



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

# NEBRASKA SANDHILL CRANES & PRAIRIE-CHICKENS

MARCH 17–24, 2025

NIORARA RIVER EXTENSION  
MARCH 24–27, 2025

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Sandhill Cranes on Nebraska's Platte River © Rick Wright

*The springtime Great Plains is the scene of one of the greatest migration spectacles in the world, when untold numbers of waterfowl and more than half a million cranes gather along the winding, braided Platte River. On the nearby prairies, another drama plays out: the ancient courtship dance of Greater Prairie-Chickens.*



Dozens, even hundreds, of Canvasback can sometimes be seen among the abundant waterfowl of the prairie spring.

© Rick Wright

*Set in the very middle of the Great Plains and the North American continent, Nebraska features an avifauna that famously combines east and west, north and south. The deciduous forests lining the Missouri River are home to such Carolinian specialties as Eastern Gray Squirrel and Red-bellied Woodpecker, while the grasslands covering much of the state are home to Western Meadowlark and Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel. The West truly begins in central Nebraska, where Mule Deer and Ferruginous Hawks live among the short grass and yuccas. Our tour is a chance to appreciate the tremendous biodiversity and unique human heritage of what too many travelers think of as “flyover” country.*

*With an eye to the vagaries of Great Plains weather, some participants may wish to add a day or two at the beginning or end of our tour to explore Omaha, gateway to the Old West and the New. We recommend visits to the Durham Museum of the American West, the Lauritzen Gardens, and the Henry Doorly Zoo, all within easy reach of the airport. The Joslyn Art Museum, Nebraska’s premier center for the visual arts, is housed in a remarkable Art Deco structure of pink marble; the museum’s Scott Pavilion was the first US work by Norman Foster. The Joslyn’s most famous holdings are the spectacular watercolor portraits of Native Americans painted in the early 1830s by Carl Bodmer, an unparalleled memorial to native cultures. The fine restaurants of Omaha’s Old Market are a perfect place to end a day of sightseeing in this vibrant city. The VENT office will be happy to help you with your arrangements.*

**March 17, Day 1: Arrival in Omaha.** Participants should plan to arrive in Omaha no later than today (airport code OMA). Our hotel provides free shuttle service from the airport; please call 712 847-0699 when you are ready to be picked up. A room will have been reserved in your name at our hotel near the airport in Carter Lake, a small city that geographic accident has placed politically in Iowa. Our group will meet in the hotel lobby at 4:00 pm for the short drive to an early supper, followed by birding in the vicinity.

This evening’s outing will likely feature good numbers of waterfowl and other early migrants, and we will be on the lookout for up to 20 species of ducks and geese, often including Cackling and Ross’s Geese, along with Bald Eagles and perhaps a Killdeer or Greater Yellowlegs. At dusk we’ll hope to witness the amazing courtship flights of American Woodcocks, their buzzing sometimes accompanied by the hoots of a distant Barred Owl.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn Omaha Airport, Carter Lake, Iowa





Red-headed Woodpecker © Rick Wright

**March 18, Day 2: Missouri River Valley and West to Kearney.** After breakfast in our hotel, we will spend the morning exploring the wooded bluffs and floodplain of the Missouri River, an important corridor for a wide range of migrants and home to several resident species near the northwestern edge of their range. We should find a few Harris's Sparrows among the juncos and American Tree Sparrows, and we will check blackbird flocks for wintering or migrant Rusty Blackbirds. Wild Turkeys occur in good numbers, and we might turn up a Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, or other woodland birds more typical of areas farther south and east in the U.S.

We may find a few Red-headed Woodpeckers on the ridges above the river; their numbers explode dramatically in years with good acorn crops. Among the most dashing of their dashing clan, these noisy woodpeckers are common breeders and in some years common winterers in the woodlands of eastern Nebraska. If any notable rarities are present within an hour or so of Omaha, we will leave the Missouri Valley to have a look.

