

SOLITARIUS

THE BELIZE RAPTOR RESEARCH INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER | SUMMER 2011 | ISSUE 2



» BREAKING NEWS

An active nest of the rare Solitary Eagle, *Harpyhaliaetus solitarius*, has been discovered with a nestling! *page 6*



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Swallow Tailed Kite seen in Mountain Pine Ridge

Meet Our Board of Directors



Flavien Daguise, President

Flavien is a hotel manager that has specialized in small eco-lodges in southern Africa. He originally started as a nature conservationist and “big five” wildlife guide in Africa. As a guide, Flavien worked in both private reserves and national parks assisting researchers in fieldwork with various species. Over time, the management of eco-lodges became his priority and he has worked with local staff in both the hospitality industry and ecological management. From 2007-2011, Flavien and his wife, Beverly, managed a small lodge in Belize called Hidden Valley Inn, where they merged conservation and tourism. Flavien is currently managing the Xanadu Island Resort in San Pedro, Belize, which is the first Green Globe Island Certified property in Belize.



Jan Meerman, Vice-President

Jan has a degree in Biology and Ecology and specializes in environmental, biodiversity and natural resource topics. He has been active in information analysis, strategic planning, project design and project evaluation in Belize, as well as other countries in Central America and the Caribbean. As an environmental specialist, he has performed several Environmental Impact Assessments and Natural Resource Inventories as well as produced numerous Management Plans. Jan has developed into one of the few GIS specialists in Belize that has contributed original datasets that are now publicly available. Important among these are: the Central American Ecosystems Map: Belize; the 2005 National Protected Areas Systems Analysis; Fire Risk Assessment; Survey of Land Degradation in Belize; and Land Use Change Detection (Deforestation) for Belize. All of these and other data are shared by means of a biodiversity clearinghouse <http://www.biodiversity.bz>, which was established and managed by Jan.



Richard Kuehn, Treasurer

Richard is a resident of northern California where he lives at The Sea Ranch, a planned community on the Pacific Ocean. A retired OB/GYN physician who now does volunteer work with hospice clients, Rich became interested in raptors and their protection through involvement with his local Audubon chapters. He’s served on the Board of Directors of both the Sequoia Audubon Society and the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society. He is a member and past Chair of The Sea Ranch California Coastal National Monument (CCNM) Stewardship Task Force, a project of Madrone Audubon Society, actively engaged in monitoring seabird species attempting to reproduce upon islands and rocks within the CCNM. Richard was recently appointed to the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, where he serves as the Alternate Member-at-Large representing Marin and Sonoma Counties. He has traveled extensively throughout the world, having visited the Central American region, including Belize, multiple times during his sojourns to more than 125 countries.

Message from the President

It is hard to believe that a year has passed since the Board of Directors first sat down together to discuss our vision for the Belize Raptor Research Institute (BRRRI). Since that time, the BRRRI has made great strides in raptor conservation and has accomplished many of the goals we set forth only twelve short months ago. From getting our 501 (c)3 non-profit status in the USA, to finding what would be only the third documented nest of the elusive Stygian Owl, to implementing the first-ever Bird-a-thon in Belize — this year has truly been a successful one!

The Board of Directors, strengthened by the broad diversity of its members, has really bonded together as a strong force for conservation in Belize, but there is still much work to be done. Our past successes only push us to look to the future and deepen our efforts toward raptor conservation. I would like to thank everyone who is involved with and has contributed to the success of the BRRRI since its inception. Without you we could never have been so successful so quickly and with your continued support we can continue to grow as a conservation organization.

Flavien Daguise, President



Marta Curti, Secretary

Marta has worked in wildlife conservation and environmental education for the past fourteen years. She began her career working for the National Park Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Arizona, Alaska, and New Mexico. Currently, Marta is a field biologist for the The Peregrine Fund. She has been with this organization since 2000 and has worked on release projects for the Aplomado Falcon and the California Condor in the U.S., as well as numerous field projects outside of the U.S., including the Harpy Eagle Restoration Project, The Orange-breasted Falcon Project, and the Ridgway’s Hawk Project.



Jim Beveridge, Member

Jim was born in Scotland in 1942. He immigrated to Canada in 1965 where he worked as a registered plumber and first class diver for several years before moving south to Amazonas where he began working for a United States quarantine station. In 1972, Jim moved to Belize and worked for three dive operations as a dive guide before starting his own business in diving and underwater photography, which he later expanded to include all wildlife photography. He served on both the Reef Preservation and Half Moon Caye Committees and conducted research on endangered nesting sea turtles and manatees. Jim retired in 2002, but he continues to fulfill his passion for nature and conservation by serving on the BRRRI Board of Directors and being a long-time member of the Belize Audubon Society.



