

## **Erroneous and unconfirmed bird records from Belize: setting the record straight**

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Ideally, a bird species should not be included on any country list without proper documentation, no matter how many times the bird has been reported, how likely it is to occur, or how easy it may be to identify. Documentation need only consist of enough information to eliminate all other species conclusively. Sometimes this is straightforward, sometimes not. If the credentials of the person reporting the species are not known, then it is helpful (but not mandatory) if the bird is photographed or more than one person sees and reports on the bird. For difficult-to-identify species, documentation of the record can be more challenging, even for a seasoned veteran. In these cases, detailed notes with field sketches and, ideally, a photograph or specimen may be necessary, or a tape-recording of calls/song where appropriate.

Until a country's expected avifauna has been clarified, it may be hard to know which species are rare enough to warrant documentation. Consequently, for countries with a relatively poorly characterized avifauna, few sight records are likely to be adequately documented. The "accepted" list is primarily specimen based. Such was the case for Belize (then British Honduras) when Russell (1964) published the first reasonably comprehensive avifauna for the country. Since 1964, birding has become increasingly popular in Belize. With this growing popularity, the number of sight records has increased exponentially. Many, if not most, sight records of rare and unexpected species, including first country records, were inadequately documented, if at all. In some instances, birds were added to the popular checklists of the time based solely on verbal communications. For these, no permanent record exists, and details such as date, locality, observer, and description, if any, have long since been lost or forgotten.

A significant part of the problem in understanding which species were and were not expected to occur in Belize was the result of: (1) birds that were poorly illustrated in the available field guides (e.g., Yellow-bellied Elaenia *Elaenia flavogaster*, various hawks), (2) a lack of understanding of the range of plumage variation (Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium brasilianum*, Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*, Black-cowled Oriole *Icterus prosthemelas*), (3) taxonomic confusion (nightjars and potoos), (4) distribution (White-throated Swift *Aeronautes saxatalis*, Rufous-winged Tanager *Tangara lavinia*, etc.), and (5) potential for vagrancy (Pine Warbler *Dendroica pinus*, Lark Bunting *Calamospiza melanocorys*, Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*, etc.)

In the past decade, we have learned a lot about the expected avifauna, and conversely, the unexpected avifauna of Belize. The landmark *A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America* (Howell & Webb 1995) was the turning point. Those authors questioned many records that had been generally accepted by the birding community, and even a few that were considered a regular part of Belize's avifauna. Of these species, many have since been documented, but some remain undocumented. Now is an appropriate time to review those which remain unverified for Belize.

This publication is my attempt to set the record straight. It is also a call for information. For some of the species discussed in the following accounts, supporting evidence for their occurrence may well exist in someone's field journal or, perhaps, as photographs, or even a misplaced specimen in a museum.

The following accounts are by no means the final word on this subject. They merely reflect my opinion based on the information at my disposal. The species included in these accounts have all appeared in literature, including peer-reviewed journals, informal trip reports published in local or regional journals, and popular checklists and other material generally available to the birding public. Such "publications" include the Belize Audubon Society Newsletter, all Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs), published or otherwise widely disseminated checklists, and manuscripts deposited in government offices or institutions, libraries, and the Belizean National Archives in Belmopan. I do not include records gleaned from unpublished field notes, personal correspondence, word-of-mouth, or unavailable data bases.

It is not my intention to embarrass or offend anyone whose records I may have included in the accounts below – only to bring to the attention of the reader those species included in documents and checklists in the public domain that I believe lack adequate supporting information, and those species that may have been misidentified based on a combination of the observer's lack of experience with birds in the region and his or her reliance on the limited and often inaccurate reference material available at the time. There is no question that some of the species listed below were, indeed, correctly identified. I myself have recorded species new to Belize that meet my personal criteria for acceptance, but for which I was unable to obtain documentation necessary for their general acceptance. For example, I have heard the distinctive calls of American Pipit *Anthus rubescens* in Belize, a species with which I am thoroughly familiar and which is also long overdue in Belize, but my hearing of a vocalization of an unseen bird without a tape-recording does not constitute adequate documentation for the species' inclusion on the Belize list. Someday the occurrence of American Pipit will be properly documented. At that time, my record will serve as supporting evidence for its occurrence in Belize.

While the opinions expressed and determinations made in this paper are mine alone, it is important to note that Belize is in the process of establishing a bird records committee, whose purpose will be to evaluate the validity of all claimed first country records (including those discussed in this paper), as well as other designated rarities. Its determinations may well differ from my own in some instances. The committee, expected to be operational by mid-2002, consists of seven voting members and a non-voting secretary. All records of birds thought to be extremely rare or unrecorded in Belize should be submitted to: Secretary (currently Carolyn Miller), Belize Bird Records Committee, Gallon Jug, Belize, Central America. For more information on the Belize Bird Records Committee, including a list of species to be evaluated by the committee, visit either [www.belizebirds.com](http://www.belizebirds.com) or the Belize Biodiversity Information System at <http://fwie.fw.vt.edu/wcs/>.

