

The Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in Southern Belize, below the jagged peaks of the Maya Mountain's Cockscomb Range. The name '*cockscomb*' comes from the jagged profile of the range as seen from the north or the south.

The Cockscomb Basin rises from about 300 feet above sea level to 3675 feet at the summit of Victoria Peak, one of the country's highest points. The basin was formed by an ancient granite dome which once filled the basin. When molten granite intruded into the basin, it cooked the surrounding rock into what is called "metasediments" - extremely hard rock. Since granite erodes faster than metasediment, the granite gradually disappeared, leaving a perfectly formed basin in its place. The basin is ringed on three sides by the high ridges and mountains of metasediments, and is accessed through a six-mile entrance road over Cabbage Haul Gap from the Southern Highway.

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History

- The area was declared a forest reserve in 1984, and a portion was set aside in 1986 as a wildlife sanctuary. Then in 1993, the entire basin was declared a wildlife sanctuary. Recent movement toward appending on the Trio valley has been taken. Over 100,000 acres are now protected in response to a large international effort to save the large jaguar population of the basin.

- The ancient Maya were the basin's first known human inhabitants. Evidence of their stay is the jungled-covered ruins of Chucil Baalum, a minor ceremonial site from the Classic Period of the Mayan Civilization.

- The Goldsworthy expedition of 1888 made the first known attempt to scale the Cockscomb Range. They also noticed loggers had already entered the basin in pursuit of mahogany and cedar. Logs were floated down the South Stann Creek to the coast where they were hauled to Belize City by tug. Many of the names on the map of the basin still bear the colorful names of the timber camps such as "Sale Si Puede" (leave if you can) and "Go to Hell Camp". All of these camps have been reclaimed by the jungle long ago.

Habitat

- A history of selective logging and hurricanes has created a mosaic of mature and dense secondary forest with a canopy of 40 to 120 feet. The basin is honeycombed by a maze of creeks and tributaries merging to form the headwaters of two major rivers, the Swasey and the South Stann Creek. A part of a third river, the Sittee River, just touches the northern part of the basin.

- The very distinct dry season runs from January to May. During the wet season, between 100 and 180 inches of rain falls. This amount of rain characterizes the basin's vegetation as tropical moist forest.

- The Cockscomb Basin has very shallow granite based soils that are poor in nutrients. Like many tropical forest soils, without the jungle's dense vegetation cover, the heavy rains of the region would cause severe erosion, leaving the basin a virtual wasteland and the rest of the watershed ruined.

- In addition to the jaguar, the Cockscomb Basin's diverse ecosystem protects a sizeable percentage of Belize's plant and animal species, including the endangered ocelot, margay, tapir

and scarlet macaw.

- The Cockscomb Basin has the highest density of jaguars yet recorded anywhere in the world. The jaguar is the third largest member of the cat family in the world. An adult male may weigh up to 200 lbs and measure 6.5 feet from nose to tip of tail. Males maintain overlapping territories of 11 to 16 square miles, while the female's ranges do not overlap and are about a third as large as that of the males.

- The lush jungle of the basin is a birder's paradise, with over 300 recorded species. Some of the more interesting species include the scarlet macaw, great curassow, keel-billed toucan and king vulture. The basin is also home to numerous species of reptiles and amphibians such as the red-eyed tree frog, boa constrictors, and iguanas.

- The jungle itself consists of a myriad of plant species such as the giant tree ferns, orchids, airplants and climbing vines. Some of the tree species include mahogany, ceiba, yemeri and the ubiquitous cohune palm.

Visitor Information

The Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary has an extensive trail system with unique features for hikers at all levels - all looping back to the starting point at the Visitor Center. Swimming in the streams and waterfalls of the basin are a must and a night hike is an awesome experience. The sanctuary is managed by the Belize Audubon Society.

Other amenities include:

- A picnic area
- A camp ground
- Basic accommodations with communal kitchen
- Drinking water is available for cooking and showers.

Pelican Beach is happy to arrange overnight tours and provide pre-cooked meals.

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