

Belize 1981: an Interim Report

Peter Jenkins

Seventeen RAFOS members took part in the expedition to Belize this spring. The aim of the expedition was to investigate the avifauna in the remote jungle and swamp regions of this small Central American country located at the base of the Yucatan peninsula and facing the Caribbean Sea. The expedition was sponsored by HQSTC and MOD(DDTPed) under the terms of GAI 2059, and to ease the transport and administration the expedition divided into two teams, each spending three weeks in Belize. Team A was led by Maj David Counsell and was preceded by an advance party of Sqn Ldr Tom Leech and Sgt Stu Richardson. Team B and the overall expedition was led by myself, Sqn Ldr Peter Jenkins. Each team was accompanied by a signaller from 244 Sigs Sqn at RAF Brize Norton. Team B was also accompanied by Maj Tim Hallchurch of the Army Birdwatching Society - who played an important part in netting operations - and Maj Bob Powell of the USAF who is a member of RAFOS and whose experience of North American birds was most useful.

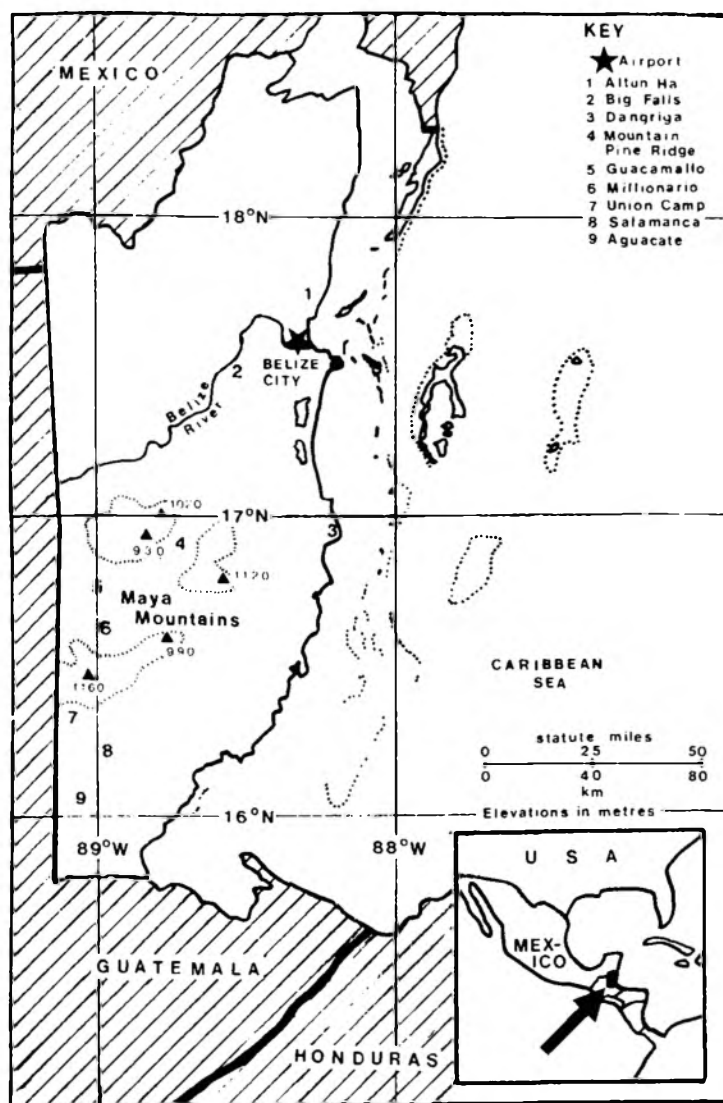
After a short period of acclimatisation at RAF Belize/HQBF each team moved by Landrover to jungle areas in the west and south. Fortunately it was the dry season from February to April so travel was relatively easy, although roads were few and very rough. Obtaining water can be a problem at that time of year, despite tropical rainfalls in other seasons, so teams camped close to rivers and streams and planned treks with care. In the hot humid climate the first two hours after dawn are the most active for birds, so a very early start was required each day. Some team members trapped birds in mist nets for weighing, measurement and photography, while others departed on one or two-day journeys, often on foot, into the less accessible areas of jungle and swamp. A Clansman HF radio was carried on these trips to maintain contact with HQBF.

