



NEBRASKA

The Pine Ridge, Wildcats, and Sandhills

June 11-21, 2026

There's not a birder alive who has not seen or does not dream of seeing the greatest wildlife spectacle on the continent--the March gathering of the cranes on the central Platte River. Far fewer of us have any idea, though, of the ornitho-riches waiting just to the west in the extraordinarily varied landscapes of the Nebraska Panhandle.

Our tour begins on the Nebraska Pine Ridge, a hundred-mile-long escarpment cutting through the state's northwest corner from the Wyoming border to the South Dakota line. Steep, ponderosa pine-topped cliffs and monumental buttes rise from the mixed-grass prairie, and lush riparian woodlands line pristine streams. The abundant wildlife here is as different as can be from stereotypical notions of the midwestern landscape. Elk graze the vast grasslands, while bighorn sheep scramble up and down even the sheerest slopes. The nesting birds include Lazuli Buntings, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Western Tanagers, and Violet-green Swallows. Lewis's Woodpeckers and Pinyon Jays are usually less common, but our itinerary takes us to all the best sites for those and many other "montane" species that maintain an outpost here on the Great Plains.



Lazuli Bunting. Photo Rick Wright

South of the Pine Ridge, shortgrass prairie stretches for what seems forever, home to Horned Larks, Lark Sparrows, Lark Buntings, and Western Meadowlarks. Swainson's and Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles nest on rocky outcrops, and Prairie Falcons wander down from the Pine Ridge canyons to hunt. Burrowing Owls, Thick-billed (formerly McCown's) and Chestnut-collared

Longspurs, Brewer’s Sparrows, and even the occasional Sage Thrasher enliven what to human eyes seem the bleakest, barest landscapes, sharing the range with pronghorn, American badgers, and coyotes.

At Agate Springs, the Niobrara River crosses the plains; its cattail beds and willow thickets offer nesting sites to Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Common Yellowthroats, and Soras. The hills above the river are home to Rock Wrens, Say’s Phoebes, and Horned Lizards—and they conceal the graves of untold numbers of bear-dogs, rhinoceroses, camels, and other Miocene mammals, making Agate one of the most famous fossil beds in the world.

The approach to the North Platte River brings us back to a tamer, more modern world, and to Scottsbluff, with almost 25,000 residents; the largest city in the Panhandle. Even here, though, spectacular wild habitats rise from the river valley. The Wildcat Hills extend from the Platte to Pumpkin Creek, a high, forested tableland carved by water and wind into fantastic buttes and canyons. White-throated Swifts, Red Crossbills, and Lesser Goldfinches are among the common summer resident birds. True to its name, this area probably hosts the highest densities of bobcats and mountain lions anywhere in the state.



Ferruginous Hawk. Photo Rick Wright

From our hotel in Scottsbluff, we will visit some of the most famous landmarks on the Oregon Trail: Courthouse and Jail Rocks, Chimney Rock, and enormous Scotts Bluff itself. Scottsbluff, the city, is spelled as a single word; the county and the national monument as two words. White-throated Swifts, Golden Eagles, Great Horned Owls, and Rock Wrens are among the species that live on the cliffs and ledges.

Our departure from Scottsbluff will take us first south and slightly west, to an area in the southernmost Panhandle known for several species that occur only rarely or not at all in the rest

of the state. The often-elusive Mountain Plover will be high on our list of desiderata. In a typical year, more than 100 pairs nest here, and we will rely on local informants in the search for this delightful dryland shorebird. Cassin's Sparrows and Sage Thrashers are also high on the list; present some years and absent the next.

From the dry prairies of the southwest, we will move east 125 miles to our final base, the Wild West city of Ogallala, gateway to the Nebraska Sandhills. Comprising 19,000 square miles of dunes, the Sandhills was designated a National Natural Landmark half a century ago in recognition of its unique topography and plant and animal life. The conscientious stewardship of generations of ranchers and the nature of the land itself have preserved the most extensive tract of natural habitat to survive anywhere in the American Midwest—and the largest temperate grassland in the world.

Long-billed Curlews, Upland Sandpipers, Great Prairie Chickens, Sharp-tailed Grouse, and Short-eared Owls are among the species most closely bound to the wide-open prairies here. In low areas between the highest hills, the Ogallala Aquifer emerges to create more than a million acres of wetlands; fresh and alkaline. Trumpeter Swans, Redheads, and Ruddy Ducks all breed on the great Sandhills marshes. American Bitterns, Western and Eared Grebes, American White Pelicans, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds are also present. A special Sandhills treat is the abundance of breeding shorebirds. The most common include the Wilson's Phalarope and American Avocet, both wonderful photographic subjects in their colorful summer plumage. Black-necked Stilts, Piping Plovers, Western Willets, and Wilson's Snipe are also expected, while Marbled Godwits and Snowy Plovers are occasional breeders.



