

KING RANCH & WHOOPING CRANES

APRIL 5-9, 2008

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The King Ranch, comprising 825,000 acres of grassland, thorn scrub, and live oak groves, has long been owned by one family, a family with a tradition of managing it for wildlife as well as cattle. Consequently, the most extensive natural groves of oaks and stands of brush in South Texas are found here. The wildlife, both birds and mammals, is abundant, and the ranch is an excellent location for viewing many distinctive South Texas specialties and wintering birds from northern states. It is the best place to see the tiny Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, North America's rarest owl, and, by mid-March, the colorful Tropical Parula, one of our rarest warblers. A wide variety of other plants and animals is found here as well, reflecting the unique combination of climatic influences which characterize South Texas: a temperate component from the Great Plains, subtropical elements from Mexico, the aridity of the Chihuahuan Desert to the west, and moist Gulf breezes from the east.

Equally remarkable is the colorful human history of King Ranch, which will be an important part of our experience here. We will visit the King Ranch Museum, observe day-to-day ranch operations, and come to appreciate more fully the way human activities have influenced and been influenced by the natural environment of South Texas.

Prior to our visit to the King Ranch, our tour will begin by birding the vast and varied wetlands in and around Corpus Christi and Rockport, and will include a boat trip into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to see Whooping Cranes, as well as numbers of other wintering and migrant water birds.

For those who would like to spend more time in Texas, this tour can be combined with our Austin, Texas Birding and Nature Festival, April 9-13, 2008.

April 5, Day 1: Arrival in Corpus Christi. Participants should make plans to arrive in Corpus Christi this afternoon. We will begin to gather in the baggage claim area of the Corpus Christi airport by 3:30 p.m. for departure for Rockport/Fulton at 4:00 p.m. (Any late arrivals will have to arrange for commercial transportation for the 30-minute ride to our accommodations.) There will probably be at least some time this afternoon or evening to bird a few of this area's many coastal wetlands.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn and Suites, Rockport/Fulton

April 6, Day 2: Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and Vicinity. This day's highlight will certainly be the morning boat trip up the Intracoastal Waterway into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, where we will see several family groups of wintering Whooping Cranes. At one time this endangered Texas flock numbered only 15 individuals, but now over 200 make the long flight from their Canadian breeding grounds to winter here from November into April. Although some of the cranes will have already headed back north by early April, many will still be present and foraging for crabs and other prey in Aransas's vast coastal marshes—sometimes less than 100 feet from the boat!

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In addition to the magnificent Whooping Cranes, we will see a wide variety of herons, ducks, marsh birds, and terns from the boat and elsewhere in this vicinity. Some species we hope to encounter include Reddish Egret; White and White-faced ibis; Roseate Spoonbill; Clapper Rail; Gull-billed, Sandwich and Least terns; Black Skimmer; and Seaside Sparrow.

This afternoon, before heading to Kingsville, we will have time to explore a few of the many other fine birding areas along the coast, where estuaries, coastal marshes, and flooded fields harbor a wide variety of shorebirds. Among the many possibilities are Piping, Wilson's and Snowy plovers; American Oystercatcher; American Avocet; Long-billed Curlew; and Marbled Godwit. Often we elect to visit the barrier beaches of Mustang Island to look for still more water birds, and there is usually time as well to check a few coastal migrant traps for a variety of woods birds, which are starting to pass through at this time. It is typically difficult to say how many spring migrants we'll see, since it will depend on the weather conditions, both before and during the tour.

After our arrival in Kingsville, we will visit the King Ranch Museum before or after dinner, where photographs and ranch artifacts provide a fine overview of over 150 years of South Texas history. In most years, we are also able to arrange for a special catered dinner in the museum itself.

NIGHT: Comfort Inn, Kingsville

April 7, Day 3: Santa Gertrudis and Laureles Divisions, King Ranch. This morning we visit the Santa Gertrudis Division of the King Ranch, the ranch's main division which lies immediately to the west of Kingsville. As we drive past the ranch headquarters and out into the brush country, Harris's Hawks and Wild Turkeys will be common sights, and there will be a fine diversity of such typical South Texas bird species as Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Least Grebe, Neotropic Cormorant, White-tailed Hawk, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Vermilion and Scissor-tailed flycatchers, Great Kiskadee, and Green Jay.

Mammals such as Javelina, Coyote, Feral Hogs, White-tailed Deer, and the introduced Nilgai, an antelope from India, frequent the ranch as well. We may also observe in passing the livestock and operations of the ranch, and see the King Ranch's very own breed of cattle, the Santa Gertrudis, the first recognized new breed of beef cow developed in the United States, along with a few genuine Texas Longhorns. In addition, the drivers will encounter another King Ranch innovation: their entertaining and often tricky bump gates.

After a picnic lunch, we usually visit the Laureles Division of the King Ranch, to the east of Kingsville, which has a more coastal character than the Santa Gertrudis. There is also an extensive amount of cropland, which often harbors a surprising abundance of wildlife. Interesting species often encountered here include Swainson's Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, American Golden-Plover, Upland Sandpiper, Burrowing Owl, Horned Lark, Sprague's Pipit, and possibly—with luck—even a flock of Mountain Plovers.

NIGHT: Comfort Inn, Kingsville

April 8, Day 4: Norias Division, King Ranch. The Norias Division, just north of Raymondville, is dominated by open grassland, groves of live oaks, and sand dunes. Wilder and more remote than Santa Gertrudis and Laureles, Norias offers a special excitement for the birder. We'll be up before dawn to have breakfast and then drive south along U.S. Highway 77. After about an hour, we'll turn off the highway onto this King Ranch division.

