



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS

MARCH 31 – APRIL 9, 2025

HILL COUNTRY EXTENSION

APRIL 9 – 13, 2025

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Whooping crane © Barry Zimmer

This tour covers the Central Texas Coast, the King Ranch, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and an extension to the beautiful Texas Hill Country, all at their finest when wonderful weather, a spectacular array of flowers, and arguably the best birding in the country combine for a truly memorable natural history experience. Beginning in Corpus Christi, the tour travels to Rockport –

wintering grounds of the majestic Whooping Cranes and breeding grounds for many species of herons, egrets, and shorebirds. It is also a stopover point for migrant shorebirds and landbirds alike. We will then head south through the famed King Ranch to the Rio Grande Valley, home to 25 tropical species of birds whose United States range is basically restricted to this incredibly rich area. Included in this list are such highly sought species as Red-billed Pigeon, Ringed Kingfisher, Common Pauraque, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Morelet's Seedeater, and Altamira and Audubon's orioles. The tour will conclude with an extension in the scenic Hill Country, the nesting grounds of the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo. Including the extension, we should see over 250 species of birds as well as fantastic wildflower displays.

March 31, Day 1: Arrival in Corpus Christi.

Participants should plan to be in Corpus Christi (airport code CRP) today and proceed to our hotel where a room will be reserved in your name. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 5:00 p.m. for a get-acquainted session, likely followed by some brief afternoon birding at a nearby marsh and a delicious seafood dinner.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn & Suites Navigation Blvd., Corpus Christi

April 1-2, Days 2-3: Corpus Christi, Rockport and Whooping Crane Boat Trip.

Although our schedule will be somewhat flexible over the next two-and-a-half days, mostly depending on weather patterns, it is likely that we will begin the day by visiting a migrant trap or two. Passerine migration is just beginning in early April, and though we are not likely to see large numbers of migrants, we should encounter a sprinkling of flycatchers, vireos, and warblers. Early migrant possibilities include Northern Parula, Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Prothonotary, and Hooded warblers. Nearby coastal estuaries could harbor stunning pink Roseate Spoonbills, comical Reddish Egrets, Snowy (declining), Piping and Wilson's plovers, Long-billed Curlew, and Gull-billed Tern, among others.



One morning we will board the “M/V Skimmer” to travel up the Intracoastal Waterway, where our target will be the endangered Whooping Crane. These magnificent birds begin migrating north in late March, but we have a very good chance to find a few lingering family groups. At one time only 15 Whooping Cranes remained in the wild, but now more than 500 make the long flight to and from their Canadian breeding grounds. Our search for the Whoopers should yield many other birds as well, including a variety of herons and egrets, American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer and up to seven species of terns. Another morning will be spent at a nearby spartina marsh in hopes of locating Clapper Rail, Sedge Wren, and Seaside Sparrow. White and White-faced ibis, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Mottled Duck, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Long-billed Curlew, and Stilt, Pectoral, and Baird's (uncommon) sandpipers are among the many possibilities. Coastlines around Rockport should yield Wilson's Plover and perhaps Least Tern as well. One afternoon we will likely visit the Goose Island area in search of additional passerine migrants and seek out Boat-tailed Grackles at the southern edge of their range.



Tropical Parula © Barry Zimmer

April 3, Day 4: Mustang Island to Kingsville. We will begin the day by taking the ferry across the bay to Port Aransas. Here, at a freshwater marsh, we may encounter Least Bittern (scarce), Cinnamon Teal, Sora and Virginia Rail, in addition to many other shorebirds and waterfowl. Nearby Paradise Pond provides yet another opportunity for landbird migrants with a lovely boardwalk through a willow-lined pond. Although damaged by Hurricane Harvey, this spot is still worth a stop. Finally, we will cruise down the beaches of Mustang Island where numerous rarities have been recorded. We will likely encounter such regular fare as Piping Plover, Red Knot (very uncommon), and Least, Sandwich, and Royal terns. Grasslands on the interior of the island may yield White-tailed Hawk or even the highly-sought Aplomado Falcon. In the early afternoon we will begin heading for Kingsville via the Chapman Ranch. Fields in this area may harbor Upland Sandpiper, American Golden-Plover, and perhaps the rare Buff-breasted Sandpiper as well.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Kingsville

