

BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK & THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

APRIL 18-28, 2024

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This tour combines two of the richest regions of Texas – the Texas Hill Country and the Trans-Pecos of West Texas – when the birding is at its peak. The lush and scenic Texas Hill Country offers good chances for the two prized area specialties, the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo. The warbler breeds nowhere else in the world and the vireo has an incredibly restricted range in the United States. In addition the Hill Country serves as a meeting point of both eastern and western species with odd pairings such as Common Poorwill and Chuck-will's-widow, Black and Eastern phoebes, Canyon and Carolina wrens, and Field and Black-throated sparrows. Several South Texas specialties reach their northern limits here, with Green Kingfisher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Couch's Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, Long-billed Thrasher, and Olive Sparrow among the possibilities. An overnight in Del Rio might even produce the extremely localized and highly-sought Morelet's Seedeater, as well as our best chance for another South Texas specialty – the massive Ringed Kingfisher. Finally we will spend one evening at a nearby bat cave witnessing the dusk flight of millions of Mexican Free-tailed Bats – truly one of the great natural history spectacles anywhere!



Then it is on to West Texas and Big Bend National Park. The avifauna of Big Bend is typical of that of the southwestern United States, with some Mexican species present for added interest. The Colima Warbler is not known to nest anywhere else in the United States and the handsome Lucifer Hummingbird only in an inaccessible portion of southwestern New Mexico. Zone-tailed Hawk, Gray Hawk, Common Black Hawk, Crissal Thrasher, Gray Vireo (declining), Lucy's Warbler (scarce), Varied Bunting, and Black-chinned Sparrow are among the species that we will target in the Big Bend region. Habitats range from floodplain thickets and sparse desert to cool mountain woodland. Each harbors different birds. In fact, more species have been recorded from Big Bend than any other

national park. This is rugged country. Temperatures can be hot and much of our birding is done on foot, however the rewards can be great both scenically and biologically.



Chisos Mountains of Big Bend NP © Brad McKinney

After three and a half days in Big Bend National Park we will travel north to the Davis Mountains, where grassy plains and rounded peaks provide a gentle contrast to the stark grandeur of Big Bend. Montezuma Quail populations fluctuate cyclically, rising in wet periods and falling in dry ones, but the Davis Mountains are probably the best place in the country to find this boldly patterned but very cryptic species. The birdlife of the Davis Mountains has more affinities with that of the Rockies than it does with that of the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend. Species to expect include Cassin's Kingbird, Western Wood-Pewee, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Violet-green Swallow, Western Bluebird, Black-headed Grosbeak, Hepatic and Western tanagers. Common Black Hawks have nested along Limpia Creek for a number of years and are a possibility, as is Phainopepla.

On our way back to San Antonio on our last birding day, we will visit the famed and incredibly beautiful Caverns of Sonora, a unique Texas Hill Country experience for sure!

April 18, Day 1: Arrival in San Antonio. Participants should plan to arrive in San Antonio today and proceed to the *Hampton Inn & Suites San Antonio Airport* where a room will be reserved in your name. The hotel offers a complimentary shuttle service from the San Antonio International Airport (airport code SAT). We will meet in the hotel lobby at 5:00 p.m. for a quick get-acquainted session followed by dinner.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn & Suites San Antonio Airport, San Antonio

April 19, Day 2: Concan & Frio Bat Cave. A short two hour drive will take us from the relative flatness of San Antonio into the heart of the Texas Hill Country. Along the way we may be delayed by a Crested Caracara, a flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks or fabulous Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. A stop near Uvalde could produce a variety of birds including the likes of Green Kingfisher, Couch's Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay (very scarce), Long-billed Thrasher, Painted Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, and Olive Sparrow, as well as possible migrants. As we near the tiny town of Concan, the diversity of birdlife will explode. Birds abound here with a very interesting mix of eastern, western, and South Texas species all swirled together in one locale.



