

Belize

REPORT

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Scarlet Macaws in Belize...*Don't miss this awesome sight!*

Conservation efforts in Red Bank Village have aided an increase in Belize's macaw population

When we first heard that there was a place in Belize where you could go and see Scarlet Macaws by the dozens, every year, we didn't believe it. How could it be so simple to find such a magnificent bird, the sighting of which is considered the "Holy Grail" for birders in Belize?

Having contemplated trekking deep into the Chiquibul Forest Reserve of the Cayo District, for the sole purpose of spotting a Scarlet Macaw, the prospect of watching flocks of the brilliant red creatures flying free and wild overhead was inconceivable.

Red Bank Village (pop. 700), in Stann Creek District, is the seasonal home of one of the largest concentrations of Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) in Belize, and, all of Central America. The story of this sleepy Maya village



first came to light about three years ago, after a group of researchers reported an apparent slaughter of Scarlet Macaws on a riverbank nearby. A project was subsequently undertaken, educating the local population about the rarity of the Scarlet Macaw and its new value as a tourist attraction for the area.

Through grants from Belize Audubon Society (BAS), and Programme for Belize, the "Scarlet Macaw Group" was formed, and the villagers are learning how to profit from tourism. The Group is chaired by Mr. Geronimo Sho, who happily reports that since the program's inception, the bird's numbers have increased. You have to respect the humble honesty of these people when they



admit that they didn't know this bird was endangered. Our guide told us that he has lived in this village since it was created, sixteen years ago, "...And the Scarlet Macaw has always been here. We didn't know it was one of the rarest birds in Belize." He talks, with some

embarrassment, about how the villagers used to eat the macaws, because they provided a lot of food for their families.

A typical view of Red Bank Village

As part of the project, a guest cabaña has been constructed to encourage tourists to visit, and the villagers, who are quite familiar with the habits of the birds, are being trained as tour guides, who can reliably lead you to the best sighting locations. The guides are also learning about all of the numerous other species of birds and wildlife that live here. Many of the women produce small woven items, baskets, embroidered pieces and other trinkets, which are available for purchase.

The macaws are seen in this area for only a brief period of time each year. They emerge

from the depths of the Chiquibul forest and congregate around Red Bank, with a voracious appetite for the ripe fruit of the annato and the locally-named, "pole wood" trees, which cover the hillsides. When this fruit season has passed, they depart, only to return the following year. This season fluctuates, as does the reappearance of the macaws. How do they know when the fruit is ripe? Well, evidently, the macaws have "scouts;" a small group of birds come early in the season, to survey the situation, and determine the appropriate time for the entire flock to return.



These Maya children proudly display a sample of their mother's fine embroidery.

Last year, at a BAS presentation in Belize City, we met Mr. Sho, then chairman, and one of the founders, of Red Bank. He said that the most dependable time to see the macaws would be around mid-January through March. A few days before our planned visit, we phoned him, to be sure we wouldn't make the trip for naught, and he said, "Yes, they are here. I counted 92 of them this morning!"

With great anticipation, we made the journey. On the Southern Highway, thirty-two miles south of the Hummingbird Highway, there's a "Red Bank Village" sign, pointing west, four miles. It is a quiet village, with several typical Maya thatch houses scattered about. Because it was still early in



Athonasio, a Red Bank guide, always knows where to find the macaws.

the afternoon, we wanted to go and see the birds right away. We found Geronimo, and he introduced us to our guide, Athonasio Salam, who accompanied us to the area where the macaws were feeding at the moment.

We started off on foot, through a forest of giant heliconia, to find the elusive Scarlet Macaw. After a mere 15 minutes, we saw two pairs of birds flying in the distance. They were too far for us to see their color, but the distinctive silhouette of the macaw was unmistakable.

Unhindered by the light rain, we hurried on. Shortly after this, another macaw flew by and landed in a tree just over our heads! This time we could see every stunning feather. It was breathtaking. Our strenuous climb to the top of a small hill, was rewarded with one fly-by of macaws after another, full of raucous chatter, as they skimmed the treetops, a mere 40 feet overhead. The huge birds glided gracefully and effortlessly on their bright red, yellow and blue wings, their long tails flowing out behind them like silk ribbons. The total count for our two hour tour was thirty-two!

We returned the following morning, knowing what to expect. As soon as we arrived, we could see more than 30 macaws perched in a bare tree on the riverbank far below us, their plumage gleaming in the morning sunlight like beacons in a storm.

After a brief period, they began to fly and many passed within yards of us. Occasionally a pair would light in a tree nearby and provide a good glimpse, but mainly, we sat and watched as dozens of them flew above the next ridge, stopping to eat at every opportunity. They were easy to spot and follow even without binoculars. The morning macaw count was up to 56 by the time we descended our vantage point, the moments behind us already becoming more dream than reality.



Photo 'ops' for the amateur are rare, but I managed to snap this with a hand-held 300mm lens.

The macaws are often spotted along the river, and they move along the front range as time passes, being sighted in the village sometimes, and even from the veranda of the guest cabaña! It all depends on the fruit. One thing is certain, everyone who goes to Red Bank during this season, will see the Scarlet Macaw.



Scarlet Macaws can often be seen from the veranda of this guest cabaña!

The guest cabaña is a well-built wooden structure, high on stilts, tucked into the trees next to a babbling brook. It contains four rooms with screened windows, and each has a firm, double bed. The shared bath facilities consist of one flush toilet and washbasin, and a separate shower. There is no electricity, so the showers are refreshing, and kerosene lanterns are used for lighting. Everything is very clean and surprisingly bug-free, considering the jungle environment, but it's definitely more like a camp than a hotel. (There is also a campground, 200 meters further down the road.)

Upon request, guests are served meals, prepared by the Women's Group, in the adjacent Kitchen/Mess Hall. You will eat as the locals do, primarily beans, rice, tortillas, (there is little meat available here); all simple, but plentiful and delicious.



It's interesting to point out that we saw numerous other birds during our visit; hummingbirds, oropendolas,

herons, thousands of parrots, and the toucan, to name a few. In fact, the poor toucan gained but a passing glance during our quest for the great Scarlet Macaw. Although the village caters to guests primarily during the macaw season, they indicated a willingness to accommodate visitors at any time, with advance notice. Red Bank could certainly be considered a year-round birding and cultural destination, especially convenient for visitors of nearby Placencia, about an hour's drive away. Cultural presentations can be arranged with advance notice. The trip would provide interesting insight into the life of the modern Maya of Belize; and the bashful and curious, yet friendly, natives are happy to welcome you.

IF YOU GO

Red Bank Village Stann Creek District, Belize

Mr. Geronimo Sho, Tel: 501-6-22233

Phone in advance to book rooms and verify arrival of the macaws

Rates: (All in US\$)

Guest Cabaña

Single: \$17.50; Double: \$25

Meals

Breakfast: \$3, Lunch: \$3.50, Dinner: \$4.50

Local Guides: \$15 per outing
\$5 charge levied for day visitors

What to take:

Binoculars, flashlight, lighter for lanterns (matches get moist), and sturdy hiking shoes or boots. If possible, it helps to take your own towel and soap.

As village supplies are limited, overnight guests may want to bring snacks, fruit and alcoholic beverages.

Take small denominations of money with you, so that you can provide exact change when paying your bills and purchasing handicrafts.

For more information, contact:

Programme for Belize

Tel: 501-2-75616

Belize Audubon Society

Tel: 501-2-34533



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