

COLORADO GROUSE

APRIL 8-18, 2021

© 2020

Five species of lekking grouse inhabit the prairies and northern valleys of North America—the Greater and Gunnison sage-grouse, the Sharp-tailed Grouse, and the Greater and Lesser prairie-chickens. All are noted for their spectacular mating displays, and all can be exceedingly difficult to find away from their “leks” or display grounds. This tour will focus on observing these birds and their mating rituals. From the sandhills of western Kansas to the high sagebrush parklands of the northern part of Colorado, we’ll be spectators at some of the most fascinating displays in the bird world, such as the “booming” of the prairie-chickens, the wild dance of the Sharp-tails, and the strutting of the huge sage-grouse. We also seek out more secretive denizens of Colorado, the Dusky Grouse and White-tailed Ptarmigan, but these birds are always a challenge and have been missed.

There are more birds to see in Colorado at this season than grouse. Possibilities will include Golden Eagle; Ferruginous, Rough-legged and Swainson’s hawks; Prairie Falcon; Scaled Quail; Sandhill Crane; Mountain Plover; Lewis’s Woodpecker; Mountain Bluebird; Chestnut-collared and McCown’s longspurs; as well as a host of waterfowl, shorebirds, and prairie and montane specialties. Mammal viewing should also be excellent, and the scenery will be breathtaking. Although the tour will require considerable daytime driving, we’ll make frequent stops.



April 8, Day 1: Arrival in Denver. Participants should make arrangements to arrive today and take the complimentary shuttle to our hotel where a room will be reserved in your name.

NIGHT: Courtyard Denver Airport, Denver

April 9, Day 2: Depart Denver; Birding Loveland Pass and Silverthorne; Drive to Gunnison. This morning we will meet in the hotel lobby at 6:00 a.m. to depart for the west side of town where we will have breakfast. We will then head into the mountains for our first attempt to see the White-tailed Ptarmigan at Loveland Pass at 12,000 feet. Nearby in Silverthorne we will hunt Rosy-Finches and other high elevation birds before heading southwest to Gunnison.



White-tailed Ptarmigan © Brian Gibbons

Note: Gunnison is at 7,700 feet. Staying hydrated is key to avoiding altitude sickness and headaches. Gunnison Sage-Grouse is a declining species and the only public lek has dispersed over the years. In 2018 we missed this grouse due to their dwindling numbers and inclement weather; we could have a second chance the following morning if necessary.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Gunnison

April 10, Day 3: Gunnison Area; Drive to Montrose.

A pre-dawn start will take us to the first of our five grouse leks, this one for the recently described and declining Gunnison Sage-Grouse. With its strange filoplume crest, more prominently banded tail, smaller size than the Greater Sage-Grouse, and tiny range (basically restricted to southwestern Colorado), this new species has instantly become one of the most endangered birds of North America. Though this lek is not close, we should have scope views of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse in their outrageous display. After the morning display by the sage-grouse, we will bird into the mountains

surrounding the Gunnison Valley. Some of our targets will be rosy-finches, grosbeaks, American Three-toed Woodpecker and Gray Jay. In the afternoon we will make the short drive over to Montrose to position ourselves for an early morning visit to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in hopes of tracking down a Dusky Grouse displaying along the road. Note: Viewing the Gunnison Sage-Grouse will be from a blind and we will be inside from around 5:00 a.m. until the grouse leave (sometimes not until after 8:00 a.m.)

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Montrose

April 11, Day 4: Montrose to Grand Junction. The spectacular Black Canyon of the Gunnison will be a wonderful backdrop as we survey this little-known national park for the hulking Dusky Grouse along the roads, in the campgrounds, and scenic overlooks. We will then bird our way up to Grand Junction while taking in the scenic splendor of the arid canyonlands. Lewis's Woodpeckers may be flycatching from ancient gnarly cottonwoods along the way.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express and Suites, Grand Junction

April 12, Day 5: Grand Junction to Steamboat Springs.