Sage Thrasher. Photo Rick Wright

This new tour is a chance to sample the tremendous diversity of an under-birded and underappreciated part of the world. New habitats, new birds, and new experiences will leave you wanting to return again and again to explore the forests, prairies, and rich wetlands of the Nebraska Panhandle.



Boot Hill, Ogallala. Photo Rick Wright

June 11, Day 1: Arrival

Participants should arrive today at Chadron's Western Nebraska Regional Airport (airport code CDR). We will meet in the lobby of our hotel at 6:30 to go to dinner together, a first chance to get to know each other and talk about the days to come.

NIGHT: Best Western West Hills Inn, Chadron, Nebraska

June 12, Day 2: The Western Pine Ridge

We will have breakfast in our hotel, then strike out for the western Pine Ridge. An hour's drive takes us to Gilbert Baker Wildlife Management Area, more than 2,500 acres of pine forest, deciduous woods, and grassland. Gilbert Baker presents a fascinating mix of eastern and western specialties, with Say's and Eastern Phoebes, Great Crested and Western Flycatchers, Lazuli and Indigo Buntings, and Black-headed and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks all among the many possibilities here along Monroe Creek.

We will have lunch in Harrison or Crawford, then spend the afternoon exploring some of the best birding spots at historic Fort Robinson, now a popular state park. The banks of the White River can be good for Northern Flickers (red-shafted, yellow-shafted, and "orange-shafted"), Warbling Vireos, Yellow Warblers, and American Redstarts, while Upland Sandpipers, Western Meadowlarks, and Vesper Sparrows nest on the drier ridgetops. Smiley Canyon Road leads us high into the Cheyenne Buttes, the heartbreakingly beautiful site of one of the most tragic events of

the Indian Wars. Today, American bison line the road up the canyon, and the skeletons of ponderosa pines left standing by the last wildfire are good places to look for Lewis's Woodpeckers, Pinyon Jays, and Black-billed Magpies.

Our return to Chadron should leave us time for a short break before dinner in town.

NIGHT: Best Western West Hills Inn, Chadron, Nebraska



Photo Rick Wright

June 13, Day 3: The Pine Ridge and Little Badlands

Breakfast this morning will be followed by an exploration of one of the loveliest and wildest of Pine Ridge localities, West Ash Canyon. Mountain Bluebirds, Western Tanagers, and Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warblers are just the most colorful of the many songbirds that haunt the riparian woodland here, while Vesper Sparrows and Sharp-tailed Grouse inhabit the open grasslands. West Ash is famous for producing rarities, from Gray Flycatchers to American Three-toed Woodpeckers, and we will be alert to the possibilities as we bird this tranquil site.

After lunch, we will drive north to the otherworldly landscapes of the Little Badlands. Toadstool Geologic Park, on the Oglala National Grassland just south of the Dakota border, preserves a large concentration of bizarrely shaped erosional remnants, cut from the greasy clay and rugged sandstone beginning some 38 million years ago. We will take a short stroll, conditions permitting,

and take a look at a reconstructed soddy before continuing three miles north to the Hudson-Meng Education Center, where paleological and archaeological investigation has been conducted for nearly sixty years. Hundreds of individuals of an early bison species died here, and the presence of Paleo-Indian projectile points and tools raises fascinating questions about the connection between these ancient bison and early hunters on the Plains. Note that the Education Center's hours are irregular, and that it is sometimes closed for long periods. It is an hour's drive back to Chadron, where we will have dinner.

NIGHT: Best Western West Hills Inn, Chadron, Nebraska



Sharp-tailed Grouse. Photo Rick Wright

June 14, Day 4: The Eastern Pine Ridge

After the past full days of excursions, we will take it somewhat easier this morning, having breakfast in town before driving just down the road to Chadron State Park. Among our likely finds in this gem-like tract of pine forest and buttes are Eastern Bluebirds, Spotted Towhees, and Yellow-breasted Chats. Historically, the burned areas in the park's highest reaches have been good for nesting Lewis's Woodpeckers, but the trees appear to have reached an age where they are no

longer attractive to that species; instead, Hairy and Red-headed Woodpeckers are common, and both Eastern and Mountain Bluebirds nest in holes drilled by those birds. Immediately adjacent to the park is Chadron Creek Wildlife Management Area, a relatively new and still little-visited addition to Nebraska's state conservation lands.



Photo Rick Wright

We will have lunch in Chadron, then plan on a short afternoon break. Those who wish to visit the Museum of the Fur Trade, with its fine exhibits detailing the early history of European settlement in the Midwest and Great Plains, may do so. It is also possible to stroll through town or simply rest one's eyes for a while.

