

NEW YEAR IN SOUTH TEXAS

**DECEMBER 27, 2006 –
JANUARY 2, 2007**

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746**

WWW.VENTBIRD.COM

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

NEW YEAR IN SOUTH TEXAS

December 27, 2006 – January 2, 2007

Leader: Kim Eckert

I don't know if global warming is to blame, but there's something about high winds which hasn't agreed with me lately. Consider VENT's Nova Scotia-Newfoundland tour, a trip I've done over 20 times without a weather-related cancellation. But for the first time, in 2006 our boat trip to the great seabird colony near St. John's—a real highlight of the tour—had to be called off due to high winds and waves. Fast forward to this December's Texas tour; no, we didn't quite end up canceling the boat excursion to see the Whooping Cranes of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, but due to a forecast of very high winds, they thought seriously about it. That also would have been a first for me after a few dozen of these rides over the years. Happily, the dire forecast was exaggerated, and we enjoyed the usual great looks at the crane families, plus spoonbills, skimmers, and many other water birds.

But windy days are the norm in South Texas, and we had a couple of others after this. It was fortunate, though, that this trip hadn't started a few days earlier, when some dangerously strong storms blew in lots of rain. Some Mountain Plovers (always a difficult—if not impossible—bird on this tour) had also blown in to some plowed fields north of Harlingen, so that first afternoon we headed to the favored field; or tried to. It seems one of the dirt roads to the site was still too wet, muddy, and impassable and the road going in another way was drifted shut by blowing dirt!

Come to think of it, between the boat and the drifting dirt, something else that afternoon contributed to making this perhaps the most interesting day of the tour. And, no, it wasn't our lunch at a Corpus Christi Luby's, but those sorghum fields south of Corpus where an estimated 4 to 5,000 Sandhill Cranes, plus about the same number of Greater White-fronted Geese, were foraging. Without exaggeration, such numbers are in the neighborhood of perhaps 100 times larger than any flocks of these species I ever remember seeing in South Texas. And there was yet another surprise to come that day, with a flock of a few dozen Common Grackles in Sarita—hardly a glamorous species, perhaps, but nine out of ten years our count for this species is zero.

The surprises kept on coming the next day in and around Brownsville. Despite the winds, we began the morning at Rancho Viejo where a lost and unexpected Western Tanager appeared next to the Vermilion Flycatcher and Tropical Kingbirds we were watching. Then, en route to Sabal Palm Grove, there was a very impressive flock of 1,000+ Snow Geese (with a few Ross's among them); like the cranes and geese of the previous day, I found myself looking at a flock size I had never seen here for this species. At Sabal itself, we tracked down three Groove-billed Anis, always a difficult—if not impossible—specialty to find in winter. Then a drive out Boca Chica Road provided a flight of dozens of Gull-billed Terns, another often hard-to-find winter bird.

Still more impressive numbers were witnessed the next two days before we headed upriver to Falcon Reservoir and vicinity. At Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, a minimum of four Clay-colored Robins were concentrated in an anacua tree's berries literally adjacent to the visitor center—there may have even been six of them (about one is average for this tour). At Frontera Audubon's sanctuary in Weslaco we found a curious array of unexpected warblers, which boosted our warbler trip list to 13 species; in all, someone figured there were no fewer than 20

species in the Lower Rio Grande Valley at the time—about double what’s normally present. One of these, a quite out-of-range Townsend’s, was at Anzalduas County Park; we saw it, in addition to great looks at oft-elusive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets and Sprague’s Pipits.

Before ending our tour back at Corpus Christi, there were still a couple of key birding days farther up the Rio Grande at places like Salineño, Chapeño, Zapata, and San Ygnacio. Of these, with all due respect to those now-unpredictable Brown Jays at Chapeño, Salineño emerged as the best locale this time. Thanks largely to the generosity of Pat and Gale DeWind and their feeders (unlike almost everywhere else, it’s still free!), we enjoyed no fewer than four oriole species, one of these an apparent but odd-looking Bullock’s Oriole. And down by the riverside we had our only Black Phoebe, observed an odd American Pipit perched up in a tree (!), and, best of all, spotted an adult Common Black-Hawk—easily the rarest species of the tour.

Itinerary:

December 27 – 5 of the 7 participants arrive in Corpus Christi by 2:00 for afternoon waterbirding excursion to Indian Point and adjacent Sunset Lake Park.

December 28 – morning boat trip aboard the Skimmer for Whooping Cranes et al. in Aransas N.W.R.; afternoon drive to Weslaco via Chapman Ranch Road’s cranes and geese, U.S. Hwy. 77, Sarita’s Common Grackle flock, plover-less back roads E of Lyford, and staging parrots at dusk.

December 29 – Rancho Viejo, Sabal Palm Grove, and Boca Chica Road; successful nocturnal pauraque & screech-owl search at Llano Grande.

December 30 – morning at Santa Ana N.W.R. (via drive through Alamo), and afternoon at Frontera Audubon and Llano Grande.

December 31 – morning at Granjeño (briefly) and Anzalduas County Park; afternoon drive to Zapata via a stop at the Pat & Gale DeWind feeders in Salineño.

