

DRY TORTUGAS

APRIL 27-30, 2011

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Located 70 miles west of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico, the seven islands that make up the Dry Tortugas are the only tropical islands associated with the mainland United States. During the breeding season, thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies come ashore to nest, making one of the tiny islands in the Tortugas chain the site of the largest concentration of these pelagic species in the Northern Hemisphere. This great seabird colony is surely one of the highlights of a visit to the Tortugas.

The Tortugas are also special because they serve as a stopover for migrating landbirds, including warblers, thrushes, cuckoos, and buntings, and there is always the possibility of a West Indian stray. While en route to and from Key West, we often encounter such pelagic species as Audubon's Shearwater, Brown Booby, and Bridled and Roseate terns. Masked Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds also breed on smaller keys in the Tortugas.

Our trip is timed for the height of migration and peak activity at the seabird colony. Each year holds new adventures and surprising discoveries. Most of our previous participants have agreed that visiting the Tortugas is one of the most unique birding experiences in North America.

Accommodations will be aboard the Coast Guard-inspected, 60-foot "Playmate," a motor vessel that comfortably sleeps up to 11 participants in semi-private cabins. The "Playmate" is clean, well-run, and has a crew of three. Special features of the vessel include central air conditioning, two bathrooms with showers, sun deck, shaded back deck, and a watermaker. We should enjoy fine cuisine as well.

This tour may be combined with our South Florida tour from April 19-28, 2011.

April 27, Day 1: Arrival in Key West. Participants not continuing from South Florida (April 19-28, 2011) may arrive in Key West at any time today and eventually make your way to the Best Western Key Ambassador Hotel. We recommend that you consider arriving as early as possible, or even on April 26, to offset travel fatigue and/or potential travel delays. Upon request, the VENT office will assist with any additional lodging arrangements.

In the evening at a time to be announced, following a brief orientation, our group transportation will depart from our hotel for the Oceanside Marina where we'll have a reception with the crew aboard the vessel.

Participants continuing from the South Florida tour have the choice of spending the night in your cabin aboard the vessel or at our hotel in Key West. Those choosing the latter will need to make their own way back to the vessel in time for the very early departure on April 28.

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Important: please read the additional information regarding lodging, luggage, and financial arrangements at the back of the itinerary.

NIGHT: Aboard the *Playmate*

April 28, Day 2: Key West to the Tortugas. The passage to the Tortugas takes a half-day, so we plan to depart the dock before dawn to maximize our time. Weather permitting, our route will take us southward into the Gulf Stream, where we will have a chance to see Audubon's Shearwater, Northern Gannet, Pomarine Jaeger, Bridled Tern, and perhaps other seabirds. A couple of favored buoys en route may harbor a few Brown Boobies and Roseate Terns. Our captain is intimately familiar with birding tours and knows where to go to give us the best chance of finding the birds we want to see. We can expect a late morning or early afternoon arrival at the Tortugas.

Set amid clear tropical waters, the sandy Dry Tortugas are beautiful tropical islands. Garden Key, the only key with year-round public access, is the site of historic Fort Jefferson. One of the largest masonry structures in the world, the fort presents an incongruous sight amidst the shallow turquoise seas of the Tortugas.

The history of the fort and islands is as fascinating as the birding. The Spanish conquistador Ponce De Leon discovered and named the islands in 1513: "Las Tortugas," Spanish for "The Turtles." Because none of the islands contained fresh water, they were later renamed the Dry Tortugas as a warning to passing mariners. By the mid-1800s, the United States recognized the strategic importance of the island chain, due to its location on a busy trade route with ships transiting between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. To protect the route, construction of Fort Jefferson began in 1846. It took 30 years to build and was actually never completed. The Union Army used the fort as a prison during the Civil War, 1861-1865.

The fort's most famous occupant, Dr. Samuel Mudd, who set the broken leg of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, was imprisoned here and left a legacy of humanitarian service before eventually receiving a pardon in 1869.

The Army abandoned Fort Jefferson in 1874. In 1908 the area became a wildlife refuge to protect the nesting terns, and in 1935 the fort and surrounding waters were given national monument status. In 1992, the entire Dry Tortugas chain was re-designated a national park to protect both the historical and natural features.

Today, Fort Jefferson's massive walls provide refuge not to armies of men, but to hundreds of exhausted trans-Gulf migrants. Its shores are visited not by conquering armies from foreign lands, but by birders, naturalists, fishermen, and curious visitors. The trees within its grounds are sometimes teeming with songbirds. As many as twenty species of warblers may feed among the foliage, while mute Cattle Egrets stalk scarce prey below.

In addition to warblers, our searches in and around the fort may yield Yellow-billed Cuckoo, the "Antillean" Short-eared Owl, Common or Antillean nighthawk, Chuck-will's-widow, Gray Kingbird, Black-whiskered Vireo, various thrushes, Indigo and Painted buntings, Dickcissel, Bobolink, and many others. Sky-watching often pays off with American Kestrels, Merlins, and Peregrine Falcons, all looking for an easy meal.

During the heat of the day we can take refuge in the shade of the trees next to a gently percolating fountain. It is often in this fashion that we have our best sightings. By simply remaining patient, we can closely study a continuous procession of birds as they come to drink. Here we have had exceptional looks at many warblers, including Blue-winged, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky, Hooded, and Ovenbird.

For those participants curious about the park's history, the park visitor center and gift shop contain books, videos, and items from the fort's heyday. There's also a self-guided tour of Fort Jefferson that allows visitors to explore the fort on their own.