After dinner in Chadron, we will make an optional evening return to Chadron State Park. As dusk falls, the dirt roads in the park attract Common Poorwills, which can sometimes easily be seen perching on the ground or hunting large insects above the road. Even if we do not have good views, the sound of singing poorwills as the sky darkens behind the buttes is unforgettable.

NIGHT: Best Western West Hills Inn, Chadron, Nebraska

June 15, Day 5: The Western Pine Ridge and High Plains

We will have breakfast and check out of our hotel early this morning, heading west to Sowbelly Canyon. Approaching from the east, we pass dramatic buttes that are home to bighorn sheep. Depending on recent precipitation, we may also be lucky enough to run across a newly exposed daemoneelix or devil's corkscrew. Once thought to be fossil sponges or the taproots of ancient

trees, these bizarre structures are now believed to be casts of the burrows dug by enormous terrestrial beavers some 20 million years ago.



Photo Rick Wright

Almost any bird known from Nebraska is possible in Sowbelly Canyon. Golden Eagles nest high on the buttes, and Plumbeous Vireos and Western Flycatchers sing along Sowbelly Creek. For some time, a pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers has nested at the foot of the canyon, and Ovenbirds are often heard singing from the riparian vegetation. If, as happens in some years, Clark's Nutcrackers are summering on the Pine Ridge, this is the place to find them.

After an early lunch, we will make our way south to Agate Fossil Beds where representative specimens from the great mammal quarries are usually on display. The visitor center also has good exhibits on the settlement history of the land, from the early Lakota to the first ranchers.

If time and road conditions allow, we will work west from Agate to the Wyoming border, where Henry Road leads south through the highest of High Plains. Horned Larks and Lark Buntings are virtually impossible to miss on this long, meandering route. We will also be on the lookout for such local specialties as the Ferruginous Hawk, Burrowing Owl, Chestnut-



Burrowing Owl. Photo Rick Wright

collared and Thick-billed Longspurs, and Brewer's Sparrow. This is bar none the very best place in Nebraska to look for the sparrow and the longspurs, and, should we miss any of those three today, we will make a point of returning to the road later on our tour.

We should arrive in Scottsbluff in time for dinner, then check in to our hotel to look forward to another day afield.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Scottsbluff, Nebraska

June 16, Day 6: The Wildcat Hills

We will have breakfast in Scottsbluff, then, depending on yesterday's results, either drive north on Henry Road or start the day at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center. In addition to astounding views of the Wildcats and the North Platte River far below, WHNC maintains feeders all year round. In the summer, American and Lesser Goldfinches, Chipping Sparrows, Spotted Towhees, and Red Crossbills tend to be the most abundant visitors, but there is no discounting the possibility of a surprise at this fine locality. A curiosity is the recent establishment of a small population of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers here.



Red Crossbill. Photo Rick Wright

After lunch in Gering, we will return to the Wildcats to explore Carter and Cedar Canyons. Both have been damaged by recent wildfires, but the surrounding buttes and bluffs are still home to a fine variety of birds, from Mountain Bluebirds to Grasshopper Sparrows. Rock Wrens can be abundant among the yuccas; raptors may include a Golden Eagle, Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks, or a Burrowing Owl. If there is time, we may also visit the top of Scotts Bluff where White-throated Swifts and Prairie Falcons can be seen dashing in front of the imposing cliffs.

We'll return to Scottsbluff for dinner, then, for those who wish, make the half-hour drive to watch the sun set at Chimney Rock; one of the landmarks so eagerly anticipated by early travelers westbound on the Oregon Trail.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Scottsbluff, Nebraska



Photo Rick Wright

June 17, Day 7: The Shortgrass

Checking out of our hotel after breakfast, we will head south to the Panhandle's remote southwest corner where the elevation exceeds that of Denver. Here we will search overgrazed pastures and burned prairie for the elegant and uncommon Mountain Plover. Once virtually extirpated from the state, this species now breeds in good numbers between Kimball and the

Colorado border. We will rely on local information in our search for these often elusive prairie shorebirds; failing that, we will resort to the traditional method of driving section road after section road. Along the way, we can hope to run across Cassin's Sparrows or even a Sage Thrasher, two species that move onto the northern Plains in some years when their "normal" more southwesterly range is dry.

