

Belize, Central America

*A small, accessible, and often neglected country
with a rich and varied avifauna*

Beauveau B. Nalle

Location: The independent nation of Belize, formerly a self-governing British colony, is located south of the Yucatan Peninsula, and east of Guatemala. It is approximately 170 miles long (N-S) and 75 miles wide (E-W). The capital, Belmopan, is some 50 miles inland from the major urban center, Belize City.

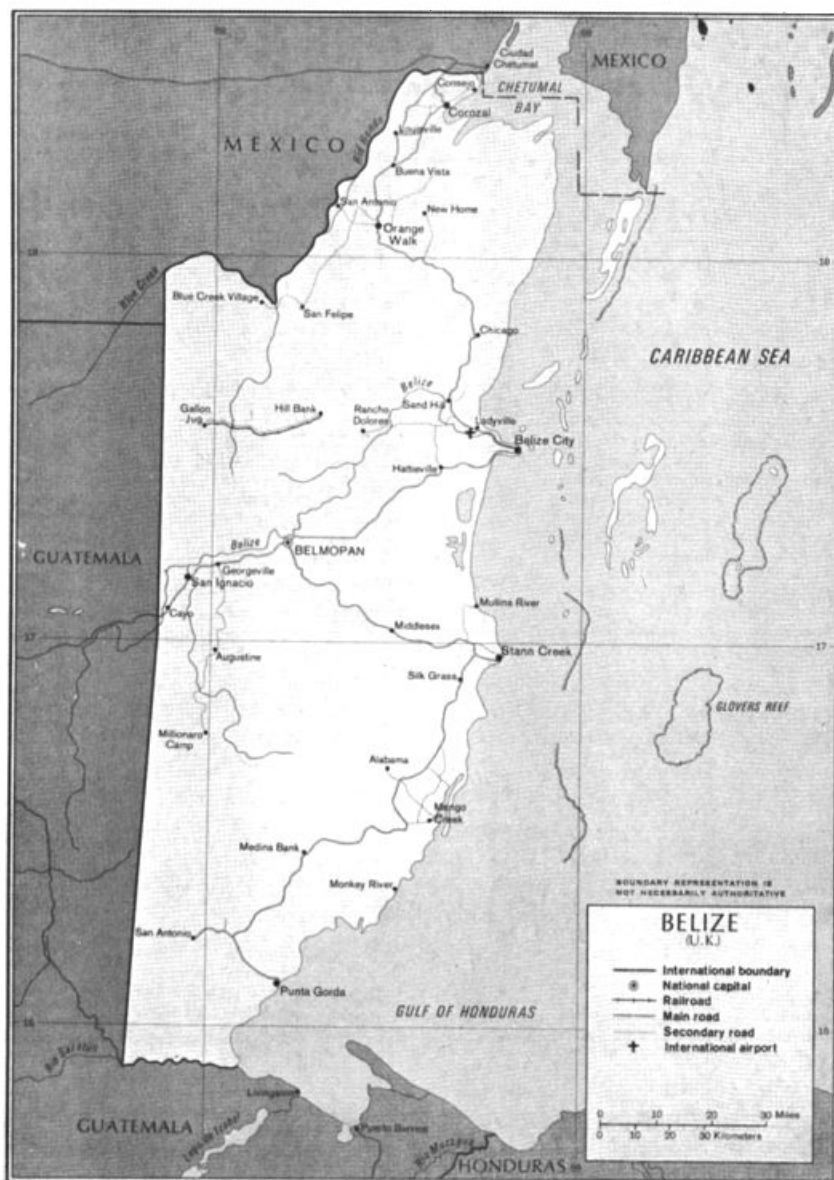
Description: The eastern coast of Belize is protected by a massive barrier reef, the second longest in the world, and a vast chain of coral Cayes (pronounced keys) and "drowned cayes" made up of mangrove clumps. The shoreline is primarily mangrove swamps; inland, this gives over to a sandy belt covered with scrub, known as pine ridge; this area is interspersed with rivers and lakes; still farther inland, the land rises to over 1000 feet and is heavily forested; in both north and south tropical hardwood forests prevail; the center is dominated by the Maya Mountains and the Mountain Pine Ridge. Here, at elevations of approximately 1000 feet, pine forests predominate. A relatively well developed road network serves the country; serious birders will want to rent four-wheel drive vehicles for access to some of the more remote areas.

Access: Belize can be reached by daily flights from both Miami and New Orleans, by road through Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula, and by road (poor in the rainy season) and air from Guatemala.

Accommodations: There are quite good hotels at varying prices in Belize City; all other major towns have hotels which are clean and comfortable, but not luxurious. A number of the Cayes, especially San Pedro Ambergris

Caye, have resort hotels of relative simplicity which specialize in scuba diving and visits to the reef. There are one or two commercial campgrounds in the country (Belize City, Corozal in the north). Self-contained campers

should have no difficulty in finding tent sites in the Mountain Pine Ridge area. It should be noted that Belmopan has no tourist facilities whatsoever. A wide variety of tinned food-stuffs can usually be purchased in





Lighthouse on Half Moon Caye National Monument. All photos/Beau B. Nalle.

Belize City; supplies are substantially more limited in the other towns. Water purification tablets are essential. The climate is always hot; the rainy season is late June-July and again September through December, although periods of lovely weather are likely to occur year 'round. Cars can be rented in Belize City. The Belize Audubon Society has its headquarters in the city and has available a checklist of some 500 species. *Peterson and Chalif*, *Russell's* slightly out-of-date annotated check list, and *Irby Davis*, *Edwards'* Mexican guide, are all useful guides to Belizean birds, with the first being perhaps the most useful.