January 1 – morning at Chapeño and return to Salineño; afternoon at Falcon State Park, Falcon County Park (briefly), unsuccessful seedeater search in Zapata, and Las Palmas.

January 2 – brief check of San Ygnacio (still no seedeaters) before our return drive to the Corpus Christi airport.

Bird List:

(Note: underlined species indicate South Texas specialties, which are generally rare, local, or absent elsewhere in the U.S.; **boldfaced species** indicate special highlights, either unexpected vagrants or hard-to-find area specialties.)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (best view, finally, at Llano Grande)

Greater White-fronted Goose (4-5,000 on Chapman Ranch Rd.!)

Snow Goose (~1,000 near Sabal Palm!)

Ross’s Goose (3 or 4 with the Snows)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard (unexpected male at Chapeño)

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal (Santa Ana)

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal (especially at Chapeño)
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
(Common Goldeneye / leader-only from the Skimmer)
Hooded Merganser (from the Skimmer)
Red-breasted Merganser (ditto)
Ruddy Duck
Plain Chachalaca (why so few?)
Scaled Quail (heard-only at Las Palmas)
Northern Bobwhite
Common Loon (from the Skimmer)
Least Grebe (best at Sabal Palm)
Pied-billed Grebe
Eared Grebe (from the Skimmer)
American White Pelican
Brown Pelican
Neotropic Cormorant
Double-crested Cormorant
Anhinga (only at Anazalduas)
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret (incl. white-morphs)
Cattle Egret
Black-crowned Night-Heron
White Ibis
White-faced Ibis (from the Skimmer)
Roseate Spoonbill
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
White-tailed Kite (pair along FM 511)
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Common Black-Hawk (adult flying over Salineño)
Harris's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
White-tailed Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon (from the Skimmer)

Sora (heard-only at Santa Ana)
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Sandhill Crane (4-5,000 with the white-fronteds!)
Whooping Crane (always a tour highlight)
Black-bellied Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Piping Plover (Indian Point & Sunset Lake)
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher (from the Skimmer)
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Whimbrel (unexpected from the Skimmer)
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
(Western Sandpiper / leader-only at Sunset Lake)
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
(Stilt Sandpiper / leader-only at Llano Grande)
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Gull-billed Tern (unexpected numbers on Boca Chica Rd.)
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Forster's Tern
Black Skimmer (from – where else? – the Skimmer!)
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Inca Dove
Common Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove
Green Parakeet (unexpected flock in Alamo)
Red-crowned Parrot (6th & Border in Weslaco)
Greater Roadrunner (only at Falcon State Park)
Groove-billed Ani (3 at Sabal Palm Grove)
(Barn Owl / probably seen by B. A. behind the Zapata Best Western)
Eastern Screech-Owl (a great, close view at Llano Grande. . .)

Common Pauraque (. . .and ditto just a few minutes previously!)
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (Frontera Audubon)
Ringed Kingfisher
Belted Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher (several nice views)
Golden-fronted Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (2 at Anzalduas County Park)
Black Phoebe (Salineño)
Eastern Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Tropical Kingbird (Rancho Viejo)
Couch's Kingbird
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Green Jay
Brown Jay (3 at the feeders in Chapeño)
(Horned Lark / leader-only)
Tree Swallow
Black-crested Titmouse
Verdin
Cactus Wren
Carolina Wren (heard-only)
Bewick's Wren
House Wren
(Sedge Wren / leader-only from the Skimmer)
Marsh Wren (Santa Anad)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
(Hermit Thrush / leader-only at Salineño)
Clay-colored Robin (4-5 at Santa Ana plus 1 at Salineño)
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
Long-billed Thrasher
Curve-billed Thrasher (why so few?)
European Starling
American Pipit (incl. one in a tree at Salineño!)
Sprague's Pipit (Anzalduas)
Cedar Waxwing
Orange-crowned Warbler
Northern Parula (but, alas, no Tropical)
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Townsend's Warbler (unusual at Anzalduas)
Yellow-throated Warbler

Pine Warbler (mostly at Anzalduas)
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart (Frontera)
Ovenbird (ditto)
Northern Waterthrush (heard-only at Frontera)
Common Yellowthroat
(Wilson's Warbler / leader-only at Frontera)
Summer Tanager (brief view at Santa Ana)
Western Tanager (only briefly at Rancho Viejo; quite unexpected)
Olive Sparrow
Cassin's Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
(Swamp Sparrow / leader-only at Santa Ana)
Northern Cardinal
Pyrrhuloxia
Indigo Bunting (Santa Ana)
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird
Common Grackle (quite unexpected in Sarita!)
(Boat-tailed Grackle / leader-only from the Skimmer)
Great-tailed Grackle
Bronzed Cowbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole (at the DeWind feeders; not normally present in winter)
(Bullock's Oriole / imm. male also at DeWind's; ID only tentative)
Altamira Oriole
Audubon's Oriole (best at Salineño)
House Finch
House Sparrow

Also seen:

Coyote
Javelina
Eastern Cottontail
Fox Squirrel
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (from the Skimmer)
Red-eared Slider
Rio Grande Leopard Frog (heard-only)