Tony Garel, Member

Tony has had a lifetime interest in wildlife and conservation. Born in Jamaica, he moved to Belize in 1976 as a young boy and he soon became fascinated and well-educated about the flora and fauna of the region. In 1985, he began work at The Belize Zoo & Tropical Education Center and for the next 20 years served as curator and manager. Tony left his position at the Belize Zoo to follow his lifelong passion for reptiles. He is currently the Director of the Belize Herpetarium & Aquarium Park and has served as President of the Sibun Watershed Association (SWA), the President of the Belize Alliance of Conservation NGO’s (BACONGO), and Vice Chair for the Board of Directors of the Belize Zoo & Tropical Education Center. He is also the author of the book “Field Guide to the Snakes of Belize” which was published in 1996. Tony continues to be one of the foremost experts on reptiles and amphibians in the country.



Roni Martinez, Member

Roni, a native of Belize, worked as a natural history guide at Blancaneaux Lodge in Belize from 2004 until 2009. It was there that he developed a passion for birds and other wildlife, as well as their conservation. In 2009, Roni became Blancaneaux’s first Conservation Officer. As a result of this position, he works along with many different researchers and conservation NGOs, who share the same vision. Currently, his work involves research and collaboration on several projects with species such as jaguars: birds, especially macaws and raptors: and bats. His work with other conservation organizations, such as serving on the Board of Directors of Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD), has been crucial in maintaining a proactive effort in conserving biodiversity and wildlife habitat in Belize.

Meet Our Executive Director



Ryan Phillips, Executive Director

Ryan is the Founder and Executive Director of the Belize Raptor Research Institute. The founding of BRRRI represented the culmination of one of Ryan’s lifelong goals of creating a

conservation organization. At an early age, Ryan became passionate about nature as he studied Tule Elk with his mother in California at age four, and traveled throughout Costa Rica at twelve years old. After graduating with a Bachelor’s of Science in Wildlife, Conservation Biology and Fisheries with a specialization in Ornithology from the University of California at Davis, he moved to Belize to work for The Peregrine Fund on the Harpy Eagle Restoration Project. He spent extensive time in Central America and worked in Belize for three years. Ryan has been involved in many conservation projects, including the Orange-breasted Falcon Project, the Harpy Eagle Restoration Project and the Coyote Valley Corridor Project, just to name a few. Ryan currently teaches in California at De Anza College in the Environmental Studies Department, where he teaches Conservation Biology, Biodiversity, Wildlife Biology, Field Methods, and Ornithology, as well as being the Co-Principal Investigator for the field projects of the Wildlife Corridor Technician Program in the Environmental Studies Department at De Anza College.



Juvenile Swainson's Hawk observed in Blue Creek, Orange Walk District

HIGHLIGHTED PROJECT

Studying the Rare Stygian Owl, *Asio stygius robustus*, in Belize

In March 2009, we began a long-term study on the Stygian Owl, one of the least known Neotropical owls. Our study area was within the Mountain Pine Ridge area of the Cayo District. The objectives are to better understand all ecological aspects of this rare owl, including their nesting biology, abundance, home-range, movement patterns, habitat usage, foraging ecology, and response to fires and deforestation.

The Stygian Owl, *Asio stygius*, has a patchy distribution from northwestern Mexico to northern Argentina, where it has been recorded in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina (Birdlife International 2009, König and Weick 2008). In Belize, it is considered a rare resident and has only been recorded in three localities (Jones 2003). The Stygian Owl is a poorly known species and its status is uncertain making it a species with high research priority (Stotz et. al. 1996, König and Weick 2008). The Mexico and Central America subspecies, *Asio stygius robustus*, is restricted to pine forest and pine savanna making it vulnerable to population declines (Howell and Webb 1995, Jones 2003, Phillips pers. obs.). Of the *A. s. robustus* subspecies, only one nest has been described and diet analysis has been limited to anecdotal information (Franz 1991).

In March 2009, we located a roosting site, where a pair was seen nearly every day. We collected pellets for a full year at this site to determine their prey base. Of 194 prey remains in 145 collected pellets, we observed 61.9% birds, 19.1% bats, 12.4% beetles, 6.2% lizards, and .5% frogs. Of the total prey items, 31% were nocturnal species. On average, from February-May the diet consisted of 70% birds, whereas from June-August their diet was comprised of 37% birds, 32% bats, and 28% beetles and from November- February it consisted of 81% birds. The change in diet coincides with the emergence of beetles in June-August, and the influx of wintering migrant songbirds. According to biomass and quantity of prey items consumed, passerines were the most

important dietary component. We located this roost site in March, and have since located another seven roosting sites of other individuals. Pellets will continue to be collected to obtain a larger sample size and to include more individuals.

