

WINTER NEW MEXICO

JANUARY 6 – 12, 2010

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The Rio Grande Valley of central and southern New Mexico plays host to an incredible array of wintering bird species each year. Tens of thousands of geese, ducks, and cranes descend on famous Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, as well as Caballo and Elephant Butte Reservoirs. Sparrows, often in astonishing numbers and variety, cover the desert grasslands and riparian thickets. Drawn by the abundant prey, raptors abound with a combined total of 17 hawk and owl species possible. In short, this avian-rich area is a mecca for winter birding.

In six days we will cover the entire Rio Grande Valley from El Paso to Albuquerque. As a stunning finale, we will visit Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, home of the Winter Crane Festival. A total of over 150 species are possible along this route, including such sought-after gems as Clark's Grebe, Ross's Goose, Ferruginous Hawk, Sandhill Crane, Burrowing Owl, Juniper Titmouse, Crissal and Sage thrashers, Green-tailed Towhee, and Black-chinned and Sage sparrows. The great birding, generally mild winter weather (while much of the country is buried under snow!), and spectacular scenery make this visit to the Land of Enchantment a must.

January 6, Day 1: Arrival in El Paso. Participants should plan to arrive in El Paso today. Once at the airport, you may proceed to the white Wyndham phone in the baggage claim area to request a transfer to the hotel, where a room will be reserved in your name. The walk to the Wyndham is only about 200 yards, so you may choose that over the shuttle if your luggage is light. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 3:00 p.m. for a visit to a huge Yellow-headed Blackbird roost (some years numbering thousands of individuals) in west El Paso. The "Mexican Duck" race of Mallard, Common Moorhen, and Wilson's Snipe might also be seen. We will go from birding directly to dinner on the west side of town.

NIGHT: Guesthouse Suites, El Paso

January 7, Day 2: Rio Grande Valley to Las Cruces. The entire day will be devoted to areas around El Paso (possibly extending eastward to McNary Reservoir) and traveling north to Las Cruces via the Rio Grande Valley. Following in the footsteps of famed Spanish explorer, Don Juan de Oñate, we will wind our way along the river, making frequent stops en route at various water impoundments, oases, and salt cedar bosques. Desert areas along our route could yield Gambel's and Scaled quail; Greater Roadrunner; Burrowing Owl; Cactus and Rock wrens; Curve-billed and Crissal thrashers; Pyrrhuloxia; Green-tailed, Spotted, and Canyon towhees; and Black-throated Sparrow among others. We will keep a close eye out for the localized Harris's Hawk as well. Reservoirs along the way should produce a sizable list of water birds with possibilities including five species of grebes, Ross's Goose, all three mergansers, Neotropic Cormorant, and a variety of gulls. We may also include a stop at local feeders to see if any hummingbirds are overwintering. This day has produced an incredible array of rarities over the years including such spectacular vagrants as Black-legged Kittiwake, Lewis's Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Gray Silky-flycatcher, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated and Townsend's warblers, and Hooded Oriole. One never knows what unexpected species will turn up next!

NIGHT: Hampton Inn and Suites, Las Cruces

January 8, Day 3: Organ Mountains and Jornada Grasslands. The majestic Organ Mountains, named for their organ pipe-shaped peaks, harbor many species typical of the southwestern oak/juniper belt. We will set a relaxed pace on a one to two-mile hike in this scenic range to seek out such species as Red-naped Sapsucker; Western Scrub-Jay; Juniper Titmouse (recently split from the Plain Titmouse complex); Bewick's, Canyon, and Rock wrens; Townsend's Solitaire; Western Bluebird; Canyon Towhee; Rufous-crowned and Black-chinned sparrows; and Lesser Goldfinch. Regal Golden Eagles sometimes patrol the mountain skies overhead.

