

Highlights of my April 2019 Belize trip

By Vicki Piaskowski, BZNC board member

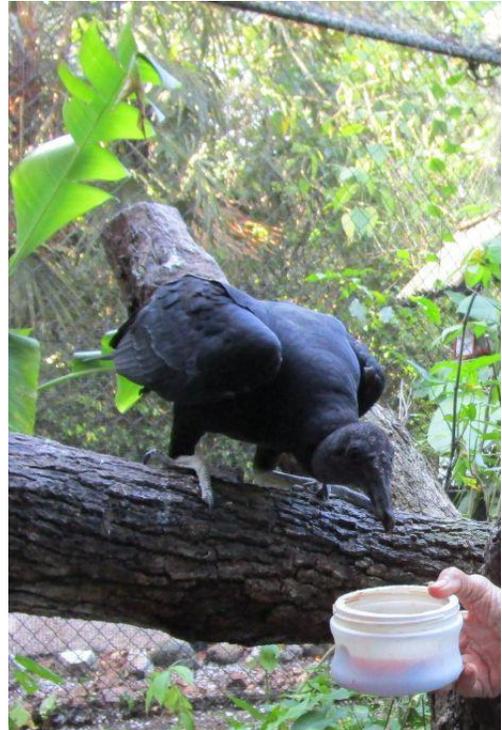
I visited Belize from March 30 to April 9, 2019 and stayed at one of my favorite places in the world, the Tropical Education Center (TEC) of the Belize Zoo. I had time to enjoy the beautiful habitats, birds (and delicious meals!) at the TEC. A benefit of staying at the TEC was that I was close to the Zoo and could easily spend time there.

I was able to join Sharon Matola, the Zoo's Founding Director, to meet some of the new animals at the Zoo. First was J.J., a new problem jaguar rescued by the Zoo that would not have survived in the wild. Before being brought to the Zoo he was heartlessly shot in the mouth and some of his teeth were shot out. The Zoo flew in two Cornell Veterinarians specializing in dentistry and they worked on helping J.J. He is now a beautiful and healthy jaguar who is learning to be hand fed by Sharon and the zookeepers.



I next met Sylvia, a charming and beautiful former problem jaguar who loves Sharon! Sharon hand fed her chicken and Sylvia was so excited that she climbed up the fencing of her cage to get closer to Sharon!

Then, I was lucky enough to meet Gyps, a beautiful, young Black vulture who is at the Zoo because his parents disappeared and he was not being fed. He enjoys being hand-fed and having his head scratched by Sharon!



I always enjoy seeing the animals at the Zoo in their very natural, vegetation-filled enclosures. All of the animals at the Zoo are orphaned, rescued, confiscated, born at the Zoo, or are being rehabilitated - no animals are acquired from the wild.

Later that week I was able to meet with the Zoo's General Curator Humberto Wohlers to see the beautiful new Vet Clinic and Commissary in action. Dr. Orlando Baptist was at the Zoo to give the new jaguarundi kittens their immunizations. As most kittens, they were very cute, but when it came time to gently wrap them in a fleece blanket for their immunizations they became very feisty! However Dr. Baptist was able to complete his mission successfully and immunize the kittens.





I also saw all of the wonderful features of the new Commissary, including the different food storage and preparation areas and watched the zookeepers preparing food for the animals.

Just before my trip I learned that Sharon Matola, the Belize Zoo's Founding Director was selected by the US Embassy in Belize as "Woman of the Year 2019". She was honored with an official ceremony and reception at the Embassy on April 18. Remarks from the ceremony: *The U.S. Embassy selected Ms. Matola as our "Woman of the Year 2019" for her tireless dedication and steadfast commitment to conserve and preserve Belize's natural heritage through zealous advocacy and education. As Chargé Keith Gilges*



highlighted, "Not only is Sharon a truly outstanding woman and an exemplary role model to Belizean youth, but also Sharon's herculean efforts and a lifelong dedication to conserving and preserving nature make her an ideal person to celebrate now, on the eve of Earth Day." Minister of State for the Ministry of Forestry and Environment Omar Figueroa emphasized Sharon's immense, positive impact across Belize and stated that Sharon is, in fact, a "Woman of the Year" every year. The ceremony took place after I was home, but I was able to celebrate this great honor with Sharon while I was in Belize.



My final adventure was a trip to the 6,175-acre Runaway Creek Nature Reserve (RCNR) with Foundation for Wildlife Conservation (FWC) staff members Ray and Stevan to view trail cameras and learn about the data they collected at different locations. In 2018, BZNC provided funding to the FWC for nine trail cameras, which were set up at the RCNR to monitor wildlife using specific areas. RCNR is a critical part of the Central Belize Wildlife Corridor. The trail cameras are providing valuable information about the wildlife using different habitats at the RCNR, which will aid in conservation planning.



My trip was very rewarding and inspiring. I was able to see all that has been accomplished with the funding provided to various projects by BZNC. Your donations are making a huge difference!