Birdwatching: The rewards of Belize are twofold—a good number of neotropical birds and relative accessibility. In addition, a large number of migrants are to be seen: Hooded Warblers in full nuptial plumage walking among the Maya ruins at Altun Ha being a good case in point. “Replacement” species are interesting: the Lined instead of the Pileated Woodpecker, for example.

For tropical birds, Belize offers 46 members of the Tyrannidae; 21 hummers and 16 pigeons and doves. Nine species of parrots flying rapidly overhead can be very demanding to call. An interesting variety of raptors can be seen along roadsides, in the forests, and hovering over swamps. Among the hardest to see are the ovenbirds and allies (Furnariidae), although a reasonably successful trip in

the right areas should turn up the Rufous-breasted Spinetail and the Plain Xenops. Also hard to spot are the antbirds (Formicariidae); again, one will surely see the Barred Antshrike, whose bubbling and distinctive call can be heard in low scrub along roadsides in many parts of the country; these striking birds respond readily to “pishing” although many others here do not react so well. The family Pipridae (Manakins) is represented by three members—the Red-capped, the White-collared and the Thrush-like manakin; they can be located, in suitable habitat (moist forest) by snapping one’s fin-

gers. The birds are curious and will often respond, especially during the breeding season when their sense of territory is keen, with wing snapping and, eventually, an appearance. The White-collared is the commonest—I have seen several within a 20-mile radius of Belize City. There are four breeding tinamous; our Christmas Bird Count usually comes up with one or two hearings; sightings are unusually difficult unless one is persistent—and lucky. Another rarity here—as in most of Central and South America, is the Agami Heron; on the other hand, Boat-billed Herons are quite common and easily seen in the swamps and have been known to breed in the mangrove cays offshore. The great Jabiru stork breeds in Belize—again, within the same 20-mile radius of the city. After nesting, they fan out into Chiapas and Quintana Roo in Mexico and become most difficult to observe. Toucans, puffbirds, Jacamar, Sungrebe and eight woodcreepers (distinguished by bill sizes and neck patterns!) are also to be found.

One of Belize’s most prized assets is the only breeding colony of Red-footed Boobies (white-phase) north of Trinidad and Tobago. This colony, estimated at some 1500 birds, is in the recently-established Half Moon Caye National Monument and is relatively inaccessible although thanks to an international cooperative effort strongly supported by the Belize Government and the Belize Audubon Society, plans are underway to make visits here more feasible. The



Sibun River, Belize.

Monument also is close to the famous Blue Hole so well filmed by Capt. Cousteau, which supports a wonderful marine ecosystem.

A reasonable trip to Belize might last two weeks and should cover, in addition to several forays from Belize City to such places as Big Falls Rice Farm, Gracie Rock quarry and Sebastian Bridge over Mussel Creek (good for spinetails and Barred Antshrike), several days in the Mountain Pine Ridge area. Here one can hope to see a number of raptors, including Hawk-Eagles, Laughing Falcon, Plumbeous Kite and Roadside Hawk, at least one of the two breeding *Basileuterus* warblers and Rusty Sparrow. The exceptionally lucky visitor might be rewarded with Scarlet Macaw at the Guacamayo Bridge. Accommodations in San Ignacio are good.

Next would be at least two or three days exploring the Hummingbird Highway from Belmopan to Dangriga. Good hotel accommodations can be found in Dangriga; again, note that no hotels exist as yet in Belmopan. Along this lovely 50-mile road winding through mountains and tropical jungle can be found an excellent variety of orioles, tanagers, ant tanagers, euphonias, Keel-billed Toucan and Collared Aracari. One should also plan to visit another Blue Hole; this one, a caved-in underground river where there is an excellent possibility for Royal Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and, with rare good luck, Orange-billed Sparrow. In Dangriga, thought should be given to a day trip out to Man-O'-War Caye (can be



Oropendola nests.



Jabiru nest with young, near Belize City.



Typical secondary road running through "high bush."

arranged at hotel) where a fine colony of Brown Booby and frigatebirds can be seen along with White-crowned Pigeon.

From Dangriga south, the roads are less good and travel more difficult. Accommodation can be found in the pretty little village of Placentia, but one must go there by boat from Mango Creek. Parrots are common—the Aztec Parakeet being perhaps the most common—although Red-lore, Mealy and Yellow-headed are also to be found. In Punta Gorda, accommodations are austere but adequate and birding good but difficult. High forest is found in the interior, and ovenbirds, cotingas, trogons and the Thrush-like Manakin can be found. It would be well to inquire in advance at the Belize Audubon Society for the names of Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries and others who might be able to assist in planning a visit

to this area.

In sum, a visit to Belize is well worth a special trip; the cayes and some interesting Maya ruins add to the pleasure. Many birders combine Belize with a trip across the border to Tikal in Guatemala, where some of the finest Maya ruins in the world are home to Ocellated Turkeys, breeding Orange-breasted Falcons and a wide variety of interesting birds.

Rating: SPRING (April-June) ★★★★★, SUMMER (July-August) ★★★, FALL (September-November) ★★, WINTER (December-March) ★★★

—American Consulate General,
A.P.O., New York 09224.