## Species Accounts

### **SOOTY SHEARWATER** *Puffinus griseus*

Listed by Wood *et al.* (1986), Garcia *et al.* (1994), Miller & Miller (1994, 1998b, 2000), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996). Miller & Miller (1998b, 2000) indicated that there are at least two records of this species by including it in their "Coastal Savannas" and "Cayes & Offshore" columns. I have been unable to locate any information whatsoever on this (these) record(s). Unless information on at least observer, date, locality, and circumstance is forthcoming, this (these) record(s) should be disregarded.

### **RUFESCENT TIGER-HERON** *Tigrisoma lineatum*

An immature was reported by three observers near Chan Chich Lodge, western Orange Walk District, on 14 April 1994 (Mallory 1994) and described briefly: "...the throat was white and feathered." Because of the unprecedented nature of the record

– it has not been reliably recorded west of eastern Honduras (Howell & Webb 1995)  
– and the extreme brevity of the published description, the identification should be considered as tentative until such time as a pattern of occurrence in northern Central America is established. If a detailed written description of this individual was taken, it should be published.

#### **RUDDY DUCK** *Oxyura jamaicensis*

Listed by Sargeant (1995). Russell (1964) stated, “Eisenmann (1955a: 19) specifically includes British Honduras within the range of the species. I can find no basis for this inclusion. Mr. Eisenmann (*in litt.*) does not have the source of this record; consequently, the species should not be included on the list of British Honduran birds.” I am not aware of any specific reports of this species in Belize.

#### **BALD EAGLE** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

Counsell (1988) published an “inconclusive sighting” of this species: an immature closely observed in flight at Guacamallo Bridge on 3 March 1986. Although it was seen by ten observers, one familiar with this species, and some field marks consistent with this species were recorded, the identification was considered tentative by the author. Miller & Miller (1998a), citing Counsell (unpubl. report), dismissed this record as “unlikely” but implied that it was reported, at least initially, as confirmed.

#### **WHITE-BREASTED HAWK** *Accipiter [striatus] chionogaster*

Sargeant (1995) included White-breasted Hawk but not Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*, which is a regular but uncommon winter visitor in Belize. There are also unpublished reports of *A. chionogaster* in Belize that most likely pertain to juvenile Double-toothed Kite *Harpagus bidentatus*, which can appear similar. White-breasted Hawk was recently merged with Sharp-shinned Hawk by the AOU (1998). This well-marked form is a resident of the highlands of southern Mexico east to Nicaragua. Although some seasonal altitudinal movement may occur (Howell & Webb 1995), it would not be expected to reach Belize.

#### **SWAINSON'S HAWK** *Buteo swainsoni*

For a species whose occurrence in Belize has never been documented, the Swainson's Hawk has been reported surprisingly frequently. Weyer (1984), for instance, stated: “Although the migrating flocks do not fly over Belize, one or two are usually seen in a day's birdwatching during the fall and winter, and these birds apparently maintain winter territories in Belize. It has been suggested that Swainson's Hawks wintering in Central America are mostly immatures, but the birds sighted in Belize are in full adult plumage.” She states further: “The black phase, often considered rare, is not uncommon here.”

Wood *et al.* (1986) listed it as an uncommon transient and winter resident in four of six regions. Wood & Leberman (1987) reported three occurrences: 23 February 1983 (Caves Creek); 23-24 March 1984 (Columbia River Forest Camp, Toledo District); and 6 April 1984 (Hummingbird Hwy). Counsell (1988) reported one seen

on 18 March 1986 at Guacamallo Bridge, Cayo District, but gave no details. Garcia *et al.* (1994) included it as an occasional transient, and it was listed by Miller & Miller (1994), Sargeant (1995), Stotz *et al.* (1996), and Edwards (1998). It was recorded on six of the first seven Belize City Christmas Bird Counts (1972-1978) and seven of the first ten Belmopan counts (1975-1984). Despite the seeming plethora of occurrences, Howell & Webb (1995) emphasized that reports from Belize require verification. Perhaps following their lead, Miller & Miller (1998a) discussed it under the heading "Problematic Species Requiring Verification in Belize," yet included it on both their original (1998b) and revised (2000) checklists.