April 4, Day 5: King Ranch to McAllen. The better part of the day will be on the Norias Division of the spectacular King Ranch. Here, in the undisturbed mesquite savannas and small oak mottes, we will get our first taste of South Texas birding. Possibilities include White-tailed and Harris's hawks, Crested Caracara, the gem-like Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Couch's Kingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and Hooded Oriole. In addition, the very local Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and the declining Audubon's Oriole might also be encountered. Our real targets here, however, will be the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and the Tropical Parula – two species rarely seen in the United States outside the boundaries of this ranch. While both are elusive and somewhat scarce (and certainly not guaranteed), we will devote considerable time and effort to locating these King Ranch specialties. Depending on our arrival time in McAllen, we may spend the early evening searching for Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets as they noisily descend to their nighttime roosts

NIGHT: Homewood Suites, McAllen

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April 5-6, Days 6-7: The Lower Rio Grande Valley. We will have many options to choose from for our two days of birding. The southernmost tip of Texas has multiple state parks, wildlife refuges, Audubon sanctuaries and the like, and all are worth a visit. Our exact schedule will be determined in part by the presence of rarities, as

well as current weather patterns. Possible destinations include Sabal Palm Grove, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Frontera Audubon Thicket, Estero Llano Grande State Park, Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, Bentsen State Park, and South Padre Island. Whichever areas we opt for, we will seek out such specialties as Least Grebe, Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Ringed and Green kingfishers, Aplomado Falcon, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and Altamira Oriole. If any are known to be present, we will likely devote some time to searching for the rare and highly sought Hook-billed Kite as well (although this species has all but dried up in recent years in the United States). Some of these areas also play host to migrant landbirds when conditions are right, with a variety of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, orioles, and buntings possible. South Padre Island can be particularly good for such “fallout” events. On occasion, past tours have had the good fortune of encountering rare Mexican strays. Masked Duck, White-throated Thrush, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Crimson-collared Grosbeak and Blue Bunting have all made appearances. While none of these species are at all likely on a given trip, the mere possibility of such superb vagrants adds to the excitement of birding this area. One night after dinner we will have an optional nightbird excursion in hopes of locating Common Pauraque, as well as Elf (very uncommon) and Eastern Screech-Owls.



Elf Owl © Barry Zimmer

NIGHTS: Homewood Suites, McAllen

April 7, Day 8: Rio Grande Valley to Zapata. Today’s schedule will be largely determined by what valley specialties we are still missing, by what rarities may be present, or by weather conditions that might be conducive to passerine fallouts. Visits to Bentsen State Park, Quinta Mazatlan, or the Frontera Audubon House Thicket in Weslaco are possible destinations. Clay-colored Thrushes, once accidental, have become a regular resident in recent years, making this species a very good possibility. If conditions are right, migrating raptors, including large flocks of Broad-winged and Swainson’s hawks and smaller numbers of Mississippi Kites, often move through this area in April. The afternoon will find us heading upriver toward Zapata with the possibility of desert birding en route. An evening owl trip will be planned if we are lacking any of our nocturnal targets.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

April 8, Day 9: Falcon Dam Area. We will have a full day to thoroughly explore the rich Falcon Dam area. Here the avifauna shows more of a western flavor than in the lower valley, with Scaled Quail joining Northern Bobwhite, and such species as Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia and Black-throated Sparrow present in the brushy uplands. Along the banks of the Rio Grande, the shy and retiring Audubon’s Oriole is making its last stand within the U.S. borders. Altamira Orioles suspend their pendulous nests from riverine trees, and Ringed (declining) and Green kingfishers patrol the snag-lined banks. Noisy Great Kiskadees and Couch’s Kingbirds call from exposed perches, while Long-billed Thrashers and Olive Sparrows scratch in the undergrowth. The rare Red-billed Pigeon, like the Audubon’s Oriole, clings to a tenuous U.S. existence along the willow-lined banks of the river. Muscovy Duck, Gray Hawk and Hook-billed Kite are rare and irregular, but possible. Common species include Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, and Bewick’s Wren.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata



Santa Margarita Bluff © Barry Zimmer

April 9, Day 10: Falcon Dam to Laredo (main tour ends); extension to the Hill Country begins. We may briefly revisit the Falcon Dam area in the early morning. If Morelet's Seedeaters are present in San Ygnacio, Zapata or Laredo, we will make a special effort to locate them. This small finch was once very common in this area up until the 1940's, but by the end of the 1970's, it had all but vanished north of the Mexican border. In recent years it has reappeared in small numbers in the Falcon Dam area. The weedy edges and river banks here offer the last U.S. refuge for this tiny Mexican finch. From here we drive north to Laredo where the main tour will conclude at the Laredo airport at around 11:00 a.m. Flights out of Laredo (airport code LRD) should be scheduled for 1:00 p.m. or later. For those continuing onto the Hill Country extension, we will have an early lunch in Laredo and then head north to Concan and Neal's Lodges.

