

Markus Jais: *You started the Belize Raptor Research Institute (BRRI) in 2008. What are the goals of the organization?*

Ryan Phillips: Our mission is to help protect Neotropical raptors throughout the Americas utilizing the “sound science” approach. BRRI strives to learn about raptors in the wild through extensive field research while raising awareness through educating and training local and international communities about raptor conservation. Our objectives are to better understand Neotropical raptors through field research; provide educational outreach and information to local communities; train future conservationists and biologists; provide volunteer and internship opportunities; and form partnerships with local and international wildlife conservation groups to help protect and better manage raptors in the wild. We are currently studying the Stygian Owl, Solitary Eagle, and the three Hawk-eagle species found in Belize.

MJ: *What threats to raptors exist in Belize?*

RP: Shooting is the biggest threat to raptors here. Belize is still relatively intact and has much forest remaining, so habitat loss is not as big a threat like in most other Central American countries. However, Belize is a rapidly growing country and this will become a much bigger issue in the future. But, for species with large home-ranges, such as the Solitary Eagle, immatures need to disperse over

Ryan Phillips in Belize © BRRI



huge areas and therefore need large contiguous tracts of forest. This is important for species with low population sizes and potentially isolated populations to maintain genetic diversity and population viability. Connectivity is of concern as Central America and Mexico have lost a lot of their forest.

MJ: *What do you see as the future priorities for raptor research and conservation in Belize in the coming years?*

RP: Currently, the Belize government is reassessing its protected areas, which could pose a great threat not only to raptors, but to all biodiversity in Belize. Belize is growing hyper exponentially so the need for more resources and more land will increase dramatically. Priorities will include working closely with the Forest Department to justify preserving these protected areas and not converting them to developed areas. Before we can do this we must learn all we can about the species and come up with sound management and action plans. Also, the involvement of local peoples is a must. There must be incentives for Belizeans to protect their biodiversity, which can be accomplished through training locals in conservation biology and field research. All too often conservation organizations have no or limited community involvement, but through education and research opportunities this can change. Raptor conservation in Belize is going to take community involvement, pride, working closely with the government and conservation organizations, and sound research and management. I feel there is a bright future for raptors in Belize, as Belizeans take great pride in their country.

MJ: *Cat conservationists from Panthera are working on a Jaguar corridor across the Neotropics. Belize is one of the countries along the corridor and there is a planned southern and central Jaguar corridor in Belize. Can this initiative also have positive effects on raptors like the Harpy Eagle and other species?*

RP: Actually this corridor, which links the northern and southern portions of Belize, was purchased and established as a protected area this year. It is now called the Labouring Creek Jaguar Corridor Wildlife Sanctuary. http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2010/08/10/belize_sets Aside land for jaguar. This was such a critical acquisition by Panthera and others that not only benefits jaguars, but all species in Belize, especially Tapirs, all the cat species, Harpy Eagles, and Crested Eagles, just to name a few. As I talked about above, connectivity will pose great threats in the future in Belize and already is having a grave impact on populations throughout Central America. This acquisition is a great leap forward in conserving the biodiversity in Belize by using the Jaguar as an umbrella species. In the past we were not focused on connectivity and linking populations, but now we are making strides in this growing discipline of corridor ecology.

MJ: *How can people help the BRRI?*

RP: BRRI is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization, so we are funded by private donations and grants. Currently, we are looking for funding to build a headquarters to house our field assistants, staff, and other researchers in the Mountain Pine Ridge where we have 15 acres. This will also assist in raptor conservation, as we can have schools and education groups visit the facility to learn about raptors and get them excited about raptors. This would be the hub for raptor conservation in the region. With your help we can make this dream a reality. To learn more, you can contact us at belizeraptorresearchinstitute@yahoo.com.

MJ: *What was your most amazing experience with raptors?*



RP: Wow, what a great question. I have so many memorable raptor moments, but probably the most amazing was seeing three of the rarest raptors in the neotropics tangling. A soaring adult Solitary Eagle carrying a Basilisk lizard was calling continuously to let the juvenile Solitary know it had food, when all of sudden a stooping juvenile Black-and-White Hawk-Eagle comes out of nowhere and starts bombing the Solitary. When the eagles would come close to one another they would both flip upside down, but did not lock

Ryan Phillips training local biologists © BRRI

talons. These went on for about 5 minutes then a recently released Orange-breasted Falcon (part of The Peregrine Fund's conservation project for this species) came in to the mix calling and stooping the Black-and-White Hawk-Eagle. In the same frame I had all three species. I enjoyed this with my raptor friends, Marta Curti, Yeray Seminario, Roni Martinez, Jenn Sinasac, and Geraldo Garcia. Roni has a great video of me screaming like a little kid in the background! We were all blown away! But seeing my only wild Crested Eagle, observing a Harpy Eagle feeding on a porcupine, watching the only known Solitary Eagle nest, and observing a female adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle feeding her chick are all up there.

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