

# SOUTH FLORIDA

APRIL 19 – 28, 2011

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The great pointed paw of the state of Florida, familiar as the map of North America itself, of which it is the most noticeable appendage, thrusts south, farther south than any other part of the mainland of the United States. Between the shining aquamarine waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the roaring deep-blue waters of the north-surging Gulf Stream, the shaped land points toward Cuba and the Caribbean. It points toward and touches within one degree of the tropics.

— Marjory Stoneman Douglas

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas thus described Florida in her 1947 classic, **The Everglades: River of Grass**. In many ways, the passage is a perfect description of the geographic uniqueness of the state. It is the “youngest” region of the lower 48 states, geologically speaking, having achieved its current appearance a mere 4,000 years ago. During the Pleistocene epoch, the northern and central tiers of the continent were periodically covered with great sheets of ice. As the ice packs repeatedly grew and then shrunk, the sea levels rose and fell. Ancient shorelines characterize the south-central part of Florida; in contrast, the southeastern mainland, where the land meets the Atlantic, is mainly formed by limestone, which creates the Atlantic coastal ridge, only 24 feet above sea level.*

*Natural depressions in the substrate allowed for the formation of central Florida’s many freshwater lakes and the deep swamps and Everglades that originally covered most of the southern part of the state. The result was the creation of a bio-region unlike any other in the world.*

*It does not do South Florida justice simply to call it the most biologically rich region in the United States and Canada. It is a land so unique that in 1976 the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the Everglades National Park as part of the International Network of Biosphere Reserves. Since then, numerous national and international conservation organizations have deemed the Everglades and nearby areas as one of the most important and threatened natural regions in the world.*

*Within the United States, South Florida stands alone with regard to biological diversity. It contains complex plant communities of oak forest, scrub, hammocks, swamps, mangroves, salt marshes, pine forests, dry prairies, and wet prairies. There are habitats found nowhere else in the country; these support over a dozen species of birds that reach their northern limit of distribution and are seldom seen elsewhere within our borders. Another dozen subspecies of more widespread species have evolved into unique, often separable, local forms not found outside Florida.*

*We’ll range from Lake Okeechobee and vicinity all the way down through the Keys to Key West itself. From east to west, the tour will move from the Fort Lauderdale-Miami area on the Atlantic*

*Ocean to Naples on the Gulf of Mexico. Areas harboring South Florida specialty birds are emphasized, but we'll also cover locations holding other sought-after species.*

*Beginning in the Fort Lauderdale area with our first search for Smooth-billed Anis, introduced exotics, and a myriad of water birds, we'll move on to the prairies and pinelands around Lake Okeechobee and Naples to find Short-tailed Hawk, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Florida Scrub-Jay, and Bachman's Sparrow. On Marco Island we bird the lagoons and mudflats of the Gulf Coast, home to frigatebirds, oystercatchers, and many other shore and wading birds. We'll go on to the Big Cypress region and the Everglades where Wood Storks and Swallow-tailed Kites reign supreme, Snail Kites patrol for apple snails, and Limpkins stalk the banks. After a day in Miami and its suburbs for exotics such as parakeets, bulbuls, mynas, and Spot-breasted Orioles, the tour concludes in the hardwood hammocks and mangroves of the Florida Keys, with White-crowned Pigeons, Mangrove Cuckoos, Gray Kingbirds, and Black-whiskered Vireos.*

*There are, of course, other remarkable inhabitants of this subtropical world—tropical plants and butterflies, amphibians, turtles, and alligators lying motionless in wait. And no trip to South Florida would be complete without gaining insight into the threats to its natural wonders. We'll have plenty of opportunity to explore this topic, as well as the \$7.8 billion Everglades Restoration Plan, which will take 38 years to complete.*

*This tour may be combined with our Dry Tortugas tour (April 27-30, 2011).*

**April 19, Day 1: Arrival in Fort Lauderdale.** Participants may plan to arrive in Fort Lauderdale at any time today and transfer to the nearby Days Inn where a room will be reserved in your name. The group will meet in the hotel lobby at 6:00 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner and orientation.

