

CALIFORNIA CENTRAL COAST AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR

DECEMBER 2 - 7, 2011

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The purpose of this tour is to build birding skills while enjoying a rich variety of birds in a beautiful location--and all done in comfort. Although we are guaranteed to see a long list of birds during our four days of birding, our primary objective is to enhance birding ability and thus increase our future enjoyment of time spent in the field. We have chosen Morro Bay on California's lovely Central Coast because of its abundant bird life and typically fine weather (the usual El Niño disclaimers apply) at this time of year.

This short tour is centered on Morro Bay, the winter home for more than 200 species of birds. This is an important wintering area for a variety of waterbirds, including Pacific and Red-throated loons, Clark's and Western grebes, Brant, Surf Scoters, and other waterfowl. Vast throngs of shorebirds feed in the pickleweed marshes at the south end of the bay, among them, Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews, American Avocets, Western Sandpipers, and Dunlin. Peregrine Falcons and Merlins keep the shorebirds in a constant state of alert. The wave-battered rocks at Montana de Oro and San Simeon are favored spots for noisy Black Oystercatchers, Black Turnstones, Surfbirds, and Whimbrels, and are usually lined with resting Brandt's and Pelagic cormorants. This is also a great place to study gulls, and we should have ample opportunity to sort through a variety of species and age groups, and in so doing, demystify the entire process of identifying gulls.

The variety of landbirds is equally impressive, and includes such western specialties as California Quail, Band-tailed Pigeon, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Yellow-billed Magpie, Wrentit, Oak Titmouse, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Western Bluebird, California Thrasher, California Towhee, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Tricolored Blackbird. Traveling a short distance inland, we come upon the Carrizo Plains. This valley contains excellent winter habitat for a wealth of raptors, among them, Golden Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon.

VENT's "Introductory Tours" are focused within a small geographic area that has a great birding and other natural history interest, scheduled at peak season and designed to appeal to birders of all experience levels. This tour will give special attention to techniques of bird identification and the importance of habitat recognition in finding birds and understanding their ecology, with a special emphasis on the identification of waterbirds (loons, grebes, cormorants, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and terns) and raptors. In the field, we will take time to compare similar species critically and discuss field marks, microhabitat, and ecological differences between species. The pace of the tour, combined with the sheer abundance of wintering birds in this region, should allow for repeated good studies of most of the typical birds of this area.

During this tour we will have the luxury of remaining in a single location and making short excursions out from our "base" (our longest drive would be less than two hours, and most locations are less than an hour from our hotel). Because of this, our exact schedule will be kept flexible, to take maximum advantage of current birding conditions, including weather and tides. All of the sites and activities

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described below will find their place into our schedule, but the exact sequence will remain open to the leader's discretion. One only need realize that Morro Bay is routinely one of the top five Christmas Counts in the nation to understand that this area is one of America's premier winter birding spots.

December 2, Day 1: Arrival in San Luis Obispo. Participants should make arrangements to arrive in San Luis Obispo (airport code SBP) any time today and take a taxi to our hotel where a room will be reserved in your name. We will meet in the hotel lobby at **6:30 p.m.** for a short orientation followed by a get acquainted dinner

NIGHT: The Inn at Morro Bay, Morro Bay

December 3, Day 2: Intro to Water and Shorebirds. Today we will bird beautiful Morro Bay and environs focusing on herons, ducks, geese and shorebirds. A visit to nearby Montana de Oro State Park will present us with opportunities to study rocky coast-loving shorebirds and cormorants. As will be true generally, we will take our time studying the various species with the goal of seeing them as well as possible for careful examination. Although an impressive list of birds is expected, the emphasis will be on learning the birds we see rather than quickly moving on to the next possibility. The bay itself is teeming with birds, among them Common Loon; Horned, Eared, Clark's and Western grebes; Brown and American White pelicans; and large flocks of Brant and Surf Scoters. There are also vast flocks of shorebirds that include Long-billed Curlew, Dunlin, Willet, Marbled Godwit, and both species of dowitchers. A few Eurasian Wigeon are present most winters amidst the flocks of more common waterfowl. Some of our time will also be spent in coastal chaparral and along willow-lined creeks looking for landbirds. California Quail, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Western Scrub-Jay, California Thrasher, Wrentit, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Bushtit, Hutton's Vireo, Townsend's Warbler and Golden-crowned Sparrow are just a few of the special birds we should see.

