

BIG BEND SUMMER

JULY 14 – 21, 2008

© 2007

The avifauna of Big Bend is typical of that of the southwestern United States, with some Mexican species present for added interest. The Colima Warbler is not known to nest anywhere else in the United States and the handsome Lucifer Hummingbird only in an inaccessible portion of southwestern New Mexico. Zone-tailed Hawk, Montezuma Quail, Cave Swallow, Crissal Thrasher, Gray Vireo, Varied Bunting, and Black-chinned Sparrow are among the species that are very local and frequently hard to find in much of the Southwest. Big Bend, the Davis Mountains, and El Paso are excellent places to find these difficult species. Several species of Mexican birds have appeared in the park as accidentals over the years, including Aztec Thrush, Rufous-capped Warbler, and Slate-throated Redstart. Although accidentals such as these can never be expected (and indeed the chances of finding any of these species is quite remote), late summer is prime time for vagrant hunting. Habitats range from floodplain thickets and sparse desert to cool mountain woodland. Each harbors different birds. In fact, more species have been recorded from Big Bend than any other national park. This is rugged country. Temperatures in summer can be hot, and much of our birding is done on foot. The rewards can be great, however, both scenically and biologically.

The tour will spend three days in Big Bend National Park and then travel north to the Davis Mountains, where grassy plains and rounded peaks provide a gentle contrast to the stark grandeur of Big Bend. Montezuma Quail populations fluctuate cyclically, rising in wet periods and falling in dry ones, but the Davis Mountains are probably the best place in the country to find this boldly patterned but very cryptic species. The birdlife of the Davis Mountains has more affinities with that of the Rockies than it does with that of the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend. Species to expect include Cassin's Kingbird, Western Wood-Pewee, Black-headed Grosbeak, Western Bluebird, Violet-green Swallow, and Western Tanager. Common Black-Hawks have nested along Limpia Creek for a number of years, and are a possibility, as is Phainopepla.

July 14, Day 1: Arrival in El Paso. Participants should make arrangements to arrive in El Paso today. Once at the airport you may proceed to the white Hilton phone in the baggage claim area to request a transfer to the Airport Hilton where a room will be reserved in your name. If your luggage is light, you may wish to walk as the Wyndham is only about 200 yards from the airport terminal. We will meet in the lobby at 4:30 p.m. for some brief afternoon birding (either a visit to nearby hummingbird feeders or a search for the locally uncommon Mississippi Kite), followed by dinner.

NIGHT: Wyndham El Paso Airport Hotel, El Paso

July 15, Day 2: El Paso to Cibolo Creek Ranch. We will start out early this morning at a desert locale at the base of the Franklin Mountains in north El Paso. Our primary target will be the secretive and elusive Crissal Thrasher, here perhaps, at the center of its abundance. Other species we may encounter include Gambel's and Scaled quail, Greater Roadrunner, Say's Phoebe, Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia, Canyon Towhee, and Black-throated Sparrow. From there we will travel southeast along the Rio Grande for about 70 miles checking out irrigation impoundments and brushy roadside thickets. Possible species include Western and Clark's grebe, Neotropic Cormorant, Cinnamon Teal, Gambel's Quail (not readily found elsewhere in Texas), Black-necked Stilt, American Avcoet, Burrowing Owl, Western Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Cave Swallow, and Blue Grosbeak.

Big Bend Summer, Page 2

By mid-morning we will head eastward, stopping at Van Horn for lunch. Swainson's Hawks, and if we are lucky a Golden Eagle, may be in evidence en route.

After lunch we will head south for Cibolo Creek Ranch. The countryside along our route is vast and the scenery spectacular. Pronghorns are likely in the grasslands near Marfa. We should arrive at the ranch sometime in the mid to late afternoon. This 25,000-acre ranch, located at the base of the Chinati Mountains, is a birder's paradise. The owner has built a beautiful lodge, adjacent to two springs, called Hacienda de Cibolo. This is a luxurious facility, complete with lovely rooms and excellent food. After settling into our rooms, we will have an early dinner and then drive up into the foothills looking for Elf Owl, Common Poorwill, Lesser and Common night-hawks, and possibly other nocturnal species.