NIGHT: Days Inn Fort Lauderdale Airport South, Hollywood

**April 20, Day 2: Fort Lauderdale and Vicinity; Drive to Clewiston.** The newly created Wakodahatchee Wetlands will be our first stop of the day. These wetlands are one of the great conservation stories to come out of South Florida recently. The name "Wakodahatchee" is taken from the Seminole Indian language, meaning "created waters." The wetlands originally were 50 acres of unused utility land, but the Palm Beach County Water Utilities Department's Southern Region Water Reclamation Facility created an artificial wetland here. Every day, the facility pumps two million gallons of highly treated water through the wetland, which acts as a natural filter to clean the water further. The result is a marsh in the middle of a city that attracts numerous birds and other wildlife.

A three-quarter mile boardwalk through the marsh will take us delightfully close to a wide variety of birds that are truly wild. Least Bitterns may be calling from the cattails while Glossy Ibis and the dazzling Purple Gallinule stride through the vegetation just feet away! Mottled Duck and Blue-winged Teal are usually present and sometimes a flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks are around. Anhingas should have young in their nests while a watchful eye on the cattails may spot a Sora scurrying about at our feet. We'll also want to be listening for the wild strident calls of Limpkins which can sometimes be seen lurking along the shoreline here.

If time allows, we will visit the nearby Green Caye Wetlands. This is another water treatment facility that is very bird and birder friendly and it sometimes has a few species that we don't see at Wakodahatchee.

The Wakodahatchee and Green Caye wetlands are an example of progressive thinking in conservation. Not only do they provide suitable habitat for wildlife in an urban setting, but the wetlands have also been designed with public access in mind.

In the afternoon, we will drive northwest to Clewiston on the south shore of Lake Okeechobee, our base for the next two nights.

NIGHT: Clewiston Inn, Clewiston

**April 21, Day 3: Short-tailed Hawk, Florida Scrub-Jay, and Bachman's Sparrow.** Although much of south-central Florida has been converted to orange groves and sugar cane, there are still large pastures where Florida's resident populations of Crested Caracara, Sandhill Crane, and Burrowing Owl can be found. Okeechobee and other area lakes host Limpkins and Bald Eagles, while Wild Turkeys, Ospreys, Red-headed Woodpeckers, and Eastern Bluebirds nest in this region's open woodlands.

But of primary import today will be finding three specialty birds of this region west and north of Lake Okeechobee. One is the Florida Scrub-Jay, a declining species found in no other state. Though its habitat of open oak scrublands is being lost to development and fire-suppression, this jay fortunately tends to be conspicuous in its behavior and not too difficult to see locally.

A local specialty of shrubby and pinewoods grasslands, the Bachman's Sparrow tends to choose conspicuous singing perches, but when silent it is much more challenging to find. A few of the state-endangered "Florida" Grasshopper Sparrows might be another possibility in one of the Bachman's areas we check.

Much more difficult at this time of year, though, is the Short-tailed Hawk. Places like Fisheating Creek, Rainy Slough, and Hickory Hammock represent the southern edge of this raptor's breeding range, and it typically takes a lot of patient scanning to spot one hunting for prey high above the deciduous canopy. Most individuals are dark-morph birds, devoid of bold and obvious field marks, and the species is seldom seen perched, always seeming to be flying high overhead or over distant treetops.

NIGHT: Clewiston Inn, Clewiston

**April 22, Day 4: Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and Drive to Naples.** Assuming we were successful in locating all the specialties around Okeechobee the previous day, our first stop this morning will be at the famous Corkscrew Swamp. Managed by the National Audubon Society since 1955, this sanctuary preserves the largest remaining tract of bald cypress in North America. A beautiful boardwalk takes visitors back in time to an age when all of South Florida was wilderness, as it passes through cordgrass and sawgrass fields and into stands of pond cypress, red maple, pine, and pond apple.

When we reach the so-called Lettuce Lakes, we are within the magnificent stand of bald cypress. Some of these giant trees are 500 years old and 130 feet tall. The birds are impressive as well: Swallow-tailed Kites and Wood Storks soaring over the canopy; Pine Warblers and Eastern Towhees singing from the pine stands; and both night-herons and Little Blue Herons stalking prey within just a few feet of the boardwalk.

