



WHERE  
DREAMS  
COME  
TRUE

Welcome to one of Central America's hottest new eco-destinations, a birder's paradise that's home to half of Honduras's 700 bird species—from the endangered Honduran emerald hummingbird, found in no other country, to the great curassow, a three-foot-long turkeylike ground dweller.

BY T. EDWARD NICKENS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROY TOFT

“Oh-baby, oh-baby, oh-baby!” Fourteen stories above the ground, David Anderson is having a fit. He straddles a branch of a common rainforest tree known locally as the San Juan rojo, where the tree’s massive crown erupts into a broccoli top of leaves and open sky. “Look-look-look! Do you see them?”

My binoculars tangle in climbing ropes, but I weave them clear. Ten feet away a troop of golden-hooded tanagers boils from a viny treetop. Blue-cheeked and turquoise-rumped, they are resplendent. “British birders call birds like that ‘crippers,’” Anderson whispers. “See one, and your knees go weak.”

This is not the time for vertigo. For three hours Anderson and I have clambered through the rainforest canopy in Honduras’s 265,000-acre Pico Bonito (“Pretty Peak”) National Park. A doctoral student at Louisiana State University, Anderson has spent untold hours over the past few years tethered to the region’s trees, studying how birds use the park’s lush rainforest canopy. Still, he is hardly immune to a crippler.

Nor am I. I watch the tanagers pluck tiny fruits one by one. Behind them, mountains rise in countless shades of green, a verdant carpet scored by three hanging waterfalls that glint like tinsel. Dangling from a rope while focusing binoculars is a delicate balancing act. But this view from above the second-largest national park in Honduras would be hard to match from any other vantage point.

Anchored by the 7,989-foot-tall Pico Bonito, which rises upwards of 2,000 feet above surrounding peaks, Pico Bonito National Park is striving mightily to establish itself as a Central American ecotourism destination. The park hugs the country’s rugged north coast, just three miles from La Ceiba, the third-largest city in Honduras. For years, however, visiting Pico Bonito has been a daunting adventure. Few trails penetrate the forest, and services for travelers have been practically nonexistent. Most of the park’s approximately 5,000 annual visitors—itsself a tiny number—only raft a river on the far eastern border of the park. Perhaps 2,000 travelers venture farther into Honduras’s interior.

But that’s now beginning to change, thanks in part to a twist on conservation that marries social justice with environmental protection. Supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and organizations such as the American Birds Conservancy, the park’s nonprofit Fundación Parque Nacional Pico Bonito (FUPNAPIB) is working to reduce poverty, improve sanitation, and develop sustainable tourism. “These co-management strategies are common in Mesoamerican countries because federal funds for conservation are so limited,” says Mark Willuhn, executive director of the Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance, a nonprofit that is nearing completion on a USAID-funded study of ecotourism along the northern Honduras coast. “But FUPNAPIB is doing a very good job and serving as a good example for Honduras and the region in efforts to integrate community-based tourism and critically needed social programs.” I’ll spend a week here, hiking, birdwatching, and rafting, and learning how these efforts are helping to preserve one of Central America’s greatest wildernesses.

One thing is unquestioned: Pico Bonito is a dream destination for birders. More than half of Honduras’s 700 species are known in the park, from the endangered Honduran emerald hummingbird—found in no other country in the world and

seen just outside the park’s borders—to the great curassow, a three-foot-long, turkeylike ground dweller with a lavish, curly head crest.

Suddenly, another of Anderson’s exclamations jolts my attention.

