

WINTER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

A RELAXED & EASY DEPARTURE WITH KIM ECKERT

FEBRUARY 23-MARCH 1, 2009

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Whether visiting the Rio Grande Valley for the first time or the fifth, you can take in the best of what this singular area has to offer on this brief trip. The emphasis will be on birding the region and its habitats from South Padre Island to Falcon Reservoir, finding all of the regular “Valley specialties,” and searching for rarities.

The Rio Grande Valley is one of the two or three best birding areas in the United States. Not actually a valley, but rather a floodplain or delta, it supports an ecosystem quite unlike any other found north of Mexico. Here we can expect to see Least Grebe, Neotropic Cormorant, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, White-tailed Hawk, Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Green Parakeet, Red-crowned Parrot, Common Pauraque, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Ringed and Green kingfishers, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Great Kiskadee, Tropical and Couch’s kingbirds, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and Altamira and Audubon’s orioles. All these birds are absent or rare elsewhere in the United States.

With luck, we may see some of the more difficult Mexican species, which are recorded every winter. These include Muscovy Duck, Hook-billed Kite, Red-billed Pigeon, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Brown Jay, Clay-colored Robin, Tropical Parula, and White-collared Seedeater. Of course, we could always encounter a real rarity on the order of Masked Duck, Roadside Hawk, Northern Jacana, Rose-throated Becard, White-throated Robin, Blue Mockingbird, Golden-crowned Warbler, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, or Blue Bunting. None of these are to be expected, of course, although all have been seen on at least one previous tour.

The great thing about “The Valley,” as it is known to birders, is that a trip here always turns up numbers of flashy tropical species which cannot be found farther north, with the chance for something really extraordinary with us each day.

This tour is one in our new series of Relaxed & Easy (R&E) tours. These tours are appropriate for participants who want a slower paced tour, with somewhat fewer hours in the field and light physical activity. They are ideal for persons who prefer a somewhat later start in the morning (typically 7:00 a.m.), a break after lunch and a shorter afternoon outing. They involve only short walks, usually not more than a half mile, and avoid difficult terrain.

February 23, Day 1: Arrival in Harlingen. For those able to arrive early enough, there will be an optional birding excursion, meeting at 1:00 p.m. at the baggage claim area of the airport in Harlingen. (The airport is relatively small, so it should be easy to find everyone.) This afternoon will be spent near Harlingen, most likely at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, where we will see our first few Valley specialties, a good variety of water birds should be present, and we might have a chance to spot an introduced Aplomado Falcon or an overwintering group of elusive Groove-billed Anis.

In previous years, we spent this afternoon at a private ranch north of Harlingen, where the highly sought and local Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl had been reliably present, but the nesting pair has not been consistent here recently. However, another nearby ranch with an accessible pair of these owls has just now begun to invite birders to view them, and this may indeed be an option on this day if the arrangements can be worked out.

We will then return to the Harlingen airport in time to meet with the later arrivals (who should plan to arrive in Harlingen no later than 5:00 p.m.) at the baggage claim area. From the airport, we will drive 30 minutes to our hotel in nearby Weslaco, where we'll have a get-acquainted dinner.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

February 24, Day 2: The Lower Valley. In most years, we elect to spend our first full day in the Brownsville and South Padre Island areas. One of our first stops will be at the Sabal Palm Grove Audubon Sanctuary, a small but very pretty patch of native palm forest. It is one of the best spots in the Valley to find over-wintering Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, and here we generally enjoy our first close looks at many South Texas specialties like Plain Chachalaca, Least Grebe, White-tipped Dove, Green and Ringed kingfishers, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, and Olive Sparrow. Elsewhere in the Brownsville area, we usually find Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, and Tropical and Couch's kingbirds.

We will also schedule a visit to the coastal habitats of South Padre Island and vicinity to look for a wide variety of waterbirds. Such birds as Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Clapper Rail, American Oystercatcher, Royal and Gull-billed terns, Black Skimmer, and many others are all possible today and may not be seen elsewhere on the tour.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

February 25-26, Days 3-4: The Mid-Valley. Few birding places in North America can compare with Bentsen State Park. It boasts a large number of resident species not found in the rest of the United States and also hosts a great number of vagrants. We'll likely spend the greater part of at least one day at Bentsen, watching the antics of Plain Chachalacas and marveling at the colors of Altamira Orioles, with these and other South Texas specialties easy to observe at the park's feeders. We will also visit nearby Anzalduas County Park, which some years is the best place to find Hook-billed Kite, Gray Hawk, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Sprague's Pipit, Tropical Parula, and Black-throated Gray Warbler.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is the largest remaining tract of native riparian woodland in the Rio Grande Valley. Here we can expect such notable regulars as Great Kiskadee and Green Jay and hope for others like Least Grebe and Ringed and Green kingfishers, which are all usually present. There is always a chance for rarities like Tropical Parula, Hook-billed Kite, and Clay-colored Robin. Santa Ana presents a rich mosaic of habitats, from dry mesquite forests to seasonal wetlands called "resacas." There is always something to see here, and there is no better place to get a feel for the unique Valley ecosystem.