Central America has a very rich variety and number of bird species and over 300 different types were identified by the expedition, including such spectacular birds as Keel-billed Toucan (the Guinness bird!) and Magnificent Frigatebird. Two species, Chuck-will's-widow and American Oystercatcher, which were identified had not previously been listed as occurring in Belize. Some of the birds seen had names as odd as their appearance. My own favourite is Montezuma's Oropendola, a large rook-like bird that nests in communal colonies of pendulous structures and sounds like a Monty Python version of a church organ.

During the initial period at the airport camp visits were made to the Mayan ruins of Altun Ha, about 20 miles north of the camp. The site was an excellent location for the study of hummingbirds, which were working the flower-



MONTEZUMA'S OROPENDOLA



covered slopes of the ruins. The tops of each temple provided an excellent view into the high trees as well as onto the top of the second-growth canopy. Other parties explored river and coastal sites in the airfield area.

As a final stage to the training phase each team stayed at the Big Falls estate - a large farm and cattle ranch. Here the expedition members were warmly received and hosted by the manager, Mr Nigel Gibbs. Many new birds were seen, including Sungrebe, Bare-throated Tiger Heron and Green-breasted Mango (a hummingbird). The sight and sound of a family of howler monkeys in the trees on the other side of the Belize river was unforgettable, as was the sight of Maj Tim Hallchurch and Sgt Alan Roberts riding horses around the ranch.

Tim's mount was extremely frisky and enjoyed galloping in an effort to shake rider, photographic and ornithological equipment to the ground. Alan's horse was not exactly fast, but quite sufficiently so to make the rider swear he would never ride again!

On one day Team B was visited by members of the Belize Audubon Society, and it was most useful to have local naturalists put

names of birds to the sounds we had been hearing. Also on the estate we saw crocodile, terrapin, huge six-foot-long orange-coloured iguanas and an even larger boa constrictor that did not take kindly to a RAFOS tail-pull! This all helped to condition us for the real jungle ahead....

Team A spent some time exploring Mountain Pine Ridge - a sparsely fir-covered area of mountainous heathland with few bird numbers or species but some very special varieties, such as Black-headed Siskin, that are only found in that area. Team B, following on later, went further south into the foothills of the Mayan Mountains and camped at Guacamallo (Macaw) Bridge. Unfortunately no Scarlet Macaws were seen, perhaps confirming that human predation for pets and bird collections has threatened this species for some time. Nevertheless we saw other magnificent species of parrot in the wild, although identification was often frustrated as these noisy birds flew quickly overhead. By now some sounds were becoming familiar, and we realised that birds such as Barred Antshrike and Ivory-billed Woodcreeper were AOS (all over the shop!). A group explored further south to the deserted village of Millionario; the road was almost impassable to Landrovers, but they reported seeing a large purple bird - any guesses?

Both teams spent the second half of their time in Belize in the south of the country. Team A camped to the north of the Gurkha base at Salamanca; their campsite was on a slight rise in secondary shrub near a small stream, with isolated clumps of tall primary jungle accessible to

the north. Besides scorpions and ants, a wide range of interesting birds were identified. Toucans were seen evacuating a nest-hole in a dead tree, a pair of Great Black Hawks were observed mating at their nest, a White Hawk was seen carrying a live snake and good views were had of Bat Falcon, Laughing Falcon, Lineated and Pale-billed Woodpeckers, and trogon. The extraordinary morning chorus of the Plain Chachalaca and the dawn-and-dusk sound of the Paraque soon became familiar. Nesting colonies of Chestnut-headed Oropendolas were located and photographed. Birds caught included a number of different hummingbirds, warblers, ant-tanagers, jacamars, Plain Xerops, saltators, manakins and tyrannulets.

Team B camped at a disused jungle training site near the Mayan Indian village of Aguacate. This proved to be an admirable campsite, close to an ample supply of water and plenty of good tall jungle. Some of the more interesting birds seen included the Emerald Toucanet (the smallest of the three toucans to be found in Belize), Lovely Cotinga (or the little blue 'bird-like' bird!), and Orange-breasted Falcon. The status of the latter two species is rare on the Belize list, but this is probably because of the lack of records from the south of the country.

A small party was taken by Puma (helicopter!) to Union Camp, a deserted jungle clearing well into the Mayan Mountains and close to the western border with Guatemala. The area was very interesting and, in their short stay there, the party saw birds such as Stripe-tailed Hummingbird and Slate-coloured Solitaire, which are rare elsewhere in Belize.

While others were at Union Camp Maj Bob Powell spent many long hours at Aguacate patiently observing hummingbirds as part of a special study he was making. He concluded that science can sometimes frustrate birding.