Canyon Wren © Brad McKinney

Our accommodations for the next two nights, Neal's Lodges, is a rustic, family-operated establishment on the banks of the clear, cool, rushing Frio River. Although the accommodations are basic, the family-style meals and homey atmosphere are delightful. Best of all, birds are everywhere on the grounds of the lodges. The amount of bird song and bird activity here is a real treat. In fact, the grounds of our lodge are one of the birdiest areas around. Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Ash-throated & Brown-crested flycatchers, Black & Eastern phoebes, White-eyed and Yellow-throated vireos, Black-crested Titmouse, Carolina Chickadee, Canyon, Bewick's and Carolina wrens, Long-billed Thrasher, Yellow-throated Warbler, Field Sparrow, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Olive Sparrow, Painted Bunting, Hooded Oriole, and Lesser Goldfinch are all likely. Even the highly sought Black-capped Vireo nests on the grounds here from time to time. Though decidedly uncommon, we have a chance for the tiny Green Kingfisher here as well. There should be plenty of birds to keep us busy throughout the day. After an early dinner, we will head out to the nearby Frio Bat Cave where over ten million Mexican Free-tailed Bats emerge around dusk. The bat exodus is without a doubt one of the great natural history spectacles around! Often raptors are present to cash in on the plentiful buffet. Other species found around the cave include Vermilion Flycatcher, Cave Swallow (over a hundred pairs nest here), Canyon and Rock wrens, Black-throated Sparrow, Painted Bunting, and if we are lucky, Common Poorwill or Chuck-will's-widow.

NIGHT: Neal's Lodges, Concan

April 20, Day 3: Lost Maples, Utopia, & Concan. Our full day in the Hill Country will take us northward to the vicinity of Lost Maples State Natural Area. Here we will seek out the two prized Hill Country specialties, the Black-capped Vireo and the Golden-cheeked Warbler. Neither is easy to find. The vireo can be particularly difficult, but this is the heart of their ranges and we will devote considerable time and effort in trying to locate

them. Along the way, we should also encounter a good variety of other species including Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Yellow-throated Vireo, Eastern Bluebird, Summer Tanager, and possibly Audubon's Oriole (a rare &



Golden-cheeked Warbler © Brad McKinney

localized species in the Hill Country). This should be an excellent and exciting day of birding with potentially great rewards! After dinner, there will be an option to go on an owling excursion with Eastern Screech-Owl (McCall's race) and Chuck-will's-widow as prime targets.

NIGHT: Neal's Lodges, Concan

April 21, Day 4: Concan to Del Rio. Today we will begin to travel westward towards Del Rio with many stops along the way. Park Chalk Bluff, located on the Nueces River, is a scenic and very birdy location that we may visit. Among the many possibilities here are Ringed Kingfisher (decidedly uncommon and reaching its northern limit) and Green Kingfisher. Bell's Vireo, Long-billed & Curve-billed thrashers, and Olive Sparrow are all possible. Not far away, the habitat changes to rolling juniper-covered foothills. The very localized Gray Vireo can sometimes be found here, as well as Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Scott's Oriole. A quick check of the Uvalde Fish hatchery could reveal migrant waterfowl and shorebirds, Great Kiskadee and Orchard Oriole. After lunch in Uvalde, we will drive toward Del Rio. Just watching the countryside change from the lush Hill Country to the stark but scenic Chihuahuan desert will be interesting enough, but we will keep a close eye out for Harris's and Swainson's hawks along the way.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn & Suites, Del Rio

April 22, Day 5: Del Rio; Drive to Big Bend National Park. This morning we will check areas along the Rio Grande with the tiny Morelet's Seedeater as our prime target. This species was just recently discovered in the Del Rio area with only a few individuals present. However, our chances for success are relatively small (and the severe freeze of 2021 may have made those odds even worse as none were seen in 2022 or 2023), but any chance of

finding this rare Mexican tanager makes the effort worthwhile. The river here provides additional chances for Ringed Kingfisher and possibly our best shot at the declining Hooded Oriole.

The afternoon will be devoted to driving to Big Bend National Park with some roadside birding along the way. Following an early dinner this evening we will offer an owling option. Elf Owl, Western Screech-Owl, and Lesser Nighthawk will all be targeted, and some interesting mammal or reptile may cross the road as well.

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend National Park



Elf Owl © Barry Zimmer

April 23, Day 6: The Window Trail & Chisos Basin. Today we will explore the Chisos Basin. Canyon Towhees and Cactus Wrens are common right around the lodge. Black-chinned Sparrows frequent the nearby chaparral. Hepatic Tanagers are sometimes found in the oak-juniper habitat right along the roadside. The bulk of our morning will be spent walking the trail down to The Window (a scenic pour-off of Oak Creek). A four and a half mile round trip hike will take us through a variety of habitats where the birding is superb. Our main target will be the plum-colored Varied Bunting, which resides in this canyon. Other possibilities include White-winged Dove; Acorn and Ladder-backed woodpeckers; Black-crested Titmouse; Verdin; Bewick's, Rock and Canyon wrens; Crissal Thrasher, Blue Grosbeak; and Scott's Oriole. Even the localized Gray Vireo is a possibility as well.

