

# SPRING IN SOUTH TEXAS

APRIL 5-16, 2009

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*This tour covers the Lower Texas Coast, Rio Grande Valley, and the beautiful Texas Hill Country, all at their finest when wonderful weather, a spectacular array of flowers, and arguably the best birding in the country combine for a truly memorable natural history experience. Beginning in Corpus Christi, the tour travels to Rockport—wintering grounds of the majestic Whooping Cranes and breeding grounds for many species of herons, egrets, and shorebirds. It is also a stopover point for migrant shorebirds and landbirds alike. We will then head south through the famed King Ranch, to the Rio Grande Valley, home to 23 tropical species of birds whose United States range is restricted to this incredibly rich area. Included in this list are such highly sought species as Red-billed Pigeon, Ringed Kingfisher, Pauraque, Great Kiskadee, GreenJay, White-collared Seedeater, and Altamira and Audubon's orioles. The tour will conclude in the scenic Hill Country, the nesting grounds of the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo. We should see over 250 species of birds, as well as fantastic wildflower displays.*

**April 5, Day 1: Arrival in Corpus Christi.** Participants may plan to arrive in Corpus Christi, TX at any time today and transfer to our hotel where rooms will be reserved in your name. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 5:00 p.m. for a get-acquainted session, some brief afternoon birding at a nearby marsh (with the declining Snowy Plover as the main target), and a delicious seafood dinner.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn Northwest, Corpus Christi

**April 6-7, Days 2-3: Corpus Christi, Rockport and Whooping Crane Boat Trip.** Although our schedule will be somewhat flexible over the next two-and-a-half days, mostly depending on weather patterns, it is likely that we will begin the day by visiting a migrant trap or two. Passerine migration is just beginning in early April, and though we are not likely to see large numbers of migrants, we should encounter a sprinkling of flycatchers, vireos, and warblers. Early migrant possibilities include Northern Parula, Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Prothonotary, and Hooded warblers. Nearby coastal estuaries could harbor Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret and Gull-billed Tern, among others.

One morning, we will board the "M/V Skimmer" to travel up the Intracoastal Canal, where our target will be the endangered Whooping Crane. These magnificent birds begin migrating north in early April, but we have a good chance to find a few lingering family groups. At one time only 15 Whooping Cranes remained in the wild, but now more than 250 make the long flight to and from their Canadian breeding grounds. Our search for the Whoopers should yield many other birds as well, including a variety of herons and egrets, American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer and up to six species of terns. Another morning will be spent at a nearby spartina marsh in hopes of locating Clapper Rail, Sedge Wren, and Seaside Sparrow. White and White-faced ibis, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Long-billed Curlew, and Stilt, Pectoral, and Baird's sandpipers are among the many possibilities. Coastlines around Rockport should yield Wilson's Plover and perhaps Least Tern as well. One afternoon, we will visit the Goose Island area in search of additional passerine migrants and seek out Boat-tailed Grackles at the southern edge of their range.

NIGHTS: Best Western Inn by the Bay, Fulton

**April 8, Day 4: Mustang Island to Kingsville.** We will begin the day by taking the ferry across the bay to Port Aransas. Here, at a freshwater marsh, we may encounter Least Bittern (scarce), Cinnamon Teal, Sora, and Virginia Rail, in addition to many other shorebirds and waterfowl. Nearby Paradise Pond provides yet another opportunity for landbird migrants with a lovely boardwalk through a willow-lined pond. Finally, we will cruise down the beaches of Mustang Island where numerous rarities have been recorded. We will likely encounter such regular fare as Piping Plover, Red Knot (very uncommon), and Least, Sandwich, and Royal terns. In the early afternoon we will begin heading for Kingsville via the Chapman Ranch. Fields in this area may harbor Upland Sandpiper, American Golden-Plover, and perhaps the rare Buff-breasted Sandpiper as well.

NIGHT: Comfort Inn, Kingsville

**April 9, Day 5: King Ranch to McAllen.** The better part of the day will be on the Norias Division of the spectacular King Ranch. Here in the undisturbed mesquite savannas and small oak mottes, we will get our first taste of South Texas birding. Possibilities include White-tailed and Harris's hawks, Crested Caracara, the gem-like Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Couch's Kingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Green Jay, Long-billed Thrasher, Olive Sparrow, and Hooded Oriole. In addition, the very local Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and the declining Audubon's Oriole might also be encountered. Our real targets here, however, will be the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and the Tropical Parula—two species rarely seen in the United States outside the boundaries of this ranch. While both are elusive and somewhat scarce (and certainly not guaranteed), we will devote considerable time and effort to locating these King Ranch specialties. Depending on our arrival time in Mission, we may spend the early evening searching for Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets as they noisily descend to their nighttime roosts.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn & Suites, McAllen