NIGHT: Cibolo Creek Ranch

July 16, Day 3: Cibolo Creek to Big Bend. We will be up early to bird the foothills above the ranch and the cottonwood oases along the creek. Possibilities include Vermilion Flycatcher, Gray and Bell's vireos, Summer Tanager, Varied and Painted buntings, and Orchard and Scott's orioles. In some years, Zone-tailed Hawk has nested nearby, so we will keep a close watch on the sky for this vulture-like species.

After lunch we will continue south to Presidio and then head southeast along the famous River Road, considered by many to be one of the most scenic roads in Texas. As we enter Big Bend country, the Chisos Mountains rise like a fortress from the desert lowlands. We will climb into the heart of the range and descend into the Basin, a huge mountain-ringed bowl. The lodge, our headquarters for the next three nights, is nestled at the foot of Casa Grande, a square peak looming above the Basin. The altitude of the Basin (just over 5,300 feet) considerably ameliorates the summer heat of the desert.

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend

July 17, Day 4: Big Bend National Park. Today we will explore the Basin. Canyon Towhees and Cactus Wrens are abundant around the lodge, and the shy Black-chinned Sparrow frequents nearby chaparral. The walk to the Window, a pour-off for Oak Creek, follows a wooded stream bottom past the park sewage ponds into a narrow canyon. Gray Vireos (scarce) and Lucifer Hummingbirds frequent the rocky hillsides; while Varied Buntings prefer the brushy creek bottom. Species of the oak woodlands found here include White-winged Dove, Acorn Woodpecker, Black-crested Titmouse, Bewick's Wren, Black-headed Grosbeak, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Scott's Oriole, and Lesser Goldfinch. Often coming to the ponds to drink are other species, such as Blue Grosbeak and Western Tanager. This is the most varied part of the mountains, a blend zone between lowland and highland plants and animals.

In the evening we will take an optional nocturnal prowl, armed with a high powered spotlight. Night is when the desert comes alive. Great Horned Owls hunt over the desert flats where Lesser Nighthawks catch insects. Elf Owls and Western Screech-Owls (both somewhat difficult to find in late summer) frequent the trees and brush, and Common Poorwills are sometimes seen on the roads. Large and small mammals, as well as reptiles are often seen crossing the roads. Millipedes and tarantulas are sometimes common. Something surprising is always encountered!

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend

July 18, Day 5: Boot Springs. This will be our most exciting day—an optional all-day hike into the higher Chisos Mountains to Boot Canyon, the only U.S. home of the Colima Warbler. This is a long hike (nine and a half miles, round trip) with some steep areas, but the trail is excellent and well-maintained, and we keep to a pace to fit our members. The crisp mountain air and the breathtaking vistas alone are worth the effort. Species of the open hillside woodlands include Mexican Jay, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Bushtit, Black-crested Titmouse, Bewick's Wren, Hepatic Tanager (uncommon), and Spotted Towhee. The cool woodlands of Boot Canyon attract the Blue-throated Hummingbird, Cordilleran Flycatcher (scarce), Hutton's Vireo, and the highly-sought Colima Warbler. Often seen overhead are Band-tailed Pigeon, White-throated Swift, and Violet-green Swallow.

Some years a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks nests near the pass, and Peregrines are occasionally seen around cliffs. We will offer alternative birding suggestions for those who wish to bird the Chisos in a less vigorous manner.

NIGHT: Chisos Mountains Lodge, Big Bend

July 19, Day 6: Morning in Big Bend; to the Davis Mountains. This morning we will leave the Basin early to visit Rio Grande Village during the cool hours of the day. The planted cottonwoods and groves of native brush harbor a variety of migrants and breeding species, making it the park's best birding locale. Greater Roadrunner, Vermilion Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, and Painted Bunting are quite common. A pair of Common Black-Hawks has nested at this location the past five years, so we will keep a keen eye out for them. Vagrants such as Gray Hawk and Tropical Kingbird have made appearances, but should not be expected.

We will leave Big Bend for the Davis Mountains in the afternoon. After the awesome emptiness of the desert, the drive northward is relieved by the high grassland plateau entered near Marathon. Lark and Cassin's sparrows are possible here, as well as the locally uncommon Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. Greater rainfall from this point to the Davis Mountains has formed grassy plains, which give way to woodland on the rounded peaks. We will spend the late afternoon and evening searching for the elusive Montezuma Quail, which may be more numerous here than anywhere else in the country.

