

WEST MEXICO: THORN FOREST TO THE SIERRA MADRE

JANUARY 16-26, 2020

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After our first night in Nuevo Vallarta, near the airport, we will seek out a few endemics before we head south to El Tuito where we will stay at the comfortable Rancho Primavera. This private ranch just south of Puerto Vallarta provides a hospitable base for explorations of diverse habitats rich in endemic birds. The second half of the tour will explore the highland pine-oak zone of the Sierra Madre Occidental, rising above Puerto Vallarta.



Cinnamon Hummingbird © Brian Gibbons



Yellow Grosbeak © Brian Gibbons

Western Mexico has one of the highest rates of endemism in North America, and the foothill region of the Sierra Madre Occidental is one of the better areas to observe a good cross section of Mexican species. Our West Mexico tour is designed to be a comfortable and inexpensive introduction to the West Mexican avifauna. The accommodations at Rancho Primavera are comfortable, the food is delicious and the grounds are awash in birds.



Our trip will focus on at least three distinct habitat types. We will explore coastal areas for herons, shorebirds, and waterfowl. The most unique habitat type is the West Mexican thorn forest, and many of the endemic species that we will be seeking most ardently, make their homes here. This dry forest type can be surprisingly difficult to bird, and is home to a number of secretive and inconspicuous species.

However, with endemic species like Citreoline Trogon and Red-breasted Chat to tempt us, persistence is sure to pay off. While there are many beautiful birds in the thorn forest, we will search for the exquisite Orange-breasted Bunting, until we've soaked in the all the orange, yellows, blues, and greens of this fine endemic. The ranch itself is set in the foothills, where thorn forest gives way to pine-oak forest, and one begins to see species such as Acorn Woodpecker and Grace's Warbler, as well as specialties like Military Macaw and various hummingbirds.

After exploring the Thorn Forest and lower elevation habitats around Rancho Primavera, we will go birding in the Sierra Madre Occidental. The moist canyons and the pine-oak forests teem with North American migrants wintering alongside a variety of great Mexican birds. A Long-tailed Wood-Partridge might creep out onto the road, while Mountain Trogons call from fir trees. The higher elevations and moist canyons will enable us to seek another ten Mexican endemics, as well as a host of other fantastic birds like Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo. Our base for these explorations will be the charming colonial town of San Sebastián del Oeste, recognized by the Mexican Secretariat of Tourism as a Pueblo Mágico, a place with natural beauty, cultural riches and historical relevance. With its cobbled streets and colonial facades, San Sebastian is from another era. Endemics of this area include



View from the Sierra Madre over the village of Real Alto © Brian Gibbons

Bumblebee Hummingbird, Mexican Woodnymph, Gray-crowned Woodpecker, White-striped Woodcreeper, Green-striped and Rufous-capped brushfinches, Red-headed Tanager, and many more.

Over the course of the tour we expect our bird list to top 250 species, of which better than 30 should be Mexican endemics, and 60 or more will be lifers for those who have not previously ventured “south of the border.”

January 16, Day 1: Arrival into Puerto Vallarta. Participants arriving into Puerto Vallarta International Airport (airport code PVR) in the late morning or afternoon, upon clearing customs and gathering your luggage, should make their way to the meeting location detailed in the departure memo. We will then proceed to Villa Varadero Hotel & Suites, where a room will be reserved in your name. We'll gather in the hotel lobby at 4:30 p.m. for an orientation session and birding, followed by dinner.