Next to Garden Key is the huge Sooty Tern colony on Bush Key. At first light, the colony is raucous, as thousands of birds become active. Along with Sooty Terns are a few thousand Brown Noddies and numbers of Brown Pelicans. The spectacle is simply awesome, as terns and noddies come and go endlessly, and we should be able to locate some recent hatchlings. Bush Key is the only nesting site in the United States for these two species.

Adjacent to Bush Key lies Long Key, the only nesting site in the United States for the Magnificent Frigatebird. One does not need to go to Long Key to see them, however. These splendid flyers pass directly over the fort or chase hapless Royal Terns just offshore. There's something unforgettable about seeing the frigatebirds hanging over the fort walls, practically suspended in air, while the setting sun turns the sky orange.

NIGHT: Aboard the *Playmate*

April 29, Day 3: Exploring the Tortugas. This morning we'll head west and land at nearby Loggerhead Key. Dry and sandy, Loggerhead is different than the comparatively manicured Garden Key. The island is covered in low, dense-growing vegetation that makes foot access more difficult, but most years we see something that we don't see on Garden Key. Not to be overlooked is the famous lighthouse, built in 1856 to warn ships of the shallow water and sandy shoals. Our time on Loggerhead will depend on the productivity of the birding.

Upon leaving Loggerhead, we'll check several buoys and park boundary markers for Roseate Terns and Brown Boobies. We're almost always successful in locating these two species. We'll also be sure to include a stop at tiny Hospital Key, the only site in the U. S. where Masked Boobies nest.

Later we'll return to Garden Key for another round of exploration of the fort. Often, the turnover of species from one day to the next is amazing. By checking and double-checking the trees in and around the fort, we're bound to turn up new species for the trip. In the Tortugas, one simply never knows what one will find! Some seemingly out-of-place wanderers can include Roseate Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Sora, and Upland Sandpiper.

The Tortugas are also a great place to see rarities. Highlights of previous trips have included White-tailed Tropicbird, Red-footed Booby, Black Noddy, LaSagra's Flycatcher, "West Indian" Cave Swallow, Bahama Mockingbird, Bananaquit and Shiny Cowbird.

For anybody interested in snorkeling, the west beach offers a fine opportunity for those with the desire to explore an underwater world of coral, fish, and other colorful marine life.

This evening we'll enjoy our last Dry Tortugas sunset. The sight of numbers of frigatebirds floating above the fort as though suspended, the constant hubbub of the tern colony, the clear tropical waters, the sunsets and sunrises, the tired migrants seeking refuge in the trees—all combine to leave visitors with unforgettable memories.

NIGHT: Aboard the *Playmate*

April 30, Day 4: Dry Tortugas to Key West. We'll have a few hours for a final check of Ft. Jefferson before heading back toward Key West. We plan to arrive back at the Oceanside Marina around 3:00 p.m. Transportation will be provided to our hotel in Key West.

Note: Due to the possibility of a delayed arrival and a limited number of evening flights out of Key West, we recommend that participants DO NOT plan to fly out this evening. Upon request, VENT will assist with lodging arrangements in the Key West area for this evening.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 11 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Michael O'Brien

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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.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for this tour is **\$1345** per person from Key West. This includes all food from breakfast on Day 2 to lunch on Day 4, all lodging for three nights during the tour as described in the tour itinerary (see **GENERAL INFORMATION** below), ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include airfare from your home to Key West and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

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.***

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

*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.

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.

GENERAL INFORMATION: Accommodations for all three nights will be aboard the *Playmate*. The vessel has four small semi-private cabins, including two cabins with two bunks each, which will be reserved for couples or pairs on a first-come, first-served basis. Specific spaces in the remaining two cabins (one with four bunks, the other with three bunks) will be assigned at the time of registration. Depending on the make-up of the group, we may have to mix sexes in any of the four cabins. The boat’s two bathrooms, both with showers, will provide a private place to change clothes.

Participants continuing from South Florida (April 19-28, 2011) have the option of spending the night of April 27 at our hotel in Key West at no additional cost and making their own way to the *Playmate* in time for the early morning departure on April 28.

Space for luggage aboard the *Playmate* is very limited. Please bring no more than a small-to-medium duffel bag or soft-sided suitcase. Since we will be on the boat for no more than three nights, you should easily be able to fit clothes and basic toiletries in a small or medium bag. You will also probably want to bring a daypack or other carry-on bag to hold camera gear, binoculars, field guides, sunscreen, etc. Excess luggage can be stored at our hotel in Key West.

In addition to a pair of sneakers or boat shoes, you may find it useful to have a pair of old sneakers or sandals that can get wet. Make sure to bring a towel and washcloth, which are not provided on the boat. Also bring a light jacket plus a sweatshirt or sweater, as mornings, evenings, and the run back to Key West can be chilly. Rain gear may be needed, and a hat for protection from the sun is essential.

Interested participants will have an opportunity to swim and/or snorkel at Fort Jefferson. The water is warm and shallow, and the fish and coral enchanting. Even the most dyed-in-the-wool birders appreciate the chance to cool off and experience the tropical marine life. You may prefer to bring your own equipment (fins, snorkel, and mask) with you or you can rent these items from a dive shop in Key West.

If you’re worried about seasickness, ask your doctor about preventative medication. Water conditions around the Tortugas are usually calm, but choppy seas are quite possible, most likely on the run to and from Key West.

For participants not continuing from South Florida, dinner on the first night is not included. Key West is full of good restaurants.

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. 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).

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 et al. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, Fifth edition. Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 2006. New edition includes most of the possible West Indian strays.

Sibley, David A. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Knopf, 2000. Some may prefer to bring the smaller and more portable *Eastern* guide (2003). Fewer West Indian vagrants than in Geographic guide.

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.

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 29, 2010 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.