NIGHT: Hotel Limpia, Fort Davis

July 20, Day 7: Davis Mountains. Today we bird the higher Davis Mountains. Beginning near the State Park, we will work our way westward into the heart of the range. The slopes are covered with an open forest of oak, pinyon, and junipers of several species. Here one may find Band-tailed Pigeon, Western Wood-Pewee, Cassin's Kingbird, Western Scrub-Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Scott's Oriole. At the very top of the road, groves of Ponderosa Pine straggle down from the inaccessible peaks. Gray Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Violet-green Swallow, Mountain Chickadee, Grace's Warbler, and Hepatic Tanager are among the many possibilities. We will also visit a site where the Common Black-Hawk has nested in the past, hoping to spot one of these rare birds.

After lunch in Van Horn, we will recheck a number of irrigation impoundments on our way back to El Paso. A wide variety of herons, waterfowl and shorebird possibilities exist at this season. We will arrive in El Paso in the late afternoon where the tour will conclude with a final checklist session and dinner.

NIGHT: Wyndham El Paso Airport Hotel, El Paso

July 21, Day 8: Departure for Home. Participants may make arrangements to depart El Paso at any time today.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Barry Zimmer and Bob Sundstrom

Barry Zimmer has been birding since the age of eight. His main areas of expertise lie in North and Central America, but his travels have taken him throughout much of the world, including such exotic locales as Japan, Russia, Madagascar, Africa, and New Zealand. Barry is a longtime member of the New Mexico Bird Records Committee, and served on the Texas Bird Records Committee for 12 years. He has co-authored three books:

Big Bend Summer, Page 4

Birds of the Trans-Pecos, A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley, and Birds and Birdfinding in the El Paso Area. Barry has a keen interest in nature photography, having captured over 1,000 species of birds on film. His other interests include sports (a diehard Red Sox fan), cooking, and movies. He received his degree in psychology at the University of Texas in El Paso. Barry resides in El Paso with his wife, Yvonne, and their daughter, Alexandra.

Bob Sundstrom has led VENT tours since 1989 to destinations including Hawaii, Mexico, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, Iceland, Papua New Guinea, the Southwest Pacific islands, Antarctica, the Bering Sea, and many destinations throughout North America. Bob takes a strong interest in both the natural and cultural settings of his tours. He earned his doctorate at the University of Washington. Bob and his wife Sally live in the rural Scatter Creek Valley south of Olympia, Washington. Bob lived in Seattle for more than two decades, continues to teach birding workshops, and leads a program of short, regional tours that begin in the Seattle area. During two seasons of work in the Pribilof Islands, he helped chronicle the occurrence of North American bird rarities. A skilled birder with a special interest in bird song, Bob has served on the boards of several nature and conservation organizations, is a member of the Washington State Bird Records Committee, and is a co-author of *The National Audubon Society Field Guide to the Pacific Northwest*. When not on tour, Bob keeps busy as the lead writer for the daily public radio program *BirdNote*. *BirdNote* is archived at www.birdnote.org.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$2335** per person in double occupancy from El Paso, Texas. This includes all meals from Dinner on Day 1 to Dinner 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 El Paso 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 **\$490**. 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 are 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 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: To prevent crowding in the vehicles, we ask participants to limit their luggage to one medium sized suitcase per person, plus one carry-on bag. As a precaution, if you are flying to meet the tour and checking luggage, we urge you to pack a change of clothes, your binoculars, medication, toiletries, and other essentials in your airline carry-on bag.

CLIMATE AND CLOTHING: Lows will be in the upper 50s to mid 60s in Big Bend and highs from the upper 80s to low 100s. You'll mostly experience temperatures ranging from 85 to 95 degrees in the day, possibly higher at Rio Grande Village. Although we will certainly have hot days in Big Bend, we may still get some cool evenings and some showers; humidity is generally on the low side. You should bring light raingear and a sweater or light jacket. A hat is strongly recommended for sun protection. Dress will be informal throughout: comfortable field clothes—jeans, shorts, tee shirts, etc. **Comfortable walking shoes (i.e. tennis shoes) and a good pair of hiking boots are essential.**

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.

INSECT PROTECTION: Chiggers can be a problem in much of Texas, although they are not generally found in Big Bend country. We will likely encounter a few mosquitoes. We recommend that you bring along some insect repellent.

LAUNDRY STOPS: None available.

