



Honduras:

The Central American country is a meeting point for the birds of the Americas — and a terrific destination for birders

BY SOPHIE A. H. OSBORN



A birder's view

BIRD-RICH: Parque Nacional Cerro Azul Meámbar, a national park in Central Honduras, is one of the country's many birding hotspots.

*G*lay in a darkness diminished by subtle hints of the impending dawn, listening intently as an unfamiliar world came to life around me. A beautiful, melodic song — cheerful, insistent, persistent — that of a thrush, perhaps, led the morning chorus. A somber, sonorous, whoot whoot that sounded like the muted cheers of white-wigged judges interrupted with quiet regularity.

Then a bubbling, watery, gurgling sound like that of a Brown-headed Cowbird on steroids momentarily drowned out the surrounding voices. My alarm sounded again, and I happily embraced the day, having enjoyed one of my favorite things: waking up in a new place, where the bird songs are unfamiliar and the hallmarks of a tropical birding adventure — bright colors, new sounds, unfamiliar forms, and intriguing behaviors — await.

ENDEMIC: The hummingbird Honduran Emerald is found only in its namesake country. It prefers semideciduous and thorn forests in dry interior valleys of the Caribbean slope.



Upon leaving my simple but spacious room in Honduras' Panacam Lodge, I immediately discovered the birds that had sounded like over-zealous cowbirds. Directly adjacent to my room stood a tree festooned with more than 20 large, pendulous, oriole-like nests. I smiled in recognition as I realized that I was looking at a vocal colony of nesting oropendolas. I was familiar with the striking Montezuma Oropendola that we would see later in the trip. But the black and brown birds with bright yellow outer tail feathers and large horn-colored bills that flew to and from the tree were Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, part of the same family that includes orioles, blackbirds, cowbirds, and meadowlarks.

As I watched, oropendolas climbed into the top of their dangling nests and disappeared inside to incubate eggs or feed young. Giant Cowbirds — large dark birds with deep red eyes — lurked quietly nearby, waiting for opportunities to sneak into a nest and lay an egg that hapless oropendolas would raise as their own, in the same way that many small songbirds do for the Brown-headed Cowbirds that parasitize their nests in North America.

DELIGHTS ALL AROUND

Our group congregated outside, binoculars glued to eager faces, and one of our stellar guides, Oliver Komar, began pointing out birds and identifying

the species responsible for the songs and calls that resonated around us. Tall and bespectacled with a wry sense of humor and a ready smile, Oliver literally wrote the book on the birds of northern Central America (*Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Northern Central America*, with co-author Jesse Fagan). His encyclopedic knowledge and obvious delight in sharing his adopted country's birds were both enlightening and infectious. I quickly discovered that the lovely sounding thrush that had awakened me was Central America's ubiquitous Clay-colored Thrush.

The *whoot whoot* I'd heard was Lesson's Motmots, striking green-backed birds with black faces, electric blue and black crowns, and long, iridescent blue-green tails that end in two black-tipped rackets. Their unusual tail tips are formed when the birds preen or abrade weak barbs near the end of their two central tail feathers, laying bare part of the feather shaft. When perched, motmots often swing their striking tails to and fro like a pendulum. We also saw the smaller but similar Turquoise-browed Motmot and heard the rare and local Keel-billed Motmot, an area specialty. With seven motmot species, Honduras could well be considered the world's motmot capital.

As we listened to the dawn chorus, a large Plain Chachalaca — a dusk-and-brown, turkey-like bird — clambered

around tree branches below the canopy. Forest pigeons, doves, flycatchers, and woodcreepers added to the morning songfest, along with raucous Brown Jays, colorful Keel-billed Toucans that croaked like small frogs, and fast-flying parrots. An elusive Black-faced Ant-thrush, a small, rail-like bird that walks around the forest floor with a stubby upraised tail, teased us from the undergrowth around the lodge. Later, a more cooperative antthrush delighted us with quick looks as it crossed a trail in front of us.