**April 10, Day 6: Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge; Brownsville Area.** Our birding today begins at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, which has been called "the gem of the national wildlife refuge system." Santa Ana is a paradise for birders. Amid the lush, moss-draped woodland, we should see Plain Chachalaca, White-tipped Dove, Couch's Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, Green Jay (considered by many to be the most beautiful bird in the United States), Long-billed Thrasher, Altamira Oriole, and much more. Least Grebes and Black-bellied whistling-ducks frequent the lakes, while muddy margins attract migrating shorebirds. In recent years, thousands of birders have flocked here to look for the Hook-billed Kite, a Mexican species previously unknown in the United States. Perhaps we will be able to find this rare, elusive bird or some other over-the-border stray. Flights of raptors are a common spring sight over the refuge and could include large numbers of Broad-winged and Swainson's hawks. After dinner we will have an optional nightbird excursion in hopes of locating Pauraque, as well as Elf (very uncommon) and Eastern Screech-Owls.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn & Suites, McAllen

**April 11 Day 7: Rio Grande Valley; to Zapata.** Today's schedule will be largely determined by what valley specialties we are still missing or by what rarities may be present. Visits to Bentsen State Park, Sabal Palm Grove, or the Frontera Audubon House Thicket in Weslaco are possible destinations. There is always a decent chance of a Mexican vagrant here at this season. Clay-colored Robins, once accidental, have become increasingly regular and have nested in recent years, making this species a real possibility. If conditions are right, migrating raptors, including large flocks of Broad-winged and Swainson's hawks and smaller numbers of Mississippi Kites, often move through this area in April. The afternoon will find us heading upriver toward Zapata with the possibility of desert birding en route. An evening owl trip will be planned if we are lacking any of our nocturnal targets.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

**April 12, Day 8: Falcon Dam Area.** We will have a full day to explore thoroughly the rich Falcon Dam area. Here the avifauna shows more of a western flavor than in the lower valley, with Scaled Quail replacing Northern Bobwhite, and such species as Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus Wren, Pyrrhuloxia and Black-throated Sparrow

common in the brushy uplands. Along the banks of the Rio Grande, the shy and retiring Audubon's Oriole is making its last stand within the U.S. borders. Altamira Orioles suspend their pendulous nests from riverine trees, and Ringed and Green kingfishers patrol the snag-lined banks. Noisy Great Kiskadees and Couch's Kingbirds call from exposed perches, while Long-billed Thrashers and Olive Sparrows scratch in the undergrowth. The rare Red-billed Pigeon, like the Audubon's Oriole, clings to a tenuous U.S. existence along the willow-lined banks of the river. Muscovy Duck, Gray Hawk and Hook-billed Kite are rare and irregular, but possible. Common species include Greater Roadrunner, Golden-fronted and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, and Bewick's Wren.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Zapata

**April 13, Day 9: Falcon Dam to the Hill Country.** We may briefly revisit the Falcon Dam area in the early morning. If White-collared Seedeaters are present in San Ygnacio or Zapata, we will make a special effort to locate them. The weedy edges and river banks here offer the last U.S. refuge for this tiny Mexican finch. From here we drive north to one of the state's most pleasant and scenic regions—the Texas Hill Country. En route we may spot Cave Swallows utilizing the highway culverts, or “skylarking” Cassin's Sparrows. We should arrive at Neal's Lodges by late afternoon. Neal's is a rustic, family-operated establishment on the banks of the clear, cool, rushing Frio River. The accommodations are lovely, and the family-style meals and homey atmosphere are delightful. Best of all, birds are everywhere on the grounds of the lodges. The amount of bird song and bird activity here is a real treat.

