

Raptors and Belize

Belize has a wide diversity of habitat types, from the flat coastal plains to the Maya Mountains to dense old growth forests and lagoons teeming with life. More than 500 species of birds visit or live in Belize, and, because of its location, Northern Belize serves as an important stop-over point and attracts a large majority of migratory birds in addition to its year-round residents.

This guide showcases the top 10 raptor species (predatory birds) that you are most likely to encounter while in Northern Belize. It describes hawks, kites, eagles, and owls. Raptors can be found inhabiting all the various habitat types of Belize. They share similar characteristics, such as powerful talons and hooked bills, which aid them in the capture and consumption of prey. However, they differ in size and body shape based on their preferred hunting techniques and locales. Longer wingspans help conserve energy while raptors search for food over open plains and savannahs; elongated tails and shorter wings increase maneuverability when they hunt in dense forests. Special noise-dampening feathers and expert night vision give the ambush hunter an edge over prey ever on the alert ready to make a quick escape.

Unique characteristics to look for while bird watching include body size (LT), wingspan (WS), coloration, distinguishing markings, and flight style. Knowledge of habitat types and familiarity with birds' unique call types help with identification as well. Your local guide is familiar with all the tricks and tips and will be your best resource when searching for elusive birds.

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Reference

Jones. H. L. 2004. Birds of Belize. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

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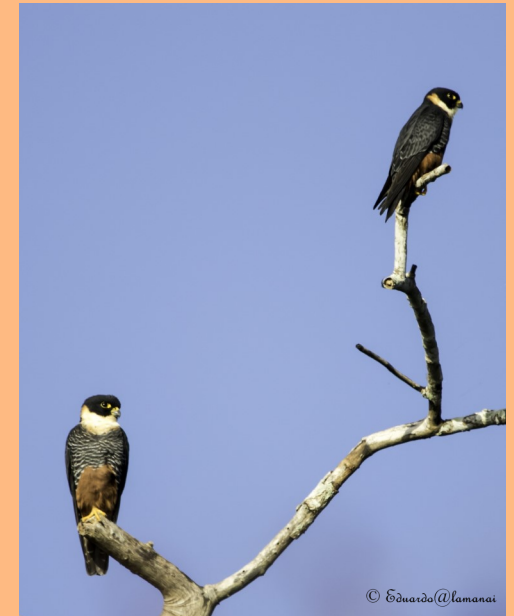
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Top 10 Popular Raptors of Northern Belize



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Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) LT 15 in, WS 49 in This medium sized owl is pale buff, grey, and white with a disproportionately large head that gives it a top-heavy appearance. The Barn Owl has dark eyes set within a white heart-shaped facial disk. It is often seen in urban communities, agricultural areas, and quarries.

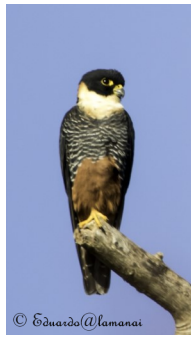
Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) LT 11.5 in, WS 26.5 in

One of the smaller raptors characterized by a slate gray back and a black tail with 2—3 light gray bands. Its breast is light brown and striped, and it has a dark teardrop shape below the eyes. It flies swiftly yet purposely and never hovers. The Merlin can be found in Belize from mid-September to early May. Both sexes give a shrill, chattering call that can last 4 seconds.



Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) LT 19 in, WS 44 in

Identified by its delicate hooked beak and a distinctive white bar across the base of the tail, which is most visible during flight. Females are a blackish brown color, while males are a dark slate grey and are found in lagoons, freshwater marshes, and rice fields. There are two call types: a very raspy and nasal *anh*, given singly or repeated, and slow, raspy *a-a-a-anh* with a frog or insect-like quality. Northern Belize is one of the few places where this normally solitary raptor can be seen in small flocks.



Bat Falcon (*Falco ruficularis*) LT 10 in, WS 26.5 in The smallest of the top 10 raptors. Dark with a white throat that extends to a partial collar, a barred black and white breast, and a brown lower belly and thighs. They can be found in most habitat types including urban landscapes. Their call is a rapid *kea kea kea kea kea kea kea*.

Roadside Hawk (*Buteo magnirostris*) LT 14.5 in, WS 29 in

These hawks have a gray head with a gray and brown streaked throat and breast, lighter brown bars on the belly and thighs, and a grayish tail marked by 4-5 black bars. They can be found in broken woodland and forest edges. Their calls range from a shrill *eeeeeeahhh*, or *cree cree cree* to a “laughing” *anh anh anh*; and a softer *heh ha heh ha heh ha*.



Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) LT 17.5 in, WS 42.5 in

An impressive bird with a distinctive broad “tear-drop” and a white slash on its face, Peregrines are often found in open areas on exposed perches and frequently seen near water.



White-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albicaudatus*) LT 21 in, WS 51.5 in

This hawk has a white underside, a grey back with light brown bars across the shoulders, and a single, distinctive black tail stripe. Its long wings taper to a sharp point and it is often found in open country, primarily savannas and pasturelands. Its call is a high-pitched laughing *ku-reee k-hek k-hek k-hek*.



Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) LT 23 in, WS 49.5 in Striking black and white plumage pattern and a deeply forked tail. A graceful flier with slow, methodical wing-beats, it soars through open

broadleaf and pine forests. Often found in upland areas. It vocalizes with several sharp cries of *k-lee!* or *kree!*

Gray-headed Kite (*Leptodon cayanensis*) LT 19.5 in, WS 39 in

This large raptor has a dark, brownish-grey back with a pale grey head, a white underside, and a black tail marked by three thin grey bands. It is typically found along forested river edges and occasionally in more heavily forested areas. It gives a strong, catlike call; a three-toned *raowwww*, *e-raaooooo*, *eee-yow*.



Plumbeous Kite (*Ictinia plumbea*) LT 14 in, WS 35 in

With a uniform gray back and a mottled greyish-white belly, Plumbeous Kites are distinguishable by their striking red eyes and elegant, pointed wings. When folded, the wings extend past the tail. They are swift predators that take prey in the air. They prefer open forests or savannas. Their call is a rapid, ringing *hee-h-h-he*.