From Corkscrew, it is only a short drive west to the Naples area. Depending on when we arrive, there may be time this afternoon to make our first attempt to locate some Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in Naples. Or, depending on the tide tables, we may decide to look for shorebirds at Marco Island's Tigertail Beach where we might find some of the best shorebirding of the tour. Tigertail Beach is one of the most important sites for wintering and migrant shorebirds on the Gulf Coast, and we will hopefully be able to time our visits to these places at low tide. We will concentrate especially on looking for the less common species, like Piping, Wilson's and Snowy plovers; American Oystercatcher; Long-billed Curlew; Whimbrel; and Red Knot. Other possibilities here include Magnificent Frigatebird, Reddish Egret, and Least and Sandwich terns.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn Naples Central, Naples

**April 23, Day 5: Naples and the Tamiami Trail/Big Cypress Preserve; Drive to Florida City.** Despite the rapid population growth and development along the Gulf Coast of Florida, there are still a few natural areas

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which remain remarkably intact in and around Naples. One of these is a stand of longleaf and slash pines on the eastern edge of town which continues to survive and support a few pairs of Red-cockaded Woodpecker. If we did not have the time to stop here the day before, we plan to start birding here at dawn in hopes of watching a pair or two emerge from their nesting and roosting cavities. This same location may also provide our best – or only – chance to see Brown-headed Nuthatch, and we might find Red-headed Woodpecker, Pine Warblers and “white-eyed” Eastern Towhees here as well.

Naples can also boast an excellent location to see a variety of herons/egrets, shorebirds, terns, and other water birds. Though not an especially natural area, the newly created lagoons of Eagle Lakes Park are easily birded from the park’s trails, and almost every year we add something new or unexpected here to our trip list.

As we head east on the Tamiami Trail, our route takes us through the Big Cypress National Preserve. Created in 1974, this preserve reached its current size of 729,000 acres in 1988: in fact, the name “Big Cypress” refers not to the trees but to the size of the preserve, a mix of wet and dry prairies, piney woods, mangroves, cypress swamps, and tree islands known as hammocks. The preserve was created to protect the western portion of the Everglades watershed, and, despite assaults by human development, Big Cypress is still a wild and beautiful home to a wide diversity of wildlife, including black bear, mink, river otter, and the critically endangered Florida panther.

We will not spend a lot of time at the preserve, but we will drive through one of the best cypress stands. Here we will be in the company of giants, their arms draped with Spanish moss. This area will also give us chances to see Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Great Crested Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Parula, and Prothonotary Warbler.

Farther east along the Tamiami Trail, we’ll be on the northern border of Everglades National Park, an area extremely rich in wildlife. The sawgrass prairies and swamplands abound with wading birds, and we are almost sure to see Wood Storks, Tricolored Herons, and White Ibis. But our main quarry here is the Snail Kite, an elegant raptor which has become the signature bird species of the Everglades. Fortunately, they’re fairly consistent along a certain stretch of this highway, and with patience we should encounter this special bird.

Numerous pulloffs along the highway will not only allow us to scan for kites but also to take in the beautiful scenery. Extensive sawgrass prairies are dotted with clumps of cypress that grow in the form of domes, betraying the substrate, where the higher areas of rock and soil are found. The nearby canals and marshy ponds host numerous alligators along with a few Limpkins and Purple Gallinules stalking the water’s edge. Other species we may encounter are Glossy Ibis, the pale “Florida” Red-shouldered Hawk, and Roseate Spoonbill.

In the late afternoon, we will arrive in Florida City south of Miami, our base for the next three nights.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

**April 24, Day 6: Greater Miami Exotics.** Where cities have increasingly replaced natural habitats in South Florida, there are numerous free-flying, exotic bird species. All these exotics have been introduced, either intentionally or as escaped cagebirds, and their populations range along a spectrum from widely established to only locally marginal.

Today we’ll search the Greater Miami area for some of the many exotics that occur in these suburban parks and yards. We will naturally pursue those species considered “countable,” but almost anything is possible. We’ll especially focus on Red-whiskered Bulbul (established since the 1960s) and Spot-breasted Oriole (present since the 1940s). Our searches should also turn up Monk, Yellow-chevrons, and White-winged parakeets (these latter two formerly comprising the “Canary-winged” Parakeet). Other interesting finds might include Common and Hill mynas, Muscovy Duck, and such parakeets as Red-masked, Mitred, Blue-crowned, and Dusky-headed.