In the morning we will explore the red rock canyonlands of Colorado National Monument searching for Pinyon Jays, Juniper Titmouse and Black-throated Sparrows among the junipers and pinyon pines of this beautiful, stark landscape.



Brown-capped Rosy-Finch © Brian Gibbons

While challenging to find on a single morning, we will also be in the realm of the introduced Chukar. Perhaps we'll have some luck with this grouse.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn, Steamboat Springs

April 13, Day 6: Steamboat Springs to Walden. Another early morning will have us searching traditional leks for Sharp-tailed Grouse. Although smaller and less physically imposing, they have the most arresting dance. With tails held high, wings bowed out to the sides, and feet propelling them in circles, they resemble wind-up toys run amok. Imitated by the Plains Indians, this dance is an integral part of spring on the northern prairies. In the rolling grasslands nearby, Sandhill Cranes and Western Meadowlarks enliven the scene. Along the way to Walden we will search a few spruce forest areas for American Three-toed Woodpecker, Pine Grosbeak and Clark's Nutcrackers before continuing towards Walden. After crossing Rabbit Ears Pass, we'll descend into North Park, a region of sweeping vistas where snow-covered mountains provide a backdrop for marshy meadows and mint-green sagebrush hills. Sage Thrashers dart between shrubs; Mountain Bluebirds add dazzling touches of color to the landscape; and in some years, roadside snowbanks or local feeders may hold lingering rosy-finches. Raptors (particularly Golden Eagle, Rough-legged and Swainson's hawks, but also an occasional Prairie Falcon) should be quite evident. Mammal possibilities for the day include Moose, Pronghorn, Mule Deer, and White-tailed Prairie Dog.



Greater Sage-Grouse display © Brian Gibbons

NIGHT: North Park Inn and Suites, Walden

April 14, Day 7: Walden to Fort Collins. Today we will travel from Walden to Fort Collins, but only after we have watched, from point blank range, the spectacular Greater Sage-Grouse on their lek. We will also spend time searching through the piles of birds at Walden Reservoir; fifteen species of ducks are possible. The grebes, shorebirds and local Bald Eagles will keep us busy for a couple of hours. We'll spend any available time searching for other birds in the foothills, including various raptors, Sandhill Cranes, Green-tailed and Spotted towhees, and Vesper Sparrows. Cameron Pass will afford a final chance for any boreal forest birds we've not tracked down yet.

Pine Grosbeak, Cassin's Finch, Gray Jay, and American Three-toed Woodpeckers are all possibilities if we have good weather. As we descend Poudre Canyon towards Fort Collins, we will encounter stunning scenery along the Poudre River, where dippers roam and Common Mergansers nest.