Reports of this species in winter are probably erroneous as this species is rare and local north of South America in winter. The fact that most reports are of adults, and even more remarkably, of the rare dark morph, runs directly counter to what would be expected, as birds seen outside their normal migratory pathways are usually birds of the year, and there is no reason to believe that dark morph birds would be disproportionately represented. While it is likely that Swainson's Hawk may occur in Belize as a very rare transient, even its occurrence on migration has yet to be documented. In fact, despite the frequency of reports in the literature, I am unaware of any description *whatsoever* accompanying a claimed Swainson's Hawk in Belize. That so many records of *swainsoni* have been claimed in the past is due, in part, to the complexities of hawk identification coupled with (until recently) poor representation of hawks in the popular field guides, and in part to the generally poor understanding of the occurrence and seasonality of *swainsoni* in Central America, as demonstrated in Weyer's comments above. It is likely that most claims of *swainsoni* in Belize pertain to juvenal and 1<sup>st</sup> basic plumage White-tailed Hawks (*Buteo albicaudatus*), a closely related species with a complex array of immature plumages. Some may also pertain to the Short-tailed Hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*), another species that, like *swainsoni* and *albicaudatus*, may fly with its wings held above the horizontal plane and its outer primaries held closely adpressed.

#### **PURPLE SWAMPHEN** *Porphyrio porphyrio*

An Old World species listed, apparently in error, by Sargeant (1995) who does not list the Purple Gallinule (*Porphyryla martinica*), a locally common resident of Belize.

#### **DOUBLE-STRIPED THICK-KNEE** *Burhinus bistriatus*

Russell (1964) included this species based on a sight record by Lancaster and Verner in Belize City on the night of 11 February 1958. This record has been dismissed by all subsequent authors. Dr. Verner kindly sent me a copy of his field notes for that date 43 years ago, and they establish by both plumage description and vocalization that the bird was a juvenile night-heron, most likely Yellow-crowned *Nyctanassa violacea*.

#### **PIPING PLOVER** *Charadrius melodus*

M. H. Peck supposedly collected one at Manatee Lagoon, southern Belize District, in March 1901, but the specimen has never been located (Russell 1964).

**BAIRD'S SANDPIPER** *Calidris bairdii*

Listed by Wood *et al.* (1986), Garcia *et al.* (1994), Miller & Miller (1994), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996), but not by Miller & Miller (1998b, 2000) or Edwards (1998). Howell & Webb (1995, p. 276) included extreme southwestern Belize within its normal migration route but did not cite any specific records. While this species surely occurs in Belize on occasion as a vagrant or rare transient, I can find no published records and only one unpublished record, but the unpublished report does not meet the criteria for acceptance as a first country record.

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL** *Larus marinus*

Listed as very rare ("1 record") by Wood *et al.* (1986), perhaps based on its inclusion on a list of birds seen at Caye Bokel, Turneffe Atoll, on 24-25 October 1983 (Anon. 1984). Howell *et al.* (1992) reported a 1<sup>st</sup> winter bird photographed in Belize City on 11-12 January 1989, but the photograph has never been critically examined and may have been lost. Based on this published record, it has been included in most reviews and checklists since (e.g., Miller & Miller 1994, 1998b, 2000; Howell & Webb 1995; Sargeant 1995; Stotz *et al.* 1996; Edwards 1998). Howell (pers. comm.) has not seen the photograph and no longer accepts the record. With other similar species now turning up (or being recognized for the first time) with some regularity in the Gulf of Mexico (Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*; Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*; Band-tailed Gull *Larus belcheri*), *L. marinus* should not be considered the "default" large, dark-backed gull in the region (cf. Howell & Webb 1995). Therefore, this species remains unverified for Belize and Central America. As it continues to expand its range southward, it may yet reach Belize, but extreme care is needed in attempting to identify any large, atypical gull in Belize regardless of plumage or perceived likelihood of occurrence.

**ZENAIDA DOVE** *Zenaida aurita*

Included by Wood *et al.* (1986), Garcia *et al.* (1994), and Miller & Miller (1994) based on an 1893 specimen in the Royal Ontario Museum, collected "50 miles back of Belize". The accuracy of the locality information accompanying this specimen has been questioned by Barlow *et al.* (1969) and Howell & Webb (1995).

**NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL** *Glaucidium gnoma*

Counsell (1988) mist-netted and photographed a pygmy-owl at the Guacamallo Bridge, Cayo District, on 8 March 1986 and mentioned two field marks that do not distinguish it from Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium brasilianum*. Both Steve Howell (pers. comm.) and I have examined digital images of the original photograph, and believe the bird to be a "typical" *G. brasilianum*. According to Walters (1993), this species was also mist-netted and ringed on 24 February 1960 in western Cayo District, but he included no citation or details. It was included on the list of birds in Belize by Stotz *et al.* (1996), although Howell (1995) had expressed grave doubts about these records a year earlier. Most observers are unaware of the wide range of colour and pattern variation in *brasilianum*. Without regard to geography, some

individuals are rich rufous-brown above and others are dull grey-brown. Also, the tail pattern in *brasilianum* is highly variable, from pale rufous to dark brown with up to 8 paler or darker bars or no bars at all. Thus, attempting to differentiate *brasilianum* from *gnoma* on plumage characters alone is problematic. Without a specimen or diagnostic photographs, it is best told by its vocal differences.

### ☰ TAWNY-COLLARED NIGHTJAR *Caprimulgus salvini*

Included by Wood *et al.* (1986) before it was generally recognized that the form occurring in the Yucatan Peninsula, including northern Belize, was a separate species—the Yucatan Nightjar *Caprimulgus badius* (AOU 1995). Perhaps anticipating the pending split of Tawny-collared and Yucatan Nightjars, but confused as to which one occurred in Belize, Garcia *et al.* (1994) included both *salvini* and *badius* in their checklist. Sargeant (1995), on the other hand, incorrectly included *salvini*, but not *C. badius*, in his list.

### ☰ BUFF-COLLARED NIGHTJAR *Caprimulgus ridgwayi*

Hallchurch (1982) reported two heard near the Swasey Bridge on the Southern Highway on 8 March 1982. Because of confusion at that time in the literature and on commercial audiotapes about the proper assignment of vocalizations to the various Central American nightjars, coupled with the frequent taxonomic lumping and splitting of species in the *Caprimulgus* complex by various authors, it is most likely that what they heard was some other species. *C. ridgwayi* is almost exclusively a resident of the Pacific slope and highlands of Mexico and northern Central America (Howell & Webb 1995) and therefore most unlikely to appear in Belize.

### GREAT POTOO *Nyctibius grandis*

Listed by Wood *et al.* (1986) as very rare in coastal savannas, by Garcia *et al.* (1994) without any status information, and by Sargeant (1995) and Stotz *et al.* (1996) without comment; however, reports from Belize were considered to be erroneous by Howell & Webb (1995). The inclusion of this species on lists of birds recorded in Belize is based, in part at least, on confusion of its vocalizations with those of the Northern Potoo *Nyctibius jamaicensis*, a fairly common resident. Older commercial tape recordings were often of the southern Common Potoo *N. griseus*, formerly considered conspecific with *jamaicensis*. *N. griseus*, which is not known north of Nicaragua (AOU 1998), has a very distinctive call, whereas *jamaicensis* has a vocal repertoire that is much more similar to that of *grandis*, especially when heard at a distance. *N. grandis* may well be a rare resident in southern Belize, and at least one experienced ornithologist familiar with *grandis* is confident he has heard it in Belize. However, a recognizable archived tape recording of this species in Belize should be the minimum criterion for acceptance.

### BLACK SWIFT *Cypseloides niger*

Included by Sargeant (1995) without explanation.

**WHITE-NAPED SWIFT** *Streptoprocne semicollaris*

Listed by Garcia *et al.* (1994), Sargeant (1995), and Miller & Miller (1998b, 2000), apparently based on a report by Mallory (1994). Mallory reported 7-12 birds in the upper Raspaculo River area (from Cushta Bani downstream to near the Guacamallo Bridge) between 2 May and 3 June 1993. All of the birds had a prominent white nape but lacked the full white collar of adult White-collared Swifts *Streptoprocne zonaris*. She reasoned that it would be unlikely for an entire flock to be comprised of juvenile *zonaris*, which lack the full white collar. Additionally, according to Mallory, at least one bird seen clearly had a rounded tail, a characteristic of *semicollaris*. I have observed flocks of *zonaris* on several occasions in which most individuals lacked or appeared to lack the full white collar. Also, a widely spread tail, or one moulting the outer rectrices, can appear rounded. Because of the difficulty in observing key field marks on rapidly flying swifts, and the unprecedented nature of this record, it is best to consider this species' occurrence in Belize as, at best, tentative or inconclusive. The occurrence of *zonaris* in Honduras was considered highly tenuous by Monroe (1968), even though the evidence (multiple sightings over a ten-year period by a number of experienced observers) was much stronger than that presented by Mallory. Monroe, in fact, considered it more likely that these birds represented an undescribed species than the improbable *zonaris* so far out of range.

