

Belize, March 3-19, 2016

Introduction

Al Harris and I, joined by our wives, headed to Belize last March for a multi-purpose trip. Fortunately, my wife Lana is a former biologist who is up for any adventure (she lived in a tent with me in the Serengeti for two years), and Cathy is a budding photographer who is quite keen as well. We managed to squeeze in some mammal-watching time amongst the snorkeling, birding, and Mayan archaeology.

I brought a Bushnell trail camera which I set and moved around each day during the trip; I learned after the fact that you apparently you need permission to use them in protected areas. Al also brought down his Echo Meter Touch acoustic bat detector that he ran through his iPad mini, with sonograms downloaded for Central American bats. Although not as satisfying as seeing a bat up close, it did allow him to identify foraging bats that would otherwise have been impossible, possibly including some new species records for La Milpa (if correctly identified by the EchoMeter Auto ID).

Participants

Lana Bresele, Robert Foster, Al Harris, Cathy Paroschy-Harris

Itinerary

Al and Cathy arrived before Lana and I, picking up the rental vehicle at the Belize City airport (Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport). The main highways in this part of Belize are in pretty good condition (albeit with massive, often unsigned, speed bumps near communities), but a SUV with clearance is needed for some gravel roads, particularly in the wet season.

Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (March 3-5)

This spot is well known to birders and easily accessible. It also provides some decent opportunities for mammal-watching and herping in the wetlands and adjacent forests.

Hill Bank Field Station

Al and Cathy had made arrangements to stay at this field station run on the east side of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area. Due to a miscommunication they didn't get required permission to cross the private lands to access the field station. If you plan to stay here, make sure the staff at Programme for Belize (PFB) fully understand your planned itinerary.

San Ignacio - Mountain Pine Ridge (March 6-7)

Granitic mountains and pine forests, unique in this part of the world, provide good opportunities for specialized birding. However, between birding and taking in the local culture, there weren't many opportunities for mammal-watching.

Caye Caulker (March 8-10)

As a partial concession to spousal unity, Al and Cathy spend some “traditional” vacation time at this popular offshore island. Limited mammal-watching options, but some dolphins and birds were observed.

Hopkins (March 11-12)

Lana and I arrived at Belize City late on the 12th, and after being picked up by Al and Cathy drove to Hopkins along the “Hummingbird Highway” after dark. A scenic drive during the day, the only mammal we saw was an opossum. Overnighted at the All Season’s Guesthouse (quite nice beach-view accommodation at a decent price for Belize). Hopkins is a small coastal town with a laid-back feel and rich Garifuna culture, and is convenient for accessing offshore reefs or buying groceries for Coxcomb. We did a reasonably-priced, full-day private excursion to the barrier reef with Happy Go Luckie Tours, where we caught bait and saw manatees in the morning, before hand-lining for a shore lunch, and snorkelling in the afternoon. Apparently sand flies can be atrocious at Hopkins, but we did not have any problems with them. Mangroves along the lower reaches of the Sitee River mouth, as well as nearby lagoons and marshes, provide birding and mammal-watching opportunities, but the area is under increasing development pressure.

Coxcomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (March 13-16)

The Audubon Society of Belize offers a range of cheap accommodation options at Cockscomb including rustic cabins, dorm rooms, and camping. We stayed at the “Private Cabin” which has a nice verandah, and is located at edge of the forest in sight of a fruit tree that brings in mammals and birds alike. There are no restaurants at HQ, but communal cooking facilities are available, as well as showers and flush and/or composting toilets.

Cockscomb has a very good network of trails, most of which are well-marked and fairly wide, making it easier and safer for night hikes. Guides are available, but are not required (we did all hikes on our own). On couple of night drives, I was dropped off at the reserve gate and walked back along the road from there; if you do not have a vehicle, out-and-back walks are well worth it since jaguar and puma have been be sighted on the road near HQ.