At some point, we will concentrate on the rocky coastline, where rock-loving shorebirds such as Black Oystercatcher, Whimbrel, Black Turnstone and Surfbird forage amidst the crashing surf.

NIGHT: The Inn at Morro Bay, Morro Bay

December 4, Day 3: Carrizo Plains. Today we visit an entirely different habitat, traveling inland to the Carrizo Plains. These barren alkali flats and scrubby grasslands are surprisingly productive for birds, and are an important wintering area for large numbers of raptors. We hope to see Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon, Ferruginous and Rough-legged hawks, and possibly Merlin, in addition to the more common Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers and American Kestrels. Raptors are always exciting to observe, but they can offer identification challenges. Accordingly, we will take the time to study these magnificent birds, and focus on how to identify them in the field. Soda Lake sometimes hosts flocks of Sandhill Cranes, and the adjacent fields and saltbush desert may yield Burrowing Owl, Mountain Plover (rare in recent years), Mountain Bluebird and Sage Sparrow. Enroute to and from the plains we will transect oak savannas that are prime habitat for the endemic Yellow-billed Magpie.

NIGHT: The Inn at Morro Bay, Morro Bay

December 5, Day 4: Return to water birds. We return to the Morro Bay estuary and nearby coast lines for a refresher course on the shorebirds, waterfowl and diving birds of the first day, adding a serious look at basic gull identification. We'll discuss the characteristics of gull plumages and begin to understand their yearly succession toward adult plumage. At the least, every participant should be able to identify adults of the local species by the end of the day and be aware of a method for dealing with the confusing nature of immature gull plumages.

NIGHT: The Inn at Morro Bay, Morro Bay

December 6, Day 5: Strategic Day. The itinerary on this day will remain particularly flexible, depending in large part on what birds and habitats we feel could use more attention. At some point in our schedule we will devote some time to birding some oak-forest areas inland from Morro Bay, where Wild Turkey, Red-shouldered

Hawk, Band-tailed Pigeon, Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Yellow-billed Magpie, Steller's Jay, Oak Titmouse, Bewick's Wren, Western Bluebird, Phainopepla, California and Spotted towhees, and Golden-crowned Sparrows are among the likely possibilities.

We'll also be sure to head down to southern San Luis Obispo County, where landbird opportunities are particularly good. Oceano Campground at Pismo State Beach is an excellent area for landbirds. Anna's Hummingbirds swarm about the introduced bottlebrush; elusive Pacific Wrens and Fox and Lincoln's sparrow tease us from the willows; and cattail-lined waters may produce a Marsh Wren, Sora or Virginia Rail. The flocks of Bushtits and Chestnut-backed Chickadees almost always include a few Townsend's and Orange-crowned warblers. Nearby, we will visit a grove of trees where huge numbers of Monarch Butterflies winter. On cool or cloudy days, the trees are draped with great hanging clusters of beautiful Monarchs, a sight that must be seen to be believed. On warm, sunny days, the butterflies are more active, and the air may be filled with Monarchs. Oso Flaco Lake provides excellent opportunities for close-up study of a variety of ducks and grebes from along a boardwalk that transects the lake. We'll want to take advantage of this spot to work on waterfowl identification skills.

December 7, Day 6: Departure for Home. Participants may plan to depart from San Luis Obispo for home at any time today.

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 7 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Kevin Zimmer.