Most of our day will be spent birding the extensive oak groves that characterize this division of the ranch. We'll be looking for two of America's rarest and most localized birds: the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and the Tropical Parula. These two species maintain breeding populations on Norias, and, while seeing them cannot be guaranteed perhaps, we typically are successful at finding both. Based on our experience of several dozen tour visits here since 1991, the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl is likely to be seen and heard (i.e., 80+% of our visits), and singing male Tropical Parulas are even more likely to be seen from mid-March on (though unlikely to be found prior

to then). There have been a few trips where the pygmy-owl was only heard and not seen, and some where it required a great deal of effort to locate one. Other times we have found two or three with relatively little effort.

Whatever our fortune with these species, we will certainly encounter a host of interesting birds and animals. A partial list of other birds we might see here includes: White-tipped Dove, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Couch's Kingbird, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and Audubon's Oriole. Participants on a few tours in years past even found the very rare Masked Duck on this division of the ranch; though it should be stressed this species is definitely not to be expected. In the afternoon we'll return to Kingsville and may also visit a few areas along Highway 77 en route, depending upon the day's timing.

NIGHT: Comfort Inn, Kingsville

April 9, Day 5: Final Morning's Birding; Departure for Home. There will still be time this morning for a few hours of birding, searching for additional water birds or migrant passerines we may have missed earlier. We'll then make the short drive back to Corpus Christi, arriving at the airport by noon, and participants may make plans to return home any time after 1:00 PM today.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. These arrangements may range from an extra night at the initial hotel of the tour to a week or more extension including accommodations and transportation. 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 14 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Kim Eckert (A second leader will be added if group size warrants)

Kim Eckert, with over 40 years of birding experience throughout the U.S. and Canada, has now been guiding birders or teaching bird identification classes for more than 25 of those years. Since the 1980s, he has annually led VENT tours to Newfoundland, Churchill, various locations in the Great Lakes and Great Plains, and to Texas—a favorite and frequent winter destination. He has authored four editions of *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota*, and has written numerous articles, notes, and seasonal reports for the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union journal, *The Loon*, and other publications such as *Birding* and *North American Birds*. Kim also operates the Minnesota Birding Weekends program of birding tours, has been a member for three decades of Minnesota's Records Committee, and for 20 years he served as Naturalist at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve in Duluth. A Minnesota resident since the 1960s, he has resided in Duluth since 1977—winters included.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$1495** per person in double occupancy from Corpus Christi. This fee includes all meals from Dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 5, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Corpus Christi 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 **\$170**. 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 90 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less **\$125** per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 90 and 70 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 70 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. *We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself.*

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
90 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$125.
Between 90 and 70 days before departure	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded.
Fewer than 70 days before departure date	No refund available.

TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE: Application forms 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 to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. 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. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.**

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

BAGGAGE: We request participants limit their baggage to one medium-sized suitcase and one carry-on, if possible, as space in the vehicles will be limited.

CLIMATE: Early spring weather in South Texas is generally pleasant, but changeable. Typical days will begin with mornings starting around 60 degrees, then warming into the 70s or 80s in the afternoon. However, days in the 90s are possible, as is the opposite possibility of a “norther” bringing in cold winds with highs remaining only in the 50s. Rain is always a possibility, and windy days are typical.

CLOTHING: Jeans or similar durable field trousers are best, though some may wish to bring a pair of shorts. Be sure to bring a sweater or sweatshirt as well, and a warm jacket, hat, and gloves might be needed for the Whooping Crane boat trip. Bring some light rain wear, a hat for protection from the sun, and sunscreen. Footwear is up to you; some people like to wear hiking boots, but sneakers are fine. Waterproof boots are generally not required, but we might walk into wet areas in search of a marsh bird or two. Some may want to bring swimwear for the outdoor pool at our motel in Kingsville. Dress will be casual throughout.

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 (877) FYI-TRIP. 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).

EQUIPMENT: You should pack a pair of binoculars, along with a belt or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, etc.). 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 to bring should include a small flashlight or headlamp and an alarm clock. Chiggers, ticks, and mosquitoes are present in this part of Texas, so insect repellent is strongly recommended.

LAUNDRY: Laundry facilities are available at our motels in Kingsville and Rockport (Fulton).

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. For the ABA/Lane Guides, try the ABA Sales Birding Store at www.americanbirding.org/abasales.

Cooksey, Mel and Ron Weeks. *A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast*. Colorado Springs: American Birding Association, 2006.

Dunn, Jon L. *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (5th Edition). Washington, D.C., 2006.

Lockwood, Mark and Brush Freeman. *The T.O.S. Handbook of Texas Birds*. College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 2004. Annotated checklist with range maps of all 623 species recorded in the state.

Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Knopf, 2000. If you elect to bring one of the small Sibley guides (2003), the Eastern guide covers this part of Texas. (Note that none of the field guides in the Peterson or Stokes series are adequate in this part of Texas.)

Oberholser, Harry C. Edited by Edgar Kincaid. *Bird Life of Texas*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1974. The definitive two-volume reference work on the Texas avifauna, including distribution maps, with paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. One of the few truly classic works on a state's birds, though out-of-print and difficult to find.

Loughmiller, Campbell and Lynn Loughmiller. *Texas Wildflowers*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1984. Field guide with nice photos of many representative wildflowers.

TIPPING: As noted in our itineraries, tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar

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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 5, 2007, 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.