SOUTH FLORIDA & THE KEYS

APRIL 25 – MAY 1, 2013

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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-surring 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, 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. The Keys (a corruption of the Spanish “cayo,” meaning island) are also a result of rising and falling sea levels. Back when sea levels were higher, shallow, warm water spread over the area where the Keys currently lie. With the main barrier reef situated along the edge of the continental shelf to the west, 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.

This fascinating region is not only rich in geologic history, but is also one of the most biologically unique parts of North America. Not surprisingly, several bird species are found nowhere else in the United States. On this short tour, we’ll confine our efforts to the southernmost portions of Florida, ranging from Miami and vicinity to Everglades National Park, and the Florida Keys all the way to Key West. We’ll focus on finding a variety of specialty birds including Magnificent Frigatebird, “Great White” Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Snail and Swallow-tailed kites, Purple Gallinule, Limpkin, Mangrove Cuckoo, White-crowned Pigeon, Smooth-billed Ani, Gray Kingbird, Black-whiskered Vireo, “Golden” Yellow Warbler, and “Cape Sable” Seaside Sparrow. We will also spend a morning searching for some of the many exotic species that have become established in the Miami area, particularly Monk and Yellow-chevroned parakeets, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Common Myna, and Spot-breasted Oriole. Late April is also peak season for northbound songbird migrants, and proper weather conditions could produce a spectacular fallout at any number of locations on our tour route. And there is always the chance for a vagrant from the Bahamas or West Indies. Recent trips at this season have produced La Sagra’s Flycatcher, Bahama Mockingbird, Thick-billed Vireo, Bananaquit, and Western Spindalis.
This tour may be combined with either or both of our Dry Tortugas tours (April 22-25 and May 1-4, 2013).

April 25, Day 1: Arrival in Key West. Participants not continuing from our April 22-25 Dry Tortugas tour should plan to arrive in Key West this afternoon and take a short taxi ride to the nearby Best Western 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: Best Western Key Ambassador, Key West

April 26, Day 2: The Florida Keys. 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 “Golden” Yellow Warbler, a race from Cuba, which has expanded its range to the Keys.

We’ll start our day at dawn looking for Antillean Nighthawk. These birds are typically a challenge to find, and often none are present yet in late April, but they are a local summer resident here and elsewhere on the Lower Keys. If we miss them this morning, we’ll have another chance at the end of the week. We’ll then begin to explore some of the taller mangrove forests at Sugarloaf Key and elsewhere where a primary target will be Mangrove Cuckoo, a shy and furtive species that often proves challenging to find. As we enter 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. In our travels, we should 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.

As we island-hop northward, 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.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

April 27, Day 3: Key Largo and Shark River Snail Kites. This morning we’ll visit Key Largo, the largest of the keys, and focus our efforts at Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park and Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge. For an area as developed as the Florida Keys, our experience here should be delightfully peaceful as we stroll through some of the largest hardwood hammocks and mangroves remaining in the keys. Migrant warblers and the occasional Caribbean stray can be found here, and if we haven’t seen one yet, Mangrove Cuckoo will be high on the list of birds to search for.

After lunch, we’ll travel north and west to Shark River Slough where Snail Kites gather to feed on apple snails. Vast sawgrass marshes in this area are also home to Limpkin, Wood Stork, King Rail, and other marsh birds.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City
April 28, Day 4: 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, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, White-crowned Pigeon, Mangrove Cuckoo, the endangered “Cape Sable” race of Seaside Sparrow, and Shiny Cowbird.

For those interested, this evening we will return to the park after dark to look for Eastern Screech-Owl and Chuck-will’s-widow at a favored stand of pines not far from the visitor’s center.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

April 29, Day 5: 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. Our morning will be spent searching 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 and Yellow-chevroned parakeets. Other interesting finds might include Common and Hill mynas, Muscovy Duck, and such parakeets as White-winged, 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, and Boat-tailed Grackle. We will also keep an eye on the hotlines – if any rarites are present in the Miami area, we will make it a priority to search for them.
April 30, Day 6: Return to Key West. Our final day will be a flexible one, the itinerary dictated by what species we have yet to see. We will likely revisit a favorite site or two, particularly in the Florida Keys as we make our way south. As we end the day in Key West, we will almost certainly take another look for Antillean Nighthawk before sunset.

NIGHT: Best Western Key Ambassador, Key West

May 1, Day 7: 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, and is primary author of Larkwire.com, an online application for learning bird sounds. 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 $2195 per person in double occupancy from Key West. This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 6, all lodging for 6 nights during the tour, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare to and 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 $505. 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.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The initial deposit for this tour is $300 per person. If you would like to pay your initial deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, 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 the initial deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at www.ventbird.com) should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.
**PAYMENTS:** Initial tour deposits may be made by MasterCard, Visa, check, money order, or bank transfer. All other tour payments, including second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc., must be made by check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). 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.*

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*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.

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

**GENERAL INFORMATION:** If you are combining South Florida & The Keys with either 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 footgear. 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 a 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 (232-4636). 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).


**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 31, 2012 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.