

Fourteen new bird species for Belize

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El aumento del interés en Belize y el creciente conocimiento adquirido por observadores Belizeanos ha resultado en muchos nuevos registros para el país. Se presentan registros para 14: especies nuevas o recientemente documentadas para Belize: *Puffinus lherminieri*, *Eudocimus ruber*, *Anas platyrhynchos*, *Lophodytes cucullatus*, *Mergus serrator*, *Ictinia mississippiensis*, *Caracara cheriway*, *Rissa tridactyla*, *Amazona auropalliata*, *Heliomaster longirostris*, *Vireo solitarius*, *Poocetes gramineus*, *Molothrus ater* and *Carduelis psaltria*.

Previously, HLJ *et al.*¹¹ provided status updates or revisions for 54 species in Belize, including several reported for the first time. Here, we report on 14 additional species, either recorded for the first time, or only recently documented as occurring. Four of these, *Lophodytes cucullatus*, *Mergus serrator*, *Rissa tridactyla* and *Molothrus ater*, were well south of their normal winter range and represent the southernmost records for these species⁸. Seven others, *Puffinus lherminieri*, *Anas platyrhynchos*, *Ictinia mississippiensis*, *Caracara cheriway*, *Heliomaster longirostris*, *Vireo solitarius* and *Poocetes gramineus*, were at or beyond the limits of their normal breeding, migratory or winter ranges. *Eudocimus ruber* and *Amazona auropalliata* were likely hurricane-driven vagrants, and *Carduelis psaltria* probably represents a recent range expansion into Belize.

The 'surge' of new and recently confirmed records in the past few years attests to an increased awareness of birds in Belize, and a rapidly rising level of expertise among Belizean birders. For these reasons, and because the number of vagrants and rare resident species being reported in Belize is increasing exponentially, a Belize Bird Records Committee (BBRC) has recently been established to review and evaluate notable records and maintain a file. Along with records previously reported in the literature, the BBRC will review and evaluate all records of these 14 species, and their acceptance on the official Belize list awaits the committee's recommendations. Please send all notable records to either Carolyn Miller, BBRC Secretary, Gallon Jug, Orange Walk District, Belize, Central America (galljug@btl.net), or to Lee Jones, *North American Birds* Regional Editor for Central America (address below).

Species accounts

Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri*

On 9 February 1990, a most unexpected Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* carcass was found on a beach near Dangriga⁹, but the much more likely

P. lherminieri has not been previously reported in Belize. In late July and early August 2000, two *P. lherminieri* were found in different parts of the country within a two-week period. The first was a dying bird found on a Caye Caulker beach in the last week of July and brought to EM for identification. This individual, which soon died, was photographed and the photographs compared with specimens in the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History by EM and Kimball Garrett, the collections manager. The specimen was initially preserved in EM's freezer but was destroyed during a power outage caused by Hurricane Keith (30 September–2 October 2000). The second was a carcass found on the beach at Jaguar Reef Resort, 2 km south of Hopkins Village, Stann Creek District, by MMe on 2 August. Photographs of it were sent to HLJ for identification. Both individuals were very similar. The two are described as follows and the Caye Caulker bird shown in Fig. 1:

Caye Caulker: shearwater, white underparts, 30 cm bill to tail tip, moderately long tailed, black undertail-coverts, folded wingtips reach tail tip; black on head reaches eye level but not below it, feet beige and black.

Hopkins: uniform blackish above, white below; primaries grey with dark leading edge; white underparts, including head-sides; greyish undertail-coverts; underwing-coverts white; typical slender grey shearwater bill with tube-like nostrils; flesh-coloured legs and greyish-flesh feet; bill tip to tail tip = 36 cm; wing from bend to tip (measured along curve of wing) = 21 cm; bill = 3 cm.

P. puffinus is a rare migrant in the West Indies²² and unrecorded in the western Caribbean other than the Belize specimen. In contrast, *P. lherminieri* is a locally common breeding resident in the West Indies²² and a regular visitor to the Gulf of Mexico. It has previously been reported in the western Car-

ibbean off the northern Yucatán Peninsula⁹. That two *Iherminieri* were found in such a short period suggests either a major congregation of *P. Iherminieri* in the region at the time, or that there was a major die-off among a smaller assemblage of birds, two of which happened to be found in Belize. How many others went undetected is unknown, but numbers may have been considerable.

Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*

On 17 March 1999, MMu observed an adult *E. ruber* with c.30 White Ibis *E. albus* near Punta Ycacos, Toledo District. All were observed at close range feeding among red mangrove *Rhizophora mangle* in an open lagoon. The *ruber* was immediately obvious due to its bright scarlet-red plumage, including bill and legs. When it flew, black tips to the outer primaries were noted. MMu speculated that it could have been hurricane assisted, perhaps reaching Belize in Hurricane Mitch, which originated in late October 1998 as a tropical depression off northern South America, where *E. ruber* is common in coastal mangroves, swamps and lagoons^{4,14}. He later learned that local fishermen claimed to have seen as many as four red ibises in the same area, over at least a year, but this cannot be corroborated. The possibility exists that they arrived prior to Mitch and were assisted by a previous hurricane or tropical storm, or were not storm assisted. Belize lies at the western end of 'Hurricane Alley', the spawning grounds and typical westerly track for hurricanes, which reaches from the eastern Atlantic, near the west coast of Africa, across the central and southern Caribbean Sea almost to Belize and the Yucatán.

E. ruber is considered a straggler to western Colombia⁷, Ecuador²³ and perhaps Panama²⁴, and quite possibly farther north in Central America. For example, Miller *et al.*¹⁵ report a hypothetical occurrence in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico in the mid-1800s. The species is often kept in captivity, especially in animal parks, zoos and open public venues in the USA; thus the natural occurrence of *E. ruber* in places such as Florida and Texas will always be questionable. However, *E. ruber* is not kept in captivity in Belize nor, as far as we have been able to determine, in surrounding areas of the Yucatán, Guatemala's Petén District, and coastal Guatemala and Honduras south and east of Belize. Old records from Costa Rica, Honduras, Jamaica, Cuba, the Bahamas, several Gulf Coast states and Nova Scotia either lack documentation or their natural origin has been questioned¹; however, Palmer²¹ points out that several Texas sightings in the 19th century occurred following tropical storms, and at least some may pertain to wild birds. Oberholser²⁰ listed the following records from Texas for which natural origin could be argued: Cameron Co., Bahia Grande: one each after severe Gulf

storms, on 15 October 1912 and in September 1915; Galveston, Galveston Co.: one collected after a severe hurricane in September 1915; Cameron Co., flock of 25 from late June through September 1933 at Boca Chica Pass at the lower end of Laguna Madre, with two carcasses found in September; and Smith Point, Chambers Co.: one collected after the hurricane of 17–20 August 1955.

For Florida, Stevenson & Anderson²⁵ had the following comments. 'The only [recent] specimen was taken at Florida City, 12 Nov 1954 (UMRC 673). Its unworn primaries indicated that it probably was not a recent captive.' Since 1960, according to the authors, the number of *E. ruber* bred in captivity, along with the number of additional young hatched from *E. albus* surrogates, has confused the issue of wild versus captive origin in Florida beyond resolution. In Central America, where few *E. ruber* are kept in captivity, the situation is different. Reports of *E. ruber* should never be dismissed as being of captive origin, especially given the frequency of hurricanes that originate in the south-east Caribbean and move west or north-west into Central American waters. For these reasons, it is our opinion that the Belize bird (or birds?) was quite possibly a natural vagrant, albeit, most likely hurricane assisted.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

On 25 November 1976, Lt. Peter Grant-Peterkin collected an adult male at Big Falls Ranch, north-east Cayo District. This first record for Belize was reported in the literature by Young²⁸, who sent the specimen to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), where its identity was confirmed by Eugene Eisenmann. For unknown reasons, the record never appeared in any of the popular Belize checklists published subsequently^{5,16,17,27}, and it was soon forgotten. HLJ came upon it when reviewing back issues of the *Belize Audubon Soc. Newsletter* in mid-2001. Curious, he contacted Peter Capainolo, Scientific Assistant in Ornithology at AMNH, who confirmed the specimen's identity and collection information. It is AMNH specimen 812604.

A. platyrhynchos occurs regularly in winter south to north Mexico⁸, but formerly occurred farther south in Mexico¹⁵ and even in Central America. Monroe¹⁸ reported that it was observed periodically by hunters in at least two regions of Honduras, with some years producing several records; Land¹² regarded it as a rare transient and winter visitor to the Pacific lowlands of Guatemala; Stiles & Skutch²⁶ stated that it was apparently once a casual to rare winter resident in Costa Rica, last recorded in winter 1950–51; and Ridgely & Gwynne²⁴ mentioned two old unsubstantiated reports from Panama. That it occurred in Belize as a vagrant in 1976 is not surprising.

Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus*

GC photographed a male on a small pond at Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary in 1990 or 1991. The original image is small, but a 15x enlargement (both examined by HLJ and *Cotinga* editorial board), though extremely blurred, clearly shows the species' diagnostic marks: the shape and position of the large white head patch, the thin black bill and two vertical black stripes on the breast-sides. HLJ learned of the record, in 1996, from Rennie Jones, who also saw it, but the photograph was not located until nearly three years later. The bird was present two days, first on the small pond and next day on nearby Northern Lagoon.

The species breeds across much of central North America, wintering primarily in the south USA, rarely to Mexico where there are more than a dozen records, with the previous southernmost from south Veracruz and north-east Quintana Roo⁸.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

On 1 December 2000, while in a stationary motor boat alongside an uninhabited caye, c.3 km north of the latitude of Belize City, TMD watched a sea duck fly past, approaching to within c.25 m. Unaware of its significance and being thoroughly familiar with the species in Britain, he immediately identified it as *M. serrator*. The very fast flight, elongated sawbill 'jizz' and overall reddish and grey/brown plumage, with a prominent white wing patch confirmed the identification as a *Mergus*. Goosander *M. merganser* was excluded by the lack of sharp contrast on the neck, overall proportions and TMD's more than 15 years' experience of the two species.

Subsequently, and unaware of TMD's earlier observation, HLJ found two *M. serrator* in female plumage on a shallow pond at Nova Shrimp Farm, Belize District, on the 17 December 2000 Belize City Christmas Bird Count (CBC). They were loosely associated with American Coot *Fulica americana* and Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*. One was observed periodically over a 40-minute period and the two were seen together once. They were viewed through a telescope with a 20–60x eyepiece, with the closest approach being c.150 m. HLJ was later joined by several additional observers and one bird was relocated in a canal c.2.5 hours after the initial observation, c.0.8 km from the original locality. This time, HLJ and the rest of the group were able to approach to within 100 m of the bird. Both were in typical female plumage. It is conceivable that one of these birds was the same as that seen by TMD c.10 km offshore to the east. The description taken by HLJ follows. Approximately the size of the coots and teal; slimmer and longer in overall body length but about the same bulk. They had slim necks, thin, needle-like bills, and shaggy crests. The crest was swept back, projecting from the hindcrown only, and

was seen to be distinctly two-parted on the bird observed in the canal. Their heads were dull orangish-brown, and the bill of the bird(s) seen well was red-orange (colour not determined in the second bird when two were seen together briefly). Their bodies were medium grey. The bird on the canal was seen to have narrow white eye crescents and a white loreal stripe. This mark was not discerned on the more distant birds seen earlier. The orangish-brown head merged gradually through the neck to a greyish breast. One bird raised-up to flap its wings, revealing white underparts with distinct grey sides, a continuation of the grey upper breast. Also prominent was a large, bold white rectangular patch in the secondaries, contrasting sharply with the dark grey primaries and medium grey wing-coverts and upperparts. The legs and feet were not seen.

On the Atlantic coast, *M. serrator* winters regularly south to northern Mexico. Farther south, Howell & Webb⁸ noted extralimital records only in south Veracruz and north-west Yucatán states.

Mississippi Kite *Ictinia mississippiensis*

On 24 October 1999, HLJ observed two juveniles migrating south-west along the coast near Punta Gorda. The following day he saw a subadult in the same location, also moving south-west along the coast. On 24th he first saw one individual c.150 m distant and 100 m high. Roughly the size of a Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* with a relatively long, square-tipped tail and slender, pointed wings, the outer 3–4 primary tips were individually distinguishable, but the relative length of the outermost primary could not be accurately determined because of the bird's distance from and angle to the observer. Two white tail bars did not extend across the outermost rectrices. No rufous in the wings. Identified as a juvenile, based on the strongly mottled and streaked underparts, including the underwing-coverts. While observing the first through binoculars, a second individual entered the field of view. By this time, both were too distant to discern any plumage details; but its similar size, shape and manner of flight were indicative of *Ictinia*.

The bird observed on the 25th was a *mississippiensis* in second-autumn (first-basic) plumage. This individual flew directly overhead c.100 m high. Pale grey head and darker grey underparts with no obvious mottling. Underparts not as uniformly grey as in a typical adult. Wings a patchwork of pale and dark brownish-grey: dark primaries, slightly paler at base, pale secondaries with a central dark triangular smudge, and inconspicuous dark carpal bar. Tail largely spread during the observation, clearly revealing 3–4 pale bars that did not extend to outer margin of outer rectrices. Outermost primary considerably shorter than next outermost. No rufous was apparent in the wings.