As we explore suburban Miami, we will find a number of native species as well, including Red-bellied Woodpecker, Northern Parula, “Florida” Prairie Warbler, and Boat-tailed Grackle. Depending on the weather, some migrant passerines may still be passing through. We’ll also stop on the way back to Florida City to view a colony of Cave Swallows of the “West Indian” variety under a favored bridge or check the mitigation wetlands near the dump.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

**April 25, Day 7: Everglades National Park.**

*There are no other Everglades in the world.*

*They are, they have always been, one of the unique regions of the Earth, remote, never wholly known. Nothing anywhere else is like them: their vast glittering openness, wider than the enormous visible round of the horizon, the racing free saltiness and sweetness of their massive winds, under the dazzling blue heights of space...The miracle of the light pours over the green and brown expanse of saw grass and of water, shining and slow-moving below, the grass and water that is the meaning and the central fact of the Everglades of Florida. It is a river of grass.*

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas, **The Everglades: River of Grass***

When Marjory Douglas’s book appeared in 1947, it brought to center stage the one-of-a-kind nature that is the Everglades. The name “Everglades” evokes images of wildness and untamable land. For many, the Everglades is Florida.

The east coast of Florida is slightly elevated. The Everglades, lying to the west on almost flat land, act like a trough for tremendous amounts of water flowing south. Because the limestone substrate declines in elevation so gradually, the flow of water is almost imperceptible. Water must travel 12 miles to lose a foot of elevation. In its natural state, water supplies to the Everglades were sustained by torrential thunderstorms over central Florida and Lake Okeechobee. As the water slowly made its way south, it spread out in a great swath, forming a broad, shallow, grass-clogged river to the sea. Marjory Douglas coined the term, “river of grass,” miles and miles of sawgrass prairie broken only by cypress swamps and hardwood hammocks.

The pristine Everglades is largely gone now. Massive projects to drain South Florida, which began in the late 1800s, have proven so effective that the natural flow of water has been severely disrupted: the construction of the Hoover dike around Lake Okeechobee, the channeling of the Kissimmee River, and the crisscrossing of canals north of the park. Some say the park is on life support. There is room for optimism, however, with the \$7.8 billion Everglades Restoration Plan, which is intended to restore some of the natural water flow.

Despite the flat, uniform appearance of the Everglades, it holds a variety of natural communities, each showing distinctive plant and animal life. We will work along the length of the park, exploring West Indian hardwood hammocks, sawgrass prairie, and mangrove swamp. Among the many possibilities today are the “Great White” form of Great Blue Heron (formerly a separate species which may be re-split), Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, White-crowned Pigeon, Mangrove Cuckoo, the endangered “Cape Sable” race of Seaside Sparrow, and Shiny Cowbird.

On this day we usually return to the park after dark to look for Eastern Screech-Owl and Chuck-will's-widow in the spotlight at a favored stand of pines not far from the visitor’s center.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

**April 26, Day 8: The Florida Keys.** The Keys stretch along a 150-mile arc southwest to Key West. The word “Key” is a corruption of the Spanish “cayo,” meaning island, and there are hundreds of islands in the Keys. These islands originated in the Pleistocene epoch with its rising and falling sea levels. Back when sea levels

were higher, a shallow, warm sea spread over the area where Florida Bay and the Keys currently lie. With the main barrier reef situated along the edge of the continental shelf to the west, the protected waters in the back reef zone were a perfect medium for the development of a patch reef system. The present Florida Keys later solidified as sea levels dropped and the reefs became exposed.

As a group, the Keys are composed of many plant community types that represent chance colonizations by hundreds of different species, many of West Indian origin. The Upper and Middle Keys are, or were, mostly tropical hardwood hammocks bordered by mangroves. The hammocks often contain many types of trees, including mahogany, tamarind, figs, palms, and gumbo limbo, that striking tree with the thin bark, burnt red in color. In comparison to the Upper and Middle Keys, the Lower Keys reveal a pronounced change in the soil and vegetation, with the ground less compact and far sandier.

Some of the birds we encounter here are species more typical of the Caribbean basin, whose ranges barely extend to the Keys. Others exist here in forms slightly different from their mainland relatives. We'll especially be on the lookout for White-crowned Pigeon, Mangrove Cuckoo, Gray Kingbird, Black-whiskered Vireo, the "Keys" White-eyed Vireo, the "Florida" Prairie Warbler, and the distinctive race of Yellow Warbler from Cuba which has expanded its range to the Keys.