After lunch, we will make the three-hour drive west to Kearney, arriving in time for an early supper and our first experience with the Sandhill Cranes as they mass to roost on the nearby Platte River.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn, Kearney, Nebraska

**March 19, Day 3: The Central Platte Valley.** We will visit another nearby crane roost this morning, arriving just before sunrise to watch the birds leave the river and spread out over sixty miles of fields and wetlands. The rest of the day will be devoted to an exploration of back roads in search of waterfowl, raptors, and sparrows. If water conditions are favorable, we may dip south into the western Rainwater Basin, where northbound waterfowl sometimes congregate in the thousands. In some years, the Snow Goose flock here totals hundreds of thousands, and Greater White-fronted, Canada, and Cackling geese are also present in large numbers. Ross's Geese can be fairly common in the flocks, and we will take the opportunity to study them wherever they appear. If the spring is an early one, we might also see Eared or Horned grebes, American White Pelican, Long-billed Dowitcher, Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, or Franklin's Gull.



The extremely local Harris's Sparrow is one of the region's most sought-after specialties. © Rick Wright



A Ross's Goose watches its watchers. © Rick Wright

Dusk will again find us on the banks of the Platte River, as endless lines of cranes descend onto their traditional sandbar roosts and settle noisily in for the night. We will have dinner in Kearney, then retire with the spectacular sights and sounds of the crane flight still filling our eyes, ears, and imaginations.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn, Kearney, Nebraska



**Sandhill Cranes at the Rowe Sanctuary © Rick Wright**

**March 20, Day 4: Morning Cranes, and On to McCook.** The Platte River at dawn affords a spectacle unlike any on earth. As the sky brightens, what seem at first islands resolve into vast flocks of cranes crowding the shallow water and sandbars; the low murmur of the roosting birds turns to an unearthly rattling howl when the odd eagle or coyote passes. Soon the cranes swarm across the sky, spreading out onto the nearby fields and wetlands to feed, their prehistoric trumpeting drowning out all other sounds.

After admiring this moving sight, we'll leave the Platte and its many thousands of cranes behind. As we move west and north toward the city of North Platte, we should run across more waterfowl and a good selection of raptors, sometimes including a Ferruginous Hawk or Prairie Falcon among the common Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, and American Kestrels. Greater Prairie-Chickens are occasionally seen flying across the road, but we can hope for far better views of that species to come.

We will have lunch in North Platte, then turn south and bird our way to McCook, arriving there in the late afternoon. After checking in to our hotel, we will attend a short- illustrated presentation by a rancher-naturalist introducing southwest Nebraska's grouse and their behavior, then have dinner in town.



**A Ferruginous Hawk takes advantage of a rare elevated perch on the prairies. © Rick Wright**



NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, McCook, Nebraska

**March 21, Day 5: Dancing Chickens.** We will leave our hotel around 6:30 this morning to be driven twenty minutes out of town to the dancing grounds of the Greater Prairie-Chickens, where we will take our places in a blind as the males perform their captivating courtship displays at often breathtakingly close range. Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks will also be singing from the ground and the fence posts or in the prairie sky. Mule Deer sometimes pick their way across the lek; the grouse react more vehemently if a Coyote or a Ferruginous Hawk appears.



**Dawn on the grasslands around McCook. © Rick Wright**



**This fine Greater Prairie-Chicken must be irresistible to the females—and he seems to know it. © Rick Wright**

We can expect to be in the blind for about two hours, then return to McCook for a delicious hot breakfast and a brief late morning break. Later on, we will drive out onto the prairies in search of specialties such as Trumpeter Swan, Northern Shrike, or the dramatically declining Black-billed Magpie. Depending on the weather, reservoirs may have good numbers of ducks, American White Pelicans, and grebes, possibly including Western or Eared. We will be back in McCook in time for a rest before dinner.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, McCook, Nebraska

**March 22, Day 6: Return to the Platte.** We'll check out of our hotel this morning, then start our drive east to Grand Island, two and a half hours away. Weather permitting, our route this time will take us north and east into the Loess Canyons region, where the hundreds of American Robins and Cedar Waxwings are sometimes joined by a few Townsend's Solitaires or Mountain Bluebirds feeding on the abundant eastern red cedar cones.



**Approaching the Loess Canyons. Photo © Rick Wright**

If time allows and recent reports intrigue, we may also visit a site or two in Nebraska's Rainwater Basin, where large marshes and sheet water on the fields attract sometimes startling numbers of migrant birds. The million-strong flocks of geese pass through in February or early March, but we may encounter numbers of Redheads, American Wigeon, and other ducks, while the first Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, or American Golden-Plover of spring may already have arrived. Once in Grand Island, we will have an early supper near our hotel before paying a final evening visit to the cranes.

