LAS CUEVAS EXPLORER

The Official Bulletin of Las Cuevas Research Station September 2026, Issue #1

From The Station Manager

Welcome to the first Las Cuevas Research Station Bulletin - Las Cuevas Explorer. We are excited to introduce this new bi-annual publication which will highlight the important research and education efforts undertaken at Las Cuevas Research Station (LCRS). Through this Bulletin we will share the stories, wildlife and people that make LCRS a special place.

On February 27, 2026 a renewed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD) and the Belize Forest Department for management and administration of Las Cuevas Research Station, which heralds another chapter of exciting discoveries and conservation of the Chiquibul ecosystem.

FCD is grateful for the opportunity to continue this important partnership for another 10 years and thankful for the ongoing support and confidence placed on our work.

As we look to the future, FCD envisions LCRS as a premier research and education facility that fosters collaboration, innovation and conservation.

Thank you for being a part of the Las Cuevas community and enjoy exploring!

Jane Champion
Las Cuevas Research Station Manager

A Look At The Past

Hon. Manuel Esquivel and Dr. Neil Chalmers signing MOU in 1997

The history of Las Cuevas Research Station began in 1992 with a MoU signed between the Forest Department and the Natural History Museum of London (NHM). The agreement envisioned a collaboration with other parties on scientific and educational disciplines.

By 1994, the museum had made major long-term investments in building construction. Subsequently, on the 16th of June, 1997 a MoU concerning Scientific and Educational cooperation was signed between Prime Minister Hon. Manuel Esquivel and NHM Director Dr. Neil Chalmers. The primary purpose of the Station was to facilitate terrestrial biological and environmental research.

On December 1997, Chris Minty took the position of Research Station Manager. The MoU arrangement ended in October 2004, thereafter Maya Forest Enterprises Limited (MFE) took operations of LCRS up to January 2009. After 2009, the station traversed through much uncertainty after the passing away of Station Manager, Nicodemus Bol in 2011. On the 15th September, 2015 a ten-year MoU was signed between the Government of Belize and FCD to continue scientific research and education.

The Last Ten Years

Since 2016 to 2025, over 3,650 researchers and students visited Las Cuevas, gaining invaluable experience through field courses and knowledge exchanged by FCD staff. This influx of researchers did not only enhance our capacity-building efforts but also positioned Las Cuevas as a center for scientific excellence and innovation in the Western Maya Mountains. The full 10-year report can be found on the FCD website: www.fcdbelize.org

With an improved security and stability of the Chiquibul ecosystem, the LCRS outlook is promising for research in the natural and cultural sciences. As we look to the future, FCD envisions LCRS as a premier research and educational facility that fosters collaboration, innovation, and conservation.

Our mission is to:

i. Enhance Research Capabilities: Continue to provide cutting-edge infrastructure and support for scientific research that advances our understanding of the Chiquibul Forest's biodiversity.

ii. Promote Education and Training: Develop and expand educational programs that inspire and train the next generation of conservationists and scientists.

iii. Strengthen Partnerships: Foster strong relationships with national and international academic institutions, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations to support collaborative research and conservation efforts.

iv. Implement Advanced Monitoring Systems: Utilize advanced technologies for continuous monitoring and assessment of ecological health, ensuring adaptive management practices.

Research Spotlight

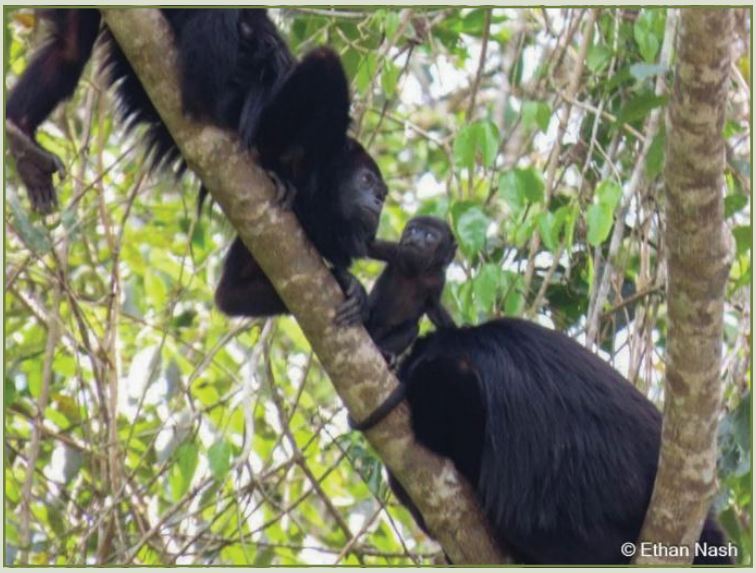
Dr. Holley Moyes and team in December 2025

Dr. Holley Moyes is a Professor of Archaeology at the University of California Merced. Her research specializes in cross-cultural ritual cave use and spatial analyses using GIS and 3D modeling.

Dr. Moyes has been coming to LCRS since 2011 studying the Maya History, both surface site and the cave complex. She is a member of the Las Cuevas Technical Advisory Commission.

Learn more about her research in this presentation on YouTube. The Las Cuevas section begins at 59:50
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7dsjrZqlYs&t=4498s

Wildlife Highlight



Howler infant born in April of 2026

On any given night sleeping at Las Cuevas, you can hear groups of Howler Monkeys howling throughout the forest. One group begins to howl, triggering another group nearby to respond as they defend their territories.