We were birding in one of Honduras' best-known national parks, Parque Nacional Cerro Azul Meámbar and the bird-rich grounds of its associated lodge. Located on the eastern boundary of the country's largest freshwater lake — Lake Yojoa — the park is just one of Central Honduras' many birding hotspots. Over a breakfast *típico* — eggs, black beans, fried plantains, fresh juice, and coffee — on the lodge's outdoor patio, we enjoyed the view and the White-bellied Emeralds, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, and Violet Sabrewings that attended the abundant hummingbird feeders.

Catching my breath after a bird-filled early morning, I scarcely had time to reflect on what I had already seen on this fast-paced trip. Offered and organized by the Honduran Tourism Institute, the trip was a quick introduction to the country's

More than 100 birds have their range limits in the country

spectacular bird life, beautiful habitats, and comfortable hospitality. The journey actually had begun the day before, when I walked out of the San Pedro Sula International Airport in northern Honduras — gateway to the region's famed Caribbean coast, islands, and resorts — to be greeted by a verdant landscape and my first Honduran bird: a Tropical Mockingbird that was feeding a chunky nestling in a palm tree bordering the parking area.

As we — three other North American writers, two exceptional bird guides (including talented local guide Yobani Peraza, who runs Xukpi Tours), two Honduran tourism representatives, and one conscientious young driver — headed south into the country's montane heart, I relished the tree-clad hills, lush pastures, and abundant birds. Turkey and Black Vultures wheeled across blue skies, a Wood Stork flew over the road, and Tropical Kingbirds graced the telephone wires that abutted the excellent highway as we sped to the first of Honduras' many fine birding destinations.

Approximately the size of Tennessee, Honduras is the second-largest country in Central America. Bordered by Guatemala to the west, El Salvador to the south, and Nicaragua to the east, Honduras is located in the heart of Central America and is a meeting point between North and South American birds. More than 100 birds have their range limits in the country: Many northern birds occur only as far south as Honduras, while many South American birds reach their northernmost extent here. Not surprisingly, given this mix, more than 770 bird species have been recorded in the country, including over 500 resident species and nearly 200 Neotropical migrants — birds that leave "our" northern climes for more temperate regions in fall and winter.

Fortunately for resident and migrant birds alike, Honduras retains the highest percentage of natural forest cover in Central America and has more than 90 protected areas. Although it claims only one endemic bird species (one that occurs in no other country) — the Honduran Emerald — Honduras also hosts a number of range-restricted species that occur only in a couple of adjacent countries, such as the Ocellated Quail, Highland Guan, Green-breasted Mountain-gem, Wine-throated Hummingbird, Keel-billed Motmot, and Black-throated Jay.

Aside from its spectacular birds and other wildlife, the country is also known for its bewitching coastlines, its coral reefs, its islands (such as the popular Bay Islands, which include Utila and Roatán), its world-class archaeological ruins (in particular the ancient Maya city of Copán), and a variety of captivating colonial cities. Add to that its abundant coffee and chocolate farms, many of which offer tasting tours, and it's easy to see why Honduras is a growing ecotourism destination and an emerging must-visit country for birdwatchers.



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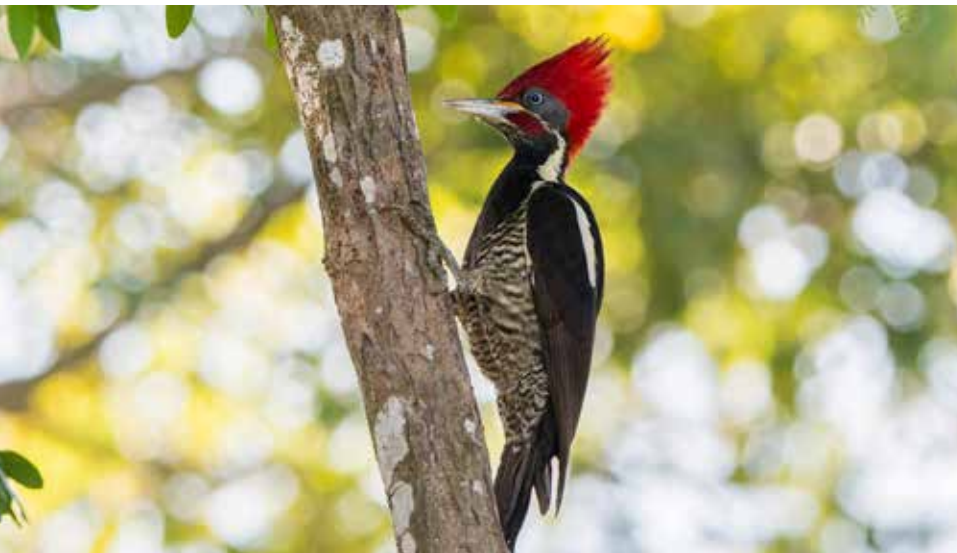
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WINGED WONDERS: The many avian delights of Honduras include Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and Lineated Woodpecker (below).