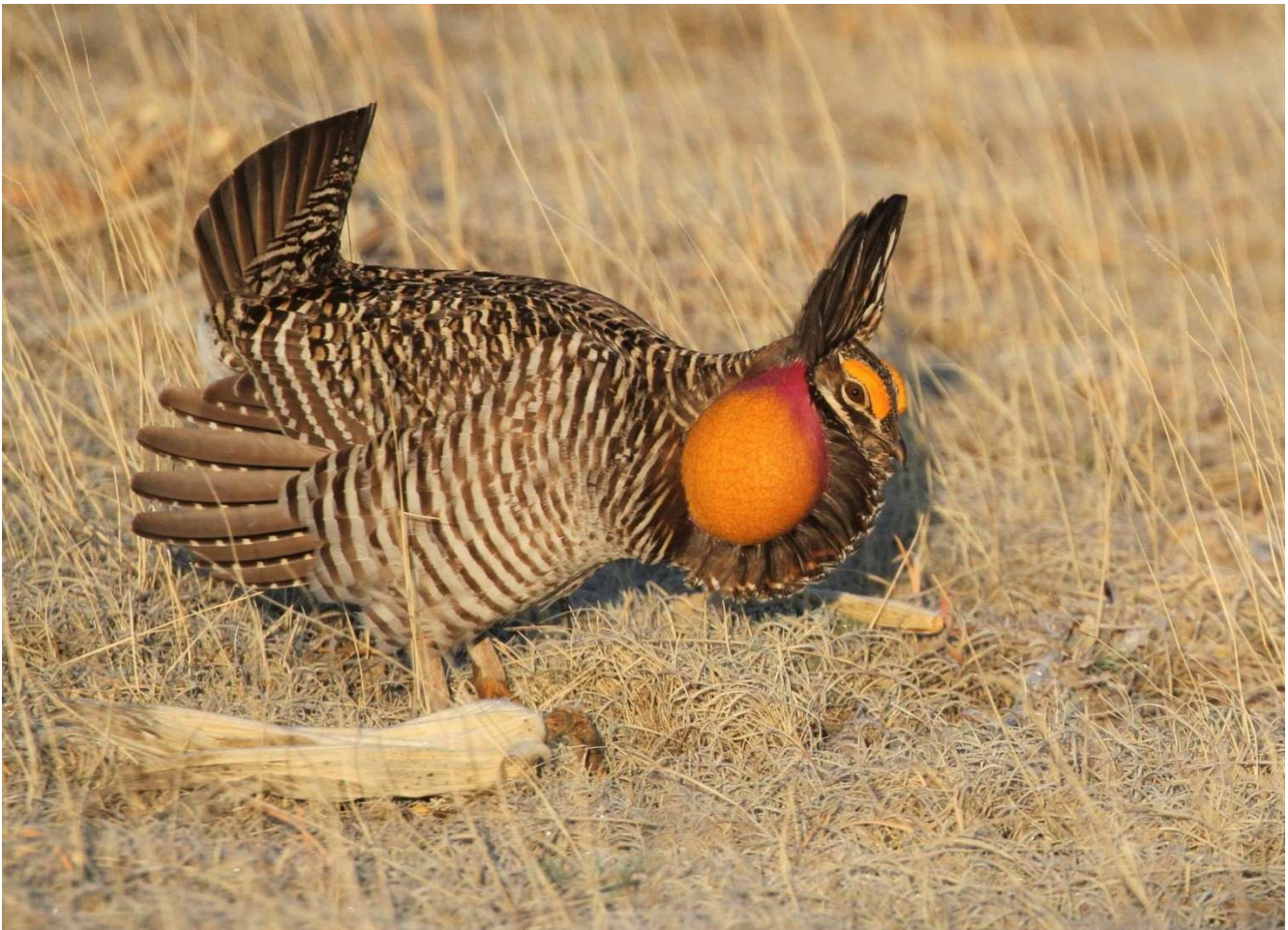
NIGHT: Hilton Garden Inn, Fort Collins

April 15, Day 8: Fort Collins to Wray. We will enjoy one of our later starts this morning before we head east to the Pawnee National Grassland, where Ferruginous and Swainson's hawks abound. With some searching, our chances are excellent for finding Mountain Plover as well as Chestnut-collared and McCown's longspurs, all in high breeding plumage. The rolling plains of shortgrass prairie with its tiny prickly pear cactus will contrast with the rugged mountains we've just departed.

NIGHT: Cobblestone Inn and Suites, Wray

April 16, Day 9: Wray to Scott City, Kansas. We will hear the Greater Prairie-Chickens before we can see them. On cue the males start cooing in unison; whoops, cackles, and foot stomping ensue. With the morning sun, the golden-orange air sacs of the males' glow with a lavender rim. With pinnae erect, the males display for any females that may wander through the lek. After this spectacular morning show we will head southeast, birding our way into Kansas for our second prairie-chicken, the Lesser.