In the late afternoon we will check the grasslands of the Jornada del Muerto or "Journey of Death," so named because this extensive, waterless region spelled the doom of many early travelers. Sparrows and raptors abound here. Black-throated, Sage, and Brewer's sparrows, as well as Lark Bunting are all likely; and we could encounter Golden Eagle or Prairie Falcon.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn and Suites, Las Cruces

January 9, Day 4: Percha Dam, Caballo Lake, & Elephant Butte. North of Las Cruces, the habitat along the Rio Grande is less disturbed by agricultural practices, with some tracts of original riparian growth still remaining. Percha Dam State Park is one such site. Regarded as one of the premier birding and vagrant-hunting spots in the state, this park has produced an incredible list of rarities. Among the more common species that we should see are Gambel's Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Great Horned Owl, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Verdin, and Crissal Thrasher. Also there may be numerous sparrows, including Lincoln's, Swamp, Song, White-crowned, and perhaps White-throated. In good invasion years, all three species of bluebirds are possible, including the incomparable Mountain. This area has produced many vagrants on past tours including Lewis's Woodpecker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Vermilion Flycatcher, and Hutton's Vireo. Surrounding agricultural fields are usually teeming with geese, cranes, and raptors. We will check closely for Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon, if we are still missing either of these elegant species.

Nearby Caballo Reservoir plays host to thousands upon thousands of wintering waterfowl, cranes, and gulls. Among the possibilities are Western, Clark's, and Eared grebes; Double-crested and Neotropic cormorants; Ross's Goose; Common Goldeneye; Common (sometimes in rafts up to 10,000 individuals!) and Hooded mergansers; Sandhill Crane; and the locally rare California Gull. Numerous Bald Eagles winter here as well, patrolling the shorelines for fish and injured waterfowl. As with Percha, this reservoir acts as a magnet, attracting an amazing number of rare vagrants. Though not likely on any given trip and never to be expected, such rarities as Yellow-billed Loon, Tundra Swan, Greater White-fronted Goose, Mew Gull, Thayer's Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake have all occurred here in recent winters. Who knows what odd waterbird might show up next?

A late afternoon visit to the sycamore-lined banks of Animas Creek should yield the locally uncommon Acorn Woodpecker and Bridled Titmouse.

NIGHT: Comfort Inn, Truth or Consequences

January 10, Day 5: Elephant Butte Lake, Water Canyon, and Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. As we head north towards Socorro, we will check Elephant Butte Lake for any waterbirds we may be missing. As with Caballo, this reservoir turns up a wealth of vagrants each year. Clark's and Western grebes are generally more numerous here, and chances for an odd loon or gull are increased. By mid-morning we will be in the Magdalena Mountains west of Socorro. Here in scenic Water Canyon, a variety of montane species are likely. Acorn Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, Steller's Jay, Western Scrub-Jay, Juniper Titmouse, Mountain Chickadee, Bushtit, White-breasted Nuthatch, Western and Mountain bluebirds, Townsend's Solitaire, Rock Wren, and Pine Siskin are among the many possibilities. Though less regular, we have a chance for invasionary species such as Sage Thrasher and Cassin's Finch.

In the mid-afternoon we will make our first visit to world famous Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. We will concentrate in particular on the north end of the refuge where huge numbers of Snow Geese and Sand-

hill Cranes stage before coming to their evening roost sites. Flock after flock pass overhead in an incredible symphony of sound. The evening will almost certainly be a memorable one!

NIGHT: Super 8, Socorro

January 11, Day 6: Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. A very early start this morning (about 5 a.m.) will allow us to witness the incredible dawn flight of geese (often 30,000 or more) and cranes (10-15,000) out of the refuge. The sights and sounds of such an extravaganza are truly unforgettable! Lying along a nine-mile stretch of the Rio Grande, Bosque del Apache combines riparian habitat, extensive water impoundments, and cultivated fields, all of which help attract tens of thousands of wintering birds. The symphony of honks, rattles, and trumpets plays throughout the day as we wind around the refuge tour loop. The tiny Ross's Goose is almost assured here, often close to the road and in rather large numbers. Ring-necked Pheasants (white-winged race) scamper about the brushy ditches. Waterfowl, often 20 or more species, are everywhere and usually close enough for superb study. Hawks, eagles, and falcons perch patiently atop cottonwood snags looking for the injured and weak among the throngs of ducks and geese. This is truly a birder's paradise!

Some winters, rosy-finches are present on Sandia Crest above Albuquerque. If any finches are present this year, and if road conditions allow us to reach the top, we will depart the refuge in mid-morning and head to the high elevations of the Sandia range. The past four years we have tallied all three rosy-finch species, in addition to the distinctive Hepburn's race of the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch. Other upper elevation species may be located here as well, such as Steller's Jay, Red-breasted and White-breasted nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, and Cassin's Finch (irregular). If no rosy-finches are being reported, we will linger longer at Bosque del Apache before heading northward.