TIGER-HERONS AND TANAGERS

Our first birding stop — at stunning Lake Yojoa, nestled between tree-covered limestone mountains that are protected by two national parks — did not disappoint. A few hours after our arrival in Honduras, we boarded a pontoon boat at the Honduyate Marina (a popular weekend destination for city-based Hondurans) and were treated to a spectacular sampling of the area's 400 or so bird species.

More than a dozen Snail Kites plied the shores, searching for their eponymous prey. Roseate Spoonbills and a variety of herons and egrets stalked the marshes along with long-toed Northern Jacanas. Purple Gallinules and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks flaunted

their colorful plumage as they foraged in the shallows. A Bare-throated Tiger-Heron posed on the marina's lawn, while an Amazon Kingfisher perched nearby. Gray-breasted Martins, a Zone-tailed Hawk, and scores of vultures — including Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures — circled overhead.

A Pinnated Bittern flapped along the shoreline, and on a subsequent visit, a Least Bittern flew over the marsh and dropped into the reeds. Diminutive crakes called querulously from near the colorful boardwalk at the Rancho Bella Vista, just down the road from the marina, and one cooperative Yellow-breasted Crake delighted us with clear views of its streaky plumage as it crept through the undergrowth.

Meanwhile, Great Kiskadees, Social and Piratic Flycatchers, Blue-gray and Yellow-winged Tanagers, Common Tody-Flycatchers, White-fronted Parrots, and a host of other birds reminded us unequivocally that we were in the tropics.

After our afternoon at Lake Yojoa and environs, we arrived at the Panacam Lodge after nightfall, enjoyed a delicious meal, then fell asleep to the sound of torrential rain on a tin roof. And now, after enjoying hummingbirds over breakfast, we ambled along the area's trails and climbed up the canopy observation tower, where a Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet rewarded us with close views. As we headed to our next destination, another northern Central American specialty, the Green-backed Sparrow, gave us a fitting send-off, flashing its muted but elegant colors.

BIRDING'S POPULARITY

A short while later, we met up with Alex Matute, owner of the delightful El Rancho restaurant and hotel, near the El Cajón Dam. Two years earlier, Alex began taking early-morning walks to recover from back surgery. And on those walks, he discovered birds. Captivated by their songs and calls, he connected with local birders who taught him about binoculars, cameras, and eBird.

Spurred by the formation of the Honduran Ornithological Association in 2010 — which promotes scientific research and conservation of the country's birds — birdwatching clubs have sprung up throughout the country in recent years. The clubs encourage their members to serve as citizen scientists by recording their sightings in eBird to help promote and protect Honduras' birds. Alex joined the fray and soon discovered that his property hosted birds that were an irresistible draw to local and international birders: Blue Bunting, Yellow-tailed Oriole, and the country's famed endemic, the Honduran Emerald, among others. After reveling in the electric brilliance of several sunlit orioles, searching unsuccessfully for an elusive, singing bunting, and enjoying phenomenal views of a laconic White-necked Puffbird, our group stood in delight as a tiny Honduran Emerald hovered in front of our faces, inspecting us as though we were

tropical flowers that had sprung up in its dry-forest home.

