



Sunrise Birding LLC
TRIP REPORT: HONDURAS
The Lodge at Pico Bonito

February 5 – 10, 2017

Report & Photos by John Kricher (unless otherwise noted)





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Leaders: John Kricher & Olbin Benjarano

SUNDAY 5 FEBRUARY: It was a sunny and hot day in the tropics of Honduras when we met each other at the busy San Pedro Sula International Airport. All members of our group had arrived by 2:30 PM local time, all flights on time, no delays. Prior to the final arrivals some of us had used the time to enjoy some birding along the scrubby fields lining the airport. There we found Eastern Meadowlark, White-collared Seedeater, Cinnamon Hummingbird, numerous Barn Swallows, Great-tailed Grackles, and one female Baltimore Oriole.

We loaded luggage and gear into the comfortable bus and were on the road to The Lodge at Pico Bonito by 3 PM. We soon came to know our local guide, Olbin Benjarano, and our most capable driver Gustavo, whom we called “Gus” throughout the trip. Indeed, we were passengers on the “Gus Bus.”

Roads were well paved and travel was easy, although Gus had to slow down frequently for slow moving vehicles such as large trucks laden with pineapples, something we would get used to as the week went on. Gus was nothing short of an outstanding driver. Rain was falling when we began our three-hour drive and it would be alternately partly clear and then rather rainy throughout our journey. Indeed, at one point there was a splendid rainbow and we optimistically noted that The Lodge at Pico Bonito (LPB) was at “the end of the rainbow.”

Roadside scenery included land cleared for pasture as well as vast fields of sugar cane, corn, bananas, oil palm, and pineapple. Coconut trees were numerous around houses. “Living” tree fences were common along the verdant landscape, many of them composed of a pink-flowering tree locally called pink pui.

And yes, there were roadside birds to be noted. We saw many Tropical Kingbirds but we also saw Great Kiskadees, Social Flycatchers, Ruddy Ground-Doves, White-winged Doves, some Groove-billed Anis, and even a quick look at a Turquoise-browed Motmot on a utility wire. We were quite chatty, getting to know one another but, as the drive continued we became quieter, just enjoying the passing scenery of the tropics.

It was after dark when we reached the road into the Lodge at Pico Bonito. Rain had left the landscape wet, ideal conditions for serpents to be out and about. And there it was, a Boa Constrictor, and a sizeable one at that, on the road immediately ahead of us. We all managed good looks of the ample serpent before it turned and slowly took its leave from the road. Good start.

We quickly unloaded at Registration and were soon assigned our cabins, each spacious to say the least. After some time to “move in” we gathered in the dining room on the veranda of the lodge for our briefing and our first dinner. Service was meticulous with our most excellent waiters, “Super” Mario and Howard. The cuisine, ordered individually from a full menu, was not only tasty but more than ample. Conversation was lively but by the time we had finished

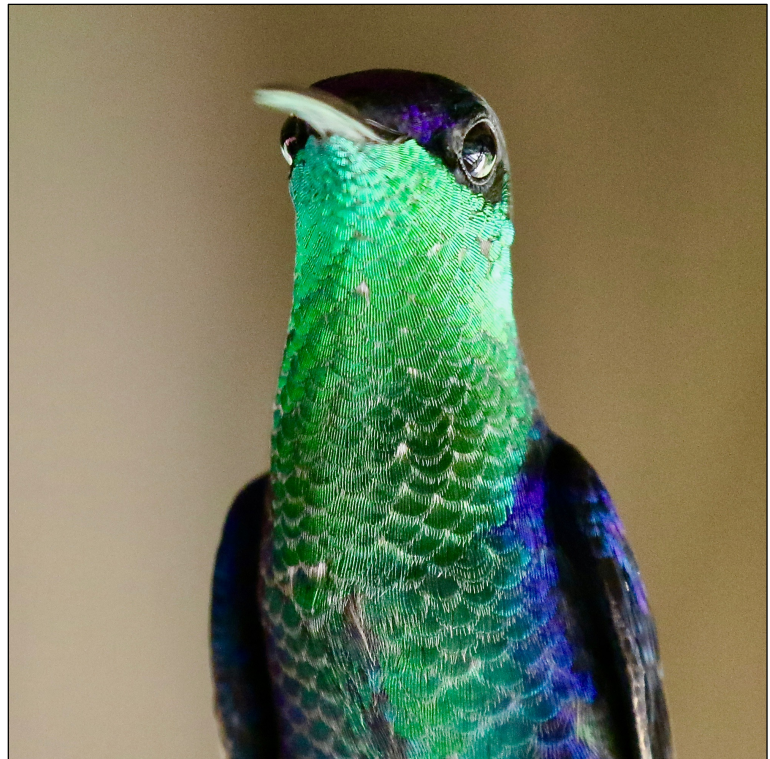
dessert we were all ready to head for our beds. It had been a long travel day. Welcome to The Lodge at Pico Bonito.