We will have lunch in the area, then drive an hour and a half east to Ogallala, on the southern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills. As time allows, after checking in to our hotel, we may visit Boot Hill, a small cemetery that is also the best place in town to look for Mississippi Kites, which are uncommon breeders anywhere in the state. Dinner will be in Ogallala.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Ogallala, Nebraska



Cassin's Sparrow. Photo Rick Wright

June 18, Day 8: Lake Ogallala and the Southern Sandhills

Fifteen minutes north of town, Lake Ogallala pools beneath mighty Kingsley Dam. This will be our first real taste of the Nebraska Sandhills, a true American wilderness. Along the way, we may

encounter Barn or Burrowing Owls and Upland Sandpipers. The lake itself may welcome us with Eared, Western, or perhaps Clark's Grebes. The cottonwoods and red cedars of the state recreation area at the top of the lake offer nesting sites to Western and Eastern Kingbirds, and Lark and Grasshopper Sparrows sing in the adjacent grasslands. In years when Dickcissels extend their range this far west, they can be quite common here; in other years, Cassin's Sparrows breed in the area, their ethereal silvery songs floating across the prairie.

In the world of ornithology, Lake Ogallala and its much larger sibling above the dam, Lake McConaughy, are famous for the important years-long studies of the Cliff Swallow conducted by Charles Brown and the late Mary Bomberger beginning in 1982. Every summer, their team worked hard to unravel the social life and behavior of these enchanting birds which breed here in unbelievable numbers on cliff faces and manmade structures. One of the most intriguing discoveries was the rapid evolution of shorter wings in the swallows, apparently resulting from selective pressure in the form of speeding automobiles: longer wings make it more difficult for the birds to rise vertically from the road, leaving them more susceptible to collisions with cars.

We'll likely return to Ogallala for lunch, then drive west to Oshkosh, whose Main Street leads straight north into one of the wildest sectors of the Sandhills. Twenty-eight miles from town, the 46,000 acres of Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, "a sea of grass in the sea of grass," are a Shangri-La of American birding, a remote complex of prairies and wetlands hosting fabulous numbers of breeding birds.



Photo Rick Wright

The first ten miles or so of the road are usually passable, but if there has been heavy rain, we cannot count on making it all the way to the refuge. Even should that be the case, though, we can still expect some very enjoyable birding before we're forced to turn back. Cinnamon Teal, Long-billed Curlews, Upland Sandpipers, Marbled Godwits, American Bitterns, White-faced Ibis, and Bobolinks are among the many birds that summer on the vast grasslands and marshes. In some years, the northbound migration of shorebirds is still going on here in late May and early June, and there is always the chance of coming across a tardy Baird's or White-rumped Sandpiper or a Black-bellied Plover. Horned Larks, Lark Sparrows, Lark Buntings, and Western Meadowlarks we have with us always.

Depending on the time, we will have dinner either in Ogallala or in Oshkosh, which is an hour's drive from our hotel.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Ogallala, Nebraska

June 19, Day 9: Clear Creek and Lake McConaughy

After an early breakfast, we'll make the easy drive to the stunning and pristine marshes along Clear Creek, one of the best-kept secrets in midwestern birding. The wetlands here support nesting Bobolinks and Wilson's Snipe; this is also one of the very few sites in western Nebraska where Least Bitterns are suspected of breeding, but even here, of course, that delightful little heron is shy and hard to see. On the surrounding grasslands, everything from Great Horned Owls and Orchard Orioles to Grasshopper Sparrows and Rock Wrens are possible.



Long-billed Curlew. Photo Sanford M. Sorkin

From Clear Creek, we'll make our way slowly east along the north shore of Lake McConaughy, the largest reservoir in Nebraska. The fifty-five-square miles of open water here attract summer tourists from throughout the central US—and the area is equally irresistible to migrant and breeding birds. McConaughy has the greatest avian diversity in the entire state, with more than 360 species recorded over the past 40 years. Among the great rarities tallied here are the Yellow-billed Loon, Glaucous-winged Gull, Cave Swallow, and Black-throated Sparrow, and we'll do our best to add to that distinguished list.

Rarities aside, we'll spend the rest of the day exploring the hills, shorelines, and scruffy woodlands surrounding the lake. Of particular interest are the beach-nesting birds. Small numbers of Least Terns nest here most years, and, in many summers, the Piping Plover colonies on the lakeshore may represent the largest concentration anywhere in this scarce shorebird's summer range. Snowy Plovers, too, which are more common a couple of hundred miles to the south, are occasionally present in small numbers.

Lunch today will be a simple picnic, or we may stop in one of the small restaurants serving boaters, fishermen, and campers. Dinner will be in Ogallala, just a short drive from the lake.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Ogallala, Nebraska



Photo Rick Wright

June 20, Day 10: The Sandhills and Prairie Marshes

Our last full day of birding together will be spent in the very heart of the Sandhills, birding some of the finest marshes on the Great Plains. For travelers taking the scenic route to Yellowstone National Park, the stretch of Nebraska Highway Two from Hyannis to Antioch is just another step on the long journey. For birders, these 45 miles can be among the most exciting summertime birding south of Alaska. The roadside marshes and lakes are full of busy nesting birds, with over summering American White Pelicans a common sight. In recent years, colonies of White-faced Ibis have hosted a Glossy Ibis or two as that species persists in its quest for world domination.