Kevin Zimmer has authored three books and numerous papers dealing with field identification and bird-finding in North America. His book, *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*, deals with finding and identifying birds in the western United States. Living in Alaska contributed to his affection for the Far North, where he has anchored VENT's tour program since 1986. For the past 20+ years he has concentrated his attention on the Neotropics, particularly on Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. He has directed VENT's Brazil program since 1991. Kevin has a PhD in biology (research emphasis in Avian Evolutionary Ecology) from New Mexico State University, and is currently a field associate of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology, a Research Associate of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, an elective member of the American Ornithologists' Union, and a member of both the A.O.U. South American Check-list Committee (SACC) and the American Birding Association (ABA) Check-list Committee. He has authored numerous technical papers on the taxonomy, distribution, and behavior of Neotropical birds, particularly those of the Amazon basin. In 2003 he completed (with co-author Mort Isler) the major chapter on the *Thamnophilidae* (antbirds) for the prestigious *Handbook of Birds of the World* series. In 2006, he and Curtis Marantz coauthored a six-CD compilation of *Bird Voices of Alta Floresta and Southeastern Amazonian Brazil* (produced by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds) that represents the most comprehensive set of commercially available bird recordings for any part of the Amazon Basin. He and Andrew Whittaker are currently at work on a comprehensive field guide to the birds of Brazil, to be published by Princeton University Press. Kevin lives in Atascadero, California with his wife Susan. Their daughter Marina completed her master's degree in psychology at Dominican University in May 2008. Recently married, she and her husband Ryan are now living in Napa, California.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$2075** per person in double occupancy from San Luis Obispo, California. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 6, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the

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tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to San Luis Obispo and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$440**. 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.

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.

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.

TRIP 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: We ask that you limit your baggage to one medium-to-large suitcase (soft-sided preferred) and one small carry-on. Space in the vans will be limited.

CLIMATE: You can expect generally mild temperatures (daytime highs in the 60s or 70s), but early mornings (especially away from the coast) could be much colder (40° or less). There is always a possibility of rain during this time of year, but most days should see temperatures in the 60-70 degree range (daytime highs).

CLOTHING: Generally, light field clothing along with a sweat jacket or windbreaker will be sufficient after early morning. However, you will also want to bring a heavy jacket, gloves, a warm hat, and if you are easily chilled, long underwear. Two or three long-sleeved shirts are recommended. Be sure to have a pair of comfortable walking shoes or boots and a second pair of lightweight shoes to change into. We will not make long hikes or climbs in difficult terrain, so sturdy hiking shoes are not required. We may experience light rain, so bring waterproof gear. Dress will be casual throughout the tour. Self-serve laundry can be done in Morro Bay; the hotel does not offer the service.

EQUIPMENT: We suggest that participants carry a pocket-sized notebook for making notes of the identification techniques demonstrated during each day's birding. You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). 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. Other items should include an alarm clock, flashlight, lip ointment, and sunscreen.

SUGGESTED READING: Our website, 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, and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com or www.buteobooks.com which specializes in ornithology books.

Field Guides and General Reading:

- Beadle, David and James Rising. *Sparrows of the United States and Canada; The Photographic Guide*. Academic Press. London, 2002
- Dunn, John L. *A Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 4th ed. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2002.
- Jameson, E.W. Jr. and H.J. Peeters. *California Mammals*. California Natural History Guide Series. Berkeley: U.C. Press, 1988.
- Kaufman, Kenn, *Birds of North America*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.
- Kaufmann, Kenn. *Mammals of North America*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004
- National Geographic Society. *A Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 4th Edition. Washington: National Geographic Society, 2002.
- Peterson, Roger T. *Field Guide to Western Birds*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.
- Pough, Richard H. *Audubon Western Bird Guide*. Garden City: New York: Doubleday and Company, 1975.
Contains beautifully written, concise compilations of the habits of western specialties.
- Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Knopf, 2000.
- Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds of Western North America*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- Twiet, Susan J. *The Great Southwest Nature Factbook*. Alaska Northwest books. Washington, 2002.
- Wheeler, Brian K. and William S. Clark. *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*. Academic Press, San Diego, California, 1995.

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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 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 April 13, 2011 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.