NIGHT: Best Western El Quartejeo Inn and Suites, Scott City



Greater Prairie-Chicken in display © Brian Gibbons

April 17, Day 10: Scott City to Denver. Our final early morning will find us on a Lesser Prairie-chicken lek. While they look similar when not displaying, the calls are different. More gurgling pops and the smaller brick red air sacs distinguish the Lesser from the Greater. After this last dance we will make our way back to Denver, searching along the way for any missing prairie birds like Mountain Plover, Burrowing Owl, and longspurs. We will have our final group dinner and checklist session at the hotel.

NIGHT: Courtyard Denver Airport, Denver

April 18, Day 11: Departure for Home. Participants may make arrangements to leave Denver anytime today.

TOUR LEADERS: Brian Gibbons and Erik Bruhnke



Brian Gibbons grew up in suburban Dallas where he began exploring the wild world in local creeks and parks. Chasing butterflies and any animal that was unfortunate enough to cross paths with the Gibbons boys occupied his childhood. A wooden bird feeder kit sparked a flame that was stoked by a gift of the *Golden Guide* and family camping trips to Texas state parks. Thirty years ago Brian attended two VENT camps for young birders. Birds are now his primary interest, but all things wild continue to captivate him. After college, Brian undertook a variety of field biology research jobs that have taken him to the Caribbean, the Bering Sea, and the land of the midnight sun, arctic Alaska. He enjoys working with kids, hoping to spark environmental awareness through birds. For many years Brian's field research has involved bird banding. His most amazing recoveries were a female Wilson's Warbler that had been banded in Alaska and was captured by Brian in Colorado, and a Sooty Tern that perished after a hurricane on the Texas coast; it had plied the Gulf of Mexico and the oceans of the world for 24 years. Brian's recreational bird-seeking has taken him to Machu Picchu in Peru, the Great Wall in China, the plains of East Africa, and the Himalayas in Nepal. Brian leads birding trips in the United States, Central America, the Caribbean, South Africa, and Europe. As well as being a fanatical birder, he loves capturing birds with photography. He lives in Tucson, Arizona with his wife, Lacreia Johnson, and their son, Grayson.



Erik Bruhnke has loved birds since he was a child looking at chickadees. In 2008 he graduated from Northland College in Wisconsin with a Natural Resources degree. Erik taught field ornithology at Northland College for three semesters. Between 2009 and 2014, he spent his summers conducting field research focused on breeding bird transects in Upper Michigan, point counts for a breeding bird atlas in Minnesota and Wisconsin's Northwoods, vegetation and breeding bird surveys throughout wind farms in North Dakota's prairie potholes, and cavity-nesting surveys in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. A devoted raptor nerd, he is drawn to hawkwatches. He worked as an interpreter for six seasons at Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory in Duluth, Minnesota; counted migrating raptors at the Corpus Christi HawkWatch in Texas in 2015; and was the 2016, 2017, and 2018 hawk counter at the Cape May Hawkwatch in New Jersey. Erik's wildlife photography has won national awards, and he's written for the American Birding Association's *Birder's Guide*, *BirdWatching* magazine, and *Bird Watcher's Digest*. When not leading birding tours, Erik often leads field trips and speaks at birding festivals. He also enjoys hiking, kayaking, cross-country skiing, and just being out in the snow. In his free time he loves to cook and bake.

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

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$3,895** per person in double occupancy from Denver. This includes all meals from breakfast on Day 2 to dinner on Day 10, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare between your home and Denver, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$700**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you would like to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard, Visa, or American Express 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 www.ventbird.com) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard, Visa, American Express), 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 prior to the tour departure date (November 9, 2020).

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 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 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 your protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

If you cancel:

180 days or more before departure date

179 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

Your refund will be:

Your deposit minus \$250*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance 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.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing. This policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside 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 Resolutions as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through

Redpoint, we recommend **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™**. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most highly regarded travel insurance programs available.

Critical benefits of **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance** 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. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available but must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause (must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit). Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: ripcordrescuetravelinsurance.com/ventbird; or click the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** 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.

NOTE: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is an equal opportunity service provider and authorized permittee of the Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado National Monument and Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

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. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

INTERNET AVAILABILITY: Wi-Fi is offered at all hotels on this tour.