**WHITE-THROATED SWIFT** *Aeronautes saxatalis*

Included in Russell (1964) based on two or more sight records of multiple individuals and a nest collected on 27 May 1906 in the Cockscomb Mountains (Bent 1940; MCZ specimen no. 11748), although he included this species in brackets, as he did all records unsupported with specimens. The nest, which contained 5 eggs, proved to be that of *Chaetura vauxi*, not *A. saxatalis*, based on photographs provided by MCZ secretary Alison Pirie and examined by M. Marin (pers. comm.). Hallchurch (1982) reported 3 each at Big Falls, Cayo District, and Airport Camp, Belize District, on 5 March 1982, but did not provide any details or suggest that they were unusual. Perhaps, based on these records, it was included in Wood *et al.* (1986) as "very rare" in three regions. Garcia *et al.* (1994) and Miller & Miller (1994, 1998b, 2000) also included it in their checklists, but its occurrence in Belize was questioned by Howell & Webb (1995). Also, Edwards (1998) did not include it for Belize in his recently revised field guide.

**GREEN VIOLET-EAR** *Colibri thalassinus*

Included without explanation by Sargeant (1995).

**EMERALD-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD** *Abeillia abeillei*

Listed by Wood *et al.* (1986) as rare in coastal savannas, by Garcia *et al.* (1994) as resident (no other status information given), and by Miller & Miller (1994), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996). However, Howell & Webb (1995) stated that reports from Belize "are not credible." The rationale for including this most unlikely montane species on the Belize list is not known.



**GREEN-FRONTED HUMMINGBIRD** *Amazilia viridifrons*

Hallchurch (1982) included this species on the basis of one mist-netted on 10 March 1982 at Blue Creek, Toledo District. Although he stated: "Description and measurements verified against skins in the British Museum...", he provided no description or measurements in his published account; thus, it cannot be independently evaluated. Miller & Miller (1998a) rightly questioned the record, and no other published list of which I am aware has included it.

**MAGNIFICENT HUMMINGBIRD** *Eugenes fulgens*

Listed by Miller & Miller (1994), Garcia *et al.* (1994), and Edwards (1998), probably based on its reported occurrence, without any descriptive information, in the Bladen Reserve by Brokaw & Lloyd-Evans (1987). This species superficially resembles the smaller Violet-crowned Woodnymph *Thalurania colombica* which, coincidentally, is found in Belize primarily in the Bladen Reserve and nearby areas in the Maya Mountains and foothills of central and western Toledo District.

**RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD** *Selasphorus rufus*

Listed by Miller & Miller (1994) without explanation other than an accompanying asterisk, which indicates that it has occurred in the Chan Chich/Gallon Jug area of western Orange Walk District. Interestingly, it was also included by Edwards (1998) as accidental in Belize. The basis for this species' inclusion on the Belize list by these two authors is unknown to me.

**BLACK-BANDED WOODCREEPER** *Dendrocolaptes picumnus*

Included without explanation by Sargeant (1995).

**PILEATED FLYCATCHER** *Xenotriccus mexicanus*

This species first reached the attention of Belize birders with a brief exchange of letters in the Belize Audubon Society Newsletter (Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 15) in 1994. What began as an inquiry into the *possibility* of this species occurring in Belize, rapidly escalated to its being considered a common resident in the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (Emmons *et al.* 1996). What caused the confusion was a poorly illustrated Yellow-bellied Elaenia *Elaenia flavogaster* in a popular field guide (Peterson & Chalif 1973). In life, the Yellow-bellied Elaenia more closely matches Peterson's illustrated Pileated Flycatcher, a southwest Mexican endemic, than it does his Yellow-bellied Elaenia. This species is still reported regularly to the author by local birders using Peterson & Chalif as their principal, or only, field guide.

**EASTERN PHOEBE** *Sayornis phoebe*

Reported on the 26 December 1978 Belmopan Christmas Bird Count, and on the 30 December 1979 Belize City Christmas Bird Count. Hallchurch (1982) reported without explanation *two* seen at Big Falls on 2 March 1982. Although the occasional occurrence of this species in Belize is possible, the likelihood of two occurring simultaneously in the same area so far from its normal winter range is exceedingly

slim, as virtually all out-of-range records are of single birds. Wood *et al.* (1986) stated that it is accidental, with “2 records”. Additionally, Garcia *et al.* (1994) indicated that it is also accidental on the cayes, but the basis for this is unknown to me. Miller & Miller (1994), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996) also included it in their lists. Howell & Webb (1995) on the other hand stated that “reports from Belize...require verification.” As it appears that no supporting information exists for any of these records, its occurrence in Belize should be dismissed. A specimen record exists from southern Quintana Roo within a few km of the Belize border (Peters 1913), so the possibility exists that it may yet be verified from Belize.