There is a meandering, yet fast-flowing, river near Cockscomb HQ that can be accessed at several points by the trail network. You can rent tubes for the 2-3 hr float between put-in/take-out points. Quite pleasant for cooling off in the afternoon, it can also provide opportunities for sneaking up on otters, turtles, and other riparian wildlife, particularly if you do it in off-peak hours. Yapok have been seen on its bank on night hikes. It is fairly shallow (most of it was less than 1-2 m deep) and clear enough that it is also a lot of fun to snorkel; small to medium-sized fish are abundant and fairly inquisitive.

La Milpa (March 16-19)

La Milpa Lodge and Field Station are run by the Programme for Belize (PFB), a local conservation organization, and are located in the largest patch of lowland forest in northern Belize (easily visible on GoogleEarth). The lodge and field station are located about 5 km from

the La Milpa archaeological site, the 3rd largest Mayan ruins in Belize. The ruins are well worth a visit with a guide who can explain what the partially excavated mounds represent. The site remains largely forested but much of the understory has been cleared, and it is an excellent spot for day or night hikes for mammals, birds, and herps. Apparently, the large brush piles are often good for snakes, but we did not see any despite some pretty dedicated searching at night.

The lodge and cabanas are quite charming, and the food simple but tasty. Both are pricey, but the funds generated help support the PFB's conservation programs. The attractive grounds are used by a surprising amount of wildlife, drawn in by the flowering/fruited trees and shrubs, as well as the open habitat (the surrounding lowland forest is quite dense). Ocellated Turkeys and Great Curassows are common on the grounds and adjacent trails, which is a good sign that poaching is not an issue here. Mosquitoes were only a minor nuisance in the forest, but it is worth tucking in your pants and/or using DEET due to chiggers.

There is a modest network of trails through the forest that you can use with or without a guide. Melvis was a keen and very knowledgeable guide, both for natural history and archaeology. He also has excellent ears, particularly valuable for birders unfamiliar with the local symphony (we were often able to track down the source, and can confirm that his id's were spot on). The gravel access road to La Milpa continues south through the Rio Bravo Conservation Area for about 20 km; access beyond that to Gallon Jug and the posh Chan Chich Lodge is through private land and requires signed permission, usually arranged in advance. The road has almost no traffic and passes through unbroken forest; it should be good for evening and night drives, but unfortunately we didn't see much.

Lamanai (March 19)

This well-known Mayan archaeological site is surrounded by a small patch of forest along the edge of the New River. Upon the advice of Melvis at La Milpa, we arrived early and had the place to ourselves for about an hour before crowds of tourists arrived via boat. Although mammals and herps were scarce, we did record some new bird species and the restored ruins are truly impressive in the early morning light.

Mammals Observed

A total of 43 species including those observed live (20 spp.), tracks, roadkill, trail camera photos, and acoustic recordings:

Gray Four-eyed Opossum (*Philander opossum*): Hummingbird Highway north of Hopkins – id uncertain

Central American Woolly Opossum (*Caluromys derbianus*): single individual observed on two night hikes on Cockscomb access road between main gate and HQ

Common Opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*): single individual observed on night hike on Cockscomb access road between main gate and HQ and at La Milpa on night drive to archaeological site

Northern Tamandua (*Tamandua mexicana*): roadkill near San Ignacio

Greater Sac-winged Bat (*Saccopteryx bilineata*): several individuals observed in a shed at La Milpa; sonogram recorded at Cockscomb and La Milpa

Lesser Dog-like Bat (*Peropteryx macrotis*): sonogram recorded at Mountain Pine Ridge, Cockscomb, and La Milpa

Northern Ghost Bat (*Diclidurus albus*): sonogram recorded at Crooked Tree and La Milpa

Greater Bulldog Bat (*Noctilio leporinus*): sonogram recorded at Cockscomb and La Milpa

