



To Kiss A Kiskadee

By: Nicole Maillet

**An Up-Close and Personal Belize Bird Watching Adventure
March 3rd to March 9th, 2014**

Acknowledgments:

*For Cheryl Markham (Mom),
Glenn Crawford (Tour Leader),
Carolyn Johns (Tour Mate),
Jane Shumsky (Tour Mate),
Maggie McManus (Tour Mate),
And Gina Nichol (Sunrise Birding)*

Carolyn Johns



*Cheryl Markham and
Nicole Maillet*



Glenn Crawford



Jane Shumsky



Maggie McManus

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Prologue

To keep it short and simple: This is an amateur writer's attempt to capture an amateur birder's mother-daughter vacation to the beautiful paradise known as Belize.

Happy Birding,
Nicole



Day 1

The friendly sun and equatorial warmth met us as we exited the plane and crossed the tarmac: we had arrived in Belize. A smiling Glenn Crawford, our tour leader, met my mother and me once we passed through Customs. Maggie, Jane, and Carolyn, our tour mates, instantly greeted us and we all boarded the passenger van and started our journey.

None of us had ever been to the Central American country of Belize before, but Glenn was so personable and pleasant, we all instantly felt at ease and at home. The itinerary that day was simple: drive from the coastal Belize City airport through the Mennonite farmlands to the tropical dry forests of the Rio Bravo Conservation Area. Little did we know, the three-hour drive to our La Milpa Lodge residence would in fact be over seven hours of bird-filled sightings from 1pm to 8pm along the dirt roads of this gorgeous landscape.

I will never forget that first afternoon when the phrase “Birding tour” took on a whole new meaning with the sights and sounds of over 50 species of birds (56 to be exact). All of us were graced by the appearance of a Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Roadside Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Black-necked Stilt, Northern Jacana, Velasquez’s Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Great Kiskadee, Eastern Meadowlark, Vermilion Flycatcher and many others!

When the stargazing began, the group was hungry, exhausted, and in a blissful state of awe. The home-cooked, family style chicken and rice dinner prepared by Ruth at the lodge was appetizing, satisfying, and filling.

For me, the highlights of the day were the nests of some of the largest and smallest of Belize’s avian residents: the Jabiru Stork nest and the Vermilion Flycatcher nest. Besides our feathered friends, some other exotic sights were that of truckloads of sugar cane and plantains.



1 Sitting Atop Barbed Wire



2 Jabiru Stork Nest



3 Time for A Swim



4 Eastern Meadowlark



5 Vermilion Flycatcher



6 Plantains



7 Sugar Cane

Day 2

The next morning we awoke to the juxtaposition of ominous-sounding howler monkeys and the sweet beat of hummingbirds, and do not forget the dew-bathing Yellow-bellied Elaenias. Glenn was naturally animated; the rest of us required coffee for the pre-breakfast birding on the lodge grounds. We all quickly adapted and acquired the skill of balancing a coffee cup in one hand and binoculars in the other.

Within the first hour, we were witness to the Red-legged Honeycreeper, Lineated Woodpecker, Golden Olive Woodpecker, White-collared Seedeater, Clay-colored Thrush, Yellow Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, and American Redstart. The only thing that could draw us away from a birder's utopia was a birder's stomach. The eggs, cheese, fruit, refried beans, and liquid sunshine

freshly squeezed orange juice all prepared us for our first full day of hiking through the semi deciduous forests.

Glenn glimpsed a tayra eating in a wasp nest; we only saw the wasp nest, but we did all see the Jaguar print in the mud (that could not run and hide on us like the tayra). The mammalian action continued when a Spider Monkey stopped by for a snack right above the trail. The little guy literally looked straight down at us and then continued on his merry way. By 10am our first sighting of the King Vulture foreshadowed the puma carcass, the scent of which stayed with us for quite a while.