#### **WESTERN KINGBIRD** *Tyrannus verticalis*

Walters (1993) reported without explanation one banded near Dangriga on 16 April 1963, and Stotz (1996) also listed this species. A tourist, on his first trip to Belize, reported *verticalis* on 29 December 1993 (Anon. 1994). He described the bird as having white outer tail feathers and “whit” “whit-ker-whit” vocalizations. His brief description does not rule out juvenile Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus tyrannus*, which may sometimes appear yellow on the lower undersides, has a short black tail with white in the outer tail feathers, and similar vocalizations. Only in flight do its forked tail and bright pink under wing coverts become evident.

#### **BELL'S VIREO** *Vireo bellii*

Included without explanation by Sargeant (1995).

#### **HUTTON'S VIREO** *Vireo huttoni*

Listed as accidental by Wood *et al.* (1986), Garcia *et al.* (1994), Miller & Miller (1994), and Sargeant (1995), presumably based on an 1888 specimen that has since been re-examined (Phillips 1991) and determined to be a juvenile Plumbeous Vireo *Vireo plumbeus notia* of the resident Belize population. Walters (1993) cited two *huttoni* banded by Nickell on 22 March 1963 and 19 March 1965 but gave no supporting details, other than mention of the 1888 specimen as evidence for its occurrence in Belize.

#### **CORAYA WREN** *Thryothorus coraya*

Included without explanation by Sargeant (1995). This species is a native of South America and may have been inadvertently included in place of the similarly named Carolina Wren *Thryothorus ludovicianus*. The Carolina Wren, sometimes referred to as the White-browed Wren *Thryothorus [ludovicianus] albinucha*, is a local resident of northern and western Belize.

#### **RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET** *Regulus calendula*

An interesting account comes from the Belize Audubon Society Newsletter (Anon. 1984), in which Ray Ashton reported six on 25 October 1983 at Caye Bokel in the Turneffe Atoll during what must have been the most spectacular autumn migration

fallout ever witnessed in Belize. Unfortunately, he gave no details of these observations other than his recognition that it was unrecorded in Belize. Mallory & Brokaw (1997) also included it in a list of birds of the Chiquibul Forest Reserve without explanation.

**WHITE-LORED GNATCATCHER** *Polioptila albiloris*

Listed without explanation by Sargeant (1995). As he did not list the common Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea*, it can only be assumed that he inadvertently listed the wrong species.

**BROWN-BACKED SOLITAIRE** *Myadestes occidentalis*

Listed in Wood *et al.* (1986) as “very rare”, and by Garcia *et al.* (1994) as “accidental.” It was also listed by Miller & Miller (1994), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996). Wood & Leberman (1987) cited a record for 21 June 1985 in the Chiquibul region of southern Cayo District, which they described only as having an “eye-ring and contrasting back and nape color.” They also stated that it “has been observed on a very few occasions near the western border of the country (Weyer, personal communication)”. Howell & Webb (1995) stated that “a report from Belize...requires verification.” Clement (2000), on the other hand, mis-stated Howell & Webb: “Has apparently wandered to Belize, but Howell & Webb (1995) questioned whether the record might refer to an escaped bird.” I have been unable to find any additional supporting information for the Chiquibul bird or any other reported occurrence in Belize.

**ORANGE-BILLED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH** *Catharus aurantiirostris*

A bird believed to be this species was briefly described by Kamstra (1995) from the Lamanai Archaeological Reserve, Orange Walk District, on 10 February 1995. His description:

“...observed closely for about 10 minutes at 7 am...perched in a tall tree in full sunlight, about 8 metres above the ground. It was calling and occasionally shifted its position within the tree. The bird had a thrush-like body form with relatively long tail. The back was dull olive-grey while the undersides were uniform pale grey. It had a distinctive bright orange bill. I did not notice the leg colour.”

This species is subject to some degree of vagrancy (one recently in southern Texas) and is, therefore, not entirely unlikely; however, the observer’s description is at odds with a nightingale-thrush’s typical haunts. The Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush is a bird of shaded forest understory and would be most unlikely 8 metres high in a tree in full sunlight. But for the bright orange bill (a yellow bill could be perceived as orange in bright sunlight), the description is consistent with that of a White-throated Robin *Turdus assimilis*, a species that is occasionally seen at Lamanai (England 2000).

