



TOUR INFORMATION FOR TEXAS: *The Rio Grande in spring*

These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING THE UNITED STATES: United Kingdom citizens need to have a passport that has a minimum validity of 6 months remaining after the tour has finished. This is an immigration requirement for many countries, including the USA. All nationalities require a machine-readable passport if travelling to the USA under the visa waiver programme (see below).

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has made changes to the immigration requirements. Travellers seeking to travel under the Visa Waiver Program must pre-apply for authorisation using the Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (**ESTA**). **ESTA** must be completed online via their website.

Having an **ESTA** is a mandatory requirement and applications should be made online at least 72 hours before departure via their website <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov> as although the majority of responses are immediate, it can take 72 hours for approval in some cases. There is a small fee to pay as a processing charge followed by a small fee when authorisation has been granted.

For further information, or if you don't have access to the internet, please contact the Embassy of the United States in London on 020 3608 6998.

Citizens of other countries should contact their nearest US Embassy for entry requirements.

Once you've applied for your ESTA please remember to print it out and take a copy of that document onto the aircraft with you.

All visitors to the USA's first port-of-entry have their index fingerprints taken by an electronic scanner at Passport Control. You will also have your photograph taken at the same time. Although the process itself only takes a few minutes the queue can be quite long if several flights arrive at the same time!

If you are transiting through another US airport you will then need to reclaim your checked-in luggage, go through security, then hand your luggage back to the airline staff who will be waiting nearby to give assistance. Once your luggage is back with the airline please proceed to the departure gate for your onward flight.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get a replacement if your original is lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopy in a separate bag to the originals.

INTRODUCTORY MEETING: There will be an introductory dinner at 18.00 on Day 1 of the tour. This informal meeting gives the leader the opportunity to introduce everyone to each other and to let you know generally what to expect on the trip - pace of the tour, daily routine, etc. We strongly recommend you arrange your flights to arrive in the late afternoon so that you can be present at the introductory meeting. Depending upon the current weather and birding conditions a very short outing pre-dinner might be offered. If you elect to arrive late in the evening of Day 1, please be aware that the birding day will start early on Day 2 and you may only get a few hours' sleep. If you can't arrive before early evening, you may want to consider arriving a day early; we would be happy to make extra hotel arrangements for you.

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TIME DIFFERENCE: Texas is 6 hours behind British Summer Time.

CURRENCY: The currency of the United States of America is the dollar (USD). Dollars can be obtained from your local bank and from exchange facilities at the airport. As the tour price includes all travel, hotel and main meal costs, you only need bring enough dollars to cover gifts, snacks, or other purchases of a purely nature.

CLIMATE: April temperatures can vary from the 50°F (occasionally the upper 40°s) to the upper 80°s or even 90°s during the day. Temperatures will be a bit lower near the coast. Wind and rain are possible anywhere.

PACE OF THE TOUR: This is a relatively relaxed tour. Days will be full, with departures usually around 07.30 and return to the hotel usually by 17.00. On a few days we will schedule a one to two hour siesta during the heat of the day. Although we spend much time on foot, our walks are at a leisurely pace and on flat terrain so are not at all strenuous. Our birding pace will be leisurely as well and we will have plenty of time to study the birds we see. There will likely be at least one (optional) night birding expedition and at least two dusk outings to look at parrot roosts and rails. Note that the published itinerary should be viewed as a general guide. The actual daily itinerary (locations and order) can change due to local birding conditions and the discovery of any special rarities.

HEALTH: **It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting.** Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations.

South Texas presents no real hazards to the visiting birdwatcher but certain factors must be considered. In summer, which extends from April to October, the sun can be intense. A broad-brimmed hat, proper clothing and strong sunscreen lotion are essential.

Texas has mosquitoes, ticks, and some chiggers. We recommend using insect repellents with a high concentration of DEET.

Fire, Crazy, and Harvest Ants are widely distributed and thoroughly obnoxious so you will frequently need to watch where you stand.

It may be difficult to obtain any special medication during the tour, so bring all you are likely to need.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

ACCOMMODATION: We stay at standard hotels throughout.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry facilities are available at most of our hotels. Perhaps the best opportunity for laundry will be either in Zapata, or during our three day stay in Harlingen near the end of the tour.

ELECTRICITY: 110/120V AC 60Hz. The plugs are 2-flat pins. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

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FOOD: We'll eat in a variety of local restaurants where the food will in most cases be American standard. We will however make sure to include good selections of Tex-Mex, BBQ and seafood, all of which are excellent in the valley. Breakfasts are generally taken in our hotels (continental plus), and lunches will be in local or chain sandwich stores or cafes.