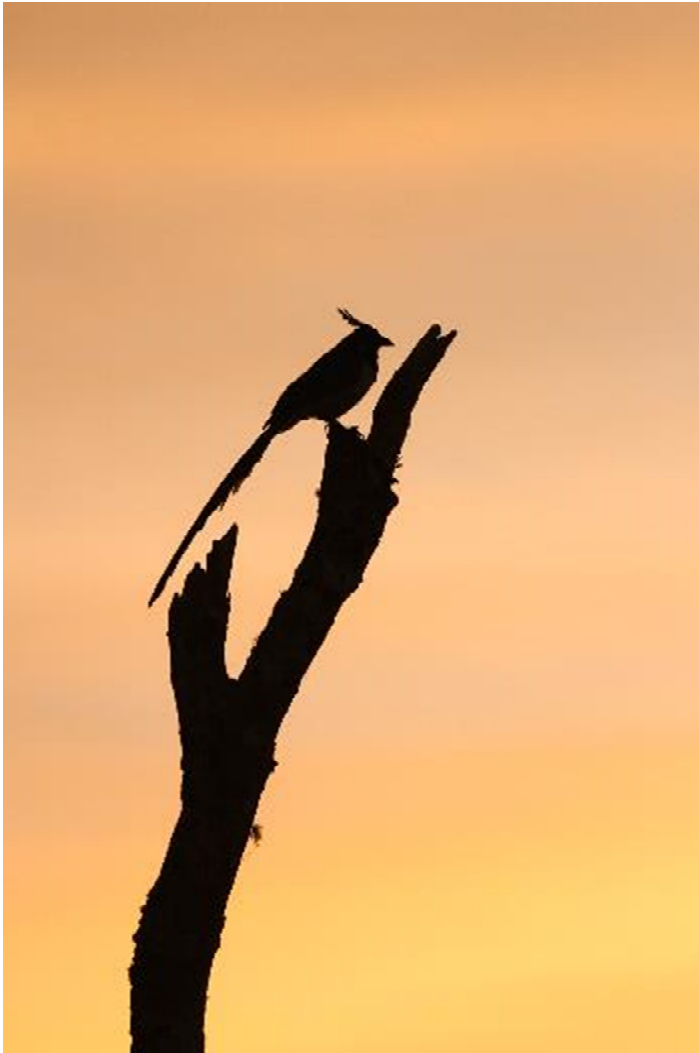
Those wanting to avoid the risk of misconnecting or desiring some down time before the tour are encouraged to arrive on or before January 15. Upon request, VENT will be happy to assist with any additional lodging arrangements.

NIGHT: Villa Varadero Hotel & Suites, Nuevo Vallarta

January 17-21, Days 2-6: Rancho Primavera. On our first morning we will explore the avifauna of Nuevo Vallarta. While there will be many birds around, we will concentrate our efforts on a few more-challenging endemics: Rufous-bellied Chachalaca, Mexican Parrotlet and the stunning Elegant Quail. We will then weave our way south through sprawling Puerto Vallarta toward El Tuito. We will be staying at Rancho Primavera which is a private ranch near the foothill town of El Tuito. The accommodations are comfortable and the food has received rave reviews, so we are confident you will enjoy your stay here. Best of all, the good birding begins right outside your door. A sampling of the West Mexican species that are likely right around the lodge includes Collared Forest-Falcon, Red-billed Pigeon, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Squirrel Cuckoo, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Mottled Owl, Russet-crowned Motmot, Berylline and Cinnamon hummingbirds, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, Masked Tityra, San Blas Jay, Happy and Sinaloa wrens, Rufous-backed Robin, Blue Mockingbird, Golden Vireo, Stripe-headed Sparrow, Black-vented and Streak-backed orioles, and Yellow-winged Cacique. More familiar species from the southern United States such as Great Kiskadee, Dusky-capped and Vermilion flycatchers, and Thick-billed Kingbird will be present as well. Rare species such as Sparkling-tailed Hummingbird, Military Macaw, and Rosy Thrush-Tanager have even been seen here.



The Orange-breasted Bunting is stunning. © Brian Gibbons



Black-throated Magpie-Jay © Brian Gibbons

Rancho Primavera will serve as our base camp, but our birding will not be limited to the grounds. We will divide our time among a number of nearby birding locales which we will explore over the course of our stay. Nearby Bioto Road is good for additional species such as West Mexican Chachalaca, Pale-billed and Lineated woodpeckers, Rose-throated Becard, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Rufous-capped Warbler, and Red-crowned Ant-Tanager. La Bascula is a foothill location, and its higher elevation may have Black-headed Siskins, White-striped Woodcreepers, and Gray-crowned Woodpeckers among other species. Some of our time will be spent in the lowlands, where agricultural fields and thorn forest give way to mangrove swamps and coastal estuaries. In the lowlands, we may find raptors such as Common Black Hawk and Gray Hawk, and possibly even the rare Lesser Ground-Cuckoo. The mangrove swamps play host to “Mangrove” Yellow Warblers and the furtive Rufous-necked Wood-Rail. Laguna de Quelele is renowned for its huge flocks of whistling-ducks (mostly Black-bellied) and should have a variety of other waterfowl, herons, and shorebirds. Wintering shorebirds and herons will be abundant and we will spend time working through some of the identification challenges.