Piping Plover. Photo Rick Wright

Beem Lake and the vast wetland of Avocet Wildlife Management Area are breeding sites for an impressive variety of waterfowl, including Trumpeter Swans, Giant Canada Geese (native here!), Canvasbacks, and Ruddy Ducks. Wood Duck boxes installed at the turn of this century have resulted in local nesting records for both that species and the uncommon Hooded Merganser. American Avocets and Western Willets join twirling Wilson's Phalaropes in the shallows.

The most strongly alkaline waters in the Sandhills are found on the flats around Antioch, once a thriving settlement surrounded by potash mines and now a virtual ghost town. This is the most reliable spot in Nebraska to find Black-necked Stilts. About twenty miles east is the northern boundary of Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, straight south of the aptly named town of Lakeside. Cinnamon Teal, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and plenty of ibis are among the many water birds we can hope to encounter. Pronghorn and Mule Deer can be especially common in this area, and there is always a chance at an American Badger, Bobcat, or even a Swift Fox out on the extensive grasslands.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Ogallala, Nebraska



Bighorn Sheep. Photo Rick Wright

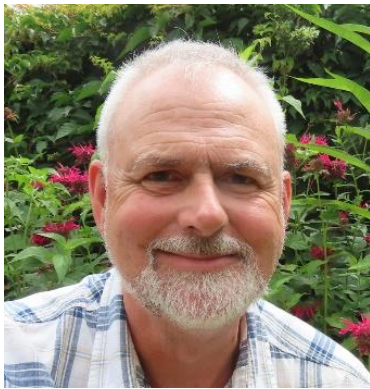
June 21, Day 11: Departure for Home

We will leave Ogallala this morning after breakfast, with a planned arrival at North Platte's Lee Bird Field (airport code LBF) around 8:00 am. At the time of writing, the morning flight for Denver departs North Platte at 10:25 Central Daylight Time.

Essential Tour Information

TOUR SIZE: This tour is limited to 12 tour participants.

TOUR LEADER(s): This tour is led by **Rick Wright** and **Raymond VanBuskirk**.



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 Germanic 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. Rick's numerous scholarly publications include two books on the Latin animal literature of the later Middle Ages. Among his recent books are second editions of the ABA Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey and of the ABA Field Guide to Birds of Arizona. His Peterson Reference Guide to American Sparrows is a standard work on that family. He is also the co-author with Sanford Sorkin of *Watching Birds in Montclair* and *Watching Birds in the New Jersey Meadowlands*. Rick lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Alison Beringer, and their jet-black lab, Quetzal.



Raymond L. VanBuskirk is an expert birder who has been guiding tours for over a decade. Raymond has led tours throughout the Western Hemisphere from Alaska to Chile and most parts in between. He has guided in almost every country in Central America, across the Caribbean, and down both sides of the Andes in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile. Raymond’s experience is not limited to the New World—he has traveled widely across the globe, has spent a great deal of time in the Pacific studying pelagics, and has led tours in Asia and Africa.

Raymond has had a longtime commitment to ornithology. In addition to guiding, he has conducted research with USFWS in the Arctic Ocean, North Pacific, and New Mexico. He has held leadership roles in the Central New Mexico Bird Alliance and Western Field Ornithologists. Raymond also helped guide the next generation of birders by being a regular instructor at the ABA’s youth birding camps and at the Hog Island Audubon camps in Hog Island, Maine.

Raymond is also committed to including everyone in birding, and organizes and leads annual conferences for QBNA, an informal club for LGBTQIA+ birders. When not leading tours or conducting research, Raymond can be found at his home in St. Louis, Missouri with his partner, Marissa; stepdaughter Savannah; and their dog and two large snakes.

TOUR COSTS & PAYMENT INFORMATION

TOUR FEE: \$4,450 per person in double occupancy from Chadron, Nebraska, to North Platte, Nebraska. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to Breakfast on Day 11, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, transfers between the group hotel and airport upon arrival and departure, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities to local guides and service providers, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home Chadron, Nebraska, and return from North Platte, Nebraska, airport departure taxes, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT: The single supplement for this tour is **\$750**. 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: You may register for this tour through the VENT [website](#) or by calling our office (512-328-5221). The deposit for the main tour is **\$500** per person. We accept MasterCard and Visa.

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 120 days (February 11, 2026) prior to the tour departure date.

