

HIGH ISLAND, TEXAS

An Introductory Birding Tour

APRIL 23-27, 2009

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High Island, Texas, has been known for decades as one of the premier spots in the world to observe bird migration. Every spring millions of birds journey north from the American tropics to the forests of eastern North America. Many fly over the Gulf of Mexico, and if they encounter north wind or rain, may put down by the thousands in the isolated groves of live oaks at High Island. Surrounded by hundreds of square miles of coastal marsh and prairie, these tiny woodlands offer much needed food and shelter to the exhausted migrants. A number of these groves have been preserved and are open to birders.

This tour is designed to provide an introduction to the rich avifauna of the Upper Texas Coast. It will focus on bird migration as observed in the coastal groves as well as in nearby fresh water marshes, rice fields, and in the coastal intertidal regions which provide feeding grounds for thousands of shorebirds, hundreds of herons, ibises, and spoonbills, and much more.

Every day at High Island is an exciting one, especially in April when migration reaches its crescendo. If weather conditions are right, you may see ten Scarlet Tanagers in one mulberry tree, 50 Indigo Buntings feeding on the ground, or several species of warblers, thrushes and vireos bathing in one small pond. At times like this, High Island provides some of the most exciting birding to be found anywhere in the world.

April 23, Day 1: Arrival in Houston. Participants should arrive at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) by 1:00 PM. This airport has four separate terminals and the leaders will begin picking up participants at 2:00 PM outside the “private car” exit located in the baggage claim areas of your terminal building. This is a different doorway than the hotel and shuttle pickup area. Please be absolutely certain that you inform the VENT office of your flight arrival time and the airline. If we do not have your flight information, we will not know to stop at your terminal. We should be on our way to Winnie, Texas no later than 3:00 PM.

Keep in mind that we cannot wait more than one hour for persons whose arrival is delayed due to flights that are running late. If you miss being picked up, you will need to take a taxi or limo to our hotel in Winnie, which will cost about \$150 for the 1½-2 hour drive. Therefore, if getting to Houston from your home involves tight connections, or if you simply want to arrive the day before to rest up prior to the start of the tour, we suggest you book a room at a Houston airport hotel. There will be one designated “pick-up” point to meet the leaders prior to them going to the airport to meet the arriving passengers.

You may also meet the group in Winnie. If you do, please be at the hotel, checked-in, and ready to go birding by 4:30 PM.

NIGHT: Days Inn (formally Holiday Inn Express), Winnie

April 24-26, Days 2-4: High Island Area. Our activities for the next three days will depend on the weather. Inclement weather on the Texas coast in the spring often means more migrants will stop along the coast, and with luck a “norther” will hit while we are here. The rain and winds associated with such frontal movements can

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cause an impressive fallout of migrants into the coastal groves. If this happens we will alter our plans to take advantage of the spectacle.

The Texas coast is the perfect place to get a feel for migration, and High Island is the best migrant trap on the entire coast. High Island is not an actual island off the coast; the name refers to the fact that it is a slightly raised area near the coast that supports lush groves of larger trees within the vast "sea" of coastal marshlands. On "good" weather days when most migrants fly inland to the forests of East Texas, some birds put down; but during inclement weather the trees may teem with birds, as thousands "fall out" of the sky into the first coastal habitat offering refuge after an exhausting flight into wind or rain out over the Gulf of Mexico. We will check the High Island woods daily and should see many migrants, including Hooded, Black-throated Green, Kentucky, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, Blue-winged, Tennessee, and Black-and-White warblers.

During low tide we will visit renowned Bolivar Flats, the best shorebirding locale in Texas. At the flats we should see over 50 species of birds, including myriad shorebirds, waders, gulls, and terns. Species to be watched for include American Avocets in spring plumage; American White Pelican; American Oystercatcher; Wilson's, Semipalmated, Piping, and Snowy plovers (there isn't a better place to study small plovers); Red Knot; dowitchers; Whimbrel; Long-billed Curlew; Semipalmated, Western, and Least sandpipers; Marbled Godwit; Herring, Ring-billed, and Laughing gulls; Forster's, Common, Least, Royal, Sandwich, Caspian, and Black terns; and Black Skimmer. Seaside and Sharp-tailed sparrows and rails frequent the nearby marshes. One of the great things about the flats is how very close one can get to the birds. It is an excellent opportunity to study and compare many species of shorebirds at once.

On at least one day during our time here we will visit Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. Established in 1963, Anahuac is a haven for thousands of marsh animals, among them birds, turtles, and alligators. Anahuac is famous among birders as a good place to observe such notoriously secretive marsh-dwellers as Least and American bitterns, King Rail, Sora, Purple Gallinule, and Marsh Wren. Fulvous Whistling-Duck, White-faced Ibis, and occasionally Glossy Ibis are also seen at Anahuac. This refuge is surrounded by rice fields and when they are flooded in April, the birds swarm into them. Sometimes thousands of shorebirds in glorious spring plumage are present, including such scarce species as Hudsonian Godwit, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, White-rumped and Baird's sandpipers, Wilson's Phalarope, and Stilt Sandpiper.

We will also likely visit the southern edge of the pine/broadleaf forest and bayou country not far north of Winnie where a number of bird species will already be nesting including several warbler species such as Prothonotary, Hooded, Yellow-throated, and Swainson's. Northern Parula, Eastern Bluebirds, and a few hawks and woodpeckers may also be present.