In autumn 2000, HLJ again observed migrating *mississippiensis* near Punta Gorda: a near adult on 16 September and eight (separate groups of five and three, all juveniles) on 3 October.

Plumbeous Kite *Ictinia plumbea* occurs in Belize from mid-February to mid-August, with 20 August being the latest report in the country. According to Howell & Webb⁸, *mississippiensis* migrates through Central America during late August to mid-October; thus any *Ictinia* in Belize in September and October is likely to be *mississippiensis* based on seasonal distribution alone.

MMe reported to HLJ that he had seen *mississippiensis* twice in his 25 years in Belize, but no longer has descriptive details to support either. He recalled seeing one over Belize City in autumn c.1985. On 10 October 1988, he saw two adults over Warrie Head, 15 km west of Belmopan. MMe is thoroughly familiar with *plumbea*, and his assessment that these were *mississippiensis* is undoubtedly correct; however, the lack of specific information on the first observation precludes any independent evaluation, and without descriptive information, neither record provides adequate confirmation for a first country record. Nevertheless, based on emerging evidence, the species is likely to be a rare autumn migrant and should be looked for, especially along the south coast, in September and October.

Northern (Crested) Caracara *Caracara cheriway*

On 17 December 2000, JC & AC found a Northern Caracara feeding in a ploughed field with Black Vultures *Coragyps atratus* between San Felipe and Blue Creek ricefields, Orange Walk District. At HLJ's suggestion, they made several after-the-fact sketches of the bird from memory (Fig. 2). Their description of the bird, taken shortly after the sighting, is as follows. About the same size as the Black Vultures but stood straighter and more upright. It had a black crest, large vulture-type bill, red on the face with white on the neck that extended onto the chest and abdomen. The wings were dark. After a few minutes, it flew away from the observers toward the Black Vultures. The tail and wings were black and there was a large patch of white at the base of the tail/rump. It was studied for c. 15 minutes.

There have been several previous unconfirmed records of this species in Belize. Hallchurch⁶ reported a *C. cheriway* from Big Falls Farm on the Cayo/Belize District border on 5 March 1982, but no description accompanied the report. One was reported, by Claude Norales (pers. comm. to HLJ) and other observers from California, beside the Southern Highway, Stann Creek District, c.10 km from its junction with the Hummingbird Highway, in February 1998. It too was with Black Vultures and was seen perched in a *Cecropia peltata*. Norales was certain of the identification, but his verbal descrip-

tion to HLJ several months after the sighting; 'dark with light crest, ruffled appearance, conspicuous white patches in flight; very unlike the Black Vultures', was too incomplete to confirm the species' occurrence in Belize.

At least one, and perhaps two, individuals have been reported previously from the Blue Creek/San Felipe area, and one was reported from the Freshwater Creek area, Corozal District (B. Miller pers. comm. to HLJ), but no dates or descriptions have been forthcoming. The species remains unconfirmed by photographic or specimen evidence, though with so many anecdotal reports, its occasional presence in Belize appears fairly well established.

Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*

An adult in basic plumage was observed and photographed (Fig. 3) by VvdS on Caye Caulker, on 9 January 2000. It was seen in flight and perched, in excellent light with the sun behind the observer, and was loosely associating with Laughing Gulls *Larus atricilla*. It was searched for, but not seen, the following day. The observer has considerable experience with *R. tridactyla* in the Netherlands, where it is common in winter. His description is as follows. It was approximately the same size as *L. atricilla*. The bill was noticeably smaller than that of *atricilla* and all yellow, with no angle at the gonys. Legs short and black, and eye also black. Plumage entirely white, except for a grey mantle, black wingtips, grey neck and hindneck and a dark grey ear-spot. Wings darkest at the base and palest at the inner edge of the triangular black wingtips. The darkest grey in mantle still much paler than grey mantle of *atricilla*. Black wingtips sharply demarcated from grey of rest of mantle and lacked white. White trailing edge to wing (secondary and inner primary tips), but not as obvious as in *atricilla*.

R. tridactyla breeds in the arctic and subarctic, and winters commonly south along the coast and at sea to mid-temperate latitudes worldwide. In the western Atlantic, it winters occasionally as far south as north Florida, rarely to south Florida and the Bahamas. It is a vagrant in the Greater Antilles and Lesser Antilles south to St. Lucia²². In the Gulf of Mexico, it winters rarely to south Texas and has been recorded once in extreme north-east Mexico⁸. This record apparently is the first for Central America.