Later that afternoon, we sat out a rainstorm while enjoying delicious homemade chocolate and coffee at EcoFinca Luna del Puente, a private reserve that offers entertaining and enlightening tours and tastings. Owner Damian Magario, an avid birder, began monitoring birds on his finca (or farm) and recording them with eBird years ago, and soon realized that the birds he was seeing would appeal to birders from around the world. We didn't find the cryptic Northern Potoo that looks like an extension of a tree branch when perched, but we did see resplendent Golden-hooded and Crimson-collared Tanagers and several White-faced Ground-Sparrows, whose beady black eyes and rufous caps highlight their unusual white faces.

The following day we visited Parque Nacional Montaña de Santa Barbara. En route, we stopped at a coffee and banana plantation for staggering views of a well-hidden Vermiculated Screech-Owl and a more forthcoming Emerald Toucanet, a Yellow-faced Grassquit, and a soaring Short-tailed Hawk. The park's buffer zone is undergoing deforestation as farmers press into the area. We shared the trail into the cloud forest with the occasional campesino walking alongside mules laden with bulky loads of cabbages. A local conservation group, Montaña de Vida, or Mountain of Life, is working to protect buffer areas around the park by promoting ecotourism — birding, hiking, cave, and coffee tours — and investing in local communities.

Regrettably, we didn't make it far enough along the Quetzal Trail to see its signature Resplendent Quetzals or the more elusive Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridges and Pheasant Cuckoos that frequent the area, but we did have incredible looks at perched adult and juvenile White-breasted Hawks as we approached the forest. A subspecies of the Sharp-shinned Hawk, this striking raptor is dark grayish-brown on the back with a snow-white front. As we meandered into the stately forest, Black-headed Nightingale-Thrushes sang ethereally from hidden haunts, Golden-crowned Warblers flitted through the foliage, Bushy-crested Jays screeched from the

canopy, and foraging Eye-ringed Flatbills, Plain Xenops, Common Chlorospingus, and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers treated us to quick views.

After a night in gorgeous Casa Hotel Celaque, we spent the next day hiking in the forests of Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque, which encompasses Honduras' tallest peak (Cerro Las Minas at 9,416 feet). After a quick trip up a canopy tower, we embarked on a long uphill trek. Large magenta orchids grew alongside the trail surrounded, unexpectedly, by a carpet of fallen pine needles. We hiked in a pine-oak-liquidambar (sweetgum) forest where species that we typically associate with northern climes — Brown Creeper and Red Crossbill — can be seen alongside tropical species like Mountain Trogon. As we ascended, we saw a variety of birds, including Green-throated Mountain-gem, Bushy-crested Jay, Golden-browed Warbler, Yellow-backed Oriole, Elegant Euphonia, and even a species that was a lifer for our guide, Oliver: the Black-banded Woodcreeper.

Brown-backed and Slate-colored Solitaires and Spotted Nightingale-Thrushes sang hauntingly from the undergrowth, while a Barred Forest-Falcon barked in the distance. Given the diversity we were treated to in Honduras' forests, I was thrilled to note that the motto on the nation's license plates is "Cuidemos los Bosques" (Let's take care of the forests).

1 TRAIL, 270 BIRD SPECIES

Our intensive, semi-successful search the following morning for the much-desired harlequin-faced Ocellated Quail

SPRITE: No fewer than 42 hummingbird species have been tallied in Honduras, including Berylline Hummingbird.



DAY SLEEPER: A Vermiculated Screech-Owl rests on a bamboo branch. The species is found in a variety of habitats up to 1,800 meters elevation.



— on private property near the town of Gracias — engendered discussions on what constitutes a “countable” bird. While many birders include birds that they hear but don't see on their life lists, I include only those I see. Regrettably, though, the Ocellated Quail pair that rocketed out of the undergrowth of a sparsely treed pasture didn't qualify as seen birds for me since they were an indecipherable blur. On the other hand, we all enjoyed magnificent close-up views of Red-throated Parakeets feeding on fruit, a Lineated Woodpeck-

er hitching its way up a tree, and a Common Black Hawk soaring in cerulean skies.