More recently, the Sabine Woods preserve near the Louisiana state-line has become available to birders. This sanctuary, owned and managed by the Texas Ornithological Society, is proving to be as productive as the woods at High Island. Lying farther north and east, sightings of rarer eastern warblers such as Cape May and Blackpoll occur here with greater frequency than other coastal locations. A boardwalk and well-marked trail system allow access to most of this small woodland, while water features continually attract a host of migrant songbirds. Time permitted, we will attempt to visit this place one afternoon.

NIGHTS: Days Inn (formally Holiday Inn Express), Winnie

April 27, Day 5: High Island to Houston; Departure for Home. We will have the entire morning to bird and will depart for Houston after lunch, arriving at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) by 2:00 PM. Flights home should not be arranged until after 4:00 PM.

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: The tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Bob Sundstrom

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 **\$1225** per person in double occupancy from Houston. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to lunch on Day 5, 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 Houston 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 **\$195**. 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.

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.***

<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.

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.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE: A brochure and application form 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 as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends Travel Insured International as our preferred insurance provider.** 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.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. **Contact Travel Insured International prior to registration for details.** Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than Travel Insured International, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

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: There are two airports in Houston, and flights for this tour should be planned to arrive at Houston’s George Bush Intercontinental Airport, airport code “IAH,” which is located north of the city. 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 air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

BAGGAGE: On all of our Texas tours, we ask participants to please limit their baggage to one medium-sized piece of luggage and one carry-on bag. Please avoid bringing rigid plastic suitcases. **Soft-sided bags (roll-ons, duffel bags, etc.) are much preferred,** as space for carrying luggage in vans is limited.

CLOTHING: Temperatures on the upper Texas coast in April normally involve lows in the 60s and highs in the 80s, with the possibility of even warmer weather. However, a late norther may bring rain and temperatures in the 50s. So, while light field clothing is the norm, you should also bring along a warm sweater or light jacket and raingear. Comfortable walking shoes or boots are essential. If there has been a good bit of rain, the trails can be muddy, in which case you might want to consider bringing along a pair of rubber boots that come up over your ankle. Dress will be informal throughout.

FOOD: Restaurants able to accommodate vegetarian, vegan, diabetic, low-cholesterol or other special dietary requests are rare in the High Island area. 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

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line 877-FYI-TRIP (394-8747) or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac.aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

MISCELLANEOUS: Chiggers can be a problem in Texas, and insect repellent is strongly recommended (we suggest Cutters or OFF and some people like to use them in combination), as are a hat and sunscreen for protection from the sun. *An alarm clock is essential* and it is also recommended that you bring a refillable water bottle to carry water. The hotel in Winnie does have a coin laundry. On all our Texas tours, we ask participants to please limit their baggage to one medium-sized suitcase and one carry-on bag. Soft luggage such as duffel bags are much preferred, as space for carrying luggage in vans is limited.

A good functioning pair of binoculars will be essential. Your leader will have a spotting scope. If you have one and would like to bring it, please feel free to do so. If you are bringing a camera, we suggest that you bring sufficient film or digital storage media as it will not always be readily available during the tour.

The marshy fields at Anahuac NWR harbor the rarely seen Yellow Rail. Refuge personnel regularly offer group walks through a marsh in search of this bird. If any have been seen recently, your tour leaders may decide to offer this activity as an option to the tour group. The chances of seeing this species are usually good. We recommend rubber boots for those who choose to participate in this exciting event.

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 the 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.

For use during the tour, we recommend:

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. National Audubon Society. New York: Knopf, 2000.

Stokes, Donald and Lillian. *Field Guide to Warblers*. New York: Little Brown, 2004.

Birds:

Choate, Ernest A. *The Dictionary of American Bird Names*. Boston: Harvard Commons Press, 1985.

DeGraaf, Richard M. & John H. Rappole. *Neotropical Migratory Birds: Natural History, Distribution, and Population Change*. Ithaca: Comstock/Cornell U. Press, 1995.

Dunn, Jon & Kimball Garrett. *A Field Guide to the Warblers of North America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

Ehrlich, Paul R., David S. Dobkin & Darryl Wheye. *The Birder's Handbook. A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Holt, Harold R. *A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast*. American Birding Association, 1993.

Kaufman, Kenn. *Birds of North America*. Kaufman Focus Guides. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

McFarlane, Robert W. *A Stillness in the Pines: The Ecology of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker*. New York: Norton, 1992.

National Geographic Society. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Fifth Edition. Washington, D.C.: NGS, 2007.

Paulson, Dennis. *Shorebirds of North America: The Photographic Guide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Peterson, Roger Tory and James Fisher. *Wild America*. Boston: Riverside Press, 1963. See chapters 16 and 17 for the adventures of two great naturalists as they bird their way through Texas.

Reference Only:

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. Detailed description material.

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Wildflowers:

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

Irwin and Wills. *Roadside Flowers of Texas*. Austin. University of Texas Press. Good selection of typical wild flowers and attractive line drawings.

Tveten, John and Gloria. *Wildflowers of Houston and Southeast Texas*. Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1993. The wildflower guide most appropriate to the area of the tour.

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

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect July 11, 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.