Belize: In a Lagoon

by

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Belize is a small country in Central America, next to Guatemala and Mexico.

We go to Belize because it has high populations of the native cat species and a great diversity of birds and other wildlife, and the people are very kind and interesting.

Some forests in Belize are inundated with water during the rainy season, and the rivers form wide shallow lagoons with islands where many birds and lizards can live and nest in trees, safe from many predators.

Crooked Tree Sanctuary is one of the habitats we like to visit.
The trees around the lagoon form a Logwood Swamp. Logwood trees are now hard to find in Belize, and Crooked Tree has the largest concentration of logwoods in the country. For hundreds of years, Europeans cut them down to make colorful dyes.
Water-loving birds like herons nest in the logwoods and are common here.
Herons are birds that hunt fish and frogs and nest in trees above water. They have long, thin bills for grabbing their prey, and long legs for wading in shallow water. There are many kinds of herons in Crooked Tree. This is the largest species, called a Great Blue Heron, but it is actually bluish grey.
This much smaller species, a Little Blue Heron, stands above the water peering down at the fish for his next meal.
Snowy Egrets are small white herons with black legs and yellow feet that feed on small fish in shallow water at the edge of the lagoon.
This is a Boat-billed Heron. Compare its bill with that of other herons. It has large eyes and a broad bill for nighttime hunting by scooping up their prey. They sleep most of the day.
As we glide quietly through the water in our little boat, we can approach herons without startling them. But if we get too close...
They will fly up and away!
The flight of herons happens over and over as we quietly float along the shoreline
This gives us a chance to observe their big flight feathers and how these large birds lift into the air.
Turtles sun themselves on logs to warm up in the cool mornings, and then drop back into the water to feed on plants and fish.
Big-eyed Basiliscus lizards hide from hawks among the leaves. If they need to escape, they can drop to the water and run very fast on their hind legs across the surface of the lagoon.
Basiliscus males have a crest at the back of the head and along the spine. Their eyes are a lovely green.

The pink lump on the underside of the branch is a cluster of snail eggs that will hatch in the rainy season.
Big Green Iguanas live in the trees and feed on leaves, fruits, and flowers. The females and young are green but the adult males of this population are a very bright orange.
Big male iguanas have large spines on their backs and grow to be more than 4 feet long.
Water lilies form important small habitats at the surface of the lagoon.
Honeybees pollinate the water lily flowers as well as many other kinds of flowers.
This baby jacana is hunting for insects in the grass. His feet are very large because jacanas can also walk on lily pads in the water to hunt their prey. Their long toes spread their weight widely so the lily pad does not tip or sink.
We usually visit Crooked Tree in December, when the rainy season is ending, and the lagoon is about 8 feet deep.

By May, after 5 months with little rain, the lagoon might be completely dry. By then the birds have finished nesting and their babies are starting a life of their own.
This Yellow-Headed Vulture is a big baby but his wings are not fully formed, so he sits alone waiting for his parents to return with carrion for breakfast. His parents take good care of him.
He will soon be flying with his parents to make a living by searching for dead animals to scavenge.
Black Howler Monkeys live in the trees surrounding the lagoon. They howl in the mornings to proclaim their territories. They eat fruits of fig trees and other trees native to this forest.
Black-collared Hawks are large, strong predators that snatch fish directly from the water. They also feed on large insects, lizards, snails, and rodents. Crooked Tree is a perfect habitat for them.
Roadside Hawks are a common small predator that are often seen perched on poles alongside roads where they can swoop down on small rodents and insects.
This Vermilion Flycatcher likes to hunt insects in the flower gardens of people who live at the edge of the lagoon.
Flycatchers eat many millions of insects every year, and help keep insect populations under control. Frogs and bats are also important insectivores. Many flycatchers from North America fly long distances to spend their winters in Belize and other tropical countries.
Hummingbirds in this area include several species that all feed on nectar gathered from flowers, as well as small insects. They are all tiny birds with long thin bills and have the special ability to hover in midair.
Red-Legged Honeycreepers also feed on nectar and pollinate flowers as they feed. This brightly colored male has a lovely turquoise spiky cap and bright red legs.
Shiny iridescent feathers help males look attractive to females.
Moonlight on the lagoon is very beautiful. The quiet is punctuated by the cries of birds like the night herons who have very large eyes so they can catch frogs in the moonlight. We can see the flight of insect-feeding bats that use echolocation to catch their prey.
This Black-Crowned Night Heron watched us from a high branch. He will sleep a lot in the daytime and be very active in the night.
Goodnight from this Lagoon in Belize!
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http://www.birdseyeviewbelize.com/home.htm