On our way to our final destination, we stopped by a tiny private hummingbird reserve (El Consejero) established by septuagenarian Julio Bu and his graciously welcoming family. While his wife told us animatedly about the young Ocellated Quail she had found the previous day, we enjoyed close-up views of Azure-crowned, Rivoli's, White-eared, and Berylline Hummingbirds buzzing around the dozens of feeders the family maintained. And I reflected with gratitude on the many local conservation efforts made by Hondurans to protect their remarkable wildlife for the enjoyment of native and foreign visitors alike.

Long before I was ready for this whirlwind trip to end, we found ourselves at our last destination, the lovely campus and environs of the Panamerican Agriculture School, also known as Zamorano University. Visitors can access this birding hotspot with a local guide (such as Maryury Gomez) or by contacting the university directly. We enjoyed strolling among the campus's elegant, white-stone buildings, staying in its first-rate hotel, and birding its recently developed Eco Sendero (Eco Trail). Winding its way past lagoons, along the Yeguaré River, and through the adjacent forest, the 2-mile trail boasts an astonishing diversity of birds — 270 species reported on eBird so far, with new species still being recorded. Birds as diverse as Anhinga and Ringed Kingfisher, Barred Antshrike and Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Squirrel Cuckoo and Grayish Saltator, Streak-backed Oriole and Yellow-billed Caticue frequent the area. Most memorable for me were the spectacular views we had of Ruddy Crakes creeping stealthily along the water's edge.

The campus at Zamorano includes adjacent hills and extends up to the top of the Uyuca Biological Reserve, which contains cloud forest habitat that supplements the university's overall bird list of 354 species. Perched on a steep hillside bedecked by flowers, the reserve is open only to those who use it for science or educational purposes. Fortunately, people who record the birds

they see in eBird qualify as scientific users since they contribute to our overall knowledge of bird distributions and habitats, so we were warmly welcomed.

We enjoyed enviable looks at an area specialty, the Green-breasted Mountain-gem, as well as seeing a Rufous-collared Robin gathering nest material, a Band-tailed Pigeon winging over the canopy, a Black-vented Oriole flashing its brilliant colors, and a Rufous-browed Wren moving furtively through thick cover, all to the echoing accompaniment of Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrushes. Those who remained in the more open portion of the reserve hoping to photograph Mexican Violetear and other hummingbirds were treated to the astonishing sight of a passing jaguarundi.

During our week-long trip, we saw just a fraction of Honduras' avian treasures. We didn't visit the renowned Pico Bonito Lodge, which promotes conservation and has delighted birders from around the world with its luxurious hospitality and abundant fauna and flora. We didn't visit the country's best-known national park — La Tigra — or countless other Honduran birding hotspots. But we did absorb unforgettable vistas of tree-cloaked mountains and verdant valleys whose fields were dotted with cattle and Crested Caracaras, stately Wood Storks, elegant egrets, and the occasional Black-necked Stilt and Double-striped Thick-knee.

And I was left with enduring images of a lovely, gracious country that is working hard to overcome its tough reputation, share its rich wildlife with the outside world, and welcome visitors to this avian paradise. 🐦

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TRAVEL TIPS

When to go

Honduras has two definitive seasons: a dry season that begins in November and ends between April and May, and a rainy season during the months of May through October. If you want to spot migrants as well as resident species, it's best to go earlier in the year.

How to get there

Honduras has several international airports, including one in San Pedro Sula, on the northern coast, and one in the capital, Tegucigalpa, in the south. The Tegucigalpa airport soon will be replaced by a new airport that is being constructed in a large valley in the center of the country, near the city of Comayagua.

Field guides

Two good options to pack are the *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Northern Central America* by Jesse Fagan and Oliver Komar (2016, \$25), and *Guide to the Birds of Honduras* by Robert J. Gallardo (2014, \$39.95).

Safety

In 2013, Honduras had the highest homicide rate in the world, most of it related to gang violence in urban areas. Since then, a number of programs (funded by the United States Agency for International Development) have helped community leaders dramatically reduce crime. In 2014, the Honduran government declared tourism a national priority. Since then, it has worked to ensure that tourist areas are safe. Nevertheless, visitors should take the usual precautions while traveling, securing belongings and avoiding urban areas after dark.