Some of the other species we may see during our week of exploration include Crane Hawk, Laughing Falcon, Mexican Parrotlet, Lilac-crowned Parrot, Mexican Woodnymph, Elegant Trogon, Russet-crowned Motmot, Nutting’s Flycatcher, Black-throated Magpie-Jay, White-throated Robin,

Yellow Grosbeak, and Grayish Saltator. The West Mexican thorn forest hosts some very special birds that will require extra effort to try and see. Among the secretive thorn forest birds that we will be trying for are Citreoline Trogon, Plain-capped Starthroat, Flammulated Flycatcher, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, and Red-breasted Chat.

NIGHTS: Rancho Primavera, El Tuito

January 22, Day 7: Rancho Primavera to San Sebastián del Oeste. Birding en route, we will seek out the final thorn forest specialties along the way to our next destination. Nestled in a valley just 40 miles from Puerto Vallarta, San Sebastian del Oeste is stuck in a colonial era. Narrow cobbled streets and a charming square are remnants of a previous time, one that made it a silver-mining boom-town. Much quieter now, San Sebastian, surrounded by corn and agave fields, is a perfect base for our explorations of the Sierra Madre Occidental which looms to the east. The gardens, orchards, and woods that surround town, and the creek that runs through it, are great places to see some of our first birds of the Sierra like Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Tufted Flycatcher and White-throated Thrush.

NIGHT: Mansion Real Hotel, San Sebastián del Oeste

January 23-25, Days 8-10: Birding the Mountains and Countryside around San Sebastián del Oeste.

Over the next few days we will enjoy some spectacular mountain birding. Birds that we will endeavor to see are Long-tailed Wood-Partridge (always a challenge), Lesser Roadrunner, Mountain Trogon, Mexican Woodnymph, Bumblebee Hummingbird, Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Aztec Thrush, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer, Flame-colored Tanager, Red Warbler (rare), Green-striped Brushfinch and many more. Roving the pine, fir and oak forests are large flocks of wintering North American birds including Bullock's and Scott's orioles; Townsend's, Hermit and Red-faced warblers; Black-headed Grosbeaks; Crescent-chested Warbler; Red-headed Tanager; Slate-throated Redstart; and Gray-collared Becards. At the flower banks higher up, we hope to find Blue-throated, Magnificent, White-eared and Amethyst-throated hummingbirds. This is also the foraging area of the Flowerpiercer. The moist canyons leading into the mountains host a variety of birds that will be new to us; Golden-crowned and Golden-browed warblers are two beautiful birds we will seek. In addition to great birding we will also have ample time to wander the cobbled streets and to purchase some of the locally-grown organic coffee; it's wonderful. Most of our birding will be along remote dirt mountain roads surrounded by majestic oaks and enormous pine and Douglas Fir trees. Three days here will give us ample time to explore these tracks all over the mountain and to see many wonderful birds.



Mountain Trogon male © Brian Gibbons

NIGHTS: Mansion Real Hotel, San Sebastián del Oeste

January 26, Day 11: Morning Birding; Departure for Home. We will probably stay close to San Sebastián del Oeste this morning enjoying the myriad of birds that are close at hand in the gardens, orchards and surrounding woods before our group transfer to Puerto Vallarta International Airport. Participants should select flights which depart after 2:00 p.m.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Brian Gibbons and Victor Emanuel



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,

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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, Lacrechia Johnson, and their son, Grayson.



Victor Emanuel started birding in Texas 70 years ago at the age of eight. His travels have taken him to all the continents, with his areas of concentration being Texas, Arizona, Mexico, Panama, and Peru. He is the founder and compiler for 50 years of the record-breaking Freeport Christmas Bird Count and served a term as president of the Texas Ornithological Society. Birds and natural history have been a major focus throughout his life. He derives great pleasure from seeing and hearing birds, and sharing with others these avian sights and sounds, both the common ones and the more unusual ones. He initiated the first birding camps for young people and considers that one of his greatest achievements. Victor holds a B.A. in zoology and botany from the University of Texas and an M.A. in government from Harvard. In 1993, he was the recipient of the Roger Tory Peterson Excellence in Birding Award, given by the Houston Audubon Society in recognition of a lifetime of dedication to careful observation, education, and

addition to the body of avian knowledge. In 2004, he received the Roger Tory Peterson Award from the American Birding Association, and the Arthur A. Allen Award from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. He is a past board member of the Nature Conservancy of Texas, the National Audubon Society, the American Bird Conservancy, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. In May 2017, the University of Texas Press published his memoir, *One More Warbler, A Life with Birds*.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for this tour is **\$3,995** per person in double occupancy from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 11, ten nights shared accommodations, ground transportation during the tour, tipping, park entrance fees, and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include airfare from your home to Puerto Vallarta and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$595**. 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.