On one of these evenings we will schedule a search to look for Common Pauriques as they vocalize and come out to feed at dusk. A late afternoon drive through the residential areas of Weslaco or McAllen should also turn up staging and roost sites for noisy flocks of Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets.

NIGHTS: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

February 27, Day 5: The Upper Valley. As one moves northwestward up the Rio Grande, the country becomes progressively drier and less populated. Today and tomorrow we'll be sampling the outstanding birdlife between Rio Grande City and Falcon Dam and beyond. En route to Zapata, we usually stop at the riverside community of Salineño, where some bird feeders should provide excellent looks at our first Audubon's Orioles, as well as White-tipped and other doves, Green Jay, Bewick's Wren, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and many Altamira Orioles.

Time permitting, another target today will be the White-collared Seedeater, a bird whose only known U.S. population is in and around Zapata and the nearby village of San Ygnacio. The birds are notoriously unpredictable, sometimes being quite cooperative and visible, and other times requiring hours of diligent searching. Persistence is generally rewarded, however, and we have typically met with success on this day or the next.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

February 28, Day 6: Falcon Dam and Vicinity. Along the Rio Grande River below Falcon Dam, there will be much to look for today. We should find both Ringed and Green kingfishers here as well as cormorants, ducks, and other waterbirds moving up and down the waterway. If we are very fortunate, we might spot the rare Muscovy Duck, a large and very shy duck which is seen nowhere else in the United States. Salineño and nearby Chapeño are also good spots to scan for Gray Hawks and recently arriving Red-billed Pigeons, a species which generally withdraws during winter months. In past years, feeding stations at both places had been reliable places for the highly local Brown Jay, but more recently this peripheral species has become scarce to non-existent.

The drier uplands around Falcon State Park, Santa Margarita Ranch, and elsewhere are good places to look for typically western desert birds like Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Say's and Black phoebes, Verdin, Cactus and Rock wrens, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher, Cassin's and Black-throated sparrows, and Pyrrhuloxia. Many birders consider the drier and wilder Upper Valley to be the highlight of a visit to southernmost Texas.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

March 1, Day 7: Departure for Home. After breakfast and perhaps another hour or two of birding, we will drive back down the river to Harlingen, arriving no later than noon. Accordingly, participants may make return flight reservations for any time after 1:00 p.m.

RELAXED AND EASY (R&E) TOUR INFORMATION: Relaxed & Easy (R&E) tours are similar to "regular" VENT tours, but set to a slower pace, with somewhat fewer hours in the field and lighter physical activity. They are ideal for participants who prefer a somewhat later start in the morning, a little lengthier afternoon break, and a shorter afternoon outing. Walking is limited to short walks of usually not more than a half mile one-way, avoiding difficult terrain. A typical day will begin with breakfast around 6:30-7:00 a.m., followed by birding until about noon. We will attempt to have lunch every day between 12:00 and 1:00 p.m., followed by birding for a couple of hours in the afternoon, usually with a break just after lunch and/or right before dinner. We will usually head for dinner around 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. Strenuous physical activity will be avoided, and all walking will be limited to well-marked roads and trails, excluding uneven or rough terrain.

Please note on this tour that longer walks of more than a half mile may be offered as options at Sabal Palm Grove and at Santa Ana N.W.R. Also, there may be late afternoon/early evening options to look for roosting parrots and parakeets and for nocturnal screech-owls and pauraques, which may delay dinner until after 7:00 p.m.

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

TOUR LEADER: Kim Eckert and Kevin Zimmer

Kim Eckert, with over 40 years of birding experience throughout the U.S. and Canada, has now been guiding birders or teaching bird identification classes for more than 25 of those years. Since the 1980s, he has annually led VENT tours to Newfoundland, Churchill, various locations in the Great Lakes and Great Plains, and to Texas – a favorite and frequent winter destination. He has authored four editions of *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota*, and he has written numerous articles, notes, and seasonal reports for the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union journal *The Loon* and other publications, such as *Birding* and *North American Birds*. He also operates the Minnesota Birding Weekends program of birding tours, has been a member for three decades of Minnesota's Re-

ords Committee, and for 20 years he served as Naturalist at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve in Duluth. A Minnesota resident since the 1960s, he has resided in Duluth since 1977 – winters included.