**GOLDEN-CHEEKED WARBLER** *Dendroica chrysoparia*

Wood *et al.* (1986) included this species without explanation as a very rare transient in the Mountain Pine Ridge, and Garcia *et al.* (1994) listed it as accidental in the Mountain Pine Ridge. It was also listed by Miller & Miller (1994), but not in their 1998 checklist or their revised 2000 checklist. Howell & Webb (1995) stated that “a report from Belize...requires verification.” This rare species winters locally at higher elevations (typically above 1,500 m) in Guatemala and southern Mexico (Braun *et al.* 1986; Howell & Webb 1995), and could perhaps occur as a stray in the Mountain Pine Ridge (maximum elevation 1,020 m).

**PINE WARBLER** *Dendroica pinus*

Wood *et al.* (1986) and Garcia *et al.* (1994) included this species as very rare in the Mountain Pine Ridge. Miller & Miller (1994, 1998b, 2000), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996) also listed it. Ashton (Anon. 1984) listed this species, along with two others new to Belize (see Great Black-backed Gull and Ruby-crowned Kinglet accounts, above) in an account of the incredible fall migration at Caye Bokel on 24-25 October 1983. Howell & Webb (1995), however, rejected all claims from Belize as unsupported. This species is unlikely to occur on geographic grounds, as it is very rare even as far south as extreme northern Mexico (Howell & Webb 1995; Rodewald *et al.* 1999). *D. pinus* can present an especially difficult identification challenge, as it is routinely confused with several other members of the Parulidae.

**CONNECTICUT WARBLER** *Oporornis agilis*

Included by Russell (1964), and subsequently on all published checklists for the country, based on an observation by J. Verner:

“On 7 May 1958, Verner observed a typical male Connecticut Warbler under ideal conditions on Half Moon Caye. Verner spent over an hour in an unsuccessful attempt to collect the bird; at times the bird was so close to him that he was unwilling to shoot it for fear that he might destroy the specimen. On several occasions he was able to see the grey hood and the very distinct, complete eye-ring. Verner had collected *Oporornis philadelphia* the day before and saw another while trying to collect the Connecticut Warbler. He was quite aware of the rarity of this species.”

I consider this sight record by a single observer tenuous for the following reasons: (1) it would represent the only record of this species for all of Mexico and northern Central America (Howell & Webb 1995); (2) there is no mention in Russell’s account of this species’ characteristic walking gait which easily separates it from the other *Oporornis*; (3) the fact that female *philadelphia* can have a complete white eye-ring and nearly all grey hood in alternate plumage (thus resembling *agilis*) was virtually unrecognized before the 1970s; and (4), a specimen collected by Verner on Little Water Caye one week later (14 May 1958), which he identified as *agilis*, was instead a female *philadelphia* (LSU specimen no. 22439).

**RED-HEADED TANAGER** *Piranga erythrocephala*

Wood *et al.* (1986) included this species on the basis of one record; however, the source and details of that record are unknown to me. Miller & Miller (1994) and Sargeant (1995) also included this species in their lists. *P. erythrocephala* is a west Mexican endemic that is most unlikely to occur anywhere near Belize; therefore, it is not surprising that Howell & Webb (1995) rejected it as not credible. This species may have been confused in the past with moulting male Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*, which often have red confined almost entirely to the head. Earlier field guides did not illustrate this plumage of *P. rubra*.

**RUFOUS-WINGED TANAGER** *Tangara lavinia*

Wood *et al.* (1986) listed this species as rare in southern hardwood forests, and Peterson & Chalif (1973) stated: "Reported B. Honduras." Miller & Miller (1994), Sargeant (1995), and Stotz *et al.* (1996) also listed it for Belize. This species is a resident of southern Central America occurring north only to eastern Honduras (AOU 1998), and it is unlikely to occur in Belize on geographical grounds. The Belize records were rejected by Howell & Webb (1995, p. 770) as "not credible", and a record from Guatemala was a mislabeled Golden-hooded Tanager *Tangara larvata* (Jenkinson & Mengel 1979).

**LARK BUNTING** *Calamospiza melanocorys*

Included as very rare in northern hardwood forest by Wood *et al.* (1986). Garcia *et al.* (1994), Miller & Miller (1994), and Stotz *et al.* (1996) also listed it for Belize. Peterson & Chalif (1973) stated: "Accidental B. Honduras." The basis for the inclusion of this species in these publications is unknown to me. It is found in winter south only to north-central Mexico. Extreme caution is needed in identifying all out-of-range birds, no matter how striking they may be, and especially birds whose identification is based largely on the presence of white wing patches. For example, partially albinistic or leucistic sparrows and finches with white patches in their wings are frequently reported as *C. melanocorys* in the United States (personal experience).

**GRASSLAND SPARROW** *Ammodramus humeralis*

This South American species was included in error by Sargeant (1995), apparently in place of its congener the Grasshopper Sparrow *Ammodramus savannarum*, which is locally common in pine savannas in Belize.

