

# DRY TORTUGAS

**MAY 2-5, 2021**

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*Located 70 miles west of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico, the seven islands that make up the Dry Tortugas are the only tropical islands associated with the mainland United States. During the breeding season, thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies come ashore to nest, making one of the tiny islands in the Tortugas chain the site of*



*the largest concentration of these pelagic species in the Northern Hemisphere. This great seabird colony is surely one of the highlights of a visit to the Tortugas.*

*The Tortugas are also special because they serve as a stopover for migrating landbirds, including warblers, thrushes, cuckoos, and buntings, and there is always the possibility of a West Indian stray. While en route to and from Key West, we often encounter such pelagic species as Audubon's Shearwater, Brown Booby, and Bridled and Roseate terns. Masked Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds also breed on smaller keys in the Tortugas.*

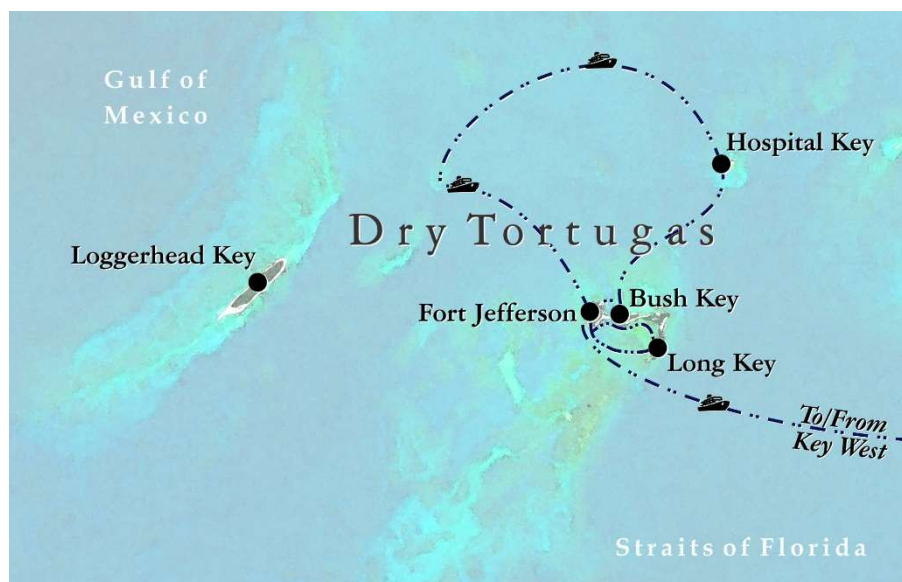
*Our trip is timed for the height of migration and peak activity at the seabird colony. Each year holds new adventures and surprising discoveries. Most of our previous participants have agreed that visiting the Tortugas is one of the most unique birding experiences in North America.*

*Accommodations will be aboard the Coast Guard-inspected, 82-foot "Makai," a motor vessel that comfortably sleeps up to 11 participants in semi-private cabins. The "Makai" is clean, well-run, and has a crew of three. Special features of the vessel include central air conditioning, two bathrooms with showers, sun deck, shaded back deck, and a watermaker. We should enjoy fine cuisine as well.*

**May 2, Day 1: Arrival in Key West.** Participants may arrive in Key West at any time this afternoon and take the complementary shuttle to the Doubletree Grand Key Resort. We recommend that you consider arriving as early as possible, or even on May 1, to offset travel fatigue and/or potential travel delays. Upon request, the VENT office will assist with any additional lodging arrangements.

At 6:00 p.m., the group will meet in the lobby for a brief orientation, followed by dinner and a transfer to Robbie's Marina, where we'll have a reception with the crew aboard the vessel.

NIGHT: Aboard the *M/V Makai*



**May 3, Day 2: Key West to the Tortugas.** The passage to the Tortugas takes a half-day, so we plan to depart the dock before dawn to maximize our time. Weather permitting, our route will take us southward into the Gulf Stream, where we will have a chance to see Audubon's Shearwater, Northern Gannet, Pomarine Jaeger, Bridled Tern, and perhaps other seabirds. A couple of favored buoys en route may harbor a few Brown Boobies and Roseate Terns. Our captain is intimately familiar with birding tours and knows where to go to give us the best chance of finding

the birds we want to see. We can expect a late morning or early afternoon arrival to the archipelago. Before anchoring, we'll be sure to include a stop by tiny Hospital Key, the only site in the U. S. where Masked Boobies nest.



**Masked Boobies nest on Hospital Key. It is their sole breeding colony in the U.S. © Rafael Galvez**

Set amid clear tropical waters, the sandy Dry Tortugas are beautiful tropical islands. Garden Key, the only key with year-round public access, is the site of historic Fort Jefferson. One of the largest masonry structures in the world, the fort presents an incongruous sight amidst the shallow turquoise seas of the Tortugas.

