

# **SOUTH TEXAS BIRDS & BUTTERFLIES NOVEMBER 11-16, 2007**

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*With the publication of some new and excellent field guides, butterfly watching in the United States has taken off explosively, and in some areas butterfly-watchers are becoming almost as common as bird-watchers. In fact, many birders are crossing over to become active seekers of both birds and butterflies, as well as dragonflies and other wildlife. The primary focus of our "Birds & Butterflies" tours will be to introduce interested birders and naturalists to the hobby of butterfly watching. The relative emphasis of birding vs. butterflying will be slightly different on each tour, but in all cases the aim will be to see the specialty birds and butterflies of each region while learning to appreciate all aspects of the natural world.*

*In the United States, there is no better area for butterfly watching than the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. As with birds, many Mexican species of butterflies cross into the United States only in south Texas. More species have been recorded there than in any other region of the United States -- of the approximately 722+ butterfly species recorded in the United States and Canada, 300+ have been found in the four southernmost counties of Texas. Increased interest in butterflies has resulted in an explosion in "butterfly gardens" throughout the Valley. This short tour will spend four nights in Weslaco and from there explore various habitats around the Valley seeking both the birds and butterflies that make this region so popular. Depending on what areas are "hot", we will probably head east on one day to the Brownsville area, and on another day we'll head up-river to the western Valley (around Falcon Dam), where desert habitats support different species.*

*Especially interesting South Texas butterflies that we hope to see include Pipevine and Giant Swallowtails, Tailed Orange, Mimosa Yellow, Silver-banded and Xami Hairstreaks, Red-bordered Metalmark, Red-bordered Pixie, Julia, Zebra Heliconian, Theona Checkerspot, Bordered Patch, Mexican Bluewing, Tropical Leafwing, White-striped Longtail, Mazans Scallopwing, Sickie-winged Skipper, Turk's-cap White-Skipper, Julia's and Fawn-spotted Skippers, and Celia's Roadside-Skipper. Our greatest challenge will be sorting out the dizzying array of skipper species, many of which are subtly marked. The showier of the possible rarities include Polydamas Swallowtail, Blue Metalmark, Silver-banded Hairstreak, Mexican Silverspot, Red Rim, Banded Peacock, Malachite, Silver Emperor, and Guava Skipper, among many others.*

*Of course, the Rio Grande Valley is also famous for birds, with many specialties occurring here and nowhere else in the United States. Some avian highlights may include Muscovy Duck, Least Grebe, Hook-billed Kite, White-tailed Hawk, Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Red-billed Pigeon, Green Parakeet, Red-crowned Parrot, Common Pauraque, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Ringed and Green Kingfishers, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds, Great Kiskadee, Green & Brown Jays, Black-crested Titmouse, Clay-colored Robin, Long-billed Thrasher, Tropical Parula, Olive Sparrow, and Altimira and Audubon's Orioles. Due to time limitations, we may not attempt to find such difficult species as Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and White-collared Seedeater, though we will gladly take time to enjoy them should we happen across them. These species are*

*regularly encountered on VENT's other Rio Grande Valley tours. If a particularly rare bird appears in the area, and meets with our schedule, we will certainly plan to search for it.*

**November 11, Day 1: Arrival in Harlingen.** Participants should make arrangements to arrive in Harlingen, TX (airport code HRL) today and take the complimentary shuttle to our hotel. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 6:30 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Harlingen

**November 12, Day 2: Laguna Atascocsa and Sabal Palm Grove.** We will begin this day early, at the small forest patch at the Sabal Palm Grove Audubon Center. Birds will be our focus in the early morning; this spot is famous for a number of specialties and has a long track record of producing rarities from Mexico. As the sun warms the grove, our focus will shift towards showy insects. The wooded trails and butterfly gardens at Sabal Palm Grove are one of the prime butterfly spots in the Valley, and are especially good for specialties such as Sickie-winged Skipper and (rarely) Blue Metalmark.

