

TRAVEL RSS MY YAHOO!

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Senior Traveler | Tours offer views of exotic birds

By John J. Hilferty
For The Inquirer

Not all birds of a feather flock together, but the people who seek them out often do, especially those seniors who have exhausted the experiences of finding and recording birds in their own neck of the woods.

Like big-game hunters, they roam the world, joining guided-tour groups to spot the likes of the exotic quetzal or ferruginous pygmy owl.

Some bird-tour companies that organize trips outside North America report that as many of three-fourths of their travelers are seniors, who have the time and the money. Some of the excursions are expensive, especially the smaller-group tours, but there are some that won't exhaust your savings.

Amateurs and experts can discover birding experiences by checking a Web site such as Birding.com (www.birding.com), which provides hot spots, checklists and tours and lodging. It also has information about beginning birding; identification, species and ornithology; photos; songs; equipment; birding organizations; and its top 25 bird Web sites.

There also are links to guidebooks, binoculars, scopes and cameras - even bird feeders and birdhouses.

If time or money is tight, consider short trips such as this one offered by **Wildside Tours** (www.wildsidetoursinc.com): Three days in the Dry Tortugas at the height of spring migration.

The seven tropical islands - part of Florida, 70 miles west of Key West - are home to a colony of sooty terns, an oceanic bird that rarely comes to land except to breed, along with brown noddies, frigate birds, masked boobies and brown pelicans. Others just passing through on their migratory routes are warblers, tanagers, vireos, nightjars, shorebirds and other passerines, which include that half of all bird species that have feet designed for perching, including all of the songbirds.

Wildside Tours, based in King of Prussia, lists trips on April 23-26 and April 27-30. Travel is aboard the 65-foot Tiburon, which accommodates 14 people. A Zodiac boat will be used for "wet landings" on Garden Key and Loggerhead Key. This trip starts at \$1,150, which is all-inclusive except for airfare to and from Key West.

A seven-day Wildside Tour to Belize leaving April 5 or April 12 will combine birding and snorkeling in one of the most environmentally conscious countries in the Western Hemisphere. There are many "greenways," or wildlife corridors, in the small seacoast country. Accommodations are at the Pelican Beach Resort on the Caribbean coast and the Bird's Eye View Lodge in the Crooked Tree Lagoon, in the small town of Crooked Tree Village.

Some of the bird-watching is by small boat through the mangroves. The company boasts possible sightings of the yellow-tailed oriole, mangrove vireo and rufous-browed peppershrike. Caribbean varieties of parrots, woodpeckers and jays also are in the picture, with a wildlife bonus of the endangered black howler monkey and Morelet's crocodile. The trip costs \$2,495 and is limited to 10 participants. Contact Wildside Tours at 610-564-0941 or 1-888-875-9453.

Bird Treks (www.birdtreks.com) sets a limit of 16 participants for U.S. tours and 13 for foreign tours. But as few as three to five persons can make a trip, says Robert M. Schutsky, owner of the company based in Peach Bottom, Pa.

Bird Trek vacations are not for travelers on a tight budget. A 13-day trip to Costa Rica, for instance, starts at \$4,195, without destination airfare, but birders can shorten it to seven to 10 days. One of the stops, Rancho Naturalista, boasts sightings of several species from its lodge porch.

"This is probably the easiest place in the country to see resplendent quetzal," Schutsky says. "We've found them feeding and nesting less than 100 feet from our cabins."

Feathered inhabitants of Costa Rica include the rare bare-necked umbrellabird, the king vulture, gray-headed kite, mangrove black hawk, blue-crowned manakin, bat falcon - a birder's favorite, Schutsky says - and streaked flycatcher. To book a Bird Treks tour, call 717-548-3303.

Birds of Panama is a 14-day **Ancon Expeditions of Panama** (www.anconexpeditions.com) trip with



ROBERT M. SCHUTSKY

A group of birders walks on the beach of Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula.

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start dates of Jan. 24, Feb. 24 and March 15, starting at \$2,400, not including airfare.

Resplendent quetzals and umbrellabirds will be found in the west near the Pacific, with macaws and harpy eagles in the east.

The rain forests in the center of this small country are within a 45-minute drive of Panama City and host more than 400 bird species. Panama records more than 960 species.

To book a trip with Ancon Expeditions of Panama, call 011-507-269-9415.

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