Parnell's Moustached Bat (*Pteronotus parnellii*): sonogram recorded at La Milpa

Wagner's Moustached Bat (*Pteronotus personatus*): sonogram recorded at La Milpa

Davy's Naked-backed Bat (*Pteronotus davyi*): sonogram recorded at Mountain Pine Ride and La Milpa

Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*): sonogram recorded at Crooked Tree

Argentine Brown Bat (*Eptesicus furinalis*): sonogram recorded at San Ignacio

Hoary Bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*): sonogram recorded at Crooked tree – id uncertain

Northern Yellow Bat (*Lasiurus intermedius*): sonogram recorded at Cockscomb

Southern Yellow Bat (*Lasiurus ega*): sonogram recorded at Cockscomb

Brazilian Free-tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*): sonogram recorded at Crooked Tree and La Milpa

Broad-eared Bat (*Nyctinomops laticaudatus*): sonogram recorded at Crooked Tree

Wagner's Bonneted Bat (*Eumops glaucinus*): sonogram recorded at Mountain Pine Ridge, Cockscomb, and La Milpa

Sinoloan Mastiff Bat (*Molossus sinoloae*): sonogram recorded at Cockscomb and La Milpa

Yucatán Black Howler Monkey (*Agoutta pigra*): observed on several occasions at Crooked Tree, Cockscomb, and La Milpa

Geoffroy's Spider Monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi*): observed on several occasions at La Milpa on the Mayo and Mahogany trails

Yucatan Squirrel (*Sciurus yucatanensis*): observed on several occasions at Crooked Tree and Lamanai

Deppe's Squirrel (*Sciurus deppei*): observed on multiple occasions at Cockscomb and Lamanai

Central American Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*): observed on several occasions on trails at Cockscomb and Lamanai

Lowland Paca (*Cuniculus paca*): one individual observed on Antelope Trail at Cockscomb; also recorded on trail camera at fruiting tree near HQ

Vesper Rat (*Nyctomys sumichrasti*): resident of dorms at Cockscomb HQ

Norway Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*): roadkill on Caye Caulker

Grey Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*): observed roadside at Mountain Pine Ridge; observed on grounds multiple times in evening and morning at La Milpa

White-nosed Coati (*Nasua narica*): several observed roadside at Maya Centre near entrance to Cockscomb; large group observed on Antelope Trail at Cockscomb; large group observed at dump (fruit and vegetable peelings) at La Milpa

Kinkajou (*Potos flavus*): single individual observed on night hike on Cockscomb access road between main gate and HQ; one individual watched at length on night hike at La Milpa archaeological site

American Hog-nosed Skunk (*Conepatus leuconotus*): roadkill near Hopkins

Southern Spotted Skunk (*Spilogale angustifrons*): roadkill east of Belmopan – id uncertain

Neotropical River Otter (*Lontra longicaudis*): observed in oxbox pond on Wari Trail at Cockscomb

Jaguar (*Panthera onca*): tracks observed multiple times on trails and road at Cockscomb; one individual captured on trail camera at stream crossing by junction of Gibnut and Antelope trails; another on trail camera the following night on main access road approximately 1 km east of HQ – also spotted by school group arriving by bus in same area earlier that night. Not surprisingly, both jaguars and pumas can be observed at La Milpa; although neither were observed by us on this trip, another guest made a plaster cast of a fresh jaguar track while we were there.

Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*): one caught on trail camera drinking from puddle on access road between La Milpa lodge and the archaeological site

Puma (*Puma concolor*): tracks observed on trails at Cockscomb; one caught on trail camera on main access road approximately 1 km east of HQ about 1 hour after the jaguar passed by.