We will probably have lunch somewhere in Brownsville, but en route to or from lunch we may have time to look for a specialty bird (Tamaulipas Crow) or bug (Xami Hairstreak). Our afternoon will be spent at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Timing will determine whether we decide to look for birds and bugs around the Visitor's Center only or whether we will decide to drive the loop road, as well. Feeders and the possibility of Aplomado Falcon should provide interesting birding, while the excellent butterfly garden at the Visitor's Center will be our best location for leps, and is another good location for Blue Metalmark.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

**November 13-14, Days 3-4: Central Rio Grande Valley.** Butterfly gardens have become very popular in the central Valley, and we will certainly not have time to visit them all. More and more patches of habitat are being preserved in the Valley, and with every visit it seems there is an exciting new area to look for birds or bugs. A sampling of the areas that we will hopefully get to visit includes Llano Grande, the Frontera Audubon Thicket, Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, and Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen.

Our two days in the central Valley will center on two spots in particular. On one day we will spend most of our time at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Santa Ana ranks as the best single location for a naturalist in the lower Valley, due primarily to its wide array of habitats—its bird and butterfly lists are the highest for any NWR in the nation. The butterfly garden at the Visitor's Center can be a virtual blizzard of butterfly wings in late fall, and the possibility for a really exciting stray is very real. After ample time at the garden, we will explore the trails. Mature tropical hardwood forests provide a unique habitat in the lower Valley and are a great place to find Heliconian butterflies, including Zebra, Julia, and perhaps something rarer. In some years Malachite, a large, green tropical butterfly, occurs in decent numbers here. Open areas around the several lakes should be good for skippers, dragonflies, and waterfowl, providing something for everyone.

Our other day will center on Bentsen State Park, with the adjacent World Birding Center and NABA Butterfly Park. Butterfly gardens here are probably the best in the Valley and have produced a continual stream of new North American records in recent autumns. While it is unlikely that we will find anything *that* rare, this is sure to be one of the butterfly highlights of our trip.

Our schedule will remain flexible, and we will try to take advantage of weather conditions to maximize our butterfly and bird opportunities. Thus, please note that we may not necessarily visit the location on the exact days suggested here.

NIGHTS: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

**November 15, Day 5: Upper Rio Grande Valley.** Today we will rise early and visit several sites in the Upper Rio Grande Valley, looking for birds and butterflies at Chapeño, Salineño, and possibly the Santa Margarita Ranch. The drier climate here is much better for desert species (both butterflies and birds) and is home to several specialties we are unlikely to find farther east. We will spend the full day exploring this area before returning to Weslaco for dinner.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

**November 16, Day 6: Departure for home.** After breakfast we will drive back down the river to Harlingen, arriving no later than noon. Participants may make return flight reservations for any time after 1:00 p.m.

**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 14 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Michael O'Brien and Louise Zemaitis

**Michael O'Brien** is a freelance environmental consultant, artist, and author living in West Cape May, New Jersey. He is an Associate Naturalist with Cape May Bird Observatory for whom he conducts numerous workshops and 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*. Michael has served on the Maryland/DC and New Jersey Records Committees, as an editorial consultant for *Birding*, and as a regional editor for *North American Birds*. His illustrations have been widely published including in *National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of North America*.

**Louise Zemaitis** is an artist and naturalist living in Cape May, New Jersey. She is a popular field trip leader in Cape May where she leads bird and butterfly walks and teaches birding workshops as an Associate Naturalist with Cape May Bird Observatory. Louise is also coordinator of the Monarch Monitoring Project in Cape May and curator of the Cape May Bird Observatory Art Gallery. An honors graduate at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, she enjoys working as a freelance artist and her illustrations have been widely published.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$1645** per person in double occupancy from Harlingen, TX. 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 tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Harlingen 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 **\$175**. 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.

**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.**

**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.**

**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:** As space in the vehicles is limited, please restrict your luggage to one medium-sized suitcase and one carry-on bag.

**CLIMATE:** Temperatures will range from very warm to potentially quite cold if a cold front should pass through. Daytime highs could reach the mid to upper 80s, while nighttime lows may dip into the upper 30s. Temperatures ranging from the 50s to 70s would be closer to the norm. Rain is possible.

