

NEW YEAR IN SOUTH TEXAS THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

DECEMBER 27, 2008 - JANUARY 2, 2009

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A RELAXED & EASY DEPARTURE WITH KIM ECKERT

This tour offers an excellent introduction to the incredible avifauna of South Texas. Along the coast from Rockport to Brownsville and up the Rio Grande Valley to Falcon Reservoir and beyond, we will pursue such avian wonders as the majestic Whooping Crane, magnificent White-tailed Hawk, striking and colorful Green Jays, Great Kiskadees, and Altamira and Audubon's orioles—as well as a couple dozen other South Texas specialties found nowhere else in the U.S. The chance for rarities also exists, with species such as Muscovy Duck, Hook-billed Kite, Red-billed Pigeon, Clay-colored Robin, Tropical Parula, and White-collared Seedeater present annually, and a host of strays from Mexico – literally too many to mention – have appeared in winter as well.

This tour is one in our new series of Relaxed & Easy (R&E) tours. These tours are appropriate for participants who want a slower paced tour, with somewhat fewer hours in the field and light physical activity. They are ideal for persons who prefer a somewhat later start in the morning (typically 7:00 a.m.), a break after lunch and a shorter afternoon outing. They involve only short walks, usually not more than a half mile, and avoid difficult terrain.

December 27, Day 1: Arrival in Harlingen. For those able to arrive early enough, there will be an optional birding excursion, meeting at 1:00 p.m. at the baggage claim area of the airport in Harlingen. (The airport is relatively small, so it should be easy to find everyone.)

Most likely, unless there have been recent reports of some unexpected and unusual species near Harlingen, we will spend the afternoon at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Here we will see some of the specialties of South Texas for the first time – e.g., White-tipped Dove, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, and others – species we will commonly see again in the coming days. More importantly, this refuge is sometimes the best place to find an Aplomado Falcon, a handsome introduced raptor, and Groove-billed Anis, a species which is typically rare and often entirely absent in winter. In addition, this will be our first opportunity to look for waders, shorebirds, terns, and other waterbirds, which will be in relative short supply until we return to the coast at the end of the tour.

We will then return to the Harlingen airport in time to meet with the later arrivals (who should plan to arrive in Harlingen no later than 5:00 p.m.) at the baggage claim area. From the airport, we will drive 30 minutes to our hotel in nearby Weslaco, where we'll have a get-acquainted dinner.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

December 28, Day 2: The Lower Valley. This morning we will bird the vicinity of Brownsville, Texas' southernmost city. Residential areas around old oxbow lakes (known locally as resacas) host Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Tropical and Couch's kingbirds, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Long-billed Thrasher, and Altamira Oriole. Occasionally, flocks of noisy Red-crowned Parrots or Green Parakeets flutter by, inevitably sparking discussion about whether they are of wild or captive origin.

The National Audubon Society's Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary preserves one of the few remnants of relatively undisturbed habitat near Brownsville. It boasts a small but very pretty patch of palm forest, the most lush and tropical vegetative community in the Valley. It is also one of the best places to find Least Grebe and both Ringed and Green kingfishers, and often Sabal Palm Grove hosts a wintering rarity like Groove-billed Ani or Tropical Parula.

In past years, no birder's visit to Brownsville was complete without a trip to its famous dump, where the Tamaulipas Crow, a diminutive and interesting corvid, had been present each winter. However, the crow has been essentially absent here in recent winters, and it is not expected that we will stop at the landfill.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

December 29, Day 3: Bentsen State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. We will spend the full day today in some of the most famous birding areas of the U.S. The Rio Grande Valley, which is actually a delta or floodplain, supports a unique plant community called Subtropical Thorn Woodland. Characterized by a dense growth of medium-sized trees and large shrubs interspersed with resacas, this unique ecosystem cannot be found anywhere else in the U.S. Although most all of this habitat has been cleared for agriculture, there are still a few tracts that support a host of endangered, threatened, or peripheral plant and animal species. Bentsen State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge are prime examples, where it is still possible to find virtually all of the regularly-occurring South Texas specialties.