NIGHT: Candlewood Suites, Grand Island, Nebraska

**March 23, Day 7: The Lower Platte, and Return to the East.** The migration of the Whooping Crane through central Nebraska typically begins in early April, but recent years have seen one or two birds appearing in the Grand Island area as early as mid-March. The return of the Whooping Crane is one of the great conservation stories of the past 100 years, the result of the unflagging efforts of talented scientists and responsible landowners. If one of these birds—or an even rarer Common Crane, an annually occurring needle in the big gray feathered haystack—has been reported, we will spend the morning in search of the rarity; otherwise, after breakfast, we will



make the two-hour drive back to the Omaha area, with a stop, time permitting, at one of the most productive birding sites on the lower Platte River, Schram Park.



**Whooping Crane © Rick Wright**



**Sandhill Cranes forage in corn stubble during the day. © Rick Wright**

Outstanding views of Harris's Sparrows and a good variety of junco "flavors" can often be had here, and if the winter has been warm or the spring early, we have a chance at finding a Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, or Myrtle Warbler around the ponds or in the steep, heavily wooded ravines. We plan to arrive in Omaha in time for a break before our final meal together.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn Omaha Airport, Carter Lake, Iowa

**March 24, Day 8: Departure, or continue to Niobrara Extension.** Those not joining our **Niobrara River Extension** can schedule their departure from Omaha's Eppley Airfield at any time today. Our Carter Lake hotel offers free shuttle service to the airport; reservations should be made the evening before.



# NIORRARA RIVER EXTENSION

## MARCH 24–27, 2025



The Niobrara River © Chris Light/Wikimedia Commons

*The Niobrara River, or Running Water, flows 535 miles across extreme northern Nebraska to empty into the Missouri where the states of Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa meet. Unlike the “Mighty Mo,” the Niobrara has never been channelized, and the lower 75 miles of its course are designated a Wild and Scenic River. Popular with canoeists and campers in the summertime, the river is an important meeting place year-round for plants and animals of the boreal forest, deciduous forest, tallgrass prairie, and mixed prairie, among them one of the focus species of our short extension, the Sharp-tailed Grouse, whose whirling courtship dance we will observe at close range from blinds at one of the many extensive tracts of public land in the Niobrara Valley.*

**March 24, Day 1: To Niobrara.** After breakfast in our Carter Lake hotel, we will pay a visit to one of the refuges, private or public, north of Omaha on our way to the Niobrara River three hours away. Our precise destination will depend on recent reports and the gaps in our bird list thus far, but whatever site we choose, we will be looking for woodland specialties such as the Barred Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, and Rusty Blackbird. Trumpeter Swans often linger along the Missouri River here into March, and in good “finch winters,” there are localities in this northeastern part of the state that may attract Red and White-winged Crossbills.

We plan to arrive in Niobrara, Nebraska, mid-afternoon, where we will check in to our accommodations on the Santee Sioux Reservation, just a few minutes east of Niobrara State Park. We'll have an early dinner in anticipation of an early start the next morning.

NIGHT: Ohiya Casino and Resort, Niobrara, Nebraska

**March 25–26, Days 2–3: Niobrara State Park and Lewis and Clark Lake.** On each of these two mornings, half of our group will visit the grouse blinds while the other gets a head start birding lovely Niobrara State Park. The two cohorts will reassemble for a hearty early lunch, then set off together to explore Nebraska's second-largest lake, Lewis and Clark, a huge reservoir behind Gavins Point Dam on the Missouri River.

Niobrara State Park is two square miles of grassed hills and riparian woodland, home to a fascinating mix of eastern and western plants, birds, and other animals. Northern Bobwhite, Wild Turkey, Greater Prairie Chicken, and of course Sharp-tailed Grouse are all good possibilities here, and good numbers of eagles, waterfowl, and American White Pelicans are present most years. We will also be looking for several desirable western species at the very eastern edge of their breeding ranges here, among them the Say's Phoebe, Black-billed Magpie, and Chestnut-collared Longspur.