Rooms are limited at Rancho Primavera (Days 2-6) and singles may be asked to share. If so, you will be credited appropriately.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** 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 (August 19, 2019.)

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 **\$500** 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 \$500*

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.

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.

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. *Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.*

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BAGGAGE: Please limit your luggage to one suitcase or duffel and one carry-on bag. As a precaution, we suggest you pack a change of clothes, your binoculars, medication, toiletries, walking shoes, and documents in the carry-on bag. Laundry service is available at Rancho Primavera for a fee.

BIRDING ETIQUETTE: To make the tour most enjoyable for yourself, other participants, and your leader, it is important to use common sense and show proper etiquette while in the field. Birds tend to be shy. Loud noises and bright colors can scare them. We encourage clothing with earth tones. Try to avoid colors like oranges, yellows, and reds. Always keep your voice down. Shouting is not conducive to extended looks at a given species. When looking through the spotting scope, always wait your turn and look briefly the first time so that others may have the opportunity to get a look. If you are a smoker, please do so at a distance.

CONDITIONS: Much of our birding will be along dirt and two-lane roads. Some birding areas are reached via long drives on bumpy, curvy mountain roads without guardrails. Cobblestones in San Sebastian can be challenging to walk on; bring a walking stick if you need extra support over rough terrain. Midday breaks are possible on a few days but don't expect them daily. Picnic breakfasts and lunches will be taken on a couple of days.

Transportation will be aboard a large Nissan van. Seating space is not a problem for most of the tour as everyone will have a window seat on most days. However, the transfer days from the airport to our hotel in Nuevo Vallarta (Day 1), from Nuevo Vallarta to Rancho Primavera (Day 2), from Rancho Primavera to San Sebastián del Oeste (Day 7) and to the airport (Day 11), means that we will be traveling with both people and luggage in the vehicle. On these transfer days, one of the bench seats will be filled with luggage, thus the other bench seat will require that three people sit together. Please note that your comfort is important and that regular stops will occur for bathrooms and to stretch our legs.

CLIMATE: At this time of year we can expect mild temperatures which can range from the low 40s at night to the high 80s during the day. Rain is rare during the dry season, December-May.

CLOTHING: Dress will be casual. Participants should bring lightweight, cool, well-ventilated clothing. Many people now prefer designer field shirts that most outdoor stores and mail order companies are carrying. A typical shirt is usually long-sleeved and buttoned down the center. The material is lightweight and usually of earth tones or pastel coloration. Mesh for ventilation is a standard feature as are several pockets for personal effects. Nights and mornings may be cold though, so be sure to bring a sweater, sweatshirt, or lightweight jacket. For those that get cold easily, light weight gloves and a warm hat can help; the morning sun can be slow to find the deep canyons in the mountains where we will be birding. Mosquitoes will certainly be a nuisance at some sites so lightweight long pants and long-sleeved shirts will be preferable and some may want to pack mosquito netting just in case. Rancho Primavera is known for its biting midges as well, so bug spray may help with them too—sandals and shorts are not recommended. Bring a hat to provide shade from the sun, and sunglasses will also be indispensable. Heavy hiking boots are not necessary, but you will want to have a light hiking boot or shoe. For down time or during periods around towns or hotels, sandals or other open toed shoes are a good idea if you prefer them. You should also bring a bathing suit. There is a pool available at Rancho Primavera and a lunch on the beach will allow time for a quick seaside dip.

CURRENCY: Mexican Peso; U.S. Dollars are best exchanged before your arrival to Mexico as you may not have much of an opportunity to exchange money at the airport or at other points during the trip. Large amounts of cash are not easily exchanged in Mexico. You would probably get a better rate of exchange in Mexico, but keep in mind that, once again, money is easily exchanged in the USA where there are several banks in the airport where money can be exchanged. All places visited on this tour accept US Dollars; Pesos are not a necessity as shopping opportunities are very limited.

INTERNET ACCESS: Expect Wi-Fi to be available in common areas and in some individual rooms at all lodges and hotels.