Hill Country Extension:

April 9, Day 1: Drive to Hill Country. The Texas Hill Country is one of the state's most pleasant and scenic regions. After departing Laredo, a two and half hour drive through mesquite brushland will lead us to Neal's Lodges on the southern edge of the Hill Country. En route we may spot Cave Swallows utilizing the highway culverts, or "skylarking" Cassin's Sparrows. Crested Caracaras and Chihuahuan Ravens should be seen along the highways. We should arrive at Neal's Lodges by late afternoon. Neal's 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.

NIGHT: Neal's Lodges, Concan



Golden-cheeked Warbler © Barry Zimmer

April 10-12, Days 2-4: Concan Area. We will have the better part of three days to enjoy the pleasures of the Texas Hill Country. Birds are everywhere here, from the rocky flower-covered hillsides to the thick brush and cypress-lined river banks. The Hill Country is simply one of the “birdiest” places around and provides a unique setting for eastern and western birds to meet. Located right on the dividing line between the junipers and oaks of the Texas Hill Country and the thick brush of South Texas, the Concan area is an ideal spot for studying the birds of both habitats. Some of the expected species present on the lodge grounds include Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Black and Eastern phoebes, Ash-throated and Brown-crested flycatchers, Verdin, Carolina Chickadee, Black-crested Titmouse, Bell’s Yellow-throated, and White-eyed vireos, Bewick’s, Carolina, Canyon and Cactus wrens, Yellow-throated Warbler, House Finch, and Canyon Towhee. A concerted effort will be made to find the two special Texas Hill Country birds, the Golden-cheeked Warbler (which nests nowhere else in the world!) and the Black-capped Vireo, both scarce and difficult to locate. This, however, is the heart of their range. Other typical Hill Country birds we should see are Black-chinned Hummingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Common Raven, Lesser Goldfinch, and Rufous-crowned and Field sparrows. Green Kingfisher and Bushtit (declining) are also possible. Several South Texas species reach their northern limits in the Uvalde area, and thus are more readily found here than elsewhere in the Hill Country. Ringed and Green kingfishers, Couch’s Kingbird, Long-billed Thrasher, and Olive Sparrow will certainly be targeted. We will likely visit Chalk Bluff Park one morning where rarities are occasionally seen, with the park hosting a vagrant Rufous-capped Warbler in 2011 & 2012.

One evening (likely the first), we will visit a nearby private ranch to view one of the greatest bat spectacles in the United States. Over ten million Mexican Free-tailed Bats pour from the entrance of a huge limestone cave. So great are their numbers that the long undulating column of bats stretches to the limits of vision and blackens a



Mexican Free-tailed Bats © Barry Zimmer

corner of the sky. The steady stream of bats continues well into the night. Hundreds of Cave Swallows nest here as well. On the way back to Neal's, we will look for Common Poorwills and Chuck-will's-Widow on the unpaved ranch roads and Eastern Screech-Owl in the oak forests.

In the early afternoon on our final day, we will depart Neal's for the hour and a half drive to San Antonio.

NIGHT: Neal's Lodges, Concan (April 10 & 11)

NIGHT: Hampton Inn & Suites San Antonio Airport (April 12)

April 13, Day 5: Departure for Home. Participants may make arrangements to depart from San Antonio (airport code SAT) any time today.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance

TOUR SIZE: These tours will be limited to 12 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Barry Zimmer and a second leader to be announced



Barry Zimmer has been birding since the age of eight. His main areas of expertise lie in North and Central America, but his travels have taken him throughout much of the world, including such exotic locales as Japan, Russia, Madagascar, Africa, and New Zealand. Barry is a longtime member of the New Mexico Bird Records Committee, and served on the Texas Bird Records Committee for 12 years. He has coauthored three books: *Birds of the Trans-Pecos*, *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*, and *Birds and Bird finding in the El Paso Area*. Barry has a keen interest in nature photography, having captured over 1,600 species of birds on film. His other interests include sports (a diehard Red Sox fan), cooking, and movies. He received his degree in psychology at the University of Texas in El Paso. Barry resides in El Paso with his wife, Yvonne, and their daughter, Alexandra.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the main tour is **\$4,585** per person in double occupancy from Corpus Christi (tour ends in Laredo) which includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 10, and accommodations and boat trip as stated in the itinerary.