**A Sharp-tailed Grouse on the lek. © Rick Wright**

It is the Sharp-tailed Grouse that will draw most of our attention, though. These handsome grassland birds can be chanced upon virtually anywhere in the area, but it is at the morning lek that they truly come into their bizarre own. Like the prairie chickens we will have enjoyed just a couple of days before, male Sharp-taileds gather in groups of six to ten to establish a pecking order and attract mates. Unlike the grave solemnity of that former species, Sharp-tailed Grouse on the lek are nothing short of frenzied, spinning in tight circles while rattling their tail quills and inflating their purple neck sacs; no dervish could ever whirl as frantically. The state park's blinds give us excellent views of this ancient and slightly comical rite of nature.

Lewis and Clark Lake, half an hour to the east of the town of Niobrara, has over 90 miles of shoreline and more than 30,000 acres of open water. The lake proper is famous for attracting rare gulls and waterfowl, and we'll be looking for such regionally scarce species as the Black-legged Kittiwake, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, Long-tailed



Duck, and any of the three scoters; late winter sees concentrations of eagles, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. Wooded areas can produce almost any passerine on the considerable Nebraska list.



Say's Phoebe © Rick Wright

Each of these two evenings will find us back at our hotel for dinner and the night.

NIGHTS: Ohiya Casino and Resort, Niobrara, Nebraska

**March 27, Day 4: Departures from Omaha.** We will have an early breakfast in Niobrara, then make the three-hour return drive to Omaha's Eppley Airfield. Please schedule your flight from Omaha for no earlier than 11:30 a.m.

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

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 12 participants.

**TOUR LEADERS:** Rick Wright and second leader to be announced.



**Rick Wright** is a widely published author and sought-after lecturer and field trip leader. A native of southeast Nebraska, Rick studied French, German, Philosophy, and Life Sciences at the University of Nebraska before making a detour to Harvard Law School. He took the Ph.D. in German Languages and Literatures at Princeton University in 1990, then spent a dozen years as an academic, holding successive appointments as Assistant Professor of German at the University of Illinois, Reader in Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, and Associate Professor of Medieval Studies at Fordham University. His numerous scholarly publications include two books on the Latin animal literature of the later Middle Ages. Among Rick's recent books are second editions of his *ABA Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey* and *ABA Field Guide to Birds of Arizona*; his *Peterson Reference Guide to American Sparrows* was published in 2019. He is also the co-

author with Sanford Sorkin of *Watching Birds in Montclair* and *Watching Birds in the New Jersey Meadowlands*. Especially interested in the history and culture of birding, he is hard at work on a study of hummingbird collecting in France from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In his spare time, he teaches Latin courses online for the Paideia Institute. Rick lives with his family, Alison Beringer and Avril Huang, and their black lab, Quetzal, in northern New Jersey, where he offers private birding tours to the marshes, woodlands, and ocean beaches.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$3,925** per person in double occupancy from Omaha. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 8, 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 Omaha and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. The fee for the Niobrara River extension is **\$2,250** per person in double occupancy from Omaha.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$515**. The single supplement for the Niobrara River extension is **\$360**. 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.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (October 18, 2024) prior to the tour departure date.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

## **CANCELLATION & REFUNDS**

### **Cancellation by Participant:**

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged



unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

<p><u>If participant cancels:</u>          180 days or more before departure date          179 to 151 days before departure date            150 days or less before departure date</p>	<p><u>Participant's refund will be:</u>          Participant's deposit minus \$250*          No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded          No refund available</p>
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\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

**Cancellation by VENT**

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A "**Force Majeure**" event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**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.**

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** It is difficult or impossible to predict fuel costs over the long term. Our prices are based on the rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend their **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services** from your point of injury or illness to your **hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary

medical expense coverage, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, **waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion**, and a “**Cancel for Any Reason**” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: <https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird>; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip cost in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

### **Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

Concerns about COVID-19 may present uncertainty for those holding travel insurance policies or who are considering future travel and purchasing such insurance. Redpoint features a **Coronavirus FAQ page** on its website that addresses questions and concerns regarding its travel insurance and the impact of COVID-19. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of topics such as policy coverage and limitations, policy modifications, cancellation, refunds, and more.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link:

[https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid\\_19\\_faq/](https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/)

Additionally, some countries maintain COVID-19 entry requirements, including mandates to purchase travel insurance covering medical expenses due to COVID-19 illness and in case of quarantine. Ripcord’s comprehensive travel insurance plans are designed to satisfy the various country-specific travel insurance entry requirements. Those who purchase a Ripcord policy will receive a “letter of confirmation” that affirms that the policy satisfies such requirements.