Sunbird tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regrettably, not be accommodated. Our tours are carefully scheduled to ensure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to take supplemental food with them

DRINKS: Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: All our hotels offer free Wifi. Mobile phone access is good throughout Texas.

Mobile phones can be useful while on tour but keep in mind that many countries operate on a different cellular technology. Your phone may be incompatible with the local system, so please check with your local carrier. Fortunately, with the advent of smartphones, it is easy to download applications such as Skype or Google Voice, which can make calling home free or very inexpensive. Another option is to replace the data ("SIM") card in your phone in-country. The SIM cards, including data can be very cheap. If you wish to use this option you will need to check that your smart phone has a SIM card slot.

FIELD CLOTHING: Dress is informal throughout. The following items are basic:

Sun hat	Light-weight waterproof jacket
Wind-proof jacket	Warm sweater
Lightweight shoes	Light-weight sweater
Lightweight trousers	Long-sleeved shirts

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS:

Notebook and pen	Alarm clock
Rucksack/Day pack	Wrist watch
Sunscreen and sunglasses	Canteen or water bottle
Insect repellent	Torch with spare batteries
Personal medication	Ear plugs if you are a light sleeper

Optional: Telescope & tripod (recommended if you have them), camera, film or memory cards, spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guide, swimwear. We do spend some time in areas where telescopes are handy; including the coast, various wader and waterfowl sites, and during our vigils on the Rio Grande.

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Note: The most effective insect repellents are those containing at least 35% of the active ingredient diethyltoluamide (DEET). The higher the percentage, the greater the effectiveness. However, care must be taken to avoid getting the repellent on to optical equipment as it dissolves rubber and plastic and can damage coated lenses. A reasonably effective alternative, which isn't corrosive, is Mosi-guard, produced by MASTA, and we recommend this. It is available in most high street chemist (including those at the airport). Camping supply stores sell a product containing permethrin 0.5%, which must be applied directly to clothing in advance of wearing and allowed to dry. This non-staining, odourless chemical is non-toxic to humans and protective on clothing through several launderings. Please make sure you never to spray insect repellent inside the vehicle or when you are standing close to other participants – it may drift on to their optical equipment.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT:

Telescope
Ice chest
Water cooler
Laser pointer

Basic first aid kit
Field guides and maps
Basic picnic supplies
Playback equipment

LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain, some birds such as herons and egrets can be obliging photographic subjects but warblers, vireos etc can be difficult to photograph. Bring all your film or memory cards with you as it may be difficult to find precisely what you need on short notice. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture- and dust-proof bags, as a precaution. Digiscoping is perfectly compatible with the tour, though it is recommended you bring your own telescope!

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leader will do all he can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

TRANSPORT: We will be traveling by 12 or 15 passenger window van or minivan, depending on the group size. Participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles, and should be prepared to rotate their seat position daily.

Fresh water will be available in the minibus throughout the tour, usually in one-gallon containers. It is suggested you bring your own personal water container so as to have a continuous supply of water in order to stay hydrated at all times.

SMOKING: Smoking is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

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TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Field Guides

Dunn, Jon, and Jonathan Alderfer. 2011. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. (6th Edition). Washington: National Geographic Society. One of the top two field guides for North America, more portable than the Sibley guide. **Recommended**

Lockwood, Mark W., and Brush Freeman. 2014. *The Texas Ornithological Society Handbook of Texas Birds*. Texas A&M University Press. ISBN-13:978-1623491208

Sibley, David Allen. 2014. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. (2nd Edition). New York: Knopf. Along with the *National Geographic*, the best North American guide. **Highly recommended**

References

Brock, Jim P., and Kenn Kaufman. 2003. *Butterflies of North America*. Houghton Mifflin, Illustrated with digitally-enhanced photographs. Highly recommended.

Kaufman, Kenn, Rick Bowers, and Nora Bowers. 2007. *Kaufman Focus Guide to Mammals of North America*, 12th Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. **ISBN-13:** 978-0618951888

Wauer, Roland H. 2004. *Butterflies of the Lower Rio Grande Valley*. Johnson Books. ISBN-13:978-1555663476

OBTAINING BOOKS: Most of the field guides and the major ornithological references in print are available by mail order from booksellers specialising in natural history titles.

Natural History Book Service Ltd
Tel: 01803 865913
www.nhbs.co.uk

Subbuteo Books
Tel: 0870 010 9700
www.wildlifebooks.com

WildSounds
Tel: 01263 741100
www.wildsounds.co.uk

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MAPS: Maps of the region may be available from:

The Map Shop
Tel: 01684 593146
www.themapshop.co.uk

Stanfords
Tel: 020 7836 1321
www.stanfords.co.uk

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc., and your international air tickets will be sent out about three weeks before the start of the tour. If you have any questions, please contact us.