



COLUMBUS
LUXURY TRAVEL

Guatemala

WILDLIFE GUIDE



A close-up photograph of a spotted gecko, likely a Leopard Gecko, with brown and black spots on its body and large, dark eyes. The gecko is positioned in the upper half of the page, with its head and front legs visible.

GUATEMALA WILDLIFE GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Guatemala is home to an impressive amount of native birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, with over 1200 documented and many more undocumented species. This is due to the nearly 20 different ecosystems and 300 microclimates. Although many animal species are found in the wetland areas of the country, most of the animals reside in the lowland forest regions. In an effort to preserve these natural wonders, Guatemala has created 118 wildlife reserves. The Tikal National Park, for instance, is a dense forest area, which is home to many foxes, monkeys, jaguars, and toucans. Another popular location for mammals is the Laguna Lachua National Park, which is home to at least 120 different mammal species.

The wildlife in Guatemala includes an almost endless list of species such as the iguana, sea turtle, crocodile, snake, howler, stork, spider monkey, ape, tapir, puma, jaguar, deer, ocelot, monkey, scarlet macaw, peccary, and many types of rodents. The Birds of Guatemala include the national bird the Quetzal and swans, geese, ducks, pelicans, toucans, hawks, vultures and eagles. There are also many types of aquatic wildlife such as sea turtles, whales and porpoises.



The Jaguar is the largest cat in the Western Hemisphere, or New World, and is the third largest cat in the world. The Jaguar is part of the four “big cats” along with the lion, tiger, and leopard. They can be found from Mexico to Central America and some have been spotted as far south as Argentina. Spotted similarly to a leopard, the jaguar is of a sturdier build and behaves more closely in nature to a tiger. The jaguar will usually find its home in the jungle and forested areas, making the Department of Petén in Guatemala a perfect location for this solitary animal. The jaguar is a stalk and ambush predator and will select prey opportunistically. This apex predator plays a vital role in stabilizing the surrounding ecosystem by regulating the population of its prey and is considered a “keystone” species. The jaguar has developed one of the most powerful bites among other big cats and uses this as its primary method for killing its prey. The jaguar also enjoys water and they are commonly found near water sources.

The jaguar is one of the most revered animals of Mesoamerican cultures with iconographic examples dating back to the pre-classic period (2000 BCE–200 CE). In Mayan mythology, the jaguar depicted different gods and demigods and was considered protectors and transformers. The jaguar was, and still is, associated with a spiritual companion to the Mayan Aj’quij’, or the spiritual guide, which protect them as they transform and cross over to the spirit world. Mayan sculptures, temples, stelae, and pottery often depicted images of gods with jaguar attributes. Since the jaguar is associated with the nighttime, the jaguar gods were usually also associated with the underworld, as the nighttime is associated with ancestors and the spirit world. The Maya’s underworld is also correlated with the source of water, the jaguar’s natural connection to water reinforced their position as an underworld god. Plants also originate from the underworld making the jaguar related with fertility, as well. The Mayan ruling class would be the only Mayans to wear jaguar pelts and would adopt the jaguar as an element of their ruling name.





PANTHER

The Panther, also known as the Cougar or Puma, is the second heaviest cat in the Western Hemisphere. These large cats reside within Guatemala's highlands and forested areas. Although the Panther is not as commonly seen as they once were, the population in Guatemala still remains stronger than that of North America. These ambush predators pursue a large variation of prey, which include deer and livestock, as well as smaller prey such as insects and rodents. The Panther is territorial and reclusive, and will avoid human contact when possible.





There are hundreds of different bird species that live in Guatemala. The Quetzal is the national bird of Guatemala and is found in forest and woodland areas as well as humid highland areas. The “quetzal” is named from the indigenous Nahuatl language quetzalli [ke-t-sal-i], meaning “large brilliant tail feather”. The Nahuatl root of quetz meaning “stand up” is used to refer to the birds plume of tail feathers. The word “quetzal” originally described the resplendent quetzal and the long-tailed quetzal of the regions of southern Mexico and Central America with the highest population of Quetzal birds in Guatemala’s vast forests. The bird’s name also became the name of Guatemala’s currency.

Other birds of interest are the Frigate birds. These large seabirds reside in tropical and subtropical coastal areas of Guatemala. The large black males of this species possess a bright red-orange area of skin called gular sacs on their necks. During mating season the gular sacs are inflated in an effort for the males to attract females.





There are many types of New World Vultures found in Guatemala. These species of vultures differ from Old World Vultures, as they find their food from the carcasses of a deceased animal by smell rather than by sight. This characteristic is not found in Old World Vultures. Among the many different vultures that reside in Guatemala, two are of importance to the Maya culture in Guatemala, the American Black Vulture and the King Vulture. These birds appear as many Mayan hieroglyphics in Maya codices. The most common species of bird represented in these glyphs is the King Vulture with its easily discernible knob on the beak and the bird's clearly distinguished circles representing its eyes. This vulture, unlike the American Black Vulture, was often depicted as a god, one with a human body and the head of a bird. The King Vulture would carry messages between humans and the other gods within Mayan Mythology; it was also often portrayed as Cozcaquauhtli, the 13th day of the month of the Mayan calendar. Conversely, the American Black Vulture was portrayed as a bird of prey and usually connected to death, sometimes shown attacking humans. This glyph depicted the vulture's black color, hooked beak and open nostril, and lacked the knob of the King Vulture.





WHITE-BELLIED CHACHALACAS

White-bellied Chachalacas are residents of the Pacific coast of Guatemala and are only found in Central America from southern Mexico down the coast to Nicaragua. Their white belly makes them distinct as it contrasts greatly with their dull brown breast. Tolerant of human presence, the White-bellied Chachalaca is commonly found in the mangroves along the coast, this bird can be observed foraging for fruits and berries, especially the dates of the Coyol palm, in large groups of 6 or more. Their 5-10 meter high nests are comprised of loose built platforms and can be seen across their distribution range within their habitat.





TOUCAN



There are 3 species of Toucans that find their homes in the areas of Petén and Alta Verapaz, within Guatemala. They are the Emerald Toucanet, the Collared Aracari, and the Keel-billed Toucan. When visiting the areas around Tikal National Park, we challenge you to find all three! These birds are native to the Western Hemisphere and are found in tropical and subtropical areas. Toucans are most recognizable by their large and colorful bills, sometimes over half the length of their short compact bodies. These birds also have short, yet strong legs, with rounded long tails. Using their bills, the Toucan is frugivorous, meaning they are fruit eating. Although they sometimes feed from insects and small lizards, their frugivorous diet is important to Guatemala's ecosystem as they serve as vectors, dispersing seeds for fruit trees.





Iguanas are commonly found throughout the forested regions in Guatemala. These reptiles spend much of their time in the trees, but can also be found on the ground foraging for food or enjoying their time in the sun. The Iguanas' principal sources of food come from plants, as they are primarily herbivores, yet many juvenile Iguanas may consume insects. Residents of Guatemala commonly see iguanas, and they are often treated as part of the indigenous peoples' diet.





Guatemala's coast is a special place for several species of Sea Turtles. These include the Olive Ridley, the Leatherback, the Hawksbill, and the Eastern Pacific Green. Sea turtles are important elements of Guatemala's history and culture. Akazul, an organization focused on the conservation and preservation of Guatemala's natural resources and marine and coastal environment, explain that, "sea turtles are a 'keystone' species that play an integral role in the health, structure and complex functioning of marine and coastal habitats. They are important indicators of ecosystem health and also act as 'connectors' between marine and coastal environments". With the threat of unlimited legal egg harvesting and the accidental capture in fishing and shrimping nets, the sea turtle is at risk, which can have a dramatic effect on the marine ecosystem. Programs such as Akazul, located on the southern coastal area, San Carlos University Center for Conservation Studies (CECON), in Monterrico, and ARCAS in Hawaii, are dedicated to the conservation of these important marine animals. Both CECON and ARCAS welcome visitors to their visitors' center and hatchery where participants can spend less than \$10 to experience the release of these animals back to the ocean.

Olive Ridley

Hawksbill

Eastern Pacific Green

Leatherback





GUATEMALAN BLACK HOWLER MONKEY

The Guatemalan Black Howler Monkey is the largest monkey found in the New World, or Western Hemisphere. They are only found in Belize, Guatemala and up to Mexico around the Yucatan Peninsula. The Guatemalan Black Howler is similar to other species of howler monkeys, which allow them to follow a folivorous diet, which consists of mostly leaves. Their high shearing crests on their molars help them eat their leafy diet. The male Guatemalan Black Howler also has an enlarged hyoid bone. This enlarged bone is near the vocal cords and amplifies the male howler's call. Using their call, they locate other males of the species without utilizing much of their energy. Since leaves are a low-energy diet, the enlarged hyoid bone allows them to preserve their energy. Howling will usually be heard at dawn and dusk.





Excessively long and thin limbs inspired the name of the Spider Monkey. Their skillful, flexible prehensile tails are hairless and resemble fingertips complete with skin grooves. The adaptation of the Spider Monkey's tail (up to 89 centimeters in length) for climbing in the trees for their arboreal life gives the monkey, in some degree, a fifth hand. These unique monkeys are only found in the New World in the tropical forests from southern Mexico down to Brazil and common to the Petén region in Guatemala. This species of monkey requires large territories of undisturbed tropical forest, therefore, they are considered an indicator species and are threatened by the destruction of their ecosystem through the growth of agriculture in their habitat.





The Tapir is a large browsing animal. Animals that browse feed off of leaves, shoots, berries, and fruits that are found off of the ground from plants and shrubs in wooded jungle areas. Browsers differ from grazers, as grazers eat grass or low vegetation. The endangered (due mostly to hunting and habitat loss) tapir is similar in appearance to a pig, with an elongated prehensile snout called a proboscis. The proboscis is very flexible and able to move in every direction, allowing the tapir to reach foliage that would normally be out of reach. The tapir is the largest wild land mammal found from Mexico to South America, measuring 6.5 feet in length and up to 4 feet tall and can weigh up to 880 pounds. A tapir's thick skin, large body, and ability to run quickly allow them to avoid many predators, such as the jaguar and crocodiles. They are also quite fond of the water, spending much of their time feeding on vegetation underwater.





The unique Kinkajou is a nocturnal mammal found in the rainforest that is related to the raccoon and often mistaken for a ferret or monkey. The kinkajou, also known as the Honey Bear or la llorona, is usually around 5 pounds and measures about 20 inches in body, with a tail that also measures 20 inches. Equipped with sharp teeth it is classified in the order of Carnivora, yet primarily feeds on fruit. The name Honey Bear was bestowed on the animal because captive kinkajous will enthusiastically eat honey. Native to Central America, the kinkajou is tree dwelling and although not rare, it is infrequently observed by people since it is strictly nocturnal. Similar to the related raccoon, kinkajous have notable manipulatory abilities, which rivals primates. Similar to the Spider Monkey the Kinkajou also has a shorthaired, fully prehensile tail, which is used as a fifth appendage for climbing. Yet, their tail is not used for reaching food. Their tail differentiates them from their closely related Bassaricyon, commonly called the Olingo, also found in Central America.

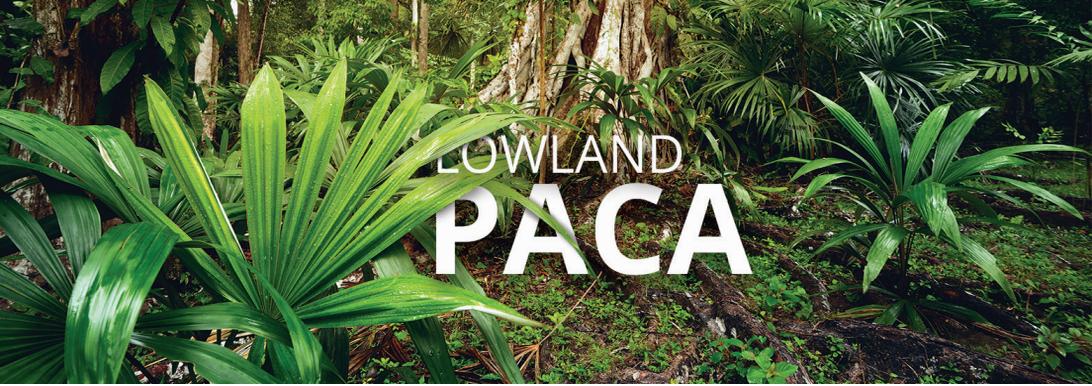




AGOUTI

An agouti is a large rodent related to the guinea pig, although they look similar they are larger and have longer legs. The Central American Agouti is named after the region that it is commonly found within. The Central American Agouti is slightly smaller (6.6-9.3 pounds) than those found in South America (6.6-11.5 pounds) and are more red and orange in color rather than brown. Agoutis are found in Guatemala's rainforest and wooded areas and conceal themselves in hollow tree trunks or in burrows. Wild agoutis are timid and shy and will quickly flee from humans. They enjoy fruit, leaves, and roots and can often be found in groups of 100 when feeding. With exceptional strong jaws and sharp teeth, the agouti is one of the only animals that can open a Brazil nut without tools.





The Lowland Paca is a rodent found throughout southern Mexico and Central and South America. The name “Paca” comes from the Tupi language and means awake or alert. The name used for the Paca in Mexico and Central America is “Tepezcuintle”, which originates from the Nahuatl language, which means “mountain dog”. Nahuatl is an indigenous language coming from the Mesoamerican people commonly referred to as Aztec. The Lowland Paca is a quite nocturnal animal that prefers a life of solitude. Its diet will include leaves and stems, roots, seeds, and especially fruit. The paca is also an avid climber and will feed off of fruit in trees. It lives in forested areas in underground burrows.





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