

## A Forest of Signs: Documenting Traditional Ethno-ornithological Knowledge and Efforts Toward Sustainable Indigenous-led Birding and among the Q'eqchi' Maya

The Q'eqchi' Maya of Guatemala and Belize share many avian terms and ethnographic associations. This paper is the result of four fieldwork trips to both Guatemala and Belize to document bird-related terminology and data regarding the role of birds as prognosticators in Q'eqchi' Maya society. This paper approaches ethno-ornithological documentation in two tracks, the first being recording the rapidly disappearing traditional understandings of bird messaging. We here focus on the messaging of bird calls, their presence, or flight patterns in six principal areas: hunting, agriculture, rain and drought, death, curing, and various more general positive and negative portents. We discuss the key role of birds in weather forecasting, both those that signal the coming of rain and those that are said to signal dry weather. We also describe how birds foretell death in various ways, either by their call or by people dreaming of certain types of birds. We further detail the role of birds play in Q'eqchi' hunting activities, both as helpers who indicate the presence of game, or at times foes who warn game of the approaching hunters. We argue that birds play a profound and integral role in orienting Q'eqchi' life by providing prophetic glimpses into future events.

The second aspect of this paper is to describe a recent phenomenon in various Q'eqchi' Maya communities of turning traditional ethno-ornithological knowledge into a sustainable income for community members, a small step toward the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of Decent work and economic growth in developing countries. We here discuss our interactions in various Q'eqchi' villages where individuals have recently begun leading birding tours and sharing ethnographic information on birds as a steady source of income. Importantly, we show how this type of economic enterprise is also contributing to the preservation of ethno-ornithological information in these Q'eqchi' communities as even teenagers are actively learning about birds from Q'eqchi' elders in order secure a viable income source for themselves.