MONDAY 6 FEBRUARY: We were up with the sun for an early morning pre-breakfast walk around the grounds and trails of the lodge. The grounds are well supplied with numerous bird feeders laden with fruits and indeed it was a lively morning. We had excellent looks at a male Slaty-tailed Trogon, Keel-billed Toucans, Collared Aracaris, Red-billed Pigeons, Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, and the noisy Brown Jays. Along one area of forest edge we found much passerine activity including Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, White-throated Thrushes, Clay-colored Thrushes, Spot-breasted Wren, and wing-flicking displaying Ochre-bellied Flycatchers. Birds seemed to be everywhere but Olbin patiently sorted them out for us as well as showing us where to look for them, assisted by his trusty green laser pointer. “You see my pointer... The bird is just a foot above my pointer.” A few Central American Agoutis were on the grounds enjoying fruits dropped from the feeders. We would see these unique rodents, related to Guinea pigs, often during the course of the week.

We took a short trail that led to the Toucan Tower and enjoyed the broad vista of the hills and the Rio Coloradito below us. Turkey and Black vultures soared overhead. More Brown Jays kept us occupied as did a unique hummingbird, the Purple-crowned Fairy, feeding on some blossoms below the tower. A distant perched immature Great Black Hawk was a bit of an ID challenge but showed well in Olbin’s scope. A small flock of Brown-hooded Parrots went screeching past us.

We continued down a short trail and a few in the group got a look at a Plain Chachalaca. Everyone in the group got to look up atop a tree stump that was, in reality, a Great Potoo, a fine scope view. These large insect-eating birds are strictly nocturnal and this one had, in essence, “gone to bed.”

Breakfast followed our walk and in addition to being tasty, it was lively, as we were all engaged with learning the various hummingbird species coming to the numerous feeders. We soon had them pretty well sorted out: the big Violet Sabrewings, with their prominent white outer tail feathers; the White-necked Jacobins, the males with smart white collars; the exquisite **Violet Crowned Woodnymph**, the Long-billed Hermit; the Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. All of these species were zipping around from feeder to feeder. The nearby fruiting trees (melostomes) brought in small, active flocks of Olive-backed Euphonias and Golden-hooded Tanagers. At one point, we stopped eating to observe a Black-cowled Oriole. Social Flycatchers, which enjoy fruit as well as insects, were also out and about. Our list grew while enjoying coffee and breakfast. Now isn’t that the way birding should be?





After breakfast the sun was well up and it was hot, real tropical weather. We were out again, enjoying good views of the large **Montezuma Oropendola**, a mega-member of the blackbird family, as well as its smaller cousin, the Chestnut-headed Oropendola. Nearby was a Black-cheeked Woodpecker. Soon we had fine views of a Cinnamon Becard and looks as well at a female Rose-throated Becard, Rufous Mourner, and Black-crowned Tityra. There was no paucity of bird species.

