingbird, hovering above the still water and plung-diving completely beneath the surface to bathe, shake off its feathers and retire to a perch for preening. Sepia-capped and Sulphur-rumped Flycatchers also put in brief appearances. And for a special treat, an incredibly early migrant, Louisiana Waterthrush, picked its way around the rocks, bobbing and weaving at every step.

We split the group into two parts for our night walk, half going with Gilberto down the road and the others wandering through the temple area with Marvin. Both ventures were successful, if very different. The roadies found a kinkajou watching them from its canopy perch, and heard a Black-and-white Owl, while those trying not to kill themselves by tripping over roots around the temple had the pleasure of seeing a Mottled Owl and hearing at least two Vermiculated Screech-owls. It was so dark in the forest that when we extinguished our torches, you could see your hand in front of your face. While we were out walking, the night drive group actually saw a mountain lion! Sometime that night, a jaguar killed a deer near the Gallon Jug airstrip. We saw somewhere around four million vultures having a field day later that morning. One of these days....

Our final full day was spent returning to our favorite birding area around the river and then doing some new activities. As we quietly sat by the Logger Trail, a young Agami Heron flew in, sporting the beginnings of its adult plumage, and allowed us to carefully watch it for 15 minutes. Three Ringed Kingfishers flew up the river near the bridge, giving their Gatling gun call to make sure we knew they were there. At last, Blue-black Grosbeaks allowed everyone a good look. A pair of Dot-winged Antwrens showed off their jet black and russet feathers, with their white spotted wings looking like a star-filled night sky. We returned for another gut-busting and delicious breakfast before the next wave of riders on the sage mounted their trusty steeds while seven canoeists dipped their paddles in Laguna Verde. Although the lake was relatively small and the sun was very hot (mucho sunscreen!), we paddled around the pond for a couple of hours, totally enjoying the glassy smooth and clear fish-filled (tilapia) water. Gale, my bowwoman, seemed intent on paddling through the forest and up the hill and had to be restrained. Neotropic Cormorants watched us from their cecropia perches, a Yellow-bellied Elaenia uttered its harsh call, Brown Jays harassed us every time we came near their cove, and a Green Heron seemed very intent on hanging around us. Groups of yellow, white and bronze butterflies clustered on dead cattail stems and exploded into what was termed a "Belizean Snow Blow" (Dave), surrounding the canoe like it was in the middle of a colorful snow fall. As we returned toward the dock, my favorite moment of the trip occurred. A group of five American Swallow-tailed Kites, elegant in their black-and-white finery, angular in wing and tail, glided gracefully toward our placid pond and began gently dipping their breasts in the tepid water as

they flew, perhaps to cool off, perhaps to impress us. Both worked. It was a ballet, as the quintet pirouetted and danced across the water's surface, flaring their long black swallow-tails like Fred Astaire in a tuxedo. I loved every moment of it. I'm sure one of them was named Ginger.

In the afternoon, we boarded the open truck again and had a brief tour of the shade coffee plantation, coffee processing plant (where we bought out their production for the year) and visited the local school house. A solo Bronzed Cowbird carefully inspected the nearby cattle corral for munchies.

We gathered in the Looter's Trench one more time, to partake in a Belikin, margarita or perhaps a pina colada as we did the final checklist and share our favorite birds, creatures and experiences from the trip. Complimenting ourselves, the most popular thought was how great this group was and what a good time we had together. This observation may have had something to do with the free beer. Following closely was the close encounter of the howler kind, the Ornate Hawk-eagle (which came into the compound early the next morning chasing a Crested Guan and generally causing havoc), the Mottled Owl, starry skies, pitch blackness in the forest at night, Barred Antshrike, The Bataan Death March, Keel-billed Toucan, the entire trip to Chan Chich (a tropical first for many), Agami Heron, screaming spider monkeys rattling tree branches at us, riding around in the open truck. No one voted for the stinking cedar trees. Everyone retired for the night, except the howler monkeys, which teed off right next to my cabana at 11:00 PM, leading a few of young and restless to go wandering around a bit in the dark to see whatever else might be happening.

Final morning: our usual slow breakfast at 7:00 AM and then off to the airstrip for our chartered flight back to the Belize International Airport. A perfect way to end the trip, with superb views of the forest canopy, extending to the horizon in all directions, giving us a better appreciation of why this area of Belize, Mexico and Guatemala is so rich in wildlife.

Overall, it was a great trip, with virtually perfect weather and wonderful company. We saw or heard 145 species of birds, all tropical residents (except for one little warbler) and dozens of other fascinating creatures. If anyone would like a copy of the Species List, just let me know and I'll shoot one right off to you.

For more information about Flights of Fancy Adventures and our upcoming tours, please contact me.

Best wishes to all!

Sam

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