NIGHT: Neal's Lodges, Concan

**April 14-15, Days 10-11: Concan Area.** We will have two full days to enjoy the pleasures of the Texas Hill Country. Birds are everywhere here, from the rocky flower-covered hillsides to the thick brush and cypress-lined river banks. The Hill Country is simply one of the “birdiest” places around. For example, five species of wrens can be found on the lodge property (Bewick's, Carolina, Cactus, Canyon and Rock), all in full song. Located right on the dividing line between the junipers and oaks of the Texas Hill Country and the thick brush of South Texas, the Concan area is an ideal spot for studying the birds of both habitats. Some of the expected species present on the lodge grounds include Black (sporadic) and Eastern phoebes, Ash-throated and Great Crested flycatchers, Verdin, Carolina Chickadee, Black-crested Titmouse, Bell's Vireo, Yellow-throated Warbler, White-eyed Vireo, House Finch, and Canyon Towhee. A concerted effort will be made to find the two special Texas Hill Country birds, the Golden-cheeked Warbler (which nests nowhere else in the world!) and the Black-capped Vireo, both scarce and difficult to locate. This, however, is the heart of their range. Other typical Hill Country birds we should see are Black-chinned Hummingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Western Scrub-Jay, Common Raven, Lesser Goldfinch, and Rufous-crowned and Field sparrows. Green Kingfisher and Bushtit are also possible. One afternoon will likely be devoted to an optional “tubing” excursion in the beautiful Frio River below Neal's (dependent upon water levels and water temperatures), so make sure to bring a swim suit if you wish to participate. One evening, we will visit a nearby private ranch to view one of the greatest bat spectacles in the United States. Several million Mexican Free-tailed Bats pour from the entrance of a huge limestone cave. So great are their numbers that the long undulating column of bats stretches to the limits of vision and blackens a corner of the sky. The steady stream of bats continues well into the night. Hundreds of Cave Swallows nest here as well. On the way back to Neal's, we will look for Common Poorwills on the unpaved ranch roads. In the afternoon on our final day, we will depart Neal's for the hour and a half drive into San Antonio.

NIGHT: Neal's Lodges, Concan (Day 10)

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Airport Select, San Antonio (Day 11)

**April 16, Day 12: Departure for Home.** Participants may make arrangements to depart from San Antonio 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 7 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Barry Zimmer

**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: *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.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$3565** per person in double occupancy from Corpus Christi, Texas (tour ends in San Antonio). This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 11, 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 Corpus Christi and return from San Antonio, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$595**. 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 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Cancellation Penalties and Refunds are based on the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less **\$150** per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 120 and 90 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

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| <u>If you cancel:</u>                    | <u>Your refund will be:</u>   |
| 120 days or more before departure date   | Your deposit minus \$150.   |
| Between 120 and 90 days before departure | No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded. |
| Fewer than 90 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:** We request participants to limit their baggage to one medium-sized suitcase and one carry-on, if possible, as space in the vehicle will be limited.

**CLIMATE:** Temperatures in Texas in April range from 60 to 80 degrees with the possibility of even warmer weather (mid 90s) in the Valley. However, a late “norther” may bring rain and temperatures around 50 degrees. Our 2007 tour had record-breaking low temperatures, in the low 40’s, for two days. In the Hill Country, night time lows could also dip into the 40’s.

**CLOTHING:** While light field clothing is the norm, you should also bring along a sweater or light jacket and raingear. Comfortable walking shoes or boots are essential, as are a hat and sunscreen for protection from the sun. Dress will be informal throughout. You may wish to bring along swim wear, especially for our optional tubing excursion in Concan. An old pair of tennis shoes or river shoes/reef walkers is recommended for tubing.

**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 during owling excursions.

**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, mosquitoes, and ticks can be a problem in Texas, and insect repellent is strongly recommended (we suggest Cutters or Off).

**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.

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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](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.

### **For use during our tour we recommend**

- **Dunn, Jon L. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. The National Geographic Society, 2002 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), or**
- **Sibley, David Allan. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Knopf, 2000.**

### ***Birds:***

Holt, Harold. *A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast*. (Lane/ABA Birdfinding Guide #413.) American Birding Association, 1993 (revised).

Lockwood, Mark, Brad McKinney, Jim Paton, Barry Zimmer. *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*. (Lane/ABA Birdfinding Guide.) American Birding Association, 1999 (revised). Both this and the above guide are great background material.

Oberholser, Harry C. and Edgar B. Kincaid, Jr. (ed.) *The Bird Life of Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974. Edited by Edgar Kincaid. The definitive two-volume reference work on the Texas avifauna, including distribution maps with a few paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Detailed description material.

Peterson, Roger Tory and James Fisher. *Wild America: The Record of the 30,000 Mile Journey*. Mariner Books, 1997. See Chapters 16 and 17: The adventures of two great naturalists as they bird their way through Texas.

Peterson, Roger Tory and Edward L. Chalif. *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997 (paperback). Has good illustrations of many of the border specialties.

### ***Wildflowers:***

Enquist, Marshall. *Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country*. Austin: Lone Star Botanical, 1989. Very thorough and attractive guide with excellent photographs.

- Wills, Mary M. and Howard S. Irvin. *Roadside Flowers of Texas*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1961. Good selection of typical wildflowers and attractive line drawings.
- Loughmiller, Campbell, Lynn Loughmiller and Lynn Sherrod. *Texas Wildflowers*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1984. Field guide with nice photos of many representative wildflowers.
- Niehaus, Theodore S. *A Field Guide to Southwestern and Texas Wildflowers* (Peterson Field Guide Series 31). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998 (reprint). This book has the greatest selection of species of the popular guides, but many are black and white line drawings only.

**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 July 15, 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.