BAGGAGE: As space in the vehicles is limited, please restrict your luggage to one medium-sized bag and one carry-on bag.

CLIMATE: Temperatures will range from very warm in the lowland prairies to very cold in the mountains. Daytime highs in the plains could reach the mid-80s, while nighttime lows in the mountains may dip below 20°F. Temperatures ranging from the low 30s to mid-60s would be closer to the norm. Spring snow storms are not uncommon in Colorado in April, so be prepared. Note that several nights are spent in towns near 7,000 feet and above (Gunnison 7,700 feet, Walden 8,100 feet and Steamboat Springs 6,800 feet). We will drive over mountain passes exceeding 10,000 feet on three days and some birding at these elevations will take place. Loveland Pass for White-tailed Ptarmigan is at 12,000 feet.

CLOTHING: We suggest lightweight field clothing, a warm jacket (possibly down), thermal underwear, hat, and gloves. You should bring a comfortable pair of walking shoes or hiking boots and a second pair of light shoes. Dress will be casual throughout. Sitting in vans on the leks in pre-dawn darkness can at times be chilly, so be prepared with layers of warm clothing. Small disposable chemical hand warmer packs have been widely employed on the frigid mornings.

EQUIPMENT: Pack a pair of binoculars in good condition, along with a belt pack or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, camera, etc.). As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, medications, and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Your leaders will have a spotting scope; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Other items should include an alarm clock, as well as a good flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries.

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, 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. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against hepatitis types A and B.

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 (232-4636). You can check the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html (click on Travel Health).

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.

Andrews, Robert, and Robert Righter. *Colorado Birds*. Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1992. An excellent up-to-date reference on bird distribution and habitats within the state.

Bailey, Alfred M., and Robert J. Niedrach. *Birds of Colorado*. Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1965. Large and very expensive but may be available through your local library.

Bailey, Alfred M. and Robert J. Niedrach. *Pictorial Checklist of Colorado Birds*. Denver: Denver Museum, 1967. Available through Audubon House, Buteo Books and other dealers.

Bowers, Nora, Rick Bowers and Kenn Kaufman. *Mammals of North America*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

Connelly, J.W., M.W. Gratson, and K.P. Reese. Sharp-Tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 354. (A. Poole and F. Gill Eds.) Philadelphia, PA: The Birds of North America, Inc., 1998. [Excellent life history account.]

Craighead, Craighead, and Davis. *A Field Guide to Rocky Mountain Wildflowers From Northern Arizona and New Mexico to British Columbia*. Peterson Field Guide Series. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.

Giesen, K.M. Lesser Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 364. (A Poole and F. Gill Eds.) Philadelphia, PA: The Birds of North America, Inc., 1998. [Excellent life history account.]

Holt, Harold. *A Birder's Guide to Colorado*. American Birding Association, 1997.

Johnsgard, Paul. *The Grouse of the World*. University of Nebraska Press, 1984. [See especially pages 109-127 (Sage Grouse); pp. 316-341 (Pinnated Grouse); and pp. 342-360 (Sharp-Tailed Grouse). Excellent discussions of displays and their interpretation.]

Michener, James. *Centennial*. New York: Random House, 1974.

National Geographic. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. (Seventh Edition.) Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2017.

Schroeder, M.A., and L.A. Robb. Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 36. (A Poole and F. Gill Eds.) Philadelphia, PA: The Birds of North America, Inc., 1993. [Excellent life history account.]

Schroeder, M.A., J.R. Young, and C.E. Braun. 9. Sage Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 425. (A Poole and F. Gill Eds.) Philadelphia, PA: The Birds of North America, Inc., 1999. [Excellent life history account.]

Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Chanticleer Press, 2000.

Zimmer, Kevin J. *Birding in the American West*. Cornell: University Press, 2000.

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: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger 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 passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its Agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on June 17, 2020, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.

CO:20210408
04/19/19-BG
06/22/20-MA/RS