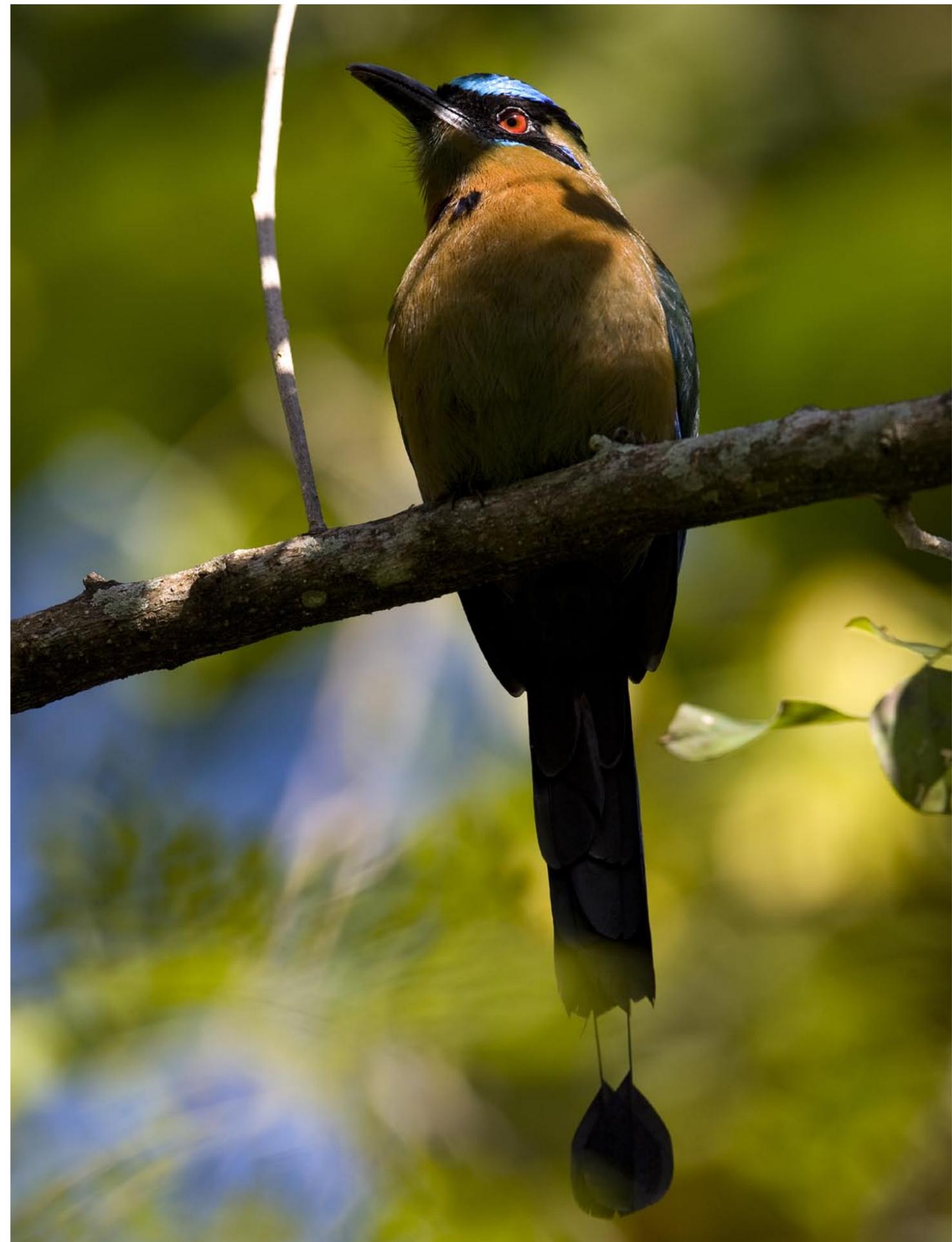
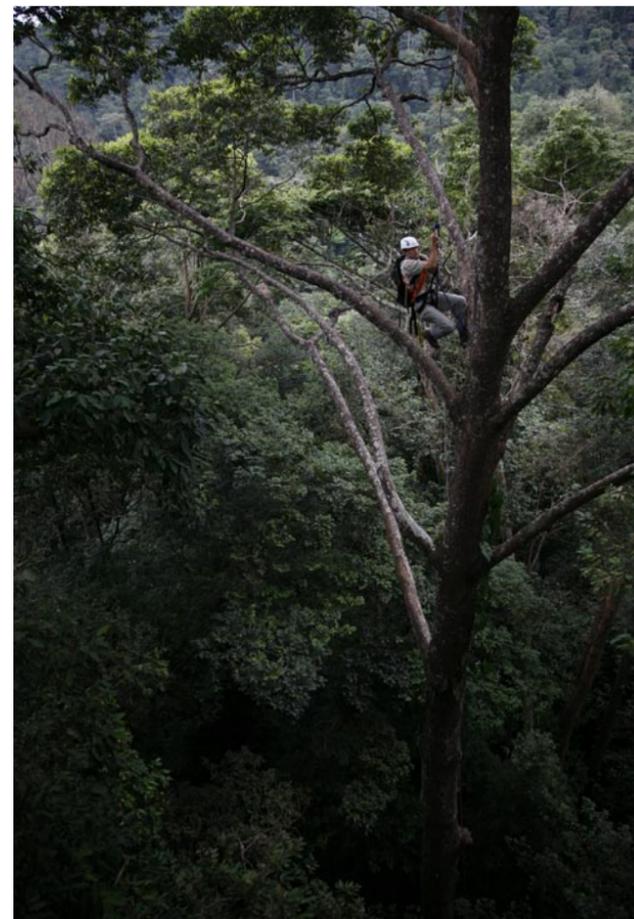
“Oh-oh, look-look. Right there, right there!”