Yellow-naped Parrot *Amazona auropalliata*

On 21 October 1998, a tropical depression formed in the south Caribbean Sea. A day later, it became a tropical storm and was given the name 'Mitch'. By 26 October, Mitch, now a Category 5 hurricane with sustained winds of 80.5 m/s (180 mph), had moved slowly north-west where it stalled over the Bay Islands off Honduras. Its closest approach to Belize was on the 28th when the eye came within

75 km of Turneffe Atoll. It then turned to the south, reaching the northern coast of Honduras on the 29th, by then downgraded to a tropical storm (information provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Environmental Satellite, Data and Information Service).

Amazona auropalliata is resident in the Bay Islands, which were devastated by Hurricane Mitch. In a hurricane, winds travel anti-clockwise, thus winds north of the eye would be blowing east to west, or in this case directly toward the central Belize coast. Turneffe Atoll is the first land encountered when traveling west across the Gulf of Honduras. Several weeks after Hurricane Mitch struck the Central American coast, three *A. auropalliata* were reported from Calabash Caye, a small inhabited caye in the south-east (Caribbean) part of the atoll. They were first identified by PS, who saw them when he arrived at the island's University College of Belize Marine Research Center, in February 1999. Though the date of their appearance has not been determined ('they had not been there for a very long time' prior to his arrival), PS and others on the island believed that they had been blown there by Hurricane Mitch a little over three months before. When PS first encountered them, there were still three individuals, but one was shot by a local resident a short time later. On 4–5 March 2000, PB, GC and Len Dieckman visited the caye and photographed the two remaining birds (Fig. 4). PB described them as follows.

They were large, about the size of Yellow-headed Parrot *A. ochrocephala*. The two displayed plumage and colour differences but were similar in size, behaviour and vocalisations. The latter were somewhat similar to those of Yellow-headed Parrot but not as harsh, tending to repeat the *rrah rrah rrah rrah* call, just as described in Howell & Webb⁸. One had a very distinct large yellow patch on the nape and bright amber eyes, giving it a bold, staring appearance. The other lacked the large yellow nape patch but had yellow flecking starting to appear at the back of the neck. It lacked the vivid eye coloration of the first and had a blander facial expression. The upper mandible of both appeared pale horn (paler than in Fig. 16, Plate 70 of Howell & Webb⁸) and contrasted with a very distinct sooty-black cere, which appeared to narrow at the dorsal edge of the upper mandible where it meets the forehead. The forehead of both was yellow, but the yellow forehead and crown of that with the large yellow nape patch was well developed, reaching level with the eye, whereas the yellow on the crown of the other was not extensive, but rather patchy. The former individual had slight traces of red at the bend of the wing, visible as it moved while perched; no red was observed in the bend of the wing of the second bird while perched. Both exhibited some red and

blue in the remiges in flight, and both had very obvious lemon-yellow tail feathers. The lower mandible of the first bird appeared concolorous with the upper mandible, but the lower mandible of the other appeared two-toned, the basal half appearing dull grey. The above observations (and descriptions in Howell & Webb⁸) led them to believe that the first was an adult and the other a juvenile. No courtship or mating behaviour was observed but they appeared closely associated, as they moved around together and perched in fairly close proximity.

Amazona auropalliata/oratrix/ochrocephala is a taxonomically complex group^{13,19}, largely because of: (1) highly variable head patterns within several disjunct populations, (2) the questionable natural origin of several key specimens, and (3) the decimation of entire populations in key areas that may have held the solution to this conundrum (see Howell & Webb⁸ for a succinct review of the problem). The AOU¹ recognises three species: *A. oratrix*, the Yellow-headed Parrot on both slopes of Mexico south to Belize; *A. auropalliata*, the Yellow-naped Parrot from extreme eastern Oaxaca to north-west Costa Rica on the Pacific slope, and Honduras and Nicaragua on the Caribbean slope; and *A. ochrocephala*, the Yellow-crowned Parrot from Panama (and possibly Honduras) south to Bolivia and Brazil (*A. ochrocephala* is itself a complex superspecies in South America). The taxon in Belize is *A. oratrix belizensis*. That on the Bay Islands, Honduras, is *A. auropalliata*. Birds in north-west mainland Honduras, adjacent to the Bay Islands are intermediate between *oratrix*, *auropalliata* and *ochrocephala* in several characters.