We will spend the late afternoon visiting the Rio Grande Nature Center in west Albuquerque. Here spectacular Wood Ducks line the pond at the visitor center by the dozens, Mountain and Black-capped chickadees frequent the feeders, and often a rarity is present as well (in 1998 and 2001 there was a gorgeous male Eurasian Wigeon!)

NIGHT: Albuquerque Grand Airport Hotel, Albuquerque

January 12, Day 7: Departure for Home. Participants may plan to depart at any time today.

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 and transfers. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

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

TOUR LEADERS: Barry Zimmer

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 co-authored three books: *Birds of the Trans-Pecos*, *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*, and *Birds and Birdfinding in the El Paso Area*. Barry has a keen interest in nature photography, having captured over 1,000 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 tour is **\$1935** per person in double occupancy from El Paso (tour ends in Albuquerque). This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 6, all lodging 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 El Paso and return from Albuquerque, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$280**. 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 **\$300** 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.

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 **\$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 for your protection.***

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.

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.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE: A brochure and application form 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 as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends Travel Insured International as our preferred insurance provider.** 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.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. **Contact Travel Insured International prior to registration for details.** Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than Travel Insured International, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

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: You should limit your luggage to one medium-sized suitcase and one carry-on item per person. Your tour leaders will have a spotting scope; however, if you have one and would like to bring it, please feel free to do so.

CLIMATE, CLOTHING, ETC.: Temperatures in mid-January can vary considerably in southern New Mexico. Daytime highs should range from the low 40s to the upper 60s (something in the low 50s would be most likely) and nighttime lows should be in the mid-20s to mid-30s. Colder weather is possible; our 1997 tour had temperatures down to 11 degrees! Precipitation is rather uncommon at this season, but one should always be prepared for the chance of a rain shower or even some snow. A sweater and a light jacket will most likely be appropriate for mid-day birding. Early mornings are likely to be quite cool: a heavier jacket, gloves, and a warm cap are recommended. Thermal underwear is recommended. Long-sleeved shirts, jeans or other birding pants, and a hat for sun protection would be standard birding gear. Comfortable walking shoes, such as tennis shoes, will be fine for the most part. You may wish to have hiking boots for our uphill hike at Aguirre Springs. Unless unexpected snow accumulations occur, you will not likely need waterproof footwear. Dress will be informal throughout, including in restaurants. Elevations on the tour will range from 3,500-10,300 feet.

BIRDING SCHEDULE: In general, we will plan to have breakfast at 6 a.m. most mornings. The exception will be our early start at Bosque del Apache. Most days we will finish birding at 5 p.m. or shortly thereafter. There may be one evening of owling.

LAUNDRY: Self-service laundry available at Super 8 in Socorro.

INSECT PROTECTION: There should not be any insect problems in mid-winter.

SUN PROTECTION: Sunscreen, hat, and chapstick are recommended for protection from the often sunny skies and dry air.

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.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

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. 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).

OTHER: A canteen or small water bottle and a small daypack (for carrying snacks) will be useful on our hike at Aguirre Springs. Though all of our hotels have wake-up service, an alarm clock is always a good idea. A small flashlight or headlamp may be helpful if we decide to do any nocturnal owling (we hope to find our target owls by day!).

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.

- Burt, William Henry. *A Field Guide to the Mammals of North America*. Third Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.
- Clark, William S. and Wheeler, Brian K. *Hawks (Peterson Field Guides)*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.
- Elmore, Francis H. *Shrubs and Trees of the Southwest Uplands*. Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, 1976.
- Hubbard, John P. *Revised Checklist of the Birds of New Mexico*. Albuquerque, NM: McLeod Printing Company, 1978. New Mexico Ornithological Society Publication No. 6.
- Moore, Michael. *Medicinal Plants of the Desert and Canyon West*. Museum of New Mexico Press, 1989.
- National Geographic Society. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Fourth Edition. 2002.
- Parmeter, John; Neville, Bruce; Emkalus, Doug. *New Mexico Bird Finding Guide*. New Mexico Ornithological Society. Third Edition. 2002.
- Sibley, David A. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Chanticleer Press. 2000.
- Zimmer, Barry. *Birds of the Trans-Pecos*. University of Texas Press. 1998.

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 April 28, 2009 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.