Afternoon plans will be flexible depending on what species we are still missing. Sam Nail Ranch and Dugout Wells, both great migrant traps, are possible destinations.

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend National Park



Colima Warbler © Kevin Zimmer

April 24, Day 7: Boot Springs. This will be our most exciting day – an optional all-day hike into the higher Chisos Mountains to Boot Canyon, the only U.S. home of the Colima Warbler. This is a long hike (nine and a half miles round trip with a nearly 2000 foot elevation gain) with some steep areas, but the trail is good and well-maintained, and we will try to maintain a pace to fit our members. The crisp mountain air and the breathtaking vistas alone are worth the effort. Species of the open hillside woodlands include Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Mexican Jay, Bushtit, Black-crested Titmouse, Bewick's Wren, Hepatic Tanager (uncommon), and Spotted Towhee. The cool woodlands of Boot Canyon attract the Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Cordilleran Flycatcher (scarce), Hutton's Vireo, and the highly-sought Colima Warbler. Often seen overhead are Band-tailed Pigeon, White-throated Swift, and Violet-green Swallow. Some years a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks nests near the pass, and Peregrines are occasionally seen around cliffs. Those who choose not to go on this strenuous hike may bird right around the rooms or go on shorter trails that begin right by the lodge itself.

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend National Park

April 25, Day 8: Rio Grande Village & Cottonwood Campground. Today we will explore the riparian habitats along the Rio Grande. At Rio Grande Village, planted cottonwood groves and thickets of native mesquite and willows combine for excellent bird habitat. Birds are abundant here, including a cornucopia of colorful species such as Vermilion Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Northern Cardinal, Pyrrhuloxia, Blue Grosbeak, Painted Bunting, and Orchard Oriole. Other possibilities include Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Bell's Vireo, and Verdin. For the past fifteen years or so a pair of Common Black Hawks has nested at this location, so we will keep a keen eye out for them as well. As this is the heart of spring migration, a wide variety of western migrant landbirds also will be possible.

In the afternoon we will head to a similar habitat in the southwestern corner of the park called Cottonwood Campground. For the most part species are similar here to Rio Grande Village, but there is a greater likelihood of Gray Hawk (very uncommon to rare), Common Ground-Dove, and Hooded Oriole. We will also check out the awesome scenery of Santa Elena Canyon before returning back to the Basin.

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend National Park

April 26, Day 9: Morning in Big Bend; Afternoon Drive to the Davis Mountains. Our plans this morning will be somewhat flexible depending on what species we are missing. A visit to Blue Creek may be in order (providing chances for Lucifer Hummingbird or Gray Vireo), or a visit to a local private ranch with hummingbird feeders and seed feeders, or we may revisit one of the areas previously covered. This is prime time for migration in West Texas, so we will certainly have many options.

After the awesome starkness of the desert, the drive northward is relieved by the high grassland plateau entered near Marathon. Greater rainfall from this point to the Davis Mountains has formed grassy plains, which give way to woodland on the rounded peaks. After an early dinner, we will spend the early evening searching for the elusive and nearly mythical Montezuma Quail, which may be more numerous here than anywhere else in the country.

NIGHT: Hotel Limpia, Fort Davis

April 27, Day 10: Davis Mountains. Today we bird the higher Davis Mountains. Beginning near the Davis Mountains State Park, we will work our way westward into the heart of the range. The slopes are covered with an open forest of oak, pinyon, and junipers of several species. Here one may find Band-tailed Pigeon, Western Wood-Pewee, Cassin's Kingbird, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Scott's Oriole. At the very top of the road, groves of ponderosa pine straggle down from the inaccessible peaks. Gray Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Violet-green Swallow, Grace's Warbler, and Hepatic Tanager are among the many possibilities.