**CLOTHING:** Your best bet is to dress in layers. Jeans or similar durable field trousers are best, though some may wish to bring a pair of shorts. Be sure to bring a warm jacket plus a sweater or sweatshirt, since a cold and windy “norther” is always a possibility. Also bring light rain-wear, and a hat for protection from the cold or sun. Footwear is up to you; some people like to wear light boots, but sneakers are fine. Waterproof shoes are generally not required, but may be useful—there may be lots of dew in the early morning. Dress will be casual throughout. There are coin-operated laundry facilities at our Weslaco hotel.

**EQUIPMENT:** Pack a pair of binoculars in good repair. A close focusing binocular (focus to 6-8 feet) is ideal for butterfly-watching, but many of the better birding binoculars (with focus 10-12 feet) also work well. A belt pack or day pack is useful 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 leaders will have a spotting scope for birding stops; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Other items should include an alarm clock, as well as a good flashlight with extra batteries. Chiggers, ticks, and mosquitoes can be a problem in Texas, even in winter, so insect repellent is strongly recommended.

**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.

**PHYSICAL EXERTION:** This tour is not too physically demanding, as our walking will be on well-maintained trails and roads, and the terrain will be level. We will be doing a fair amount of riding in vans, interspersed with many periods of moderate to long walks.

**SUGGESTED READING:** Our website, [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. 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](http://www.amazon.com), and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) or [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) which specializes in ornithology books.

## **BIRDS**

- Dunn, Jon L., et al. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*: Either the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (1999) or the 4<sup>th</sup> (2002) recommended. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.
- Sibley, David A. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. Currently, this and the Geographic guide are the most complete and up-to-date field guides. If you elect to bring one of the smaller Sibley guides (2003), the Eastern guide covers this part of Texas.
- Lockwood, Mark W., Brad McKinney, Jim Paton, Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. Colorado Springs: American Birding Association, 1999. The definitive bird-finding guide to the region.
- Lockwood, Mark W., and Brush Freeman. *The TOS Handbook of Texas Birds*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. A good summary account of the birds of Texas.
- Oberholser, Harry C., Edgar B. Kincaid, Jr., ed. *The Bird Life of Texas*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1984. The definitive two-volume reference work on the Texas avifauna, including distribution maps, with a few paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Detailed description material. While out of print, used copies are available. Try the internet sources listed above.

## **BUTTERFLIES**

- Brock, Jim P. and Kenn Kaufman. *Butterflies of North America*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. Perhaps the best butterfly guide for beginners, this book with modified photos treats almost all species we are likely to encounter, but does not treat them in depth.
- Garwood, Kim and Richard Lehman. *Butterflies of Northeastern Mexico: Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Monterrey, Mexico, 2005. A photo guide with no text, this provides some of the only images of the rarer Rio Grande vagrant butterflies, as well as images of most of the commoner species.
- Glassberg, Jeffrey. *Butterflies through Binoculars: The East*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999. A very good book with nice photos, its treatment extends only to central Texas; it does not treat tropical species from the Lower Rio Grande Valley.
- North American Butterfly Association. *Checklist & English Names of North American Butterflies*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Morristown, NJ: North American Butterfly Association, 2001. A checklist with current names.
- Scott, James A. *The Butterflies of North America: A Natural History and Field Guide*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986. Large volume; nationwide perspective.
- Wauer, Roland H. *Butterflies of the Lower Rio Grande Valley*. Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 2004. Treats all species we are likely to encounter, but the photos are not all of top quality. Still the most relevant guide for this trip.

## **DRAGONFLIES**

- Abbott, John C. *Dragonflies and Damselflies of Texas and the South-Central United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. Specific to the region, this is a large volume but includes both dragonflies and damselflies and treats both as well as any book to date.
- Dunkle, Sidney W. *Dragonflies through Binoculars: A Field Guide to the Dragonflies of North America*. New York, NY: 2000. An excellent nationwide perspective on dragonfly identification.

## **OTHER**

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

**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 effect May 17, 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.