We first enter Key Largo, the largest of the keys, where large hardwood hammocks and mangroves are still intact at Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park and Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Migrant warblers and the occasional Caribbean stray can be found here, but we will especially concentrate on finding one of the shyest and most furtive species in North America: the Mangrove Cuckoo. This bird always presents a challenge, and, if we haven't already found one, we will certainly be looking on Key Largo.

As we island-hop southward, our journey will take us along the route of the former Overseas Railroad, which Henry Flagler began building in 1904 to connect the mainland to Key West. Construction was completed in 1912 and required 43 bridges. The line was later destroyed by a hurricane in 1935, and by 1938 the railroad had been converted to the Overseas Highway.

Upon reaching Big Pine Key, we'll be in both the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge and the National Key Deer Refuge. By driving the side roads, we may be able to spot one of the endangered Key Deer, a diminutive version of the White-tailed Deer. By the time we near Key West, we should have come across a few "Great White" Herons and perhaps one of the intermediate "Wurdemann's" Heron in the numerous mangrove-lined lagoons and shallow bays.

We should arrive in Key West early enough so there is time after dinner to look for Antillean Nighthawks at dusk. These birds are typically a challenge to find, and often none are present at all by early May, but they are a local summer resident here and elsewhere on the Lower Keys.

NIGHT: Best Western Key Ambassador, Key West

**April 27, Day 9: Key West and the Lower Florida Keys.** In Key West, we are in the heart of the "Conch Republic," the name given to the keys when they seceded from the union in 1982 in protest of a Border Patrol checkpoint in Florida City. The colorful history of Key West dates to the early 1800s, when the island originally attracted ship captains, treasure hunters, salvage operators, and pirates. In those early years, Key West became a boomtown and the wealthiest city per capita in the country. The Great Depression sent Key West's economy reeling, and it wasn't until World War II that the economy would recover, with the U.S. Naval Base here an important station for ships in the Atlantic. After the war, the island steadily became a haven for artists, writers, and eccentrics. As more people visited the Keys, Key West became a hot spot for sport fishermen, divers, politicians, jetsetters, and other tourists.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Key West, however, is that there are still places to find birds! White-crowned Pigeons and perhaps a Shiny Cowbird or two can be found in residential areas. The botanic gardens on nearby Stock Island are home to a wonderful hardwood hammock that often teems with northbound migrants. Some years there are a few surprises still hanging around from winter, such as Broad-winged or Short-tailed hawk, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, or Western Kingbird. Nearby Indigenous Park and Fort Zachary Taylor State Park give us a chance for more migrants and possibly a Caribbean stray, while the latter park is often good for spotting Roseate Terns. Past tours have recorded Bahama Mockingbird, Western Spindalis, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and other strays in Key West.

This day may also include some birding on Sugarloaf, Saddlebunch, and other Lower Keys if we didn't have time for them the previous afternoon. Some of the best Mangrove Cuckoo locations are on these keys, along with White-crowned Pigeon, Gray Kingbird, Black-whiskered Vireo, and other South Florida specialties. In the evening, another Antillean Nighthawk search may well be necessary.

At a time to be announced this evening, participants continuing on to the Dry Tortugas (April 27-30, 2011) will be provided an orientation and have the option to spend the night aboard the Playmate (see the Dry Tortugas itinerary for details).

NIGHT: Best Western Key Ambassador, Key West

**April 28, Day 10: Departure For Home or Continue on Dry Tortugas.** Participants not continuing on to the Dry Tortugas may depart Key West at any time today.

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

**TOUR LEADERS:** Michael O'Brien & Louise Zemaitis

**Michael O'Brien** is a freelance artist, author, and environmental consultant living in Cape May, New Jersey. He has a passionate interest in bird vocalizations and field identification, and a serious addiction to migration and nocturnal birding. His travels have taken him throughout North and Central America and beyond. At home in Cape May, Michael serves as an Associate Naturalist with Cape May Bird Observatory for whom he conducts numerous workshops, and, for many years, conducted a fall songbird migration count. He is co-author of *The Shorebird Guide*, *Flight Calls of Migratory Birds*, and *America's 100 Most Wanted Birds*. His illustrations have been widely published in books and field guides, including the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and the new Peterson field guides. Michael also has an intense interest in butterflies, leads several "Birds & Butterflies" tours with his wife, Louise Zemaitis, and is coordinator of the Cape May Butterfly Count.