To better understand these elusive, nocturnal raptors, we trapped and radio-tagged (using VHF transmitters) two male Stygian Owls in December 2010. This is the first time this species has been trapped and fitted with radio transmitters. We continuously monitored these two individuals but in February we lost a signal on one of them. Possible reasons for this include: the antenna of the transmitter was chewed off; the transmitter malfunctioned; or the individual left the area. If the male returns to his usual roost site we should be able to more accurately determine what occurred.

The other male eventually led us to a nest containing a single chick, approximately 2 weeks old, on March 30th. This represented only the second nest of this species to be discovered in Belize and only the third such nest to ever be studied anywhere. From this tagged male, we've obtained data on their home-range, movements, foraging ecology, and habitat usage. This male was observed feeding upon a Least Bittern, the second largest prey item ever to have been documented for this species.

We discovered that Stygian Owls may not be the pine-oak or pine specialists that we once thought it to be. This male moved nearly 15 kilometers through broadleaf forest and into cleared farmlands where he foraged for songbirds, bats, and insects before returning to his nest and roost site in pine-oak forest. They may only nest and roost in pine-oak or pine, but other habitats may be critical in their foraging ecology and survival when pine-oak and pine habitat is lost or altered. It is too early to determine if this is consistent across the population, but as we radio-tag more individuals we will be able to unravel this elusive mystery.

This project will continue for a minimum of five years and we will continue to radio-tag individuals and collect data on home-ranges, movements, foraging ecology, nesting biology, as well as assessing how fires and deforestation affect Stygian owl populations. Stay tuned to find out what we discover next about this rare owl species.



Stygian Owl pellets collected from a roost site



A Stygian Owl at its roost site



Stygian Owl chick at the nest

“The Stygian Owl is a poorly known species and its status is uncertain making it a species with high research priority.”



Roni Martinez releasing a male radio-tagged Stygian Owl

HOT OFF THE PRESS: STYGIAN OWL FILM

“The Quest for the Nest: The Belize Stygian Owl Project”

Please go to YouTube and view our newly released Stygian Owl film produced and edited by Wayne Hall. Thank you Wayne, for ALL of your support!

Please pass the URL below along to anyone you know who may be interested in the details. Thanks for viewing.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5DckfqTXml>

BREAKING NEWS

After seven years of searching for the elusive Solitary Eagle nest in the Mountain Pine Ridge of Belize, the BRRF team, with assistance from Blancaneaux Lodge and The Peregrine Fund, located the only known nest in 52 years.

In 2009, The Peregrine Fund's Orange-breasted Falcon Team first observed the eagles in the area, including a recently fledged juvenile, but the nest was not located. On 30 June of this year, Roni Martinez of BRRF and Blancaneaux Lodge, with the greatly appreciated assistance of Camille Meyers, Matt Allshouse, Stacia Novy, Audrey Martin, and Jonathan Urbina of The Peregrine Fund, located the nest with a single approximately two to three month old nestling.

The discovery of this nest is a big step forward in the conservation of the Solitary Eagle. There are less than an estimated 1,000 individuals left in the wild and virtually nothing is known about the species. The Solitary Eagle is a rare and

local resident with a small population size within its broad, but patchy distribution from Mexico to Chile. It is currently listed as Near Threatened by the IUCN, but may be up-listed based on further evidence of decreasing population size and trends. Most aspects of its natural history, breeding biology, and population demographics are unknown making this species a top research priority. Prior to the discovery of this nest, only two others have been found. Both were found in the 1950's in Mexico and either the eggs or adults were collected for museum specimens, therefore no data was collected on the species' nesting biology.

With the discovery of this nest we can now begin to understand this unknown

species and its requirements, so that management strategies can be implemented and its conservation status can be better understood. We will conduct observations on the nest until the juvenile has left the nest area. During that time we would like to fit the juvenile and adults with satellite transmitters, so that we can learn about their movements, home-ranges, habitat, ecology, juvenile dispersal patterns, and seasonal behaviors. If we are able to radio-tag the juvenile we can better determine if the Solitary Eagle's patchy distribution is isolated or if it may function as a meta-population. These findings will be critical in the conservation of this mystical eagle. **More updates to come in Issue 3!**

Featured News

» FIRST ANNUAL BRRF BIRDATHON FUNDRAISER: A SUCCESS

On March 25th, two teams, the Bird-a-holics and the Corozal Eagles, composed of 13 participants in total — Jim Beveridge*, Dorothy Beveridge, Adrian Choco, Glenn Crawford, Rich Kuehn*, Silverio Marin, Roni Martinez*, Ryan Phillips*, Graham Sampson, Hugo Sanchez, Jorge Sanchez, Dean Schuler, and Marvin Vasquez) set out to make fundraising history in Belize!