Lucifer Hummingbird © Brad McKinney

After lunch in Fort Stockton, we will break up our drive back to San Antonio with a visit to the internationally renowned Caverns of Sonora (Sonora, Texas). Sonora, Texas is located on I-10, about two hours east of Fort Stockton and about 2.5 hours west of San Antonio. We will arrive in San Antonio in the early evening where the tour will conclude with a final checklist session and dinner.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn & Suites San Antonio Airport, San Antonio

April 28, Day 11: Departure for Home. Participants may make arrangements to depart San Antonio (airport code SAT) at any time today.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Brad McKinney and Kevin Burke



Brad McKinney began birding during the winter of 1987–88, an exciting year in which many Mexican rarities were recorded in South Texas. His passion for birds has led to numerous birding trips and photography expeditions across North America, Mexico, Central America, and Hawaii. Brad loves pelagic birding and has guided Texas pelagic trips since 1995, many from his home town of South Padre Island. He has been a longtime tour leader at the Rio Grande Birding Festival and has led birding trips across Texas and Mexico. Brad has served on the Texas Bird Records Committee for six years and co-authored *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. He received his degree in biology at the University of Texas at Austin and a master's degree in marine ecology at the University of Texas at Brownsville. Brad's other interests include nature photography, surfing, and snowboarding with his son, Will. He lives at South Padre Island with his wife, Janette, and their two dogs.



Kevin Burke is originally from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. He grew up running around in the woods and trails of Shenandoah National Park. His family spent many summers camping and hiking in the park. One of Kevin's favorite activities was jumping in the river and turning over every rock to see what was underneath. This eventually earned him the nickname "Hellgrammite Kid." This early exposure to the natural world has vaulted into a lifelong obsession with the outdoors. Kevin was introduced to birding while spending summers in Rhode Island at his grandmother's house. She would point out all the feeder birds and help him identify them. These early encounters helped foster a love for birds. An early Ornithology class at Hocking College in Ohio rekindled his love for birds. He has been birding every day since. He went on to get a Bachelor of Science in Ecotourism and Conservation Ecology from the

University of Idaho. Kevin has been involved with leading bird trips in some capacity for almost 20 years. He has led birding trips all throughout the United States, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic. His birding journeys have also taken him to some spectacular locations such as Portugal, Colombia, The Bahamas, and Canada. This is truly a lifelong obsession. He currently resides with his family in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Kevin's wife and two kids also enjoy birding. They have fun kayaking, hiking, and camping in the mountains that surround their home. One of their favorite activities is jumping on the paddle board and kayaks and leisurely floating the French Broad River near their house.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$4,475** per person in double occupancy from San Antonio, Texas). This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 11, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to San Antonio and return from San Antonio, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$1,150**.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (November 20, 2023) prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:

Cancellation by Participant:

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

If participant cancels:

180 days or more before departure date

179 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

Participant's refund will be:

Participant's deposit minus \$250*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded

No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

Cancellation by VENT:

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A “**Force Majeure**” event means any act beyond VENT’s control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will

do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend their **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services** from your point of injury or illness to your **hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, **waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion**, and a “**Cancel for Any Reason**” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: <https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird>; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 14 days of making your tour deposit. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 14 days in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. The primary medical expense benefit is available to U.S. residents only. For this reason, non-U.S. residents will pay an adjusted premium when purchasing a comprehensive policy, which includes all of the other benefits available to U.S. residents. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

Coronavirus (COVID-19):

Concerns about COVID-19 may present uncertainty for those holding travel insurance policies or who are considering future travel and purchasing such insurance. Redpoint features a **Coronavirus FAQ page** on its website that addresses questions and concerns regarding its travel insurance and the impact of COVID-19. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of topics such as policy coverage and limitations, policy modifications, cancellation, refunds, and more.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ page** at the following link:

https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/

Additionally, some countries maintain COVID-19 entry requirements, including mandates to purchase travel insurance covering medical expenses due to COVID-19 illness and in case of quarantine. Ripcord’s comprehensive travel insurance plans are designed to satisfy the various country-specific travel insurance entry requirements. Those who purchase a Ripcord policy will receive a “letter of confirmation” that affirms that the policy satisfies such requirements.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per-person fees apply for each set of travel

arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

BAGGAGE: To prevent crowding in the vehicles, we ask participants to limit their luggage to one medium sized bag per person, plus one carry-on bag. As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest you pack a change of clothes, your binoculars, medication, toiletries, and other essentials in your airline carry-on bag.

CLIMATE: Lows will be in the upper 40s to upper 60s in Big Bend (though it dipped into the lower 30s on our 2015 tour) with highs from the upper 70s to upper 90s (it is even possible to surpass 100 by early May, though not likely). You'll mostly experience temperatures ranging from 85 to 95 degrees in the day, possibly higher at Rio Grande Village (our 2011 tour experienced temperatures ranging from an unexpectedly cold upper 40's to one hundred degrees!). Although we will certainly have hot days in Big Bend, we may still get some cool evenings and some showers; humidity is generally on the low side. Temperatures should be slightly cooler, but humidity higher, in the Hill Country. Rain possibilities are greater in the Hill Country as well.