**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. Per-person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.\* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

\*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler’s consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

**BAGGAGE:** Please limit your baggage to one piece of luggage and one smaller carry-on or day pack. Hard suitcases are not recommended; softer bags and bags with wheels are preferred. Pack so that you can lift your bag in and out of the vehicle. As a precaution, pack your binoculars, other valuables, a change of warm clothing, toiletry items, medications, and travel documents in your carry-on bag.



**CLOTHING:** We will hope for a warm early spring, but participants should plan on dressing for winter weather, with a warm coat, insulated boots (if not snow, there will be mud), hat, gloves, and thermal underwear. A sweater or two and a raincoat or rain jacket are also recommended. Some participants place chemical hand warmers in their gloves and boots the night before our visit to the grouse blinds, and hotel hair dryers were created for nothing if not to warm woolen socks. Informal dress is the rule throughout the tour.

**LAUNDRY:** Coin-operated washing machines and dryers are available in our hotels, but it is a far better idea to simply bring enough clothing to see you through the tour.

**FOOTWEAR:** Bring a broken-in pair of insulated hiking boots or heavy trail shoes, ideally waterproof, for our time afield; snow or mud can be encountered anywhere on this trip. The floor of the grouse blinds can be cold in the morning; insulated footwear and warm socks are highly recommended. Normal walking shoes or tennis shoes are fine for evenings.

**EQUIPMENT:** We recommend a pair of binoculars in good condition and a camera for capturing memorable moments. Feel free to bring a spotting scope, though the leaders will also have theirs. Sunglasses, sunscreen, and lip balm are highly recommended as protection against sun and, especially, wind. Please be sure to bring your favorite water bottle for refilling in the hotel; temperatures permitting, we will also have bottled water available in the van, and it is easy to stop almost anywhere along the way for other drinks and snacks. A belt pack or day pack will be handy for books, sunscreen, extra clothing layers, field guides, etc. We recommend National Geographic's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* or *The Sibley Guide to Birds*; if for some reason you decide to bring another guide, please make it an addition and not an alternative to either of our recommended titles.

**CLIMATE AND WEATHER:** March weather varies wildly on the Great Plains. In a "typical" season, highs on the central Platte River will be in the 50s and lows in the low 30s F; temperatures are often a few degrees higher in the Omaha area and a few degrees lower in the western part of the state. It is not unusual on this tour to experience a temperature range of over 60° in the course of the week. We can expect wind most of the time, ranging from a light (but often still chilly) breeze to strong winds. Precipitation is possible at any time. On average, rain is more likely in eastern Nebraska and snow in the west, but any combination is possible—as is a solid week of warm, bright, clear days. Whatever the weather, our mornings spent sitting still in the grouse blinds are likely to feel cold. The weather's variability and the possibility of rapid changes make dressing in layers essential.

**CONDITIONS:** We will be staying in four hotels of good standard quality. Our birding activities will include easy walks along level roadsides and on wide trails; many of our destinations can also be birded from the vehicle should the weather turn cold or rainy. Though the physical demands posed by this tour are modest, and there will be occasional opportunities to sit out a particular walk, you will benefit most from our birding if you are able to walk a mile at a normally slow birding pace.

Thanks to daylight saving time and our position near the western edge of the time zone, there are no early starts on this tour apart from our mornings watching grouse, when we may have to leave the hotel as early as 6:00. Most of our days will start with breakfast in our hotel, followed by a full morning in the field before stopping for lunch, generally in a fast-food restaurant. We will usually visit new areas in the afternoon, then have a break before dinner. On our first evening, weather permitting, we may venture out to look for dancing American Woodcock, returning to our hotel around 8:45 p.m.; our evenings with the cranes will end at about that same time. On our visit to the grouse, we generally sit in the blind for about two hours, then return for a good hot breakfast before continuing with the rest of the day's birding plans.