They participated in the country's first-ever Bird-a-thon. The day was quite successful for each team as they birded their favorite locales across the country during the 24-hour window. A total of four districts were covered during the all-day event, including nearly all the types of habitat found in Belize.

The Corozal Eagles, led by Graham Sampson, birded an impressive 13 hours in the Corozal District and tallied a very respectable 130 species, with their best bird being an immature Ornate Hawk-Eagle. The Bird-a-holics, led by Ryan Phillips*, birded

14 hours, covering the Cayo, Belize, and Stann Creek Districts, and tallying an astounding 238 species with the best bird being a Gray Kingbird found on Caye Caulker. The Corozal Eagles took the Best Bird Award with their immature Ornate Hawk-Eagle, while the Bird-a-holics were awarded the Most Species Award. Rich Kuehn* raised nearly \$3,500US and was given the Person Who Raised the Most Money Award.

Between all thirteen participants, (Board members and our ED are indicated with an asterisk*), we raised over \$4,000US for BRRF, which goes directly toward our conservation efforts. We would like to thank all of our participants and their many sponsors for making this a very successful first Annual BRRF Bird-a-thon. Our goal for the 2012 Bird-a-thon is to raise \$10,000US and have over 50 participants. Please plan to craft and register your own team or join another team prior to the March 2012 BRRF Bird-a-thon. You can help make 2012's event an even greater success!

» UPCOMING EVENTS

2ND ANNUAL BRRF BIRDATHON FUNDRAISER: MARCH 2012

Join in the fun by joining a team or forming your own team. Register by sending an email to harpiabz@yahoo.com

2ND ANNUAL NEOTROPICAL RAPTOR IDENTIFICATION WORKSHOP

Now accepting early registration for the 2nd Annual Neotropical Raptor Identification Workshop. Workshop instructed by William S. Clark and held at Blancaneaux Lodge in August 2012. Sign up before December 31st and receive a \$50 discount. Register by sending an email to harpiabz@yahoo.com.

» RAPTOR QUIZ RESULTS

MARCH 2011
-Hook-billed Kite (*Chondrohierax uncinatus*)
-juvenile light morph

Correct answers were submitted by:
David Araya
Bill Clark
Bob Power
Sergio Seipke

» RECENT RAPTOR SIGHTINGS

SPECIES	DATE	LOCATION	OBSERVER
Ornate Hawk-Eagle	5 March	near Cerros Arch. Site, Corozal	Graham Sampson
Crested Eagle	11 March	La Milpa Archaeological Site	Vladimir Rodriguez
Swainson's Hawk	23 March	Blue Creek, Orange Walk Dist.	R. Phillips* and R. Martinez*
Northern Harrier	23 March	Blue Creek, Orange Walk Dist.	R. Phillips* and R. Martinez*
Merlin	23 March	Blue Creek, Orange Walk Dist.	R. Phillips* and R. Martinez*
B.&W. Hawk-Eagle	23 March	Rio Bravo Cons. & Mang. Area	R. Phillips* and R. Martinez*
Crested Caracara	23 March	Central Farm, Cayo	R. Phillips* and R. Martinez*
Ornate Hawk-Eagle	27 March	Mai Gate, Cayo	Marguerite Bevis
Spectacled Owl	17 April	Blue Hole National Park	Eric Tut
Black-and-white Owl	3 June	Belmopan	Tony Garel
Solitary Eagle	12, 14 June	Mountain Pine Ridge	Camille Meyers

Please report your raptor sightings in Belize to harpiabz@yahoo.com



» TWO ORNATE HAWK-EAGLE, *SPIZAETUS ORNATUS*, NESTS WITH EGGS IN RIO BRAVO CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT AREA (RBCMA)

We are excited to announce that two Ornate Hawk-Eagle nests in the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (RBCMA) are active and have eggs. One of these nests has been active for over 20 years, when RBCMA was first established as a private reserve. The RBCMA has one of the densest Ornate Hawk-Eagle populations in the region and possibly in all of Central America. This may be because the area comprises large tracts of virtually undisturbed lowland broadleaf forest with little or no human pressures such as hunting, deforestation, and habitat degradation, which results in a healthy prey population for the hawk-eagles. The main prey items for Ornate Hawk-Eagles in RBCMA are Great Curassows, Oscillated Turkeys, Crested Guans, Keel-billed Toucans, and medium-sized mammals, which are all commonly observed within the reserve. To date, we have located three active Ornate Hawk-Eagle nests that we will continue to monitor for many years to come.