Jaguarundi (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*): one observed running across the grounds at La Milpa in the early morning; also observed by another guest nearby on main access road

West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*): one or two manatees observed in lagoon at Twin Cayes on barrier reef

Baird's Tapir (*Tapiris bairdii*): tracks observed multiple times on trails at Cockscomb

Collared Peccary (*Tayassu tajacu*): herd of 5-8 individuals observed from porch of Cockscomb cabin feeding on fallen fruit in late afternoon and evening

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*): observed multiple times on grounds at La Milpa

Bottle-nosed Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*): several observed at Caye Caulker

Reptiles

Species for which possible id's could be determined.

Furrowed Wood Turtle (*Rhinoclemmys areolata*): Crooked Tree

White-lipped Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon leucostomum*): roadside at Crooked Pine and streamside pond at Cockscomb – id uncertain

Common Slider (*Trachemys scripta*): one roadside near Crooked Pine and another roadside near wetland northeast of La Milpa

Morelet's Crocodile (*Crocodylus moreletii*): at pond on grounds at La Milpa

Yucatan Banded Gecko (*Coleonyx elegans*): caught during night hike at La Milpa archaeological site

House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*): common and widespread in buildings

Central American Smooth Gecko (*Thecadactylus rapicauda*): in buildings at Coxcomb and La Milpa

Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*): Crooked Tree

Striped Basilisk (*Basiliscus vittatus*): common at Coxcomb, La Milpa, Crooked Tree

Ctenosaur (*Ctenosaua similis*): Crooked Tree

Lundells Spiny Lizard (*Sceloporus lundelli*): on ruins at Lamanai - id uncertain

Ghost Anole (*Norops lemurinus*): La Milpa – diamondback variant

Brown Anole (*Norops sagrei*): Cockscomb – id uncertain

Greater Scaly Anole (*Norops tropidonotus*): Cockscomb – id uncertain

Anole (*Norops* spp.): several other unidentified individuals at Coxcomb

Middle American Ameiva (*Ameiva festiva*): Antelope Trail at Cockscomb – id uncertain

Black-striped Snake (*Coniophanes imperialis*): attacking Mexican Tree Frog on the Mayo Trail at La Milpa

Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon corais*): roadkill north of Hopkins – id uncertain

Speckled Racer (*Drymobius margaritiferus*): roadkill at Lamanai – id uncertain

Tropical Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis triangularum*): on edge of Gibnut Trail at Coxcomb in late afternoon

Variable Coral Snake (*Micrurus diastema*): La Milpa

Fer de Lance (*Bothrops asper*): roadkill near Lamanai

Amphibians

Cane Toad (*Bufo marinus*): Crooked Tree, Hopkins; night walk on River Trail at Cockscomb

Campbell's Rainforest Toad (*Bufo campbelli*): multiple occasions at Coxcomb and La Milpa

Gulf Coast Toad (*Bufo valliceps*): night and walks on River Trail at Cockscomb

Common Mexican Treefrog (*Smilisca baudinii*): in the jaws of Black-striped Snake on the Mayo Trail at La Milpa

Maya Mountain Frog or **Julian's Frog** (*Rana juliani*): Coxcomb – id uncertain

Birds

Approximately 200 species. Bird list will be reported in separate trip report, time permitting.

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Yucatán Black Howler Monkey (C. Paroschy-Harris)



Geoffroy's Spider Monkey (R. Foster)



just north of Belize City (R. Foster)



Deppe's Squirrel (R. Foster)



Central American Agouti (C. Paroschy-Harris)



Greater Sac-winged Bat (R. Foster)



White-nosed Coati (R. Foster)



Jaguar (R. Foster)



Collared Peccary (C. Paroschy-Harris)



Common Mexican Treefrog with its hind leg the jaws of a Black-striped snake (not visible)(R. Foster)



Yucatan Banded Gecko (R. Foster)