The history of the fort and islands is as fascinating as the birding. In 1513 the Spanish conquistador Ponce De Leon discovered and named the islands “Las Tortugas,” Spanish for “The Turtles.” Because none of the islands contained fresh water, they were later renamed the Dry Tortugas as a warning to passing mariners. By the mid-1800s, the United States recognized the strategic importance of the island chain, due to its location on a busy trade route with ships transiting between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. To protect the route, construction of Fort Jefferson began in 1846. It took 30 years to build and was actually never completed. The Union Army used the fort as a prison during the Civil War, 1861-1865.

The fort’s most famous occupant, Dr. Samuel Mudd, who set the broken leg of Lincoln’s assassin, John Wilkes Booth, was imprisoned here and left a legacy of humanitarian service before eventually receiving a pardon in 1869.

The Army abandoned Fort Jefferson in 1874. In 1908 the area became a wildlife refuge to protect the nesting terns, and in 1935 the fort and surrounding waters were given national monument status. In 1992, the entire Dry Tortugas chain was re-designated a national park to protect both the historical and natural features.

Today, Fort Jefferson’s massive walls provide refuge not to armies of men, but to hundreds of exhausted trans-Gulf migrants. Its shores are visited not by conquering armies from foreign lands, but by birders, naturalists, fishermen, and curious visitors. The trees within its grounds are sometimes teeming with songbirds. As many as twenty species of warblers may feed among the foliage, while mute Cattle Egrets stalk scarce prey below.



Many bird species including warblers, thrushes, buntings and others visit the fountain regularly. © Rafael Galvez



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In addition to warblers, our searches in and around the fort may yield Yellow-billed Cuckoo, the “Antillean” Short-eared Owl, Common and Antillean nighthawks, Chuck-will’s-widow, Gray Kingbird, Black-whiskered Vireo, various thrushes, Indigo and Painted buntings, Dickcissel, Bobolink, and many others. Sky-watching often pays off with American Kestrels, Merlins, and Peregrine Falcons, all looking for an easy meal.

During the heat of the day we can take refuge in the shade of the trees next to a gently percolating fountain. It is often in this fashion that we have our best sightings. By simply remaining patient, we can closely study a continuous procession of birds as they come to drink. Here we have had exceptional looks at many warblers, including Blue-winged, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky, Hooded, and Ovenbird.

For those participants curious about the park’s history, the park visitor center and gift shop contain books, videos, and items from the fort’s heyday. There’s also a self-guided tour of Fort Jefferson that allows visitors to explore the fort on their own.

Next to Garden Key is the huge Sooty Tern colony on Bush Key. At first light, the colony is raucous, as thousands of birds become active. Along with Sooty Terns are a few thousand Brown Noddies and numbers of Brown Pelicans. The spectacle is simply awesome, as terns and noddies come and go endlessly, and we should be able to locate some recent hatchlings. Bush Key is the only nesting site in the United States for these two species.

Adjacent to Bush Key lies Long Key, the only nesting site in the United States for the Magnificent Frigatebird. One does not need to go to Long Key to see them, however. These splendid flyers pass directly over the fort or chase hapless Royal Terns just offshore. There’s something unforgettable about seeing the frigatebirds floating above the fort as though suspended, the constant hubbub of the tern colony, the clear tropical waters, the sunsets and sunrises, the tired migrants seeking refuge in the trees—all combine to leave visitors with unforgettable memories.

NIGHT: Aboard the *M/V Makai*



**Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies streaming out of the colony at Bush Key. © Rafael Galvez**

**May 4, Day 3: Exploring the Tortugas.** This morning we'll return to Garden Key for another round of exploration of the fort. Often, the turnover of species from one day to the next is amazing. By checking and double-checking the trees in and around the fort, we're bound to turn up new species for the trip. In the Tortugas, one simply never knows what one will find! Some seemingly out-of-place wanderers can include Roseate Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Sora, and Upland Sandpiper.

The Tortugas are also a great place to see rarities. Highlights of previous trips have included White-tailed Tropicbird, Red-footed Booby, Black Noddy, LaSagra's Flycatcher, "West Indian" Cave Swallow, Bahama Mockingbird, Bananaquit and Shiny Cowbird.

For anybody interested in snorkeling, the west beach offers a fine opportunity for those with the desire to explore an underwater world of coral, fish, and other colorful marine life.

Only if the weather permits, we may land on Loggerhead Key to the west. Dry and sandy, Loggerhead is different than the comparatively manicured Garden Key. The island is covered in low, dense-growing vegetation that makes foot access more difficult, but may at times turn up something that we don't see elsewhere. Not to be overlooked is the famous lighthouse, built in 1856 to warn ships of the shallow water and sandy shoals. Our time on Loggerhead will depend on the productivity of the birding.

This evening we'll enjoy our last Dry Tortugas sunset. We will take dinghy rides in small groups along Bush Key as thousands of terns and noddies sweep right past us, leaving their colony towards the open sea for feeding. We will also coast Long Key and get closer to the frigatebird colony. Hundreds of them will be hanging effortlessly over the mangroves; some of the males may be displaying inflated throat pouches. The dinghy runs often turn up



Sunrise within Fort Jefferson's Parade Grounds on Garden Key © Rafael Galvez



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interesting shorebirds, wading birds, waterfowl and even aquatic species such as sea turtles, sharks and American Crocodile. This is often ranked as one of the most magical experiences of the tour, as we get personal with swarms of countless birds while the sun sets.