The team established friendly relations with the local Indians and were able to give some medical help to them. Our deputy leader, Flt Lt Alex Smith, was well on his way to becoming an honorary Mayan by the time we left, but even he could not confirm the identity of the animal prowling our campsite at night or get involved in negotiations to buy the insect-ridden carcass of a fresh ant-eater that was offered to us by a local hunter at 5 am one morning. We were told by the Indians that Guan and Curassow could be found in the surrounding jungle. We believe we heard them, but they make very good eating and so were hard to find!

The journey from the south back to Belize City is a long day's drive although the distance is only about 200 miles. Stopping on the coast at Dangriga to do some sea-watching, teams saw Black Skimmer, Wilson's Plover and Savannah Sparrow in addition to the American Oystercatcher. Back at the airport camp camping equipment, Landrovers and trailers were cleaned and handed over to the next team and then back to the Army, who had been so tremendously helpful to the expedition. In the last few days of their stay teams visited coastal lagoons and offshore islands (cays). Birds seen included a White Pelican, which was only a



EMERALD
TOUCANET
ON
AVOCADO
PEAR TREE

second record for Belize - the first being in 1901. It is a very much larger bird than the common Brown Pelican and had been identified first near Belize City by Audubon Society vice-president Mr Ford Young. Other interesting large birds on the coast included Tri-coloured Heron, Boat-billed Heron and Roseate Spoonbill in their beautiful pink plumage.

Netting and observation at the airport camp was continued right up to departure and data was collected on over 600 birds. It is now being analysed, but one interesting feature already evident is the pattern of migration over the seven-week period that the expedition was in the field. During team A's last few days, Sqn Ldr Tom Leech was shown Jabiru and their nest from an Army Air Corps Gazelle helicopter. Some other team members tried to locate the nest from the ground, but the national bird of Belize was playing safe and was not found.

Living and working in the jungle had its hazards. Most of the team members saw more snakes each day than they had previously seen in their entire lives; species ranging from an eight-foot boa constrictor to the small but deadly coral snake were seen. Fortunately, man's dislike of snakes is mutual; they usually moved away when disturbed and no-one was bitten. The same cannot be said for insects and, although not a major problem, sandflies, ants and ticks were often a painful nuisance as Cpl Norman Lonsdale - Team B medic and inventor of the RAFOS ant dome - can verify. Scorpions and tarantulas also provided some interest and the expedition leader has only recently hatched a large bot-fly maggot from his head some seven weeks after returning to the UK!

However, despite the tropical environment, I think that everyone thoroughly enjoyed the expedition and learnt a good deal about themselves and their colleagues as well as experiencing the difficulties and pleasures of camping and working in the jungle. Thanks are due to many people in many organisations but in particular, perhaps, to the staff of HQ British Forces Belize for ensuring that the expedition was highly successful and enabling RAFOS members to see something of the rich and exciting avifauna of Central America.

A full report of the expedition results and species identified will be published in due course and I for one would like to go back, despite the bot-flies!

TEAM COMPOSITIONS:

Team A	Maj	David	Counsell	Team Leader
	Sqn Ldr	Tom	Leech	Dep Ldr, Catering & Logistics, Recorder
	FS	Bernie	Priaulx	Dep Catering & Logistics
	Sgt	Stu	Richards	Photographer, Dep Specimens
	Sgt	Peter	Tithecott	Netting, Specimens, Medical
	Cpl	Bruce	Root	Communications, Dep Medical
	Jnr Tech	Nigel	Eustace	Botany, Safety & Security
	SAC	Jeff	Clarke	
	SAC	Fred	McAughtrie	Transport
	Sig	Peter	Glover	244 Sigs Sqn(TCW)
Team B	Sqn Ldr	Peter	Jenkins	Team Leader, Recorder
	Maj	Tim	Hallchurch	Netting
	Maj	Bob	Powell	Hummingbird Studies
	Flt Lt	Alex	Smith	Dep Leader, Catering, PR
	Chf Tech	Mike	Rogers	Netting, Transport
	Sgt	Alan	Roberts	Quatermaster
	Cpl	Norman	Lonsdale	Specimens, Medical
	Cpl	Dave	Osborn	Photographer
	Mr	Ray	Raynor	Dep Medical & Specimens
	Sig	David	Knight	244 Sigs Sqn(TCW)



**The Royal Air Force
Ornithological Society
NEWSLETTER**

Edited by
DAVID COURT-SMITH MBOU



CITREOLINE TROGON AT ALTUN HA , BELIZE

Issue No 36

Autumn 1981