Howler Monkeys can be found throughout the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains, where they spend much of their time high in the forest canopy.

One particular howler group lives close to the research station. For generations, they have lived in the area and become accustomed to the presence of researchers and guests. When they are resting quietly in the canopy, it is possible to walk right under them without noticing. Their territory stretches from the Cave Trail, across the main entrance road, and over to the fig tree behind the bunk house. Students in March 2026 were lucky enough to spot a new infant female born in the group.

Researcher Testimony

Testimony and photo credit: Ivan Samayoa

Ivan Samayoa is a biologist from El Salvador. He is a founding member of the Bat Conservation Program of El Salvador and a member of the NGO Asociación Territorios Vivos El Salvador. He travels to Las Cuevas with the University of South Wales as part of their field school as the role of bat scientist, teaching about monitoring techniques for bats.

"I'd like to say first that I've enjoyed all the expeditions at LCRS, sharing great time with people and capturing bats, every night has been an adventure spending good time surrounded by the jungle; and checking the list it's hard for me to pick just one as my favorite species, because all of them are beauty in their own way, and like them all, but I would say that my favorite bat captured at LCRS so far is The Fringe-lipped bat *(Trachops cirrhosus)*, and I have few reasons: first of all, I wasn't expecting to catch it, because they're related to water bodies (and water is hard to find on this part of the jungle) so I was surprised when we got it in the net the first time; my second reason is the way they look, having these fringed surrounding their mouth, and having a fluffy fur all over their bodies in brownish color, and last but not least, we've had catch it in every visit to Las Cuevas, so we're hoping to find their roost at some point.

There might be more species to find at Las Cuevas, and I really would like to keep visiting and monitoring bats for many years more, catch them and share these findings with the world."

Monitoring Update

Motus tower being installed with the help of University of South Wales in March 2026.

We are excited to have a new piece of research equipment installed at LCRS: a Motus tower. Motus stations detect and log signals from tagged wildlife, providing valuable insight into migration routes and movement patterns, particularly for birds and bats. Las Cuevas is an excellent location for a Motus tower since it helps fill in a large data gap in Belize, namely the Western-Maya Mountains.

Motus is used to study movement and behaviour of birds, bats, and large insects that have been fitted with transmitter tags. There are Motus stations worldwide, most being in North and Central America. The equipment was donated by Birds Canada and connects to a larger network of stations, monitoring wildlife movement and migration. Up to the time of this report, the station has detected 3 wood thrushes that have migrated from the US and a lesser yellowlegs that has migrated from South America. The individual bats that were tagged in March by Derek Morningstar were also detected at the station.

Many thanks to Dereck Morningstar and Birds Canada for donating the equipment. Motus data is an open access program. You can find the Las Cuevas station by using the "Explore" tab at: www.motus.org.

Life At Las Cuevas

"What an honor it has been to experience this beautiful place. Thank you for all you do to protect the Chiquibul and her residents"

Amelia Tauber, Sacramento State University

"Beautiful place and so thankful to learn from everyone here."

Olivia Matthews, Wheaton College

Camera Trap Corner

Puma image captured on 50-hectare trail

In December of 2025, a total of 8 trail cameras were installed along the trails at Las Cuevas Research Station. Observations obtained from the cameras include white lipped peccaries, ocelot, possums, tamandua, and jaguars. They have been running continuously and are checked approximately every 2 months.

This image, captured in August on the 50-hectare plot trail at LCRS, shows a beautiful puma *(Puma concolor)*. Also known as cougar, mountain lion, panther or red tiger, the puma is the most widely dispersed cat species in the Americas and is found at Las Cuevas. Pumas are rarely seen or heard, but they are regularly captured by non-invasive camera traps along the trails at LCRS. This image highlights the species' slender frame and long hind legs, for leaping and attacking prey species.

Recent Publication

Scaled Antpitta captured via mist netting, photo credit: Anne Høydal

In March 2024, a University of South Wales research group captured a Scaled Antpitta *(Grallaria guatimalensis)* during mist netting research at LCRS, providing the first confirmed record of the species in Belize.

The Scaled Antpitta a shy, ground-dwelling bird. Although suspected to be present in the country, this marks the first official record. Less than a week after the mist net capture, an individual was also recorded on a camera trap.

Though the Scaled Antpitta is listed as "Least Concern" due to its wide distribution—from southern Mexico to Bolivia—it had never been recorded in Belize. The nearest known population was about 140 kilometers south in Guatemala. Researchers suggest this may not be a new arrival, but a previously overlooked resident of Belize's submontane forests due to its secretive, ground-dwelling habits.

"This is an exciting and unexpected discovery in a forest that has been studied for decades," said researcher Dr. David Lee. "It raises important questions about how many more 'hidden' species might be living quietly in Belize's highland forests."

Read the publication here:
https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/en/publications/first-record-of-scaled-antpitta-grallaria-guatimalensis-in-belize/

Upcoming Opportunities

With funding from the Protected Areas Conservation Trust, FCD has purchased new tree identification signs for the Maya Trail. Our next project is to create a self-guided trail booklet and we are looking for a volunteer to assist with its development. This volunteer would spend approximately 2-4 weeks at the Research Station, working alongside the Las Cuevas Staff to interpret the medicinal uses of the plants and develop a booklet that guests can use while exploring the trails. Drawing skills and experience in environmental communication would be an asset. If you are interested, please contact: fcd.lcrs@gmail.com

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