Before we settled in for lunch and a siesta, the White-whiskered Puffbird, Gartered Trogon, and Northern Bard Woodcreeper all paid us a visit. Lunch time itself had excitement all its own with a fox running under the solar panels and hummingbirds drinking around our heads.

The afternoon trek began with a mahogany tree lesson: the seed pods point skyward and pop open when the time is right and the sun heats them up enough. Once we reached the bridge, we all gathered on it to watch the Purple-crowned Fairy take a bath and watch the American Pygmy Kingfisher, our first kingfisher of the trip! Later, the resident Morelet's Crocodile would reclaim his bridge, but for now we admired his smile on the bank.

As we neared the gardens, Glenn explained how you could make tea from the flowers of the Provision Tree. Then we "snapped" our way through the garden with a White-collared Manakin and Spot-breasted Wren before making it to the gravel road where a Roadside Hawk perched.

After dinner, we reviewed our birding checklists and we have a healthy count of over 100 species already and day 2 is not over yet: it was time to do some night spotting! There were bats, thousands of leaf-cutter ants, a wolf spider with live young, and the star of the show, the Mottled Owl.



8 Crocodile Smile



9 Fox Chasing His Own Tail



10 Jaguar Print



11 Provision Tree Flower



12 Cloudless Sulfur Butterflies Puddling



13 Mahogany Tree Seed Pods



14 Pygmy Kingfisher 15 Red-legged Honeycreeper 16 Spider Monkey



17 Yellow-throated Euphonia



18 White-collared Manakin



19 Crossing the Bridge



20 This Is My Bridge Now

Day 3

Time for some pre-breakfast birding, but the fog was still clinging on. Red soon became the color theme of the morning with a pair of Red-legged Honeycreepers, along with a Brown-hooded Parrot with red armpits and a Red-lored Amazon Parrot. We also managed to see a pair of Red-billed Pigeons (the male cooed when he got the chance to sit next to his girlfriend).

Once we started the morning hike, we saw a chicken-like bird dart in front of us, but no one could say why the Great Curassow crossed the road. Shortly after, we saw a kingfisher-like bird, the White-necked Puffbird, looking stoic on bare branches.

At the La Milpa Mayan site, Glenn pointed to a steep mound and explained it was a Maya temple that has yet to be excavated, but there is a rope to assist people in climbing to the top through the tree roots. Mom immediately nudged me and said, “Nicole, go climb that.” With Glenn’s expertise to help me, I gladly obliged. We even propped up the camera and put on a timer so we could photograph our triumph at the top of the mound.

Once back at ground level, the bird sightings resumed with not only a Pale-billed Woodpecker, but a Crested Guan. Some frustrated hummingbirds then drew our attention to a quiet fellow: the Pygmy Owl. He captured our gaze for some time before we decided to head back to the lodge for lunch. As it turns out, it was also lunch time for a Yellow-winged Tanager. Some berries provided the appetizer, followed by a custard apple as the main course.

The afternoon drive was a successful Ocellated Turkey quest. In the Blue Creek Mennonite lands, we also came across a flooded rice field with dozens of Tricolor Herons and Little Blue Herons and Great Blue Herons, and Snowy Egrets and Great Egrets. In a nearby pond, we spotted Black-necked Stilts, Short-billed Dowitcher, American White Ibis, and Pectoral Sandpiper, not to mention all of the cattle.

After dinner and updating the birding checklist for day 3, Glenn went over a map of Belize on the wall of the dining area and discussed where we have been and where we are going.



21 Fork-tailed Flycatcher



22 Pygmy Owl



23 Hummingbird



24 Strike A Pose



25 Pale-billed Woodpecker



26 Yellow-winged Tanager



27 White-necked Puffbird



28 Trogon



29 Top of the Mound

Day 4

We start off towards the archaeological compound that the University of Texas uses a few months per year. There is naturally occurring limestone along the embankments, and sapodilla trees are all around. I was able to get a video recording of Glenn whistling to a bird and the bird responding. They sang back-and-forth for a few cycles and I got the whole conversation!