Two plausible explanations exist as to how these birds reached Calabash Caye. Firstly, they could have escaped from captivity, either as pets already present on Calabash Caye, or during transportation by boat from the Bay Islands to Belize, possibly in rough seas associated with the approaching hurricane. Secondly, they could have been free-flying birds carried by the hurricane out to sea in the direction of Belize where they escaped the grip of the hurricane as it lost force and flew to the nearest land, Calabash Caye.

Escaped cage birds originating on Calabash Caye are unlikely, as interviews with people on this small island uncovered no knowledge of any pet parrots. Furthermore, there must be very little trade in Belize of parrots originating in Honduras as, sadly, there is a thriving pet trade of 'home-grown' parrots in Belize, including the very similar Yellow-headed Parrot *Amazona oratrix*. However, parrots illegally captured in Central America are often transported to other parts of the world, especially the USA and Europe⁸, and escapes from boat transport are a well-known source of vagrant records in other parts of the world³. Nevertheless, it appears likely that a small flock of free-flying parrots was

caught in the eye of the hurricane and carried west from the Bay Islands to Belize.

Long-billed Starthroat *Helimaster longirostris*

On 21 September 1999, PB and Erneldo Bustamante observed a male at Capital Gardens, Cayo District, near Beaver Dam 0.8 km south of the Western Highway at Milepost 40. It was perched on an exposed tree branch at the edge of a clearing, c.5 m up and 12–15 m distant. It was actively preening, giving good views from the side and behind. PB described it as follows. A large green hummingbird, about the size of Green-breasted Mango *Anthracothonax prevostii* or Wedge-tailed Sabrewing *Campylopterus curvipennis*, with a long straight bill c.1/3 its overall length. From behind, it had a distinctly white elongated central lower back patch and distinct oval-shaped white patch on the flanks. Tail short and square, or slightly notched, with distinct white outer tips. A broad dark sooty band extending from the eye along the neck contrasted sharply with a white moustachial and a glittering rose-red lower gorget, reminiscent of that of a male *Archilochus colubris*. While under observation, the observers referred to Howell & Webb⁸ to review differences between the two Mexican species of *Helimaster*. Subsequently, they both noted the distinct white postocular eye crescent contrasting with the rest of the crown and nape. No glittering turquoise in the crown was observed, even when it moved such that the glittering rose-red gorget was apparent; thus, it was most likely a juvenile. At this point it took flight and landed closer (c.5–6 m) on a lower perch. It continued to preen, raising its wings and fluffing its feathers. From this position, the clear white belly was noted and the small white postocular spot clearly observed, confirming its identification as Belize's first *H. longirostris*.

On the morning of 29 July 2000, PB again observed this species, this time in Big Falls, Toledo District, c.120 km south-southwest of Capital Gardens. All field marks observed on the first individual were also observed on the second, from as close as 3–4 m as it hawked tiny insects, nectared at a *Heliconia* and perched on nearby plants. It was additionally noted that the bird produced a recognisable buzzing of its wings in flight.

On 24 May 2001, Omar Figueroa, Reynold Cal, Eric Melendez and Mario Teul observed a male and female *longirostris* 11 km south of La Democracia, Belize District, along the Coastal Highway, thus providing the third record in Belize, only 20 months after the first report.

The species occurs on both the Pacific and Caribbean slopes, from southern Mexico, south of the Yucatán, through Central America to central South America. In Guatemala it is fairly common in the Pacific lowlands, but rare in the Caribbean lowlands

and Petén¹². In Honduras it is very uncommon in the humid Caribbean lowlands below 750 m¹⁸. This species may be a stray from nearby breeding populations in Guatemala and Honduras or (more likely?) a rare resident in west Belize.

Blue-headed Vireo *Vireo solitarius*

Until their recent split¹, resident *Vireo solitarius notius* was considered conspecific with North American populations, known collectively as Solitary Vireo. With the split, *notius* was tentatively assigned to *Vireo plumbeus*, which it most closely resembles. No occurrence of 'Solitary' Vireo outside the limited range of *notius* has been documented in Belize. Therefore, a Blue-headed Vireo, found by HLJ, PB and Mick Craig, in Belmopan, on 25 December 2000 is the first verifiable record in Belize of the North American migrant *V. solitarius*. A summary of the field description taken by HLJ follows. Its solid blue-grey head contrasting sharply with the white throat and bold white eye-ring were the first features noticed. Also noted were a blunt-tipped bill, spectacles formed by continuation of the eye-ring as a white stripe to the bill (supraloral) and an olive-green back contrasting rather sharply with the blue-grey head. Its white underparts reached the undertail-coverts, but for a strong yellowish wash to the sides and flanks. Wings dark grey with narrow pale fringes to the tertials and secondaries, and two bold, dirty white wingbars. About the size of a redstart, with a larger, more rounded head, thicker bill and shorter tail. It actively flew from place to place with the associating warblers, but when perched, remained relatively inactive compared to the constantly foraging warblers. It never called.