MISCELLANEOUS: Restaurants able to accommodate vegetarian, vegan, diabetic, low-cholesterol or other special dietary requests are rare in West Texas, away from El Paso. Your leaders may be unable to fulfill these requests at many locations. Please feel free to bring food to supplement what is available on the tour. **A canteen (up to 2 liters of water may be needed for the Boot Springs hike) and a small day pack (or "fanny-pack") are essential for the all-day hike to Boot Springs. You will be carrying your own lunch on this hike.**

Your tour leader will have a spotting scope. If you want to bring your own, please feel free to do so. If you are bringing a camera, we suggest that you try to bring sufficient film, as it will not always be readily available during the tour. Sunscreen is essential, as is an alarm clock (no wake up calls at Big Bend or Davis Mountains). Don't forget a flashlight with extra batteries and lip balm.

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. Also go to www.bigbendbookstore.org, the online bookstore for The Big Bend Natural History Association.

Big Bend Summer, Page 6

Indispensable in the field will be your favorite North American field guides, plus guides to other topics that particularly interest you (mammals, reptiles and amphibians, trees, cacti, geology, etc.). A guide to the birds of Mexico will be carried by your leader in the unlikely, but always possible, event that a stray Mexican species of bird is encountered. **To use during the tour, we recommend a good U.S. field guide, such as the *National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America*.**

Birds:

- Brandt, Herbert W. *Texas Bird Adventures*. Cleveland: The Bird Research Foundation, 1940. See pp 1-130 for an easy-to-read account by a prominent naturalist who visited the region before it became a national park. Out of print, but try www.abebooks.com.
- Cruickshank, Helen. *A Paradise of Birds: When Spring Comes to Texas*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1968. See pp. 119-208 for a good account of the Big Bend segment of a spring trip to Texas. Out of print, but try www.abebooks.com.
- Lockwood, Mark W. and Brad McKinney, James Paton, and Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. Lane/ABA Birdfinding Guide. American Birding Association, 1999.
- Peterson, Jim and Barry Zimmer. *Birds of the Trans-Pecos*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998.
- Peterson, Roger Tory and James Fisher. *Wild America*. Boston: Riverside Press, 1975. See chapters 16 and 17 for the adventures of two great naturalists as they bird their way through Texas.
- Peterson, Roger Tory. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Texas and Adjacent States*. Peterson Field Guide Series # 13. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co, 1979. This guide is rather out of date.
- Peterson, Roger Tory. *A Field Guide to Western Birds*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1998. Completely new, third edition of this excellent guide to all species found in North America west of the 100th meridian and north of Mexico.
- Sprunt, Alexander, Jr. "The Colima Warbler of the Big Bend," *Audubon* Vol. 52 (1950): 84-91. A short article on finding the Colima Warbler and other specialties of Big Bend.
- Wauer, Roland H. *Birds of Big Bend National Park and Vicinity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973. An invaluable aid to understanding the ecology, distribution and abundance of the bird life of the area. The bibliography of this book provides a list of journal articles pertinent to this area for those desiring further study. Out of print, but still available.
- Wauer, Roland H. and Carl Fleming. *A Naturalist's Big Bend*. College Station. Texas A&M Press, 2002.

Wildflowers & Plants:

- Kirkpatrick, Zoe Merriman. *Wildflowers of the Western Plains, A Field Guide*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Irwin, Howard S. and Mary Motz Wills. *Roadside Flowers of Texas*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1985. Good selection of typical wildflowers, with attractive line drawings.
- McDougall, W.B. and Omer E. Sperry. *Plants of Big Bend National Park*. Washington: U.S. government Printing Office, 1957. Detailed key, with photographs, to plants of Big Bend. Out of print, but try www.abebooks.com.
- Warnock, Barton H. *Wildflowers of the Big Bend Country, Texas*. Alpine, Texas: Sul Ross State University, 1970. Guide to plant ecology and identification within this region. Out of print, may be difficult to find.

Miscellaneous:

- Davis, William B. *The Mammals of Texas*. Austin: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Bulletin No. 41, 1974. Species accounts of all mammals found in Texas. Consult the Texas Parks and Wildlife website: www.tpwd.state.tx.us
- Tyler, Ronnie C. *The Big Bend: A History of the Last Texas Frontier*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984. An excellent historical account of the region, available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Try www.abebooks.com

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 October 29, 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.