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 date. We can easily make hotel arrangements, often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

FUEL SURCHARGES: Our prices are based on fuel prices at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TIPPING: An important part of the value of a VENT tour is knowing that tips for local service providers at our destinations—restaurant staff, hotel staff, drivers, local guides, and various other support staff—are included in your tour fee. If you would like to offer any of your local guides an additional tip, \$5 to \$10 a day is a common amount.

Tips for your VENT tour leader(s) are **not** included, but it is customary to tip one or both if you feel that you have received exceptional service. To assist in your planning, we recommend tipping your VENT tour leader(s) \$15 to \$20 per day, or the equivalent of approximately 2–4% of the tour fee.

If you plan to give tips by cash, they should be given directly to your tour leader at the end of the tour and **not** sent to the VENT office. Some of our tour leaders use mobile payment applications such as Venmo, PayPal, and Wise. If you would like to use this method, please ask your tour leaders directly whether they can accept tips through such an application.

We emphasize that tipping is optional and that these amounts are only recommendations. The amount you decide to tip is based entirely on your experience and at your discretion.

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS

CANCELLATION BY PARTICIPANT:

- **More than 120 days prior to the tour start date:** A refund of all monies paid will be issued, less 50% of the deposit (including initial and second deposit)
- **120 days or fewer prior to the tour start date:** No refund will be provided.
- **Optional add-ons:** Some tours offer optional add-ons that are designated as non-refundable. Any such add-ons are clearly identified as non-refundable at the time of booking. By selecting and purchasing an optional add-on, the participant acknowledges and accepts its non-refundable status. Fees paid for non-refundable add-ons are not refundable under any circumstances, regardless of when the tour is cancelled.

This cancellation policy applies to all participants and all tours (Pre-Tours and Extensions are considered self-contained tours separate from the main tour). Because unexpected events can occur, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance.

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.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE/PROTECTION REQUIREMENT: This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may not be available. **For this reason, travel insurance/travel protection which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour.** This coverage is included in the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** program. Alternatively, comparable service can be obtained through **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist** plan. If you choose not to purchase insurance/travel protection through Ripcord or Medjet, you are required to obtain it through another provider. Please refer to the TRAVEL INSURANCE/TRAVEL PROTECTION section for additional information.

SUGGESTED OPTIONS: 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 its comprehensive Ripcord plan, which includes a medical evacuation benefit. With this in mind, it is important to note that medical evacuation is not offered by Redpoint as a stand-alone policy or benefit. For travelers not interested in comprehensive travel insurance, VENT recommends **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist®** plan. Medjet is not an insurance company, and Medjet Assist is not an insurance product; rather, Medjet is a membership-based air-medical transport company specializing in moving hospitalized travelers from an admitting hospital to

a medical facility of choice. Medjet does not provide medical evacuation service from the point of injury or illness; yet, the MedjetAssist plan offers robust enough travel protection to satisfy the medical evacuation insurance requirement in place for many VENT tours.

About Redpoint Travel's Ripcord Plan

Ripcord is a completely integrated travel insurance program with single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims. Critical benefits include comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, 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: [Ripcord Travel Insurance](#); or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help > Preparation and Insurance > 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, second deposit, 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 costs in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and

conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a [Coronavirus FAQ page](#) on its website that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics.

About Medjet's MedjetAssist Plan

MedjetAssist is a membership program that functions like AAA for motorists. The company's primary service is air medical transport. Critical benefits of MedjetAssist include a staff on call and ready to provide assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; all-expenses-paid air medical transport in the United States and internationally to medical facility of choice, regardless of medical necessity; repatriation of remains; and no exclusions for pre-existing conditions.

For travelers under 75, MedjetAssist may be purchased as Short-Term Memberships of 8, 15, 21, and 30 days, or Regular Annual Memberships from 1 to 5 years. For travelers 75–84, Medjet offers a Diamond Membership that is the same program but with a few additional conditions.

For a price quote or to purchase MedjetAssist, please visit: [Medjet.com/VentBird](https://www.Medjet.com/VentBird) or call 1-800-527-7478. Pricing is based on type and term of membership.

GETTING THERE & REQUIRED TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

AIR TRAVEL: 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.

Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm

that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.

*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 baggage to one piece of luggage and one carry-on. The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your pre-departure materials and/or airline to find out specific weight restrictions.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security, we recommend that you check the website of [the Transportation Security Administration \(TSA\)](#) for information pertaining to permissible carry-on items.

WHAT TO BRING

CLOTHING: Informal attire is fine for the entire tour, including meals. Long pants and long-sleeved shirts of lightweight textiles are recommended for our time in the field. Shorts will likely leave you cold in the mornings, and expose your legs to sun and encounters with thorny plants. A waterproof rain jacket is essential on the odd chance that we are caught by a rapidly advancing rain; the precipitation rarely lasts long, but it is unpleasant to wear wet clothes for the rest of the day, especially given that temperatures can drop noticeably after a rain.