We walked along the road and encountered some North American migrant wood-warblers such as American Redstart and Black-throated Green Warbler. But our focus, our quest, was Lovely Cotinga, and we succeeded well. We visited a field with scattered trees that overlooked a forest edge with numerous dense fruiting trees. The fruits attracted the cotingas and the cotingas attracted the birders and photographers. Many of the cotingas were well within the foliage when we arrived but some of them soon came out into the open where we could get fantastic binocular and scope views of both the brilliantly colored males and the far more cryptically adorned females. The Lovely Cotinga is the icon bird species for Pico Bonito as it is perhaps easier to see here than anywhere else in the Neotropics. And see it we did. We were hot in the mid-day sun but happy reveling at looks of such a spectacular bird species.

As morning gave way to afternoon we were back on the veranda having our lunch. A couple of Melodious Blackbirds were walking the grounds and we had nice looks at Keel-billed Toucan as well as the scores of hummers that buzzed around the many feeders.

After some brief rest, we were out on the trail again at about 2:30 PM. The clear skies had given way to afternoon clouds and rain looked to be likely. Humidity was high. That's the tropics for you.

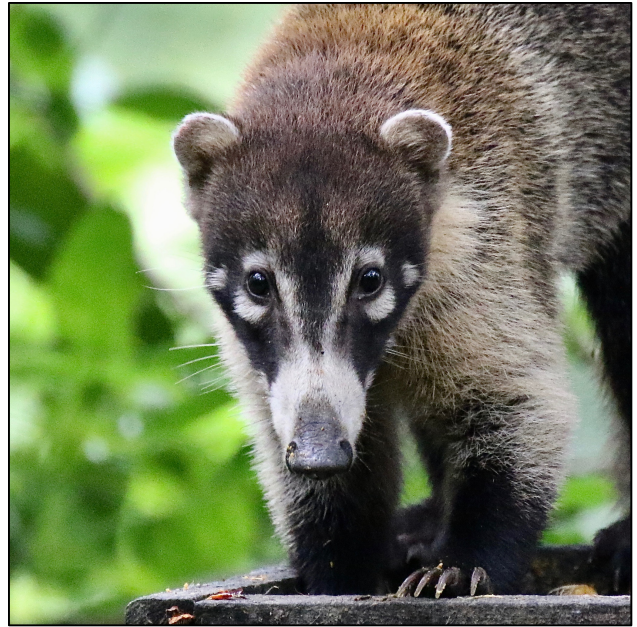
Olbin walked us along a short trail and then took us into the forest. He began searching the trees, soon finding what he was looking for, a pair of Vermiculated Screech-Owls. They habitually roosted in that cluster of trees but it took a little work for us all to find them. Scope views were outstanding. One was a red morph, the other a gray morph, and both were showing pretty well.

We had a few sprinkles but rain never bothered us and we continued along a forest edge trail with fruiting cecropia trees. Several colorful Blue Morpho butterflies flew (and one landed) along the forest edge. The cecropia trees attracted Keel-billed Toucans, Collared Aracaris,

oropendolas, and we met a new tanager species, the Yellow-winged Tanager. Add to that some North American migrants in the forms of Chestnut-sided and Magnolia warblers and American Redstart.

By about 3:45 PM we had returned to the lodge and looked forward to some relaxation before checklist and dinner. Several of us were delighted to find Coatis visiting “our” fruit feeders near our lodgings.

TUESDAY 7 FEBRUARY: Today was our day for a boat excursion at the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge. After a 6 AM breakfast we were on our way aboard the Gus Bus by 6:30. It was clear and pleasant, no sign of rain. Indeed, our morning on the river would be placid, bright, and very sunny.



We drove to a town not far from the lodge where we would catch the train to go to the boats. The funky little two-car train, which more closely resembled a motorized stage coach, ran on a narrow-gauge railroad that, though functional, showed its age, namely about 100 years. The engine was adorned with a bright painting of a Keel-billed Toucan. As we waited to board the train we had some nice looks at Golden-fronted Woodpecker, White-winged Doves and Brown Jays, as well as the ever-present Tropical Kingbirds and Great Kiskadees.

And then the train left the station. We chugged along at slow speed (the train was actually moving backwards and the engineer had to constantly look over his shoulder to see ahead) which gave us good opportunities to note “railside” birds. The track took us through open fields with copses of woodland as well as lots of marsh. We saw various heron and egret species, got some quick looks at a few shorebirds such as Least Sandpipers, and grabbed some views of Crested Caracaras. Some jacanas were present and we would later see others very well from the boats.