V. plumbeus (including *V. p. notius*) has a blue-grey back and rump, concolorous with the head, has narrower wingbars and lacks a strong yellow-buff wash on the sides and flanks. *V. cassinii*, a remote possibility, more closely resembles *solitarius*, but it is not as boldly marked, having a duller grey head that contrasts noticeably less with both its white throat and duller greyish-olive back.

Our bird was seen in flowering *Gmelina* trees in the large park in central Belmopan that had also attracted large numbers of Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*, Orchard Oriole *Icterus spurius*, Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula* and various warblers. It was seen again the following day on the Belmopan CBC by HLJ and several other count participants. Given several records from the Yucatán and northern Guatemala⁸, it was an anticipated vagrant in Belize.

Vesper Sparrow *Poocetes gramineus*

On 16 January 2001, GC observed an unfamiliar sparrow with white outertail feathers in Crooked Tree Village, Belize District. At the time, he thought

it might be a longspur *Calcarius* sp. About six months later, when HLJ learned of the sighting, he discussed it with GC. HLJ's assessment of the bird, based on GC's verbal description, was that it was more likely *P. gramineus*, though its true identity would probably never be known based solely on GC's recollection of the sighting.

On the unlikely date of 26 August 2001, while observing migrating swallows at Cattle Landing, near Punta Gorda, Toledo District, HLJ observed a sparrow fitting the description of this species. It perched on a powerline c.40 m distant, where HLJ was able to study it closely for c.20–30 seconds through his telescope. His sketch (enhanced from a crude sketch made in the field immediately after the sighting) constitutes Fig. 5. His detailed notes of the observation are on file at the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural History where his original field journal is housed. HLJ is thoroughly familiar with the species from nearly 50 years of birding in the USA, principally in North Carolina and California. He recognised the bird immediately upon training the scope on it, and was able to assess and eliminate from consideration all similar species while it was still under observation. He was also aware that late August may be an exceptionally early migration date for the species, especially south of its normal winter range.

Key field marks noted were its dull sandy-brown plumage, evenly streaked breast, narrow but complete white eye-ring, dark-bordered auricular patch, dark lateral throat stripe, streaked back, lack of distinct wingbars, and pale undertail. Because of backlighting (even though the sun was behind the observer, it was behind a cloud, and the bird was seen against a grey sky), it could not be ascertained whether the undertail (the two outer rectrices were all that were visible) were actually white, but they clearly were not medium to dark grey. The chestnut lesser wing-coverts were not clearly seen.

P. gramineus winters south to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and has been recorded as a vagrant in the north Yucatán Peninsula, Chiapas and Guatemala⁹.

Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*

On 1 March 2000, BZ, Victor Emanuel, José Moh and 16 tour participants discovered a female *Molothrus ater* at a cattle corral in Gallon Jug, Orange Walk District. It was perched in a small flowering sapling adjacent to the corral with 8–10 Bronzed Cowbirds *Molothrus aeneus*. It was studied at length through a telescope from c.30 m. BZ photographed it (Fig. #), but unfortunately it was backlit against the mid-afternoon sky. Attempts to move closer for better photographs caused all the cowbirds to fly north and out of sight. Nevertheless, the features diagnostic of *M. ater* can be seen in Fig. 6.

Clearly smaller, by c.2.5 cm, and paler than nearby female *M. aeneus*. Plumage overall a smooth, medium to pale grey-brown, the underparts being slightly paler, with a contrastingly paler, dull whitish throat. A slight dusky malar bordered the throat. Faint blurred streaks on upper breast. Eye dark, clearly not red, as was readily visible in accompanying *M. aeneus*. Bill short, dark, and conical—almost finch-like in shape. The photograph appears to show a pale eye-ring, though this was not noted in the field. The observers carefully studied the bill shape to eliminate the very similar female Shiny Cowbird *M. bonariensis*, which is also unrecorded in Belize, but with a high potential for occurring soon, as it continues to spread across North and Central America from the West Indies. All considered the short, stubby bill to be typical of *M. ater*, and unlike the longer, more sharply pointed bill of *M. bonariensis*. The faint breast streaks, pale throat, hint of a dark malar and pale eye-ring are also typical of *ater*, not *bonariensis*. All observers in the group, except Moh, have vast experience of this species in the USA. In addition, BZ and Emanuel have recent field experience with *M. bonariensis*, including females.