I swivel on a branch to meet the stares of two keel-billed motmots, a notoriously timid species. “Honduras has more species of motmots than any other country—seven of the ten,” Anderson whispers. “You can see six right here in Pico Bonito.” I watch the striking green-crowned birds flick their blue racquet-tipped tail plumes. “Two at 20 feet,” Anderson sighs. “That was a gift.”

#### DROP CAP

To get face-to-face with a motmot, Anderson first launched a crossbow arrow into the rainforest canopy. The arrow trailed a length of cord, which we used to pull climbing rope over the high branches. Scaling the dangling rope using hand-held ascenders was the most physically demanding hour I can recall in two decades of wilderness travel.

Fortunately, there are easier ways to explore Pico Bonito. Our survey tree grew along the park’s border with the Lodge at Pico Bonito, a 400-acre property that serves as an unofficial visitors’ center for the park. Nestled between two rivers, cabins made of stone and native pine are scattered among old cacao groves. Lounge chairs circle a tiled swimming pool, lined up for drop-dead views of the park’s namesake peak. An open-air restaurant dishes up gourmet meals with a local twist—think beef medallions coated with cacao.



*Contributing editor T. Edward Nickens most recently wrote “Paper Chase” (November–December 2008), about Canada’s boreal forest—one of the world’s largest breeding grounds for birds—and the perils it faces from the profligate use of paper products.*



But nature tourists croon over other amenities. Boardwalks tunnel under lancetilla and other palms where tree frogs lay eggs. Observation platforms afford intimate views of the waterfalls and rainforests where jaguar tracks are found. The lodge's bird list tops 400 species, from antwrens and ant-tanagers to parrots and parakeets. "Many guests," says chief naturalist James Adams, "will leave a plate of fine food to go see a bird."

One of the most prized is the lovely cotinga, a plump, fruit-eating bird that perches high in the rainforest canopy, where the lodge's observation platforms give birders a rare chance to see them. True to its name, the male bird's blue feathers nearly glow in the sun. The plumes were so coveted by ancient Mayans that they were gifts of tribute to clan lords. "I looked for the lovely cotinga for 20 years before finally seeing it here," nature videographer Greg Homel tells me at lunch one day. Since breakfast he had filmed six without leaving the grounds.

Despite its upscale trappings, a visit to the Lodge at Pico Bonito offers connections with Honduras in ways that transcend typical tourism. Consider German Martinez. Left homeless after Hurricane Mitch pummeled Central America in 1998, Martinez has since learned English and completed a course in a local village that trains rural people to become bilingual nature guides. I've already logged a sunrise bird walk when Martinez walks up to the lodge's dining deck. Stocky and affable, he's one of a half-dozen local guides on the lodge's staff who lead bird walks around the property and day hikes into the national park. From there, guests can even take trips to remote villages to see how women use "micro-loans," funded by the U.S.-based Adelante Foundation, of as little as \$50 to start businesses such as selling firewood or organizing sewing cooperatives.

"There are two ways to Unbelievable Falls," Martinez announces, giving us early birds a testing look with dark, twinkling eyes. "Easy way, and hard way." The choice, he says, is ours.

His "hard way" ascends a ridge that rises like a machete blade between the Cornito and Coloradito rivers. There are more than six miles of maintained trails on the lodge property, and along our route, Martinez points out every bird and dozens of plants.

At a saddle between two ridges, he nods toward the dark woods. Fifty feet away, I spot branches lashed high in a tree.

"Illegal hunters," Martinez says, his eyes flat now, and glintless. "I find many platforms."