**BLIND ETIQUETTE:** We view the booming of the Greater Prairie-Chickens from a blind converted from a stock trailer, with openings large enough to easily accommodate binoculars and cameras; spotting scopes are inconvenient here and unnecessary, as the birds are usually very close. We generally leave our hotel around 6:15 a.m. and are in the blind before 7:00 a.m. We extinguish the overhead lights inside as soon as we are all settled in

our seats, which are cushioned; the blind is unheated, but chemical hand warmers and blankets are provided for additional warmth. It is possible to stand up and stretch quietly in the blind, and comment and conversation are acceptable at low volume. We stay in the blind until the birds leave the booming grounds to feed, usually about two hours later.

There are no opportunities to use the restroom until we leave the blind, a circumstance that should be kept in mind if you drink coffee in the early morning. Snacks and drinks from our supply can be consumed in the blind, but please avoid crinkling wrappers or clanking thermos cups.

Photographic opportunities here are often exceptional. Tripods are strongly discouraged, as they are awkward and an obstruction in the blind. Flash photography is not permitted at any time; the best shots are in any event obtained after the sun has risen. Please be sure to silence any shutter snaps, focusing beeps, or other camera sounds, which are a distraction and an annoyance to the birds and birders alike.

Cell phones must be silenced before entering the blind. Please do not use the light on your phone or a flashlight of any kind; our local guide will have a light should it be needed for some reason.

The Sharp-tailed Grouse blind in Niobrara is similar and governed by similar practices, but it is smaller, requiring the splitting of the group into two.

**TIME:** The eastern two thirds of Nebraska is in the Central Time Zone. Daylight Saving Time this year begins on Sunday, March 9, 2025, a week before our tour begins.

**MONEY MATTERS:** Your trip to Nebraska includes most necessary expenses. You will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the program, such as alcoholic beverages, taxi rides, gifts, laundry, gratuities, and personal items. It is best to carry cash in small denominations, as many places we visit may be unable to provide change for large bills.

**HEALTH:** VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, 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.

**COVID-19:** We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying “Up to Date” with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19.

**Insect Repellents** – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions,

time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.

- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

### ***Field Guides***

Sibley, D. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. 2nd ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. Either of the smaller regional volumes published in 2016 is also usable in Nebraska, though those books gain a slight advantage in portability only at the considerable expense of the ingenious and informative layout of the large, single-volume edition.

Alderfer, J., and J. Dunn, eds. *National Geographic Complete Birds of North America*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2021. This is an expanded version of the seventh and latest edition of the authoritative *National Geographic Guide*. The eighth edition of the *Guide*, by Ted Floyd, is scheduled to appear in 2025, and may be available by the time of our tour; until then, it makes much better sense to purchase the expanded *National Geographic Complete* than the imminently outdated seventh edition of the *Guide*.

### ***Birds***

Farrar, J. *Birding Nebraska*. Lincoln, NE: Nebraskaland, 2004.

Forsberg, M. *On Ancient Wings: The Sandhill Cranes of North America*. Lincoln, NE: Michael Forsberg Photography, 2004.

Hoch, G. *Booming from the Mists of Nowhere: The Story of the Greater Prairie-Chicken*. Iowa City, IA: University Iowa Press, 2015.



Johnsgard, P. *Sandhill and Whooping Cranes: Ancient Voices Over America's Wetlands*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2011.

Sharpe, R., et al. *Birds of Nebraska: Their Distribution and Temporal Occurrence*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

Silcock, W. R., and J. G. Jorgensen. *Birds of Nebraska — Online*. [www.birds.outdoornebraska.gov](http://www.birds.outdoornebraska.gov). Lincoln, NE: Game and Parks, 2018 ff., with regular updates.

Vance, J., and N. Paothong. *Save the Last Dance: A Story of North American Grassland Grouse*. Jefferson City, MO: Paothong Photography, 2012.

### **Others**

Janovy, J. *Keith County Journal*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1979.

Johnsgard, P. *The Platte: Channels in Time*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

Johnsgard, P. *The Nature of Nebraska*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, 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 tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, “**VENT**”) act only as agents for the participant 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 participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on May 28, 2024, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "***Airline***") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

PR:20250317  
4/15/2024 – RW  
5/28/2024 – SG  
10/17/2024-PN/SB