We were soon loaded into two boats and off we went on the river, leaving the dock at 8:15. The sun was bright and it was a good day to be wearing a Tilley Hat. The river was wide, the scenery outstanding. Red mangroves lined most of the river but interspersed were big clusters of palms as well. Oh, and there were birds. By then the vultures were up and soaring and among the Turkey and Black vultures we found Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, a savanna specialist often seen soaring above rivers. Later we saw Short-tailed Hawk and Common Black Hawk soaring among the vultures. Good numbers of White-collared Swifts were flying low over the river, showing very well. Not surprisingly kingfishers put in appearances: Ringed, Belted, Amazon, and Green. A few of us got a quick look at a well tucked-away Sungrebe. We saw immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and later we found two spectacular Boat-billed Herons. Little Blue Herons as well as Snowy and Great egrets were easy to come by and a few Green Herons were present too. Olbin amazingly pulled out a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet high in a riverside tree and most of us got a fair to middling look at an amazingly nondescript bird. Not at all nondescript was the big White-collared Puffbird that was perched high along the river offering wonderful looks. One of our best species was the furtive and well-named **Mangrove Cuckoo**. With a little effort and excellent work by our boatmen, all of us got to see it clearly perched in the mangroves.



In addition to birds we managed a rather marginal look at an American Crocodile whose ridged back was visible among the mangrove roots. As we returned to the dock we saw a big Green Iguana perched in the vegetation along the river's edge. And we managed good looks at two mammal species: a group of relaxing Mantled Howler Monkeys draping themselves in the riverside tree branches, and, on a sign along the river, a few roosting Proboscis (Long-nosed) Bats.

By 11 AM we were back from the boat rides. After a bit of a wait (nothing compared to Amtrak) our little train arrived. By 12:40 Gus had us back at the Lodge in ample time for lunch.

We met for a walk at 3 PM, past the Frog Ponds to the Loop Trail (Las Pilas). As we were passing the big white panel that serves as a moth attractor at night, we noticed a huge Hercules Beetle comfortably perched on it and got close looks and photos of this enormous tropical coleopteran. As we continued along the trail we encountered a Purple-crowned Fairy; more Red-throated Ant-Tanagers were scolding from the underbrush; our friend the Ochre-bellied Flycatcher was around; and some of us had a brief look at a Streak-headed Woodcreeper. After climbing a formidable array of steep steps to a trail overlooking the valley, some of us continued down a winding trail to view Mermaid Falls while others stayed behind. This separation of folks eventually created a slight mix-up that resulted in Olbin searching for John and Alan, who were searching for Martha and Dot. But everything got quickly sorted out and no one was left wandering aimlessly in the forest.

Dinner concluded with the serving of a delicious birthday cake prepared for Stan and John, our two “birthday boys.”

WEDNESDAY 8 FEBRUARY: This was our early morning with a 4 AM departure. After a long drive in which most of us slept, we had a delicious outdoor breakfast at 6:30 AM at a gas station complete with picnic tables. We were joined by noisy Great-tailed Grackles as well as Tropical Kingbirds, Social Flycatchers, Ruddy Ground-Doves, a Yellow Warbler, and a Baltimore Oriole. Oh, and there were some House Sparrows too. They do get around.

Our objective was to visit the Rio Aguan Valley, where a reserve is set aside to protect the Honduran Emerald, the only endemic bird species in Honduras. As we continued after breakfast on this clear and hot tropical day we passed some American Kestrels on utility wires. A stop in an open field allowed looks at Eastern Meadowlark, Groove-billed Anis, Baltimore Oriole, and White-collared Seedeater, among others. At yet another stop along a river we had fine looks at Mangrove Swallows, Black Phoebe, Spotted Sandpiper, Wood Stork, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, more seedeaters, and Indigo Bunting.

We moved along, making brief stops along the highway to observe a backlit Turquoise-browed Motmot on a utility wire and a beautifully perched roadside Crested Caracara in full sunlight atop a tree.