A light jacket, or a sweater to wear under your rain gear, will be welcome most mornings. Thin gloves or glove liners are also recommended. A wide-brimmed hat is essential. Bright days in the Panhandle are intensely sunny, and even on cloudy days, the sun's rays can inflict painful sunburn. A high-SPF sunscreen lotion is also highly recommended.

FOOTWEAR: Sturdy, waterproof hiking boots or good walking shoes are appropriate for trails and roadsides. You may wish to bring a lighter pair of shoes for evenings.

Binoculars: We strongly recommend you bring a pair of good binoculars of 8x32, 8x42, or 10x42 magnification. Please do not bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like them because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. You will find that 8x32 binoculars are compact and light enough.

Spotting Scopes: Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

DESTINATION INFORMATION & LOCAL CONDITIONS

CLIMATE AND WEATHER: Summer comes late to these high elevations, and it is likely to still be pleasantly cool for most or all of our time in the Panhandle. Daytime temperatures typically reach the mid-70s F, while nights drop to the chilly 40s or even high 30s. Rain is possible at any time, and you should be prepared with a raincoat, waterproof footwear, and perhaps a small folding umbrella. Significant storms are infrequent, but lightning and hail are possible at any time; heavy rain can alter our schedules, as some roads are impassable when wet. One of the most awesome sights in all of nature is the advance of a large thunderstorm across the prairies—viewed, of course, from a safe distance.

ELEVATION: We will be birding at elevations ranging from 3,200 to 5,000 feet. These altitudes are very unlikely to cause discomfort in most people, but if you are particularly sensitive or are coming directly from sea level, you may want to arrive in Chadron a day or two before the tour starts to acclimate.

CONDITIONS: This tour stays in three hotels of good standard quality; we have at least two nights in each, reducing the time spent packing and unpacking.

Our days will typically begin with breakfast at 6:00 or 7:00, followed by a morning's birding and lunch in the early afternoon. On most days, our afternoon activities allow us time for a short break before dinner together, which will be followed by an evening checklist session for those interested.

Western Nebraska is not known as a prime culinary destination, but the food we eat will be satisfying. Our breakfasts will be at the hotel, with possible exceptions on days when we have planned an early start. Because restaurants are widely scattered across the landscape, lunches will occasionally be in the field, consisting of sandwiches purchased that morning or the evening before and kept cool in an ice chest. Dinners will be in simple restaurants, often chain restaurants. Vegetarians will find that the selection at most restaurants is limited; vegans and others with similarly strict diets are likely to find some menus entirely unaccommodating, and should consider bringing a supply of their favorite foods with them.

There will always be snacks and water available in the vehicles. Please bring a wide-mouthed water bottle for refilling in the hotel or from the larger bottles in the vehicle.

Our birding and sightseeing activities will take place almost exclusively on level, mostly wide roads and trails, some of them paved but most not. Sandy substrates can be taxing, and gumbo paths are very slippery after a rain. At some of our destinations, benches or other structures offer a chance to pause on our walks; it is also possible to remain in the van should a particular site seem too challenging. You will never be required to exert yourself beyond your physical capacity.

In the Field: Remembering a few helpful practices will make your tour even more enjoyable.

Participants must regularly change seats in the vehicle so that everyone has an opportunity to ride at least once in the “best” places—typically the front seat. If you eat or drink in the van, please be sure to place any wrappers or other garbage in the bags provided.

On our birding walks, do not go ahead of the leader unless you are told to do so. Stay on paths and try to avoid blocking other participants’—especially shorter participants’—sight lines.

If you see or hear a bird that the leader appears to have missed, quietly point it out; sometimes he will genuinely not have noticed it, but at other times he will have decided to prioritize a different bird and plans to return by the same route. If you miss a bird, please let the leader know so that he can be sure to get you “on” the next individual of the species.

NATURAL HAZARDS: There are few natural hazards in this part of the world, almost all of them easily avoided by staying alert to your own behavior.

Poison ivy can be common in some riparian areas, but is easy to recognize and to stay out of. Prickly pear cactus is abundant in a few disturbed areas; staying on the trail is the best way to remain unprickled.

Wild mammals pose little danger in this area. Bobcats and coyotes, both of which are common, are extremely furtive. The same goes for mountain lions, which are present throughout but almost never seen; should you be so fortunate as to encounter one, do not run, but raise your hat or pack high above your head and speak loudly to the cat, which will flee. There are no bears in Nebraska (grizzly bears were extirpated almost two centuries ago).