To make the morning even better, breakfast at the lodge included fry jacks! They were hollow pastries that Carolyn and I made into scrumptious peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

The morning views included the Golden-crowned Warbler, Red-crowned Ant Tanager, Grey-headed Kite and a Give and Take Palm. The spines of a Give and Take Palm cut and poison whoever touches it. The remedy is the sap from the very same tree. It contains a chemical that will nullify the poison, help heal the cut, and disinfect the wound. We also passed by some wild orchids, and the

Logwood Tree, which yields indigo dye. The Lianas are also of note; they were the plants that resemble vines and compete with trees for sunlight.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed our final lunch, packed our bags and were off to Lamanai. Our arrival at the Lamanai Mayan Site was marked with the greeting from a Collared Aracari Toucan. As we explore, Glenn explains how Lamanai means “Submerged Crocodile” and he shows us the Jaguar Temple, the Ball Court and N10-43 (the High Temple). Glenn, Maggie, Cheryl and I all crawled our way to the top of the High Temple, again with the assistance of a rope ... except for Glenn who jogged up the steps.

After Lamanai was fully explored, it was back into the van for the journey to our second of two lodges for the expedition: Crooked Tree Lodge. The entertainment for the drive was provided by the lightning storm, which strangely did not have any thunder.

Crooked Tree itself is an inland island surrounded by a lagoon. The lodge was directly on the lagoon with a breathtaking view. Dinner was delicious and in the company of a married couple from Alaska (Angie and Buck).



30 Collared Aracari Toucan



31 Glenn Jogging up Temple Steps



32 Upward We Go



33 The Climb



34 Mayan Temple N10-43

Day 5

Before coffee on the veranda, before the Ringed Kingfisher or the Green Kingfisher, before the Mayflower Tree or the Morelet's Crocodile, before any of that, the morning began with puppies! Seven energetic, adorable, and friendly puppies!

Once I made it through the barrage of puppies and up onto the veranda, I enjoyed the view of a Grey-necked Wood Rail, Grey-breasted Martin, Baltimore Oriole and Orchard Oriole, White-fronted Amazon parrots and Jacana. Glenn, using Mom's camera, captured a Heron getting a fish for breakfast: perfectly - timed picture.

Breakfast was a two-course culinary masterpiece provided by Mick and Angie that included kiwi, banana, cantaloupe, and peach yogurt, followed by sausage, eggs, beans and toast. We then all prepped for the morning hike and set out.

We started off with the third kingfisher sighting of the morning: the Belted Kingfisher. As we continued, Glenn talked about the cashew trees and that conversation led to the mention of a Sci-fi film "Dragon Wasps" which was not

only filmed in Belize but had a very special Belize resident in the film, our very own Glenn Crawford!

An endemic species, the Yucatan woodpecker, and a Rose-throated Becard, Masked Tityra, and a Greyish Saltator rounded out the morning. There was also the communal granary where the Acorn woodpeckers kept their treasures.

The relaxing spot on the dock where we hosted the birding checklist update soon proved to be too relaxing. Before we could go over the mammals, plants and reptiles that were new, most of the tour group was fast asleep. Jane, however, took this opportunity to go for a refreshing swim in the lagoon before lunch.



352 Porcupine in the Bathroom

Now here is a sight we did not expect to find: a porcupine in the men's restroom behind the lodge! Anyway, back to birds and time for a boat ride.

The cool of the evening and the fact that we were comfortably sitting (and not hiking) made the birding boat ride absolutely splendid. And the boat did not hinder us in the least. We spotted over fifty Neotropic Cormorants, Snail Kite, Red-winged Blackbird, Caspian Tern, Western Osprey and a tree full of Whistling ducks. We also came across two boat-billed herons and a Grey-necked Wood Rail together in a little haven. As we motored away, a massive crocodile was spied floating nearby, but we were quickly distracted by a Fork-tailed Flycatcher in flight. By now, sunset was upon us, so we snapped a few photographs and headed for the dock.