**Louise Zemaitis** is an artist and naturalist living in Cape May, New Jersey where she is a popular field trip leader teaching birding workshops as an Associate Naturalist with New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory. She also enjoys leading birding groups and lecturing at birding festivals and is known for her enthusiasm for all natural history subjects. Louise and her husband, Michael O'Brien, have been guiding young birders at birding events and conferences for many years. In addition to leading, Louise is coordinator of the Monarch Monitoring Project in Cape May, compiler of the Cape May Christmas Bird Count, and member of the Cape May Artists' Cooperative. An honors graduate of Temple University's Tyler School of Art, she enjoys working as a freelance artist and her illustrations have been widely published. Her proudest accomplishment has been the raising of her two sons, Bradley, a biologist and artist, and Alec, a philosopher and musician.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for this tour is **\$2895** per person in double occupancy from Fort Lauderdale (tour ends in Key West). This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 9, all lodging for 9 nights during the tour, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Fort Lauderdale and return from Key West, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$540**. 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:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$150** 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 **\$50** per person. 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. ***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 \$150*
Between 120 and 90 days before departure	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded
Fewer than 90 days before departure date	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 \$50 per person.

**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.

**IMPORTANT NOTE: Please read your itinerary carefully to see whether or not your tour/cruise requires MANDATORY Medical Insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation/repatriation during the trip.** This coverage is included in the Worldwide Trip Protector plan offered by Travel Insured International. If you do not choose to purchase the insurance through Travel Insured International, you will need to do so through another insurance provider. A good website for information and acquisition of emergency evacuation/repatriation insurance is: [www.insuremytrip.com](http://www.insuremytrip.com).

**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 to Fort Lauderdale from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

**GENERAL INFORMATION:** If you are continuing from South Florida to the Dry Tortugas tour, we suggest that you use a small or medium-sized duffel, etc., in which you can carry items needed only on the boat. Extra luggage may be stored at our hotel in Key West.

Springtime in Florida offers generally warm, sunny, and pleasant weather, although afternoons can be muggy. Rain—particularly in the form of an afternoon shower—is a distinct possibility. Your main considerations when choosing clothes should be avoiding overexposure to the sun and staying cool. The Florida sun can be intense and participants who are especially sensitive to sun should take all necessary precautions. A light-weight, long-sleeve shirt and some cool field trousers are recommended; shorts and T-shirts are fine, although they offer less sun protection. A light windbreaker and a sweatshirt or sweater may come in handy for early morning or nighttime excursions. You should also bring sunglasses and a sun hat, preferably one that will not easily blow off.

Sneakers or other comfortable walking shoes are good footwear. Bring a rain jacket or poncho, and, if you wish, bring a bathing suit. A small travel alarm clock will be useful.

Please limit your luggage to one suitcase or duffel and a small carry-on bag. If you are also on the Dry Tortugas tour, you will find soft-sided baggage to be vastly more convenient.

Biting insects and similar pests can be a problem, especially mosquitoes in mangroves and coastal marshes. Chiggers are also found in the area, as are deer ticks, but neither usually presents problems. Your best defense against all of these is a good repellent.

Poisonous snakes do occur in the area; however, we will probably not encounter any.

**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 "Cutters" to your body from the waist down BEFORE putting on your clothing.

- Spray your pants and socks with a spray repellent such as “Cutters” 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.

**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 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour, recorded Travelers’ Information Line (800) CDC-INFO. You can check the CDC 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).

**SUGGESTED READING:** Our website at [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. The online bookstore can be found by following the link on our homepage. 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](http://www.amazon.com), and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com), or [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com), which specializes in ornithology books.

*Audubon* (July-August, 2001). Entire issue dedicated to South Florida and restoration of the Everglades. You can order a back copy of the magazine from Audubon itself: The website is [www.magazine.audubon.org/content/content.html/](http://www.magazine.audubon.org/content/content.html/). Also see “Marjorie Stoneman Douglas and the Glades Crusade,” *Audubon* (March 1983).

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**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, local guides, and boat crew) 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.

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