

GUACAMALLO BRIDGE - Major (QM) M C Hann, ACC

Guacamallo Bridge is situated on the Macal River within the Mountain Pine Ridge area of central Belize. During our brief stay in the area (26/2 - 1/3) it proved to be a superb area for birdwatching. The river itself is fast flowing with rapids occurring and with interludes of placid stretches of water which provided large quantities of birds.

Mountain Pine Ridge is perhaps one of the most beautiful areas of Belize and the Macal river which runs from North to South, subdivides the terrain from secondary jungle to the west and pine forest to the east of the river.

On our arrival at our camp site, members either decided to participate in the bird ringing group, which was organised by Chris Mead and Tim Hallchurch, or strolled along the many footpaths in the near vicinity to study and watch birds. The species of birds seen were, for the majority of us, quite breathtaking and although I do not intend to include all species seen in this short article, mention must be made of the Plumbeous Kite Swallow-tailed Kite, the Keel-billed Toucan, Emerald Toucanet, and Collared Aracari, not forgetting the one lone sighting of a male Great Curassow. Parrots and Parakeets were in abundance.

The Mountain Pine Ridge area of Belize proved to be hot during the day and rather cool at night. The river, besides being a natural habitat for various types of birds, was the home for a pair of Otters and families of Iguanas near to our camp site, which were an added attraction for those members who were lucky enough to view them. We were fortunate in that our birdwatching area comprised of secondary jungle, pine forest, hills, rivers and scrubland which allowed numerous sightings of all types of birds.

Without doubt a short scheduled stay at Guacamallo Bridge was an outstanding success from the administration and organisation to the sightings, recordings and sheer pleasure of the actual area, and it was with some reluctance that all members of the group finally packed up and departed for our next location at Big Falls Ranch.

BIG FALLS RANCH - Lt Col D W Sherrard-Smith

After a very successful period at Guacamallo Bridge the party moved, on Monday 1st March 82, to the Big Falls Ranch. It proved to be fortuitous that the move was planned for this day since the heavy rainfall of the late morning and afternoon would have made life intolerable under the meagre amount of tentage available.

In order to ease the transport shortage, four members moved from Guacamallo Bridge to Central Farm in the administrative vehicle travelling from the Jungle Training Camp to Holdfast. After a comfortable luncheon and a little local bird watching, these four then hitched a lift on a Landrover returning to Belize City. They were dropped off at the entrance to the Big Falls Ranch (some 15 kms further down a dirt track) and then waited for what seemed an interminably long time being bitten by mosquitoes and feeling rather damp and bedraggled. The collecting vehicle arrived just as morale was sagging badly, the driver reporting that he had been bogged down on the wet road for over an hour before he succeeded in extracting himself single handed. His plight had been worse than that of the intended passengers!!

The Big Falls Ranch is principally a rice farm with a moderate amount of cattle farming on the surrounding drier areas. The General Manager, Nigel Gibbs, made us very welcome and put at our disposal two mobile homes normally used by his management staff. This meant we had fine dry accommodation with such luxurious facilities as gas stoves, showers and water closets!!

The Ranch is on the flat hinterland alongside the Belize River situated some 40 kms inland. The area is mostly scrub savannah but some 12,000 acres are devoted to the growing of rice. These extensive flooded areas provided an ideal habitat for ducks, waders and herons. The Belize River runs along the northern boundary and, being wooded along the margins and with dense jungle on the northern side, provided yet another valuable ecological habitat. The rice processing plant was located near the river and the heaps of waste grain hereabouts proved very attractive to numbers of seed-eaters which in turn drew the regular attention of a Bat Falcon whose speed and agility in flight amazed us all. To add to our interest a troupe of Howler Monkeys was in residence in the tall trees across the river for most of our stay.

Probably the most noteworthy bird recorded was the Jabiru since very few of these are left in Belize. Impressive by sheer numbers were the huge flights of Blue-winged Teal whilst Little Blue Herons abounded. The immature of this latter is pure white and very easily mistaken for the egrets which are also present in very great numbers.

A large night-roost of White Ibis and various herons provided interest and an adjacent moderately sized day-roost of Yellow-crowned Night Herons added to the enjoyment. Just over the bank was a pool favoured by the Black-necked Stilt.

Searches of the rice fields provided good sightings of Bitterns, both American and Pinnated. The smaller waders and plovers were not plentiful due to the lack of open mud spaces, the rice being now in advanced stages of growth. Purple Gullinule were much heard but seldom seen.

The hooked-bill species were well represented. The ever-present Turkey Vulture hung in the sky all day whilst frequent sightings of smaller birds of prey added interest. A very good view of a Black-collared Hawk feeding on a fish gave satisfaction since the species is now rarely seen in the country. Laughing Falcons, Grey Hawks, Short Tailed Hawks and others increased the list of birds seen by the party.

The ringers (or banders) had enormous success near the rice processing plant where they trapped and banded some hundreds of birds. These were mostly Indigo Bunting, a migratory species soon to move North to the USA - and perhaps re-trapping there. Their list included several other interesting species, not least of which was the Bat Falcon already mentioned. This individual was suffering from a club foot but this did not seem to hinder him greatly.

Perhaps the strangest record was that of a Barn Owl which had taken up residence in a long horizontal ventilation pipe at the rice processing plant. When disturbed, his hopping progress down this metal tube could be easily followed and his "explosive" exit from the cannon's mouth was remarkable.

BLUE CREEK - Major D J R Counsell, RA

Blue Creek is a tributary of the Moho River in Toledo District, the southern area of Belize. It flows out from a cavern at the base of a high cliff on the southern face of a line of jungle covered hills, and flows past a large wooden hut where the members of the expedition stayed for four nights. The verandah overlooks a blue-pool which is ideal for swimming, large enough for a canoe, and contains large shoals of fish which nibble a bather. The jungle is reasonably tall and traversable, but openings for bird watching are few. The three species of green kingfisher, both water thrushes and the Black Phoebe were regularly seen on the river, and a pair of White Hawks and a group of Collared Aracaris were seen in the tree tops. 46 species were netted, including 26 species not caught elsewhere.

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