At Bentsen State Park, feeding stations are maintained to lure Altamira Orioles, Green Jays, White-tipped Doves, Plain Chachalacas, and many others, while Olive Sparrows and Long-billed Thrashers frequent the brushy edges. Some sought-after rarities that are regular here, including Hook-billed Kite, Gray Hawk, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and Clay-colored Robin, may also happen by at any time.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is more than twice the size of Bentsen, and has more wetland habitat. A visit here invariably turns up a couple of good birds not found elsewhere. It is one of the best places in the Lower Valley for Least Grebe, raptors, all three kingfishers, and wintering warblers. Nearby Anzalduas County Park almost always has a few species we do not see elsewhere. In some years, it proves to be the best spot to find a Gray or Zone-tailed hawk, tyrannulet, Tropical Parula, or Black-throated Gray Warbler.

On one of our days in Weslaco, we will be out just before dusk to search for flocks of Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots coming to roost in residential areas, and to listen and look for nocturnal Common Pauragues and Eastern Screech-Owls just after sunset.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn, Weslaco

December 30, Day 4: To Zapata. After a final morning at Santa Ana and Bentsen and vicinity, we will head upriver to the western and northern portions of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. More arid and hilly than the fertile Rio Grande delta, they have been less affected by clearing for agriculture. Narrow subtropical woodlands still line the banks of the Rio Grande, while on the uplands a low, thorny brushland approaches desert conditions, with most of the countryside utilized for ranching.

The South Texas specialties for which the region is famous and which we saw earlier all still occur here, and the only U.S. population of the Brown Jay was discovered here in 1974. These jays still occur in small numbers scattered along the river between Roma and Falcon Dam. Here as well, the shy Audubon's Oriole finds its last foothold in the United States. In the last decade or so, a few goose-sized and genuinely wild Muscovy Ducks, a tropical species that has responded to a nest-box campaign in northern Mexico, have been turning up annually along this stretch of the Rio Grande. Like the Brown Jays, however, Muscovies have become increasingly elusive, and it will be a challenge to find either species.

The uplands have a distinctly southwestern flavor with Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Chihuahuan Raven, Cactus Wren, Verdin, Pyrrhuloxia, and Cassin's and Black-throated sparrows in arid chaparral. Favored areas such as Chapeño, Salineño, Falcon Dam, and Santa Margarita Ranch may be covered briefly this afternoon en route to Zapata, with these locations covered more thoroughly on Day 6.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

December 31, Day 5: Falcon Dam. Using Zapata as a base, we will bird riparian woodlands near Falcon Dam, hoping to find the above-mentioned species, and perhaps encounter some lingering Red-billed Pigeons or other rarities, such as Gray Hawk, Hook-billed Kite, or Clay-colored Robin. Since this area provides our only opportunity for Muscovy Duck, Brown Jays, and Audubon's Orioles, which can be difficult to locate, this day will be a full one. Time permitted, we may also look for the more elusive and local Scaled Quail, Black and Say's phoebes, Rock Wren, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Green-tailed Towhee. We'll also be sure to investigate favored spots in Zapata or along the Rio Grande in the nearby village of San Ygnacio to search for White-collared Seed-eaters, a tiny tropical finch, playing hide-and-seek in cane brakes and grassy thickets. Unfortunately, this highly local specialty has become scarce and more difficult to find in recent years.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

January 1, Day 6: To Rockport/Fulton and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. This morning will be devoted principally to driving the 150-mile distance between Zapata and Rockport, although we will be watching the road edges for White-tailed Hawk, a South Texas specialty and easily one of the country's most striking raptors. We should also spot Crested Caracaras, Harris's Hawks, and a few other birds of note en route.

The afternoon's highlight will be the boat trip up the intercostals canal, to the Blackjack Peninsula, and into Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Unless we are grounded by high winds or dense fog, we are certain to see one of the rarest and most striking birds of our continent, the Whooping Crane. The grassy salt flats on the south end of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge are the wintering grounds for more than 200 of these endangered birds. Previous tours have seen as many as 40 Whoopers, and occasionally we have had the opportunity to view a family group within one hundred feet of the boat! Other possibilities include Brown Pelican, Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Clapper Rail, American Oystercatcher, and Black Skimmer, as well as a variety of herons, ducks, shorebirds, gulls, terns, and other waterbirds.