NIGHT: Aboard the *M/V Makai*

**May 5, Day 4: Dry Tortugas to Key West.** We'll have about an hour for a final check of Ft. Jefferson before heading back toward Key West. We plan to arrive back at Robbie's Marina around 3:00 p.m. Transportation will be provided to our hotel in Key West.

Due to the possibility of a delayed arrival and a limited number of evening flights out of Key West, we recommend that participants DO NOT plan to fly out this evening. Upon request, VENT will assist with lodging arrangements in the Key West area.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 11 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Rafael Galvez



**Rafael Galvez** has been birding and illustrating birds since childhood, a dual passion that developed when his family moved from Peru to South Florida. Always with a sketchpad in hand, he has traveled throughout the U.S., Latin America, and Eurasia in pursuit of birds. He served several years as a board member of the BirdLife International affiliate in the Republic of Georgia, developing educational and conservation programs. He gained knowledge of the Caucasus region while directing a series of records and documentary shorts on the ancient chants of the Georgian nation. During that period he also produced retrospective books and catalogs on the works of Russian realist painters. He has combined his love of art, education, and birds while collaborating in several publications, including a field guide to *Raptors and Owls of Georgia (Caucasus)*, which he illustrated and coauthored. After working with raptor research along the

Black Sea, he returned to South Florida to spearhead a new phase for the Florida Keys Hawkwatch migration monitoring project, where he has participated as director. As chair of citizen science and IBA monitoring at Tropical Audubon Society in Miami, he has reached out to underserved communities by providing opportunities for the greater appreciation of birds and Florida habitats. Currently, he lives in Homestead, spends much time in the Everglades, serves on the Florida Ornithological Society's Records Committee, and is on the Leica Sport Optics Pro Staff. He loves sharing his passion for birds with audiences of all ages, and has been a guide and teacher for over 15 years. You can find some of his latest sketches and articles about painting in the field at his blog, GalvezBirds.com.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for this tour is **\$2,195** per person from Key West. This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to lunch on Day 4, all lodging for three nights during the tour as described in the tour itinerary (see **GENERAL INFORMATION** below), ground and water transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include airfare from your home to Key West and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

**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 (December 3, 2020) prior to the tour departure date.

**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.

**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.

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For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: [ripcordrescuetravelinsurance.com/ventbird](http://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.

**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.

**GENERAL INFORMATION:** Accommodations for all three nights will be aboard the *Makai*. The vessel has four small semi-private cabins, including one cabin with two bunks, which will be reserved for couples or pairs on a first-come, first-served basis. Specific spaces in the remaining cabins (one with four bunks, the others with three bunks) will be assigned at the time of registration. Depending on the make-up of the group, we may have to mix sexes in any of the four cabins. The boat's two bathrooms, both with showers, will provide a private place to change clothes.

Space for luggage aboard the *Makai* is very limited. Please bring no more than a small-to-medium duffel bag or soft-sided suitcase. Since we will be on the boat for no more than three nights, you should easily be able to fit clothes and basic toiletries in a small or medium bag. You will also probably want to bring a daypack or other carry-on bag to hold camera gear, binoculars, field guides, sunscreen, etc. Excess luggage can be stored in Key West.

In addition to a pair of sneakers or boat shoes, you may find it useful to have a pair of old sneakers or sandals that can get wet. Make sure to bring a towel and washcloth, which are not provided on the boat. Also bring a light jacket plus a sweatshirt or sweater, as mornings, evenings, and the run back to Key West can be chilly. Rain gear may be needed, and a hat for protection from the sun is essential.

Interested participants will have an opportunity to swim and/or snorkel at Fort Jefferson. The water is warm and shallow, and the fish and coral enchanting. Even the most dyed-in-the-wool birders appreciate the chance to cool off and experience the tropical marine life. You may prefer to bring your own equipment (mask, snorkel, and fins) with you or you can rent these items from a dive shop in Key West. These will not be provided by the M/V Makai.

If you're worried about seasickness, ask your doctor about preventative medication. Water conditions around the Tortugas are usually calm, but choppy seas are quite possible, most likely on the run to and from Key West.

**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](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada [www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html) (click on Travel Health).

If you have any dietary restrictions, please be sure to relay those to us when you sign up. The chef is excellent and willing to accommodate any dietary restrictions, but be aware that supplies on board are finite, so any dietary restrictions need to be specified ahead of time.



**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](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Dunn, Jon et al. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, Seventh edition. Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 2017. Includes most of the possible West Indian strays.

Sibley, David A. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, Second edition. New York: Knopf, 2014. Some may prefer to bring the smaller and more portable *Eastern* guide (2003).

**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 unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on July 1, 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.

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