And return van ride included a pit-stop at the one-chair barber shop that consistently drew our attention every time we passed it.

Mick and Angie's dinner plans for tonight consisted of tomato soup, followed by lagoon-caught tilapia with rice and broccoli. But one of their sons, Cory, captured my heart for the evening with his chocolate cupcake and bananas and of course, more chocolate.

What night would be complete without some frog watching too? Jane, Glenn and I went down to the water's edge and found Marine Toads, Rainforest Toads, Rio Grande Leopard Frogs, Boat-billed Heron, and a Fishing Bat that loved all the commotion Glenn was stirring up with his lamp.



36 Whistling Ducks



37 Grey-necked Wood Rail



38 Boat-billed Heron



39 Acorn Woodpecker



407 Boat Ride Sunset



41 Puppies in the Flower Bed



42 Hungry Heron with Fish in Mouth

Day 6

Today we traversed the Pine and Oak Savanna with its sandy paths and open terrain. Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Tropical Kingbirds, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Devil's Gut Cactus, Blue-grey Tanager, Grey Catbird, and Mangrove Vireo all welcomed us. However, to get to the Common Tody Flycatcher's nest, we had to navigate through the white clay that is so sticky, it attempts to keep your boots and rip them off your feet. It was quite fun actually.

Entering the lodge grounds, we beheld a limpkin get an apple snail out of its shell; limpkins do not have specialized beaks for that, so a little effort is required. Then the group settled in for brunch and iced coffee. Siesta time came and went, and then it was time for more food! Our late lunch was a fried tilapia wrap: yum!

Mom's camera now had over 1000 photos, but it was time for more because who can resist snapping a few pictures of two affectionate Groove-billed Anis sharing a fence post and hugging and kissing.

Excitement rose when we saw our first Purple Gallinule, then excitement skyrocketed when we came across a group of at least ten endemic Yucatan Jays!

Before dinner, some of us took a parrot stroll to see the Yellow-headed Amazon Parrot. Along the way, we paused to listen to the chorus of Rio Grande Leopard Frogs.

On the menu tonight was a whole snapper. Mind you, none of us had the slightest idea on how to eat an entire fish. Lucky for us, tour leader, boat captain, temple-climbing, bird whisperer Glenn, was also knowledgeable about how to de-bone and consume a small fish such as the snapper.



43 Early Morning Binoculars and Coffee



44 Hugs and Kisses



45 Limpkin with Snail



46 Yucatan Jay



47 Peek-a-boo



48 Olive-Throated Parakeet

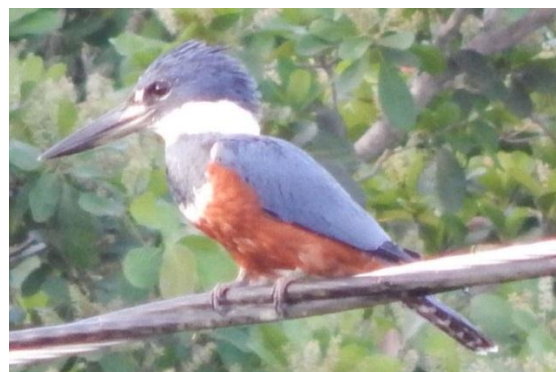
Day 7

It was our final morning in Belize. We all sat up on the veranda and drank our coffee (an iced coffee treat today) and participated in pre-breakfast birding. And to see us off, the Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Ringer Kingfisher, Grey Hawk, and Roadside Hawk all made an appearance. And before breakfast, a Green Heron and two Jacanas were captured with one click of the camera.

We enjoyed breakfast, packed our bags, posed for a group photo and boarded the van for the airport. What a wonderful and educational vacation!



49 Bare-throated Tiger Heron



50 Ringed Kingfisher



51 Heron and Two Jacana



52 Roadside Hawk



53 Grey Hawk



54 Great-tailed Grackle



55 View at Crooked Tree Lodge