DOCUMENTS: Travel into Mexico for citizens of the United States requires a passport valid for the full duration of your time in the country. Non-United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions. Additionally, a tourist card, which may be filled out aboard your flight to Mexico, is required. Both your passport and tourist card must be carried with you while in Mexico.

EQUIPMENT: You will want to have sunglasses and sunscreen first and foremost. You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good condition, along with a belt pack or day pack (for carrying books, sunscreen, extra digital storage media, etc.). Other important travel items include a flashlight or headlamp, travel alarm clock, and water bottle. A camera is highly recommended as there is much to see. 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 leader will have a spotting scope, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Earplugs may be necessary for dogs, roosters, and donkeys.

HEALTH: When traveling, becoming seriously ill is never expected nor anticipated, but is always a possibility, especially when in a foreign country. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against hepatitis types A and B. Hepatitis A is a disease of contaminated food and water. Hepatitis B is a disease transmitted through unsanitary needles and contaminated blood. Hepatitis vaccinations are standard travel precautions. Traveling in western Mexico does not necessarily mean your chance for exposure is greater or less than anywhere else. You should also know your blood type!

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 800-CDC-INFO (232-4636) or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel 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. Standard travel items include such stand-bys as aspirin/Advil/Tylenol as well as Pepto Bismol and Imodium. Sunscreen is a necessity on this tour! Your leader will always let you know when it is or is not appropriate to drink the local water. In places where it is not appropriate, bottle or purified water will be provided.

Zika Virus – This tour visits an area or areas where Zika virus is known to occur or could occur; however, we believe the risk to VENT travelers is extremely low. The Zika virus is a mosquito-borne infection transmitted by mosquitos of the genus *Aedes*, and is related to other tropical diseases: Dengue, Yellow Fever, and West Nile virus. This type of mosquito bites during the day and typically is found in areas of dense human habitation where sanitation and drainage of standing water is poor. Zika virus presents the greatest threat to women of childbearing age. For others who become infected, the effects are usually nonexistent to mild, although some people exhibit symptoms such as mild fever, rashes, joint and muscle pain, and red eyes. If infected, the best treatment is plenty of rest, nourishment, and other supportive care. There is no vaccine to prevent or cure the disease; however, Zika virus is not contagious and, therefore, cannot be transmitted through air, food, or water.

Your safety is our highest priority, and we want to emphasize that the best way to avoid Zika virus (and other mosquito-borne diseases), is to take appropriate precautions in avoiding mosquito bites:

- Stay informed about the Zika virus
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants, socks and shoes, and a hat*
- Use effective insect repellents (those containing DEET) and reapply regularly

***We strongly recommend the use of Insect Shield® clothing.** Insect Shield is a process by which clothing is treated with an EPA-approved formula of the insect repellent permethrin. Such clothing is highly repellent to insects and provides durable and long-lasting protection, even after dozens of washings. Outdoor wear with Insect

Shield protection includes name brands such as Ex Officio and Tilley, and can be purchased at outdoor recreation stores such as REI and from a variety of online retailers. In lieu of Insect Shield clothing, you should consider treating your clothes with permethrin, which has the same effect, and that can be purchased at outdoor recreation stores and from a variety of online retailers.

For the latest information and news about Zika virus, please visit the website of the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/zika/>

INSECT PROTECTION: Mosquitoes, chiggers, biting midges, and ticks can be a problem and insect repellent is strongly recommended.

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, like 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 a cream-style insect repellent, such as "Cutter" to your body from the waist down BEFORE putting on your clothing.
- Spray your pants and socks with a spray repellent such as "Cutter" 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.

Field Guides:

- Howell, Steve N.G. and Sophie Webb. 1995. *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, **This is the main field guide for the area**, and is far more than a simple field guide in size (2 inches thick). In addition to exceptionally good plates, it is a trove of information on distribution (the only Mexico field guide with range maps), vocalizations, subspecies, and natural history information.
- The Cornell Lab. Merlin Bird ID. This exciting new app has created a simple West Mexico field guide with photos and sounds of all the birds we will encounter. Download the app and the Mexico: West Bird Pack.

Also, United States field guides will be useful as well since the Mexico guides do not show the common species from the U.S.A. that may occur in Mexico as wintering birds or migrants. Two of the best options are:

- Dunn, Jon L. and Jonathan Alderfer. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 7th Edition*. Washington D.C.
- Sibley, David S. 2014. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

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