CLOTHING: You should bring light raingear and a sweater or light jacket. A hat is strongly recommended for sun protection. Dress will be informal throughout: comfortable field clothes – jeans, shorts, tee shirts, etc. **Comfortable walking shoes (i.e. tennis shoes) and a good pair of hiking shoes are essential.**

ACCOMMODATIONS: Neal's Lodges does not provide daily room service. Amenities there are limited (a bath towel and hand towel are provided, as is soap), however items such as in-room coffee, blow dryers, shampoo, and bath mats are not. **Please bring these items if you require them.**

LAUNDRY: Self service laundry machines are available at Neal's Lodges and in Big Bend.

HEALTH: VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

COVID-19: We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying "Up to Date" with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19> for our official statement regarding COVID-19 and the operation of our

tours. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

Insect Repellents – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

INSECT PROTECTION: Chiggers can be a problem in much of Texas and are certainly a possibility in the Hill Country. They are not generally found in Big Bend country. Tucking your pant legs into your socks and spraying around the ankles can help prevent chigger bites. We will likely encounter a few mosquitoes. We recommend that you bring along some insect repellent.

A Note About Chiggers: This tour visits areas where chiggers are known to occur. Chiggers are tiny parasitic mites found in most warm weather areas of the southern United States and the world's tropics. They are especially numerous in grassy areas, where, in the immature stage, they attach themselves to other animals or humans who make contact with the grass as they pass by. Chiggers do not suck blood and the majority of the world's species do not carry disease. They do feed on bodily fluids, however, through a process in which a digestive enzyme is produced by the chigger which essentially liquefies the skin around the area where the chigger is attached. The chigger is not usually attached to the skin for more than a few hours before it either falls off or is knocked off. Our bodies respond by producing a hardened area as a defense against the chigger's digestive enzyme. Though

the chigger may be long gone, it is the presence of the hardened area, and the body's natural process of reabsorbing it that typically causes intense itching, often lasting for a week or more. Chiggers like to attach themselves to areas of thin skin, especially around the ankles, beltline, undergarment lines, knees and elbows.

Chiggers can be avoided by following these procedures:

- Avoid walking, or standing in particular, in areas dominated by grass. These areas are where one is most likely to encounter chiggers.
- Tuck your pants into your socks to avoid direct skin-to-grass contact. Chiggers can find their way through clothing, but this is a standard and effective prevention technique commonly employed by many.
- Apply insect repellent, such as "Cutters" to your body from the waist down BEFORE putting on your clothing.
- Spray your pants and socks with a spray repellent such as "Cutters" or "Off." Repellants with high concentrations of DEET (70-100%) are most effective. You do not need to apply these to you skin, only to clothing. (Be careful as DEET will damage plastics and lens coatings). Repel Permanone is an odorless aerosol insecticide that offers perhaps the best defense against chiggers. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online. It should only be applied to clothes and allowed to dry before you dress. Never apply Permanone directly to the skin. Permethrin is known to be a highly toxic chemical to insects. It is the active ingredient in Permanone, but is present in a small amount (0.5%).
- Powdered sulfur applied to waist, bottoms of pants, sock and boots is also effective at repelling chiggers. However, be warned that clothes will retain the sulfur odor for several washings.
- Shower at the end of each day in the field. Use a washcloth to vigorously rub your legs, feet, and ankles.

By following these methods, you should be able to avoid all chigger bites, as well as tick bites. If, however, you are bitten by chiggers anyway, you can reduce or eliminate the symptoms by applying benzocaine or hydrocortisone creams, calamine lotion, After Bite, or any number of anti-itch products.

EQUIPMENT: You should pack a pair of binoculars in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). For the all-day Boot Springs hike, a camel pack, large water bottle or canteen is recommended. An alarm clock is essential (no wake up calls at Neal's Lodges, Big Bend and Davis Mountains). Your leader will have a spotting scope; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. If you are bringing a camera, we suggest you bring sufficient memory cards also, as they will not always be readily available during the tour. Sunscreen and lip balm are essential. Don't forget a flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries.

INTERNET & PHONE: Phone service varies at Neal's Lodges depending upon your carrier. Currently AT&T customers have service but others do not. Free Wi-Fi is available at the lodge (mostly in the restaurant and near the office). In Big Bend there is cell phone service in the Basin where we stay, but there is limited access in other parts of the park. The Chisos Mountains Lodge also has internet service available near the office and restaurant. Other areas that we visit on the trip should have readily available phone service and internet.