**SONG SPARROW** *Melospiza melodia*

Included without explanation by Miller & Miller (1994).

**LAZULI BUNTING** *Passerina amoena*

According to Miller & Miller (1998a), "One record exists from a reliable observer along the Macal River, Chiquibul National Park, where several individuals were seen during a four-day period in 1993 (Tzib pers. comm.)." My attempts to learn

more about this improbable record (e.g., time of year, number of birds, sex, how identified, etc.) have not been successful. Unless more information is forthcoming, this record should be disregarded as hearsay.

### AUDUBON'S ORIOLE *Icterus graduacauda*

Included by Garcia *et al.* (1994) and Miller & Miller (1994, 1998b, 2000). Edwards (1998) included it as accidental with a question mark. Miller & Miller (1998a) stated "...records exist for Gallon Jug and Rio Bravo, as well as Lamanai (Noble *et al.* pers. comm.) and the Bladen (Brokaw & Lloyd-Evans 1987). Robbins (pers. comm.) recorded two individuals in the Toledo District in January 1989." This species is widely reported in Belize despite the fact that it is sedentary and found no closer to Belize than central Veracruz on the Atlantic Slope and Oaxaca on the Pacific Slope, each 800 km to the west. I suspect that most or all of these reports are based on misidentified Black-cowled Orioles *Icterus prothemelas*. The extent of plumage variation in female and juvenile *prothemelas* is greatly under-appreciated. For example, many *prothemelas* (immature males and adult females) have a nearly complete black hood, and some of these in turn have no black in the back (personal observations). Howell & Webb (1995, Plate 66) illustrated some of these plumage variations.

## Conclusion

Forty-five species for which confirmation appears to be lacking, are reviewed in this paper. Some have undoubtedly occurred and only lack proper documentation; others (primarily migratory species) have the potential to occur but fall short of having the minimum required documentation, and still others (mostly sedentary or near-sedentary species) are highly improbable and are, no doubt, based on misidentifications. My placement of these species in the above categories (Table 1) is, of course, somewhat arbitrary, and to some degree reflects my consideration about their likelihood of occurrence. Until we learn more about patterns of dispersal, especially in the nocturnal, hard to identify, and easily overlooked species (e.g., owls, nightjars, and swifts), the assignment of birds to these various lists is tenuous. For example, I would never have predicted Flame-colored Tanager *Piranga bidentata* to have a resident population in Belize (Jones *et al.* 2000) before receiving a report from a highly competent observer and subsequently seeing it myself. Other mid-elevation species from the mountains of nearby Guatemala may yet prove to have small populations on one or more of the higher, unexplored peaks in Belize, but their presence remains undocumented.

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**TABLE 1**

Allocation of species as yet unconfirmed for Belize to categories of likelihood of occurrence. Those that may occur rarely would be close to the limits of their known distribution; those that are possible as vagrants would be well outside their known limits of distribution or from currently known migration routes; those regarded as improbable are most likely to be misidentifications or to have been formerly listed in error.

Probable	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i> <i>Nyctibius grandis</i>	<i>Calidris bairdii</i> <i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>
Possible (more likely)	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i> <i>Larus marinus</i> <i>Colubri thalassinus</i> <i>Vireo bellii</i> <i>Dendroica chrysoparia</i>	<i>Charadrius melodus</i> <i>Cypseloides niger</i> <i>Sayornis phoebe</i> <i>Regulus calendula</i> <i>Oporornis agilis</i>
Possible (less likely)	<i>Puffinus griseus</i> <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> <i>Zenaida aurita</i> <i>Streptoprocne semicollaris</i> <i>Selasphorus rufus</i> <i>Catharus aurantirostris</i> <i>Calamospiza melanocorys</i>	<i>Tigrisoma lineatum</i> <i>Burhinus bistriatus</i> <i>Caprimulgus salvini</i> <i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i> <i>Myadestes occidentalis</i> <i>Dendroica pinus</i> <i>Passerina amoena</i>
Improbable	<i>Accipiter [striatus] chionogaster</i> <i>Glaucidium gnoma</i> <i>Abeillia abeillei</i> <i>Eugenes fulgens</i> <i>Xenotriccus mexicanus</i> <i>Thryothorus coraya</i> <i>Piranga erythrocephala</i> <i>Ammodramus humeralis</i> <i>Icterus graduacauda</i>	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i> (wild origin) <i>Caprimulgus ridgwayi</i> <i>Amazilia viridifrons</i> <i>Dendrocolaptes picumnus</i> <i>Vireo huttoni</i> <i>Polioptila albiloris</i> <i>Tangara lavinia</i> <i>Melospiza melodia</i>