

# NORTHEAST MEXICO

## The Sierra Madre Oriental

### February 7-14, 2009

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*South Texas is just the tip of a tropical iceberg. The diversity of birds just south of the border and the Tropic of Cancer explodes. Seven families of birds, that never occur north of the border, lurk in lush tropical forest, brush and along streams. The odd Sungrebe is one of those denizens that swim along backwaters of forest rivers. Thicket Tinamous are often heard whistling their presence, rarely seen. The Blue-crowned Motmot may be one of the most tropical-looking creatures of Northeast Mexico. The Gomez Farias area of Tamaulipas, the northeasternmost state in Mexico, is a great base to explore the wonders of the tropics close to home in the El Cielo Biosphere Reserve. We will have ample time to explore the temperate forests that include pines, oak and sweetgums at the higher elevations of the reserve as well as the northernmost extension of cloud forest. Around Gomez Farias, tropical forest dominates and right around town trogons and motmots gaze for their next meal as Hummingbirds, like the giant Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, zip around sipping nectar.*

*We will be 250 miles from the US border in a tropical realm where 70 species of birds that never occur in the US are found. Ornate Hawk-Eagles and rarely Solitary Eagles soar over their domain looking for their next meal. Laughing Falcons and Collared Forest-Falcons are oft heard but they prefer the cover of the forest. Crested Guan is a massive turkey-sized bird that stumbles around in the trees eating fruits. The Singing Quail patrol the forest floor scratching out sustenance from the leaf litter. More than ten species of doves and pigeons inhabit northeast Mexico, Blue Ground-Dove, Ruddy Quail-Dove and Gray-headed Dove will be the most sought after.*

*Parrots of course - Military Macaw; White-crowned, Red-lored and Red-crowned parrots are all residents of the El Cielo area. While this area is obviously very rich for tropical birds we will also encounter some familiar faces as many North American birds spend their winter in these productive forests. Mingling with Yellow-winged Tanagers and Scrub Euphonias we should see Wilson's Warblers, Summer Tanagers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and other birds we consider ours in the summer. Four Species of Orioles, Rufous-browed Peppershrike and Spot-breasted Wren are some of the birds we should find in the Gomez Farias area. One of the most spectacular bird songs of North America is that of the Brown-backed Solitaire and should be common in the mountain forests of El Cielo. This is an excellent first-trip into the neotropics with many new birds and families but not too much to be overwhelming.*

**February 7, Day 1: Arrival in McAllen, Texas.** Participants should make arrangements to arrive in McAllen, TX (airport code MFE) today. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 7:00 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner and orientation. The hotel offers a complimentary airport shuttle service from the McAllen International Airport.

NIGHT: Howard Johnson Plaza, McAllen

**February 8-12, Days 2-6: Birding El Cielo Biosphere Reserve.** With five nights in Gomez Farias we will have ample time to discover many habitats and birds of northeast Mexico. Our first afternoon will take in some

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easy birding around Gomez Farias. Just on the outskirts of town we hope to see Bat Falcon, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, Elegant Trogon, hummingbirds, orioles and a variety of the common species of the northern tropics. One day we will bird the tropical forest in search of lower elevation birds like Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Blue Ground-Dove, Black-headed Saltator, Thicket Tinamou and many more. We will always be listening for tropical raptors. Laughing Falcon and Collared Forest-Falcon are more often heard than seen even though they can be common birds. One afternoon and evening we will take a boat trip from the area of Bocatoma. Cruising along the Rio Sabinas we hope to find Sungrebe cruising the backwaters as well as Boat-billed Herons that are just waking up for their night-time hunting of crayfish. There should be Ringed and Green kingfishers around too. Tropical Parulas, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, flycatchers, Squirrel Cuckoo, Masked Tityra, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Euphonias other species should be seen in the huge Cypress trees that line the river.

One morning we will take an all day excursion into the cloud forest and higher elevations. This will require an early departure to ensure good birding in the very different habitats of higher elevations. Pines and oaks are common trees above the cloud forest. Bumblebee Hummingbird is possible in the open pine forest. Hooded Grosbeaks will mingle with White-winged Tanagers as we ascend. Fan-tailed Warbler can be common in the mixed species flocks. We will spend plenty time checking these flocks for a variety of wintering warblers and Mexican residents.