MISCELLANEOUS: Restaurants able to accommodate vegetarian, vegan, diabetic, low-cholesterol or other special dietary requests are rare in West Texas. Your leaders may be unable to fulfill these requests at many locations. Please feel free to bring food to supplement what is available on the tour. **Since the Chisos Basin Restaurant opens late for breakfast in the morning, we will be having picnic breakfasts in the leader's room on each of those days.** This will likely be the case our morning in Fort Davis as well.

We will have two long, strenuous hikes on this tour. The hike to the Window is a little over four miles roundtrip (with an 800 foot elevation drop from top to bottom) while the hike to Boot Springs is about nine and a half miles round trip with a two thousand foot elevation gain and drop. The starting elevation for each of these hikes is around 5000 feet. For the all-day hike to Boot Springs, a camel pack, large water bottle or canteen (2 liters of water per person) is recommended, and a small day pack (or "fanny-pack") is essential. You will be carrying your water (not bottled water from the ice chest) and your own lunch on this hike. Other birding on this tour is generally done along roadsides and is not nearly so strenuous. Most

mornings we will have breakfast at around 6:00 a.m. Some mornings may be slightly earlier or slightly later.

SUGGESTED READING: A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend www.amazon.com which has a wide selection; www.buteobooks.com and www.nhbs.com which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and www.abebooks.com for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Indispensable in the field will be your favorite North American field guides, plus guides to other topics that particularly interest you (mammals, reptiles and amphibians, trees, cacti, geology, etc.). A guide to the birds of Mexico will be carried by your leader in the unlikely, but always possible, event that a stray Mexican species of bird is encountered. **To use during the tour, we recommend a good U.S. field guide, such as the *National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America*.**

Birds:

Dunn, Jon and Alderfer, Jonathan. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Seventh Edition. 2017. National Geographic. Washington D.C.

Lockwood, Mark W. and Brad McKinney, James Paton, and Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. Lane/ABA Birdfinding Guide. American Birding Association, Fourth Edition. 2008.

Lockwood, Mark. *Birds of the Texas Hill Country*. University of Texas Press. Austin. 2001.

Peterson, Jim and Barry Zimmer. *Birds of the Trans-Pecos*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998.

Peterson, Roger Tory and James Fisher. *Wild America*. Boston: Riverside Press, 1975. See chapters 16 and 17 for the adventures of two great naturalists as they bird their way through Texas.

Wauer, Roland H. *Birds of Big Bend National Park and Vicinity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973. An invaluable aid to understanding the ecology, distribution and abundance of the bird life of the area. The bibliography of this book provides a list of journal articles pertinent to this area for those desiring further study. Out of print, but still available.

Wauer, Roland H. and Carl Fleming. *A Naturalist's Big Bend*. College Station. Texas A&M Press. 2002.

Wildflowers & Plants:

Kirkpatrick, Zoe Merriman. *Wildflowers of the Western Plains, A Field Guide*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Irwin, Howard S. and Mary Motz Wills. *Roadside Flowers of Texas*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1985. Good selection of typical wildflowers, with attractive line drawings.

Loughmiller, Campbell and Lynn. *Texas Wildflowers*. Austin: The University of Texas Press. 1986.

Warnock, Barton H. *Wildflowers of the Big Bend Country, Texas*. Alpine, Texas: Sul Ross State University, 1970. Guide to plant ecology and identification within this region. Out of print, may be difficult to find.

West, Steve. *Northern Chihuahuan Desert Wildflowers*. Falcon Guide. Helena, Montana. 2000.

Miscellaneous:

Bowers, Nora & Rick and Kaufman, Kenn. *Mammals of North America*. Houghton Mifflin: Hillstar Editions. 2004.

Brock, Jim and Kaufman, Kenn. *Butterflies of North America*. Houghton-Mifflin. Hillstar editions. 2003.

Garrett, Judith & Barker, David. *A Field Guide to Reptiles & Amphibians of Texas*. Texas Monthly Press. 1987.

Tennant, Alan. *A Field Guide to Texas Snakes*. Texas Monthly Press 1985.

Tyler, Ronnie C. *The Big Bend: A History of the Last Texas Frontier*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984. An excellent historical account of the region, available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Try www.abebooks.com.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely

appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, “**VENT**”) act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on August 2, 2023, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant’s Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant’s risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the “**Airline**”) is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline’s aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.