The greatest risk is running into an American bison or a moose. Moose are very scarce and rarely seen, but it is important if you do see one to avoid coming between a cow and her calf; the best solution is to return immediately to the vehicle or some other type of shelter. Bison are common at some of our sites, and are notoriously ill-tempered all year round—especially so when they are calving in late spring. In this case, too, a rapid retreat is called for to avoid conflict with these huge and somewhat oblivious prairie monsters.

The only poisonous reptile found here is the prairie rattlesnake. These handsome snakes are probably not rare, but they are very hard to find. Even though Nebraska sees at most a handful of incidents of snakebite a year, many hospitals keep antivenin on hand. Far more convenient than a trip to the hospital is the habit of simply keeping your hands and feet out of any place you cannot see into. Staying on trails and not shuffling through brushpiles and rocks is enough to prevent any unwanted encounters.

Ticks are present throughout the area, and are especially common in grassland habitats. The most frequently employed strategy to avoid tick bites is to wear pale clothing and tuck your pants hem into your socks, making it easier to detect and destroy these tiny pests. As in most parts of the world, Nebraska's ticks can transmit disease to humans; it is worthwhile to check for ticks at the end of each day.

Chiggers, which can be a considerable annoyance at the height of summer, are generally not a problem this early in the season. Staying out of the grass and on the paths and roads is the best way to avoid them.

Mosquitoes here are largely a phenomenon of late summer, but we may meet up with a few in the early mornings. Long sleeves and long pants make it easier to defend yourself; a headnet is easy to carry and effective, but is not necessary at this season. Deerflies do not normally emerge until the end of June.

CELL PHONE SERVICE and INTERNET: Each of our hotels offers wifi connections in the rooms, but their strength can vary with the time of day, weather, and other inscrutable factors. If you find yourself getting only a frustratingly weak signal, it sometimes helps to take your device to the lobby, where service is often more reliable.

Cell phone service is available in towns and cities as a matter of course. Several of our birding destinations are quite remote, however, and there will almost certainly be a time or two when we are temporarily out of range. Please let your friends and family at home know this is a possibility, and that it will not last long.

TIME ZONE: Western Nebraska observes Mountain Time. Daylight Time is expected to come into effect on March 8, 2026. MDT is two hours behind Eastern Daylight Time and one hour ahead of Pacific Daylight Time.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH: As a standard precaution, you should always be up to date with vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases, including the routine vaccinations, which are Measles/Mumps/Rubella (MMR), Diphtheria/Pertussis/Tetanus (DPT), Varicella (chickenpox), Hepatitis A, and Hepatitis B.

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.

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 for avoiding COVID-19.

SUN EXPOSURE: The sun’s ultraviolet rays are dangerous under prolonged exposure (sometimes only a matter of minutes), even in winter and early spring. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. A severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

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.

- Herbal insect repellents contain a mixture of oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other aromatic plants. Their effectiveness varies widely depending on their precise composition.

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 it is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment must 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>

Suggested Reading & Trip Preparation

For the purchase of field guides and other natural history resources to prepare you for this tour, we recommend shopping at amazon.com, buteobooks.com, and nhbs.com; abebooks.com can help in the search of out-of-print and otherwise elusive titles.

Birds:

Floyd, T. 2025. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of the United States and Canada: West*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society. Indispensable.

Sibley, D. 2014. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. 2nd ed. New York: Knopf. Recommended.

Silcock, W., and J. Jorgensen. 2025. *Birds of Nebraska Online*. BirdsofNebraska.org. Highly recommended.

Zimmer, K. 2000. *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP. Highly recommended.

History, Natural History, and Science:

Brock, J., and K. Kaufman. 2006. *Kaufman Field Guide to Butterflies of North America*. Boston: Mariner Books.

Brown, C. 1998. *Swallow Summer*. U Nebraska P.

Dankert, N., et al. 2025. *Nebraska Lepidoptera*. Nebraskalepidoptera.com.

Farrar, J. 2011. *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains*. 2nd ed. Iowa City: U Iowa P.

Janovy, J. 1978. *Keith County Journal*. New York: St. Martin's P.

Johnsgard, P. 2005. *The Nature of Nebraska: Ecology and Biodiversity*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Books.

Jones, S. 2006. *The Last Prairie: A Sandhills Journal*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Books.

Maher, H., et al. 2003. *Roadside Geology of Nebraska*. Missoula, MT: Mountain P.

Matthews, A. 2002. *Where the Buffalo Roam*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U Chicago P.

Ried, F. 2006. *Peterson Field Guide to Mammals of North America*. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Shepard, L. 1996. *Smithsonian Guides to Natural America: The Northern Plains*. New York: Random House.

Treuer, D. 2019. *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*. New York: Riverhead Books.

TERMS, CONDITIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

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 August 2, 2025 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.

View the complete [Terms and Conditions](#) on our website.

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