

Waterfowl Surveys Belize, Central America 2001

The Belize training workshop was scheduled for January 20-21, 2001 and was held at Chaa Creek in the Cayo District. Steve Adair, Mariate Fernandez and Omar Figueroa facilitated the two-day workshop. Twenty-two participants from across the country attended the two-day workshop. Participants from the northern and southern parts of the country arrived to San Ignacio on January 19. On January 21, 2001, all participants were divided into three groups, each responsible for surveying a specific wetland or assemblage of wetlands. These three areas were northern, central and southern Belize. Throughout the next few months I faced several unforeseen problems that affected the surveys. Group leaders for the Northern and Central areas were not communicating with me and the ground surveys were not being conducted in these areas. Domingo Teul, the leader of the southern surveys, was very consistent with his responsibilities. The ground surveys for the Aguacaliente wetlands was therefore executed, for the most part, according to schedule. Due to the remoteness of some of the villages where the survey participants lived, communication proved to be a major problem. Some of these villages do not have access to telephones and therefore the only means of communication would be relaying messages and hoping these messages made it to the individuals. Despite the many obstacles, several of the participants remained committed to the surveys and we were therefore still able to look at most of the wetlands across the country. We learnt to deal with the many problems and hopefully we will be able to avoid these in future survey seasons.

We managed to conduct at least two aerial surveys on a monthly basis. In January, I participated on two surveys, one with Mariate Fernandez and the other with both Mariate and Steve Adair. These were very helpful, as this was the first time I was actually conducting an aerial survey. The plane was rented from the Janus Foundation, a non-government conservation organization in Belize. Unfortunately, this plane experienced mechanical difficulties shortly thereafter and we were not able to use this plane for subsequent surveys. Janus recommended Frank Plett, a local pilot from Spanish Lookout in the Cayo District. We also used the services of Lighthawk, an organization that conducts conservation related overflights at very reasonable rates (\$120BZ/hour). We conducted the Belize aerial surveys using the services of both Lighthawk and Frank Plett. At times it was not possible to rent these planes on the two monthly dates recommended for the surveys. However, because this was the pilot season of field surveys in Belize we decided it was very important to go ahead and conduct the surveys so as to learn the distribution of the different waterfowls across the various wetlands, as well as to gain experience in the actual surveys. Next season we would then be able to conduct the surveys in a more systematic manner.

The different waterfowls recorded at the Aguacaliente wetland, together with the number of individuals for the ground surveys were as follows:

Dendrocygna arborea - maximum was 2,250 individuals

Anas crecca – maximum was 400 individuals

Anas discors – maximum was 3,000 individuals

Anas cyanoptera – maximum was 50 individuals

Cairina moschata – maximum was 50 individuals

The Aguacaliente aerial surveys were as follows:

Dendrocygna arborea – max of 2,750

Anas discors – max was 2,650

Cairina moschata – max was 100

No ducks were recorded for the central region of Belize. This area includes both the Stann Creek and Cayo Districts.

In January when Steve Adair, Mariate Fernandez and I flew over the entire country we did not record any waterfowl in the Crooked Tree wetlands. Mariate commented how weird this was because she thought that the Crooked Tree wetlands seemed perfect habitat for waterfowls. Hurricane Keith, which had affected the northern part of Belize just a few months earlier had caused very severe flooding in the northern zone including the Crooked Tree area. As the water levels receded, Crooked Tree proved to be a very important wetland for waterfowls in Belize.

The Crooked Tree aerial surveys:

Dendrocygna arborea – max number of 2,500

Anas discors – max number of 5,130

Cairina moschata – max number of 36

75 Lesser scaup was also recorded about four miles southeast of the Mussel Creek drainage. Even though I received reports of significant numbers of waterfowls in the Shipstern lagoons, Mussel creek drainage and Cox lagoon wetlands, surveys of these areas resulted in zero records.