» SWALLOW-TAILED KITES, *ELANOIDES FORFICATUS YETAPA*, OBSERVED DRINKING WATER

With the exception of vultures, raptors rarely actively drink water, as they obtain their water balance from their food. On March 28, we observed eight Swallow-tailed Kites actively drinking water and cooling their legs by skimming from a private man-made lake in Mountain Pine Ridge. With the hot temperatures during the dry season, this is an efficient way of cooling the body (Smithe 1966 "The Birds of Tikal"). Therefore, the kite's behavior could be explained either as a cooling mechanism or as a needed water balance due to the lack of moisture from their primary diet of lizards and insects. Why this species has evolved this behavior while others have not is unclear, but may have to do with its physiological requirements. Further research is needed to better understand this phenomenon.



» EDUCATIONAL RAPTOR POSTER PRODUCED

In collaboration with The Belize Zoo, The Center for the Study of Tropical Birds, Inc., Blancaneaux Lodge, The Belize Forest Department, and Programme for Belize we produced our first raptor educational poster, "Birds of Prey: They Balance Nature." It has been distributed across Belize in the Cayo, Orange Walk, Belize, and Corozal Districts. Two thousand posters were kindly printed by BRC Printing Ltd. and Yeray Seminario graciously allowed us the use of his photo. We will continue to use this poster to help spread the message about the importance of raptors in the Neotropical region.

» PUBLICATIONS:

Phillips, R, P. Balderamos, & D. Roth. 2010. First nesting of Northern Crested Caracara Caracara cheriway in Belize, Central America. Bull B.O.C. 130: 69-70.

Phillips, R. 2009. Studying Hawk-Eagles in Belize. Neotropical Raptor Network Newsletter 7: 1-11.

Phillips, R & Y. Seminario. 2009. Aging characteristics of *Spizaetus melanoleucus*: First photographic documentation. Neotropical Raptor Network Newsletter 8: 1-5.

Seminario, Y., R. Phillips, & M. Curti. 2011. Observations of the post-fledging behavior and prey of the Solitary Eagle. J. of Rapt. Res. 45.

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Little Vaqueros Enclave
Mountain Pine Ridge Cayo District

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SPECIAL THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS:

The Belize Forest Department and Rasheeda Garcia for their continued support, The Center for the Study of Tropical Birds Inc. and Jack Eitnrear for jump-starting BRRI and continued support, Blancaneaux Lodge, Neil Rogers, Bernie Matute and Luvia Morales for providing room and board as an In-Kind donation, Hidden Valley Inn and Trevor and Brian Roe for providing room and board as an In-Kind donation and allowing us to hold our first Board of Directors meeting at the Inn, Melina and George Headley of Bull Run Overseas Ltd. For their continued support and allowing us to conduct our research on their property, all of our field volunteers listed above, Programme for Belize, Herbert Haylock, and Vladimir Rodriguez for their In-Kind donation of room and board at the La Milpa Ecological and Research Center and continued support, Janmarie Wright our graphic designer, Russell Thorstrom for assisting in the donation of transmitters, Holohil Systems Ltd. for donating transmitters to our projects, Sharon Matola and The Belize Zoo for their continued support and allowing us to hold our second Board of Directors meeting at the Tropical Education Center, The Peregrine Fund, Marcus Canuto, William Clark, Wayne Hall, Peter Guenther, Lloyd Kiff, Yeray Seminario, Angel Muela, and all of our donors. Without all of your support we would not have been able to accomplish our goals.

HOW TO DONATE

BRRI relies entirely upon donations from organizations and individuals like you to fund our projects and to achieve our goals. We hope to raise \$10,000US for the 2012 field season, and we can reach this goal with your assistance. Please help support our efforts by making a tax-deductible donation of any size by either:

» Mail a check to: 1298 W Hacienda Avenue Campbell, CA 95008

» Donate via PayPal: to belizeraptorresearchinstitute@yahoo.com

You can also:

ADOPT-A-NEST

With a donation of \$500 or more you can adopt either a nest or an individual bird of a species we are studying. You will receive periodic updates, as well as a photograph and certificate.

NAME-A-BIRD

With a donation of \$250 or more you can name one of our study birds of your choice. You will receive periodic updates, as well as a photograph and certificate.