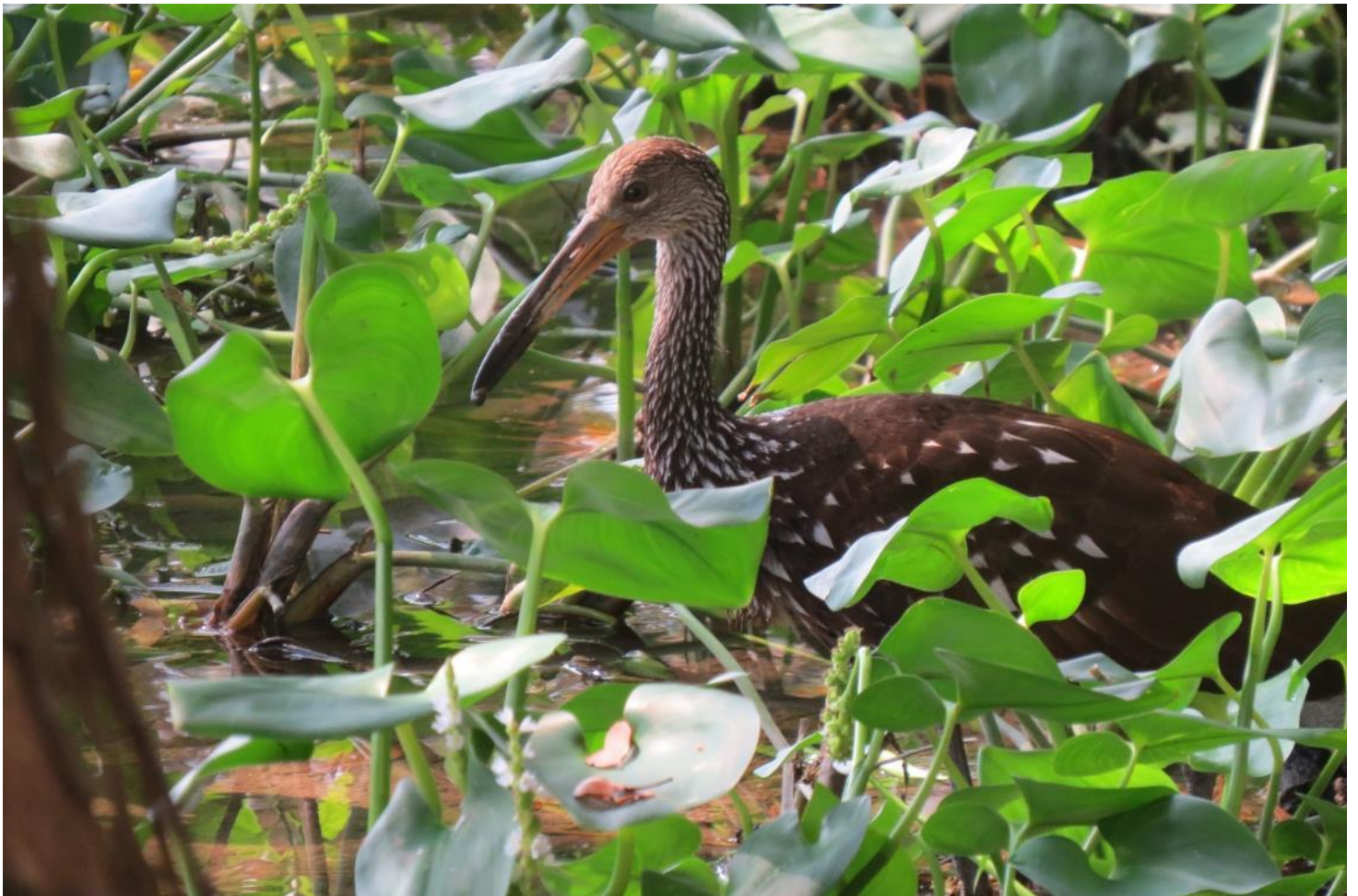
Morelet's Crocodile (C. Paroschy-Harris)



Great Curassow at La Milpa (R. Foster)



Hooded Warbler at Lamanai (R. Foster)



Lamanai Limpkin (R. Foster)