By now we had entered a landscape of dry acacia, cactus, and other desert-loving species, a much different landscape from the lush moist tropical forest of Pico Bonito. Before long we arrived at THE spot for Honduran Emerald. On the drive into the Honduran Emerald Reserve we had great looks at a couple of Lesser Roadrunners. Then it was on to find the Emerald. We came to an airstrip and some buildings and around the buildings were flowering Euphorbias, whose blossoms offer the nectar sought by the Emerald. And within minutes, there it was! Zooming from flower to flower among the clumps of Euphorbias, we all got multiple, quick, but good looks at a male Honduran Emerald. When we headed off on the hot trail in quest of other bird species, Peter stayed behind and rewarded us with a grand photo of the Emerald perched on a Euphorbia stalk, gorget gleaming. Photo by Peter Auster.



We walked trails winding through rather dense columnar and other cacti and acacias, not a “friendly habitat” for bushwhacking. The day had become intensely sunny and very hot. But Olbin persevered and most of us got satisfactory looks at the White-lored Gnatcatcher, a specialty of the region. We had less good looks at yet another specialty, the White-bellied Wren, but most of us saw “some of it” as it scurried around in the dense underbrush. More hummers were to be had. We saw more of the Honduran Emerald, met Salvin’s Emerald (recently split from Canivet’s Emerald), and had long looks at a perched migrant Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

Once back from our walk we took a group photo and headed to lunch, which was enjoyed in a private home with ample numbers of chickens in the yard. Lunch, perhaps unsurprisingly, was fried chicken with rice and beans, delicious.

After lunch we headed straight back on the long drive to Pico Bonito, eventually passing through the city of La Ceiba and getting nice looks at the local Rock Doves as well as the inviting and picturesque Caribbean Sea as we drove along the shoreline. We were back at the lodge by 4 PM, ample time to swim and relax before checklist and dinner.

THURSDAY 9 FEBRUARY: Dawn broke bright and sunny and would remain so throughout the day. We were in the Gus Bus and on the road to Lancetilla Botanical Garden by 6:20 AM. Lancetilla is located west of Pico Bonito in the town of Tela. Our birding began at about 8 AM along the road into Lancetilla.

The place was hopping with birds. As Olbin played his recording of Pygmy-Owl calls the passerines began flying ever closer and we were soon seeing multiple species. North American migrant wood-warblers seemed to be everywhere: American Redstart, Magnolia, Yellow, Northern Parula, Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow-throated, Black-and-White, Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Yellow-breasted Chat, Chestnut-sided, Hooded. Along with the warblers we had fine looks at male and female Passerini’s Tanagers, White-collared Manakins, Black-headed Trogon, and Keel-billed Toucan. We encountered a pair of Smoky-Brown Woodpeckers, a species often missed, and had fine looks at them. At one point a Gray Hawk flew low overhead, well below the soaring Turkey and Black vultures.

We drove a bit further down the road stopping to enjoy watching **Montezuma Oropendolas** coming to their colony of huge bag-like nests in a large roadside tree. Some Giant Cowbirds were present too, stalking the oropendola nests in an attempt to drop a cowbird egg, a continuous drama that unfolds daily in oropendola colonies.

We moved into a secondary forest along a small trail but that necessitated crossing a muddy stream. But luck was with us, as a man came along carrying boards. He graciously allowed us to make a bridge, facilitating what might have been a tricky and perhaps wet crossing.



Already bird activity was declining as the heat of the day was intensifying but in a dense thicket we all had looks at both female and male Barred Antshrike. Some of us also had a look at Dusky Antbird. Olive-throated Parakeets were allopreening on a distant tree and two Masked Tityras were perched high but clearly visible in a tree, good scope looks. Soon we would discover the cavity nest of the tityras in a palm snag along the trail.

Our final stop at Lancetilla was at the visitor center. On the way Gus pointed out some Black River Turtles in a pond along the road.