The fee for the Hill Country extension is **\$2,395** per person in double occupancy from Laredo (tour ends in San Antonio) which includes all meals from lunch on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 5, and accommodations as stated in the itinerary. Both fees include ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leader(s). It does not include airfare from your home to Corpus Christi or Laredo and return from Laredo or San Antonio, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for the main tour is **\$633**; the single supplement for the Hill Country extension is **\$545**. 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 deposits for these tours are **\$500** per person per tour. 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 1, 2024 for the main tour; and November 10, 2024 for the Hill Country Extension) 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.**

<u>If participant cancels:</u>	<u>Participant's refund will be:</u>
180 days or more before departure date	Participant's deposit minus \$250*
179 to 151 days before departure date	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded
150 days or less before departure date	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.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Neal’s Lodges (Hill Country Extension) 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 coffee, blow dryers, shampoo, and bath mats are not. Please bring these items if you require them.

BAGGAGE: Luggage space in the vans is somewhat limited. Soft luggage is preferable to rigid suitcases for making the most of the van’s storage capacity. Please limit your luggage to one medium-sized duffel or soft-sided bag and one carry-on.

SCHEDULE: Most mornings breakfast will be around 6:00 a.m., with departures for birding varying from 6:40 to 7:15 a.m.. The morning of our visit to the King Ranch, however, we will likely have breakfast at 5:30 a.m. and depart at 6:00 a.m.

CLIMATE: Temperatures in Texas in April range from 60 to 90 degrees with the possibility of even warmer weather (mid 90s) in the Valley. However, a late “norther” may bring rain and temperatures around 50 degrees. Our 2007 tour had record-breaking low temperatures, in the low 40’s, for two days. In the Hill Country, night time lows could also dip into the 40’s (we dipped to 39 degrees on our 2014 trip). Rain is possible at all locations.

CLOTHING: While light field clothing is the norm, you should also bring along a sweater or light jacket and raingear. Comfortable walking shoes or boots are essential, as are a hat and sunscreen for protection from the sun. Dress will be informal throughout. You may wish to bring along swim wear.

LAUNDRY: Guest laundry (self-service and/or valet) is available at all hotels.

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.). An alarm clock is essential (especially at Neal’s Lodges). 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. A small flashlight may come in handy during owling excursions.

INTERNET & PHONE SERVICE: Wi-Fi is available in all hotels on the main tour and mobile phone service is also readily available throughout.

On the extension, Wi-Fi is limited at Neal’s Lodges. The strongest signal is at the office/store/cafe area. Phone service at Neal’s depends on your carrier. **At the time of publication, AT&T customers have service, while Verizon and Sprint do not.**

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, mosquitoes, and ticks can be a problem in Texas, and insect repellent is strongly recommended (we suggest Cutters or Off).

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 your 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.

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.

For use during this tour we recommend either of these two books:

- **Dunn, Jon L. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. The National Geographic Society, 2011 (6th edition).**
- **Sibley, David Allan. *National Audubon Society: The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Knopf Doubleday, 2000.**
*Note that the Sibley Western guide does not cover most of the South Texas specialties.

Birds:

Holt, Harold. *A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast*. (Lane/ABA Birdfinding Guide #413.) American Birding Association, 1993 (revised).

Lockwood, Mark, Brad McKinney, Jim Paton, Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. (Lane/ABA Birdfinding Guide.) American Birding Association, 1999 (revised). Both this and the above guide are great background material.

Oberholser, Harry C. and Edgar B. Kincaid, Jr. (ed.) *The Bird Life of Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974. Edited by Edgar Kincaid. The definitive two-volume reference work on the Texas avifauna, including distribution maps with a few paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Detailed description material.

Peterson, Roger Tory and James Fisher. *Wild America: The Record of the 30,000 Mile Journey*. Mariner Books, 1997. See Chapters 16 and 17: The adventures of two great naturalists as they bird their way through Texas.

Peterson, Roger Tory and Edward L. Chalif. *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997 (paperback). Has good illustrations of many of the border specialties.

Wildflowers:

Enquist, Marshall. *Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country*. Austin: Lone Star Botanical, 1989. Very thorough and attractive guide with excellent photographs.

Wills, Mary M. and Howard S. Irvin. *Roadside Flowers of Texas*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1961. Good selection of typical wildflowers and attractive line drawings.

Loughmiller, Campbell, Lynn Loughmiller and Lynn Sherrod. *Texas Wildflowers*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1984. Field guide with nice photos of many representative wildflowers.

Niehaus, Theodore S. *A Field Guide to Southwestern and Texas Wildflowers* (Peterson Field Guide Series 31). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998 (reprint). This book has the greatest selection of species of the popular guides, but many are black and white line drawings only.

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 May 29, 2024, 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.

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