NIGHT: Best Western Inn by the Bay, Fulton

January 2, Day 7: To Corpus Christi and Departure for Home. After one final check of the area this morning for any water birds that may have eluded us earlier, we will make the short 35-mile drive to the Corpus Christi airport for the end of the tour. Participants should plan to book flight reservations from Corpus Christi no earlier than 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.

RELAXED AND EASY TOUR INFORMATION AND CONDITIONS: Relaxed & Easy (R&E) tours are similar to “regular” VENT tours, but set to a slower pace, with somewhat fewer hours in the field and lighter physical activity. They are ideal for participants who prefer a somewhat later start in the morning, a little lengthier afternoon break, and a shorter afternoon outing. Walking is limited to short walks of usually not more than a half mile one-way, avoiding difficult terrain. A typical day will begin with breakfast around 6:30-7:00 a.m., followed by bird-ing until about noon. We will attempt to have lunch every day between 12:00 and 1:00 p.m., followed by an afternoon break (when possible). We will resume birding for a couple of hours in the mid-afternoon. On most days we will attempt to provide about an hour for personal time before dinner which will usually be between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m. Strenuous physical activity will be avoided, and all walking will be limited to well-marked roads and trails, excluding uneven or rough terrain.

Please note on this tour that longer walks of more than a half mile may be offered as options at Sabal Palm Grove (Day 2) and at Santa Ana N.W.R. (Day 3). Also, there may be late afternoon/early evening options to look for roosting parrots and parakeets and for nocturnal screech-owls and Pauraques, which may delay dinner until after 7:00 p.m. In addition, there is usually one pre-dawn departure (Day 5) which might require a 6:00 a.m. breakfast.

Relaxed & Easy (R&E) refers only to the slower pace of a tour, not to a participant’s birding skills or ability. Accordingly, birders of all levels of ability are welcome, as they are on typical VENT tours; R&E tours should not to be mistaken as tours for beginning birders. All birders are welcome, regardless of skill level, as they are on regular VENT tours.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: **Kim Eckert**

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 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 **\$1985** per person in double occupancy from Harlingen, Texas. This includes all meals from Dinner on Day 1 to Breakfast on Day 7, 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 with return from Corpus Christi, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$315**. 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.

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.

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 are 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. As a precaution, if you are flying to meet the tour, we urge you to pack a change of clothes, your binoculars, medication, toiletries, and other essentials in your airline carry-on bag.

CLIMATE, CLOTHING, ETC.: Temperatures in South Texas during the winter months usually range from lows in the 50s to highs around 70. Sometimes, though, a "Norther" will bring blustery winds, rain, and temperatures in the 30s or 40s. Therefore, as a precaution, you should bring along warm clothing, including a medium or heavy-weight jacket, a windbreaker or sweater, and raingear. A warm hat and gloves are often needed on the Whooping Crane boat. Dress will be informal throughout. There are coin-operated laundry facilities at all of our hotels.

EQUIPMENT: You should pack a pair of binoculars in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). An alarm clock is essential. Your leader will have a spotting scope; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. If you are bringing a camera, we suggest you bring sufficient film also, as it will not always be readily available during the tour. A small flashlight may come in handy and an alarm clock is a good idea. Sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat are recommended for protection from the sun. Sneakers or walking shoes are generally sufficient, but you may also want a pair of waterproof shoes or boots as we often encounter muddy or wet conditions.

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.

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 you 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.

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.

National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (Fourth or Fifth Edition) and *The Sibley Guide to Birds* are significantly better than other guides for use in extreme southern Texas. If you prefer the smaller regional Sibley guides (2003), the Eastern edition covers this part of Texas.

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

Howell, Steve and Sophie Webb. *A Guide to Birds of Mexico and North Central America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Good accounts and illustrations of the border specialties.

Lockwood, Mark, Brad McKinney, James Paton and Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. Colorado Springs: American Birding Association, 1999.

Lockwood, Mark and Brush Freeman, *The TOS Handbook of Texas Birds*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004.

Oberholser, Harry C. Edited by Edgar Kincaid. *The Bird Life of Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974. The definitive two-volume reference work on the Texas avifauna, including distribution maps, with a few paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Out-of-print.

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 March 14, 2008 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.