M. ater breeds in North America, from central Canada south to central Florida, and the Mexican plateau, chiefly on the Pacific slope, to the Oaxaca–Chiapas border². It is a short-distance migrant and occurs regularly to south Florida and on both coasts of Mexico south to the Isthmus. There are no records from Guatemala.

Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*

On 1 September 1998, HLJ observed what was almost certainly a female *C. psaltria* near August Pine Ridge, Orange Walk District. As it flew into a nearby pine, HLJ noticed white flashes in its wings. The perched bird was facing HLJ and he could not see the wing pattern or the upperparts, but he did notice the short conical bill and straight culmen, the bird's small size, yellow underparts, including throat, and green head. It was moulting its tail—only one full-length rectrix remained—making tail pattern and shape impossible to determine. While repositioning himself to obtain a side view, the bird flew. Fig. 7 is a sketch made that evening from field notes and rough sketches taken immediately following the observation.

JU and Derrick Hendy closely observed three *C. psaltria* feeding in weeds behind New River Park, near the west bank of the New River, at the Tower Hill Bridge, on 22 April 2001. One was an adult male, another an immature male and the third a female. They were feeding with a group of White-collared Seedeater *Sporophila torqueola* and Blue-black Grassquit *Volatina jacarina* on grasses in an open area with scattered trees c.25 m from

the river. The adult male had entirely black upperparts with a bold white flash at the base of the primaries, white tertial tips and a white lower wingbar (greater wing-covert tips). The entire underparts were bright yellow, including the throat. Its bill was greyish, very small, finch-like and pointed. The female's head and upperparts were olive to greyish-olive, and its wings were dark brown to blackish with a whitish to pale grey lower wingbar. The immature male resembled the female, but its head and upperparts were mottled black. Its tail had white streaks on the outer rectrices. All three had dark brown legs. The only vocalisation heard was a *ch-ch-cht*. They were observed for 15 minutes at close range.

We have recently learned that Wilvur Martinez, a site supervisor at Birds Without Borders, began seeing in February 2001 up to four *P. psaltria* (one an adult male) in Trinidad Village, 8 km north-east of August Pine Ridge. They were still present in late August 2001 (*vide* Omar Figueroa).

Based on the above evidence, it is likely that these birds represent a recent attempt by the species to colonise north Belize from adjacent Quintana Roo. Its status as a resident in south Quintana Roo is uncertain, and more field work is necessary to ascertain its distribution and relative abundance in the southern Yucatán. This species, like the Yellow-faced Grassquit *Tiaris olivacea* in the 1990s¹⁰, could colonise much of Belize in the future in response to deforestation.

Acknowledgements

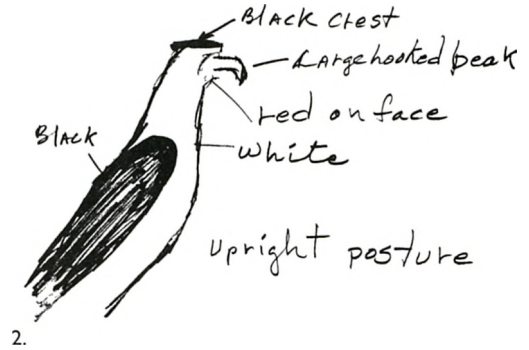
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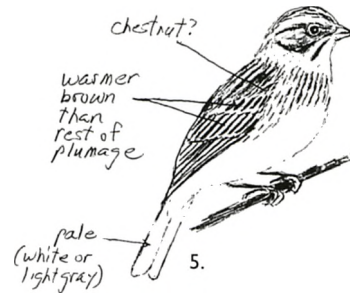
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- Figure 1. Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri*, Caye Caulker, Belize, late July 2000 (Ellen McRae)
 Figure 2. Sketch of Northern (Crested) Caracara *Caracara cheriway*, Orange Walk District, Belize, December 2000 (John & Agnes Caulfield)
 Figure 3. Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, Caye Caulker, Belize, January 2000 (Vincent van der Spek)
 Figure 4. Yellow-naped Parrots *Amazona auropalliata*, Caye Calabash, Belize, March 2000 (Philip Balderamos)
 Figure 5. Sketch of Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*, Punta Gorda, Belize, August 2001 (H. Lee Jones)
 Figure 6. Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*, Gallon Jug, Belize, March 2000 (Barry Zimmer)
 Figure 7. Sketch of Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*, August Pine Ridge, Belize, September 1998 (H. Lee Jones)

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