We were on the main highway again by 11:30 heading for the Rio Santiago Nature Resort for lunch and birding. There are seemingly more hummingbird feeders here than there are lights on the Rockefeller Center annual Christmas tree, simply amazing. Hummers swarm and naturally we tried to see all of them. True, the hummingbirds got their lunch far more quickly than we got ours but we scarcely minded. The abundance and proximity of so many hummers as well as honeycreepers was dazzling. We had very close views of multiple Long-billed Hermits, Stripe-throated Hermits, Violet Sabrewings, White-necked Jacobins, Violet Crowned Woodnymphs, and Rufous-tails. We added some species new to our growing list: Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Brown Violet-Ear, White-bellied Emerald and Stripe-tailed Hummingbird. Add to that some outstanding long and close looks at both male and female Green Honeycreeper and immature and mature male Shining Honeycreeper, and nice looks at two Yellow-winged Tanagers on a palm frond. All good.

As we waited for our lunches amid the endless Hummingbird Fiesta we eventually noticed that a female Margay was lying on a platform high above the restaurant bar, sound asleep. Soon we got pretty good looks at it from outside the building as it lazily gazed upon us from its shadowy abode. This is a rescue cat that has been hand-reared by the owner of the lodge and thus it is unnaturally friendly with people. Some of us discovered that reality later, those who stayed behind on our late afternoon bird walk. The owner arrived and called the Margay down and some even got to pet it. No, not wild, but really cool.

By 3 PM our ample lunches had been consumed and the majority of us were out for a bird walk around the grounds. An old friend from the summer months greeted us, a Gray Catbird. A beautiful Yellow-faced Grassquit let us get a nice look. More North American warblers were out and about: Tennessee, Hooded, Kentucky, Black-throated Green, and some of us, with a bit of strong neck-craning, got a brief look at a female Golden-winged Warbler active in the treetops. As earlier, the pygmy owl call that Olbin used was magic in attracting the birds. It also attracted a pygmy-owl, but it only answered and did not come in to take a look. And we finally saw a Squirrel Cuckoo, whose demonstrative call we had heard here and there throughout our walks.

We ambled along a shady trail into gorgeous rain forest in hopes of meeting the Keel-billed Motmot but it was not to be. Olbin tried calling it in but it "put us on hold" and never showed. Nobody seemed very disappointed given our splendid birding day.

Our journey back to Pico Bonito was briefly interrupted by a sizeable rock. As we turned onto the main highway the bus of Gus was not sounding to be its chipper self. A rock about the size of a softball had become wedged between the two tires on the back right of the bus. Gus tried valiantly to dislodge it. The various men of the bus unloaded to add moral support in a manly way. The rock didn't care and never budged. Then Lorraine pointed out that our hobbled bus was parked, well, just across from a tire repair shop. Hmmm. Soon the bus was moved, its rock-laden tires raised up on a board, and the capable tire repair hombres loosened the outside tire sufficiently to dislodge the rock. We presented it to Gus as a souvenir. And then we were

off to The Lodge at Pico Bonito, our final evening in the paradise of Honduras.

We did our list, summarized the trip, had some laughs, and shared a wonderful dinner together in a truly magnificent place.



FRIDAY 10 FEBRUARY: Some of us awoke to the dawn calls of the Wood Thrush as we gathered for our final meal together, breakfast at the Lodge. And wouldn't you know, we scored another bird species, a Lesson's Motmot. You should note that on our checklist it appears as Blue-crowned Motmot, but it has been split off from that widely distributed species. This would bring our bird species list to a total of 187, pretty darn good for a mere week. At breakfast we also enjoyed more looks at the array of hummingbirds and more Olive-backed Euphonias and Yellow-winged Tanagers. Some noticed two **Great Kiskadees** making a nest nearby. Olbin presented each of us with a hand-painted keyring made by his art school students depicting a Lovely Cotinga. And he gave John a painting he had done the night before of a Lovely Cotinga. We thanked Olbin for his outstanding work in showing us birds and other cool stuff throughout a very busy week.

Shortly after 8 AM we were again aboard the Gus Bus headed back to San Pedro Sula and the airport. We arrived there by 11:15 and said our farewells to Gus and Olbin and to each other as we went to our various gates to await the flights home.

Honduras had been fun.



Photo: Crested Caracara