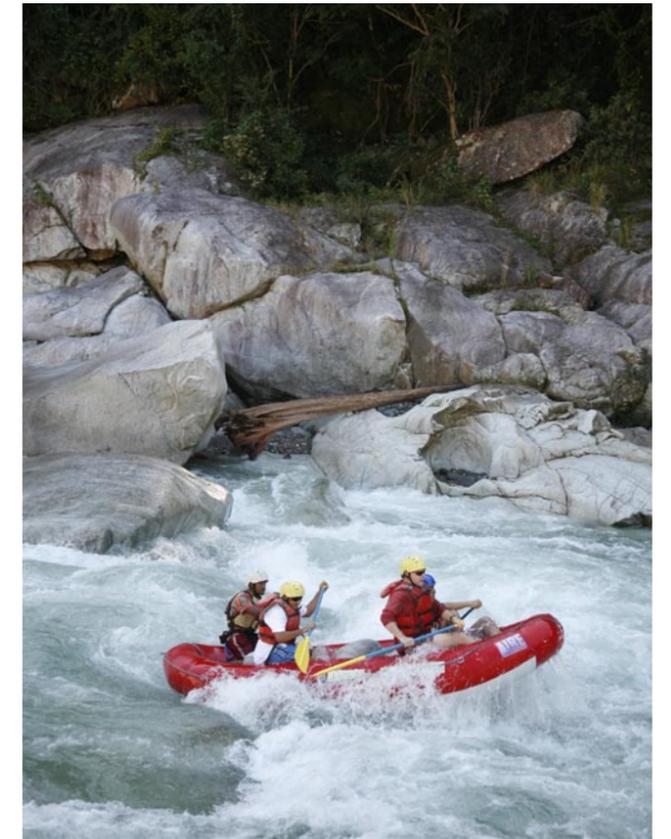
Martinez once worked as a park ranger for Pico Bonito National Park. "Is one of the most dangerous jobs in Honduras," he says. "Your job is to protect the nature, the forest, the animals. But the job for the bad people is to destroy everything." Martinez knows of rangers who have been beaten and killed in retaliation for turning in illegal woodcutters and poachers. The fact that he now makes a living showing people the value of the park's trees and wildlife is a privilege that he hardly could have dreamed.

"I love my job," he says. "People all over the world come to hear me tell about the nature of Honduras. Is unbelievable, no? Like the falls! Almost there!"

Almost. For an hour and a half more we climb accompanied by the bubbly warble of the Montezuma oropendola and the high whistle of purple-crowned fairy hummingbirds. Then we plunge 400 feet through a tangle of rock and vines. Martinez nurses us down with motherly caution.

"Loose rock!" he calls. "Spiny branch! Very slippery!"

Suddenly we burst into the open, where Unbelievable Fall's sun-drenched exclamation point of water tumbles 80 feet through dense jungle. I shimmy out of shoes and dive in. True enough, the water here is unbelievably clear and gorgeous. And



unbelievably cold.

#### DROP CAP

Two days later and five miles west of the lodge, I'm on a different river trail when guide Jose Maria Calderón issues a challenge.

"You eat the termite before?" Calderón asks offhandedly. "Is good."

I hesitate for a moment. "You first."

He pokes a hole in a brain-shaped termite nest, which clings to a nearby sapling. Red termites swarm up his index finger. Calderón sticks it in his mouth. "Mmmmm," he murmurs. "Taste like chicken."

My bluff called, I lick a finger, swipe up a few dozen insects, and chew quickly to keep the insects from devouring my tongue.

We are a few hundred yards up the trail, which climbs through a recently refurbished access area along the Zacate River. Narrow enough to cross by hopping a few boulders, the river pours off the northern flanks of the park's highest mountains in the La Ruidosa waterfall, a cascade out of proportion to the river's small size. Calderón punctuates our conversation with the names of singing birds. Barred antshrike. Brown-hooded parrot. Slaty-tailed trogon. Ten years ago he toiled in the chemical-laced pineapple plantations that ring the park's coastal plain, a machete in hand and little hope for a future different from the next muddy row of fruit. Then he landed a job in a supermarket, which paid him enough to take time off for English classes and the nature guide-training course sponsored by the USAID and Pico Bonito National Park. He's now a full-time guide for the Lodge at Pico Bonito.

In fact, much of the conservation work at Pico Bonito National Park emphasizes social programs as a bridge to environ-

mental protection. The park's core areas are protected from development, but outside that zone, more than 200 villages are found within the park borders. There locals still cut down the forest with axes and machetes, burn the trees, and plant corn and beans in the ashes. To mitigate human impacts and educate locals about the fragile ecology of the rainforest, FUPNAPIB, the park foundation, assists villages with projects as diverse as watershed protection, tree planting, medical aid, and school construction.

In addition, FUPNAPIB recently installed trail bridges and interpretive signage along the Zacate River, and completed a new visitor's center on the park's eastern edge, where the Cangrejal River makes a mad 20-mile dash from cloudforest to the Caribbean Sea.

On the Cangrejal I spend an adrenaline-laced day in Pico Bonito, watching the rainforest from under the brim of a rafter's helmet along with Jose "Pepe" Herrero, USAID's regional director for the watershed natural resources project, and a handful of local river guides and whitewater kayakers. The river pours through powerful Class V rapids, supporting a handful of eco-tourism lodges that cling to jungled cliffs. First I plunge over five-foot ledges as the river twists through gravel bars and boulders. Now my rafting crew faces Lava Rapid, a boiling train of six-foot waves where rock walls compress the river into a chute only nine feet wide.

Jose Herrero, USAID's regional director, taps me on the knee. "If you are thrown from the raft," he warns, "be careful of *revolcadero*. The Maytag." It's the paddler's term for tumbling in a rapid like a towel in a clothes dryer. I tighten my grip on the paddle.

In 2001, these rapids came close to drying up when plans were announced to dam the Cangrejal for a hydroelectric project. Community activists, including Herrero, fought the dam bitterly. Although conservationists caution that dam plans are never fully shelved, for now, the river flows freely, and the campaign to halt the dam has helped many Hondurans appreciate the river's natural splendor. "I bring congressmen and agency ministers to the Rio Cangrejal, and they tell me, 'This looks like another country,' " as if they had no idea their homeland is so beautiful, Herrero says, while we catch our breath in an eddy below Lava Rapid. "The most enlightened people in Honduras are only now learning what we have here."

With that threat averted, FUPNAPIB recently opened a soaring footbridge over the river. The USAID brought in American trails and education experts to lead a three-week course on interpretive exhibits. It still takes creativity and planning, but a savvy visitor can now schedule a multi-day hike into Pico Bonito or take a mountain bike or mule tour of local villages.

"Not so long ago," Guillermo Anderson, FUPNAPIB's former president earlier mused, "it was crazy to tell Hondurans who were growing beans from a hole in the ground that people will come here to see a hummingbird, and that their kids will make money taking people down the river in rafts. But it is no longer just a dream."

#### DROP CAP

Late one night at the Lodge at Pico Bonito, David Anderson and I sprawl under ceiling fans hung from the dining hall porch. After exploring the threats to Pico Bonito National Park from dams, poaching, and illegal logging, it is a guilty pleasure to retreat back to the lodge. Suddenly we hear a frantic call from the darkened grounds.

"Dah-veed! Dah-veed!"

Jose Maria Calderón takes the porch steps in one leap. In a hushed tone he says: "Dah-veed. Black-and-white owl."

Anderson leaps up without a word and tears off into the darkness. I follow, and after a hundred-yard-dash we skid to a stop under a pair of tall *Cecropia peltata* trees, which locals call *guaruma*. Two spotlights illuminate the striking, aptly named black and white owl with an orange beak the color of Halloween candy.

For five long minutes we don't speak a word. Then Anderson leans over and whispers to me: "A lifer. I have seen more than 500 Honduran birds. But never this."

A few more moments of silence pass.

"*Tantos años*," Anderson murmurs. So many years.

Behind him, Calderón, the pineapple laborer turned nature guide, whispers a reply. I'm not sure whether he's speaking of the bird and its magical appearance, or the lodge, or the park, or perhaps of his native country that seems to be embracing its natural wonders right before his eyes.

"*Sus sueño becho realidad*," he says.

Here, dreams really do come true.



#### Honduras: Making the Trip

Honduras has nonstop air service from Atlanta, Houston, Miami, New Orleans, New York City, Newark, and Dallas. La Ceiba, the north coast city closest to Pico Bonito National Park, is a 30-minute flight from the La Mesa International Airport in San Pedro Sula. The Lodge at Pico Bonito ([www.picobonito.com](http://www.picobonito.com); toll-free from the United States and Canada at 888-428-0221) is the perfect gateway to the park, and it can help arrange ground transport from La Ceiba. Peak season rates, January-April, start at \$240 double occupancy a night, including a full

breakfast in the lodge restaurant, where other meals are also served daily. In addition to the lodge's on-site amenities and guided birding tours, horseback riding, archaeological walks, snorkeling, and kayaking are offered. To begin planning your trip, visit [www.picobonito.org](http://www.picobonito.org), one of the few English websites on the region. Another helpful resource is *Honduras Tips*, the country's official travel guide, available at [www.hondurastips.honduras.com](http://www.hondurastips.honduras.com), and Cangrejal Ecotourism ([www.cangrejal.com](http://www.cangrejal.com)), a collaboration of 10 tourism services in the Rio Cangrejal corridor.