Around Gomez Farias we will have some great birding. We should see plenty of White-crowned, Red-lored and possibly Red-crowned parrots, and with some luck Military Macaw. Crested Guans clamber through the trees looking for fruit in the forest. We will make special efforts to see the Northern Mexican Endemics like Red-crowned Parrot, Bronze-winged Woodpecker, Hooded Grosbeak, Tamaulipas Pygmy-Owl and other special birds like Blue Mockingbird, Squirrel Cuckoo, Blue-crowned Motmot, Ornate Hawk-Eagle. Canivet's Emerald, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing and Azure-crowned Hummingbird are some of the dazzling tropical hummers we expect to see. We will also make a special outing into the lowlands at dusk to look for the odd nocturnal shorebird Double-striped Thicknee, around marshes we could also find Altamira Yellowthroat.

NIGHTS: Cumbres Inn and Suites, Gomez Farias

**February 13, Day 7: Birding El Cielo Biosphere Reserve and starting our northward return.** Today we will try to spot some of the birds we may have missed in the previous days' birding around El Cielo Biosphere Reserve. There are also parks around Ciudad Victoria where some typical desert birds can be added to our list.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express Ciudad Victoria, Ciudad Victoria

**February 14, Day 8: Early departure from Mexico for return to South Texas.** Today we will say goodbye to the tropical realm and head back to Texas. You should plan your departures from McAllen, TX after 2:00 PM.

**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 time.

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

**TOUR LEADERS:** Brian Gibbons and a second leader TBA if necessary.

**Brian Gibbons** was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. He took an interest in all things wild at a young age, but has specialized in birds since age 10. Brian graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University in east Texas with a B.S. in biology. Since that time he has worked on a variety of field ornithology research projects, from the Bering Sea and the midnight sun of the North Slope of Alaska to the Dominican Republic. From 1998 to 2000 he was an observer for the Migration Over the Gulf Project sponsored by a Minerals Management Service grant and administered by Louisiana State University. The project involved placing observers on oil and gas

platforms throughout the Gulf of Mexico. The goal was to assess the impact of these platforms on the several hundred million trans-Gulf migrants that pass through the region in both spring and fall. More recently he has worked with the Smithsonian Institution in Jamaica, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as part of a team researching West Nile Virus, and assessing the role of migratory birds in the dispersal of the virus. Recreational birding and travel have taken him to The Great Wall in China, Machu Picchu in Peru, and the Himalayas in Nepal. One of his primary birding mentors was the late Al Valentine, a bird bander, who helped to instill a love of handling birds and learning from them. For many years Brian's field research has involved 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.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$2240** per person in double occupancy from McAllen, TX. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to lunch on Day 8 accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to McAllen 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 **\$400**. 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, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**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.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Cancellation Penalties and Refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less \$300 per person is refundable. If cancellation is made fewer than 120 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 for your protection.***

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$300.
Fewer than 120 days before departure date	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, 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.

**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.

**BIRDING ETIQUETTE:** To make the tour most enjoyable for yourself, other participants, and your leader, it is important to use plain 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.

**CLIMATE:** The weather should be quite mild this time of year. There could be a chance of rain in the mountains but we will be visiting during the dry season. Cooler temperatures in the mountains and warmer temperatures in the lowlands should be a normal scenario. Expect a range of temperatures from 50-90. Sun could be intense and bugs should not be too bothersome during the dry season.

**CLOTHING:** Lightweight long pants and shirts are recommended for sun and or bug protection. Rain jacket and or a small packable umbrella are ideal in case of a shower. Sturdy hiking shoes for birding outings are a must.

**CURRENCY:** Dollars are widely accepted for drinks and gifts. If you do change money \$50-100 would be more than adequate for these things.

**DOCUMENTS:** Travel into Mexico for citizens of the United States requires a passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure. Non United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions.

**EQUIPMENT:** You will want to have sunglasses and sunscreen first and foremost. You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). Other important travel items include a flashlight, travel alarm clock, 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 877-FYI-TRIP (394-8747) or you can check their website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new\\_e.html](http://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 Bristol and Imodium. Sunscreen is a necessity on this tour! Your leaders 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.

**INSECT PROTECTION:** A DEET based insect repellent works well if insects, chiggers or ticks are encountered.

**SUGGESTED READING:** Our website, [www.ventbird.com](http://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 this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You may also visit such other online stores such as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) or [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) which specializes in ornithology books.

### ***Birds***

Sutton, George M. *At a Bend in a Mexican River*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. This book details an Ornithologist's travels in Northeast Mexico in the middle of last century.

Sutton, George M. *Mexican Birds: First Impressions*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951. Out of print, but try [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com).

***Field Guides*** - The only field guide, for birds, worth carrying south of the border is Howell and Webb's *The Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. While there are many other smaller guides none is adequate or comparable to Howell and Webb.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurants, 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 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

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full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where 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 October 3, 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.