

TRIP REPORT- NEW ZEALAND TOUR

16 Jan-6 Feb 2018

Wrybill Birding Tours/NZ Land & Pelagic Birding Tours

By Ross Silcock

Day 1, Tue 16 Jan

Our group of 8 plus Sav and I departed Rose Park Hotel in Parnell, Auckland at 8 am heading for the Muriwai Gannet Colony. Australasian Gannet Chicks were near-fledging, working out their wing muscles. Good numbers of **White-fronted Terns** present as usual. From there to Orewa for drive-by Barbary Dove (!), Straka's Pond for **NZ Grebe**, Little Black Cormorant, NZ Scaup, Waiwera for **NZ Plover**, Waipu Estuary for two distant Fairy Terns, and then to Kerikeri. After dinner, we were joined by Detlef Davies who guided us on a kiwi walk to the Marsden Cross area. The walk was very successful, with 5 **North Island Brown Kiwi** seen, with at least 10 more heard- a remarkable showing. Additional endemics seen during the day, for a total of 17, were **Paradise Shelduck, NZ Scaup, Fluttering Shearwater** and **Cook's Petrel** off Orewa Beach in the strong easterly, **Pied Cormorant, South Island Pied Oystercatcher, Variable Oystercatcher, Banded Dotterel** (aka Double-banded Plover), **NZ Pigeon, Morepork (heard only), Tui, Grey Gerygