Mammals of Belize

What makes a mammal?

There are over 40,000 mammals on planet Earth, some live on land and others in water, but they all share certain characteristics. Mammals are a group of animals with vertebrae or backbone, and their bodies are covered with hair. Mammals also produce milk which allows them to nurse their young and spend a lot of time with them as they are growing up. Mammals are endothermic or warm-blooded, which means that they can regulate their own body temperature. This is the group of animals which humans belong to.

Belize has approximately 145 species of mammals living within its boundaries. Mammals exist within all the different habitats of Belize, from the manatee and dolphins of the coastal zone, to the 5 different species of wildcats which live deep within our lush broadleaf forests.

The wild mammals of Belize tend to be very secretive and mostly nocturnal. This makes them extremely difficult to see. They usually see, hear, or smell you long before you know they are near by. Forest dwelling mammals do not stand out in the open for easy viewing, but instead
climb through the canopy or scurry over the forest floor well ahead of you. That is one reason the Belize Zoo is such a special place. Here you can see many of the mammals found in Belize's forests.

A visit to The Zoo is the best way to get an introduction to the mammals of Belize, and to understand why it is important to protect the habitats that sustain them. Here at the Zoo you get a chance to get up close and personal with Belize's National Animal, the Central American Tapir. As you walk around the Zoo you will see spider monkeys, white-tailed deer, coatimundis, white-lipped peccaries, and Belize's five wildcat species. You can even give a jaguar a "high five" by doing a Jaguar Encounter.

The Birds of Belize

What makes a bird?

Birds are a group of winged, two-legged animals that also have a backbone just like mammals. They are warm blooded like mammals, but do not have hair on their bodies; instead they have feathers. All birds lay eggs and most of them incubate the eggs with their warm, fluffy bodies.

Belize supports over 580 species of birds. This includes both resident and migratory species. Birds thrive in all of Belize's habitats. Wading birds congregate along the coastline and inner lagoons. The grasslands and savannas provide seeds for the many finches, and hunting grounds for keen-eyed soaring raptors. Tall emergent trees provide nesting sites for giant birds.
such as the Harpy Eagle and Jabiru Stork. In our tropical forests there is an astonishing diversity of birds, such as parrots, toucans, mot mots and others.

**Watching birds in the tropical forests of Belize** can be difficult at times, but extremely rewarding for birders. The thick vegetation, and the typical behavior of quick, seemingly random movements of many forest birds, make them often difficult to see. Many birds also live in the upper canopy of the forest, making it a strain to be constantly looking upward. Often times we hear but do not get to see them. However, early morning and late afternoon are excellent times to bird watch, as most bird species are feeding or moving to new locations during these times.

**The Belize Zoo has always had a strong collection of bird species**, from parrots such as scarlet macaws, to vultures and hawks, and wading birds, including the iconic Jabiru Stork. A part from birds in enclosures the habitat around the zoo supports a variety of wild birds, that come and go when they chose to. For another up close experience you can do a Toucan Encounter with "Runt" our ambassador Keel-billed toucan.

**Reptiles and Amphibians of Belize**

The exact number of reptiles and amphibians is unknown as it is often difficult to study these two groups due to their habitats. To date there is approximately 139 species of reptiles and amphibians recorded in Belize, with 62 of those being snakes.

**What makes a reptile?**

Reptiles are back-boned animals covered with scales. They lay shelled eggs similar to birds, or keep the eggs inside their bodies till they hatch. Reptiles are grouped into turtles, crocodiles, snakes and lizards.

**What makes an amphibian?**

Amphibians are back-boned animals that have smooth, thin skin and require water to keep their bodies moist. They can be found under rocks, alongside streams, in swamps and marshes;
places which are not the most comfortable for humans. This group includes salamanders and frogs.

Reptiles, unlike amphibians, are not restricted to wet habitats because they have scales. Snakes and lizards can be found in any habitat, from the soil and leaf litter of the forest floor, to the upper canopy of the rainforest, and the mangrove forests of the coastline and Cayes of Belize.

The Belize Zoo supports a small display of the more common snakes of Belize including the infamous Fer-de-lance. Humans tend to have a strong fear of snakes, although venomous snakes are not frequently sighted, as they are mostly nocturnal, and will only attack a human if threatened. The Zoo includes the non-venomous Boa Constrictor in its many environmental education programs in order to teach persons the importance of snakes.
We focus on the positive aspects of snakes. Snakes help to keep the population of more prolific creatures which are harmful to humans balanced, such as rats, mice, and insects of the tropics. A visit to the Zoo might give you a chance to meet "Balboa" our friendly boa constrictor.

The Zoo is also home to two species of crocodiles; the Morelet's and American crocodile. "Rose" the American Crocodile is an ambassador for her species as she also accompanies "Balboa" on educational programs to educate children and adults about their importance.