Kevin Zimmer has authored three books and numerous papers dealing with field identification and bird-finding in North America. His book, *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*, deals with finding and identifying birds in the western United States. Living in Alaska contributed to his affection for the Far North, where he has anchored VENT's tour program since 1986. For the past 18 years he has concentrated his attention on the Neotropics, particularly on Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. He has directed VENT's Brazil program since 1991. Kevin has a PhD in biology (research emphasis in Avian Evolutionary Ecology) from New Mexico State University, and is currently a field associate of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology and a Research Associate of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. He has authored numerous technical papers on the taxonomy, distribution, and behavior of Neotropical birds, particularly those of the Amazon basin. He recently completed (with co-author Mort Isler) the major chapter on the *Thamnophilidae* (antbirds) for the prestigious *Handbook of Birds of the World* series. He and Andrew Whittaker are currently at work on a comprehensive field guide to the birds of Brazil, to be published by Princeton University Press. Kevin lives in Atascadero, California with his wife Susan. Their daughter Marina is in graduate school at Dominican University in San Rafael, California.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$1525** per person in double occupancy from Harlingen. This includes all meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 7, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Harlingen and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The fee for the optional birding on Day 1 is **\$65**.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$250**. 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.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, complete the VENT registration form and return it with a deposit of **\$300** per person (check or money order in U.S. dollars). If registering by phone, the deposit must be received within 10 days or the space will be released. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before departure date, the deposit less **\$150** per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 120 and 90 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 90 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself.***

If you cancel:

120 days or more before departure date

Between 120 and 90 days before departure

Fewer than 90 days before departure date

Your refund will be:

Your deposit minus \$150.

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

No refund available.

TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE: Application forms for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. We **strongly recommend** that you purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available, as are other coverages such as terrorism protection;**

however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.

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.

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.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least **two months** prior to your departure date. These arrangements may range from an extra night at the initial hotel of the tour to a week or more extension including accommodations, sightseeing, and transportation. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

CLIMATE: Winter and early spring weather in south Texas is generally quite pleasant, but changeable. Typical days will begin with cool mornings in the 50s, then warm into the 70s or often the 80s in the afternoon. Warmer days in the 90s are even possible, but just as likely are cold fronts and north winds holding daytime highs in the 40s. Rain is unlikely, but always a possibility.

CLOTHING: Jeans or similar durable field trousers are recommended, though many participants also bring a pair of shorts. Be sure to bring a warm jacket plus a sweater or sweatshirt, since a cold and windy “norther” is always a possibility. Also bring light rain wear, and a hat for protection from the cold or sun will be needed. Footwear is up to you; some people like to wear light hiking boots, but sneakers or other comfortable walking shoes are fine. Waterproof footwear is generally not required. Dress will be casual throughout.

EQUIPMENT: You should pack a pair of binoculars, along with a day pack for carrying books, sunscreen, water, etc. Your leader will have a spotting scope, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Other optional items to bring include a small flashlight and an alarm clock. Chiggers, ticks, and mosquitoes are present in this part of Texas, even in winter; thus, insect repellent is recommended.

LAUNDRY: There are coin-operated laundry facilities at both our motels.

PHYSICAL EXERTION: This tour is not physically demanding. We will be doing a fair amount of riding in vans, interspersed with many periods of short to moderate walks.

SUGGESTED READING:

Our website at www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com or www.buteobooks.com, which specializes in ornithology books. Dunn, Jon L., et al. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*: Either the Fourth (2002) or the Fifth Edition (2006) is recommended. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.

Sibley, David A. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. Currently, this and the Geographic guide are the most complete and up-to-date field guides. If you elect to bring one of the smaller regional Sibley guides (2003), the Eastern guide covers this part of Texas.

Lockwood, Mark W., Brad McKinney, Jim Paton, Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. Colorado Springs: American Birding Association, 1999. Complete guide to the birding areas covered on this tour.

Lockwood, Mark and Brush Freeman, *The TOS Handbook of Texas Birds*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. Annotated accounts with range maps of all Texas species.

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

TIPPING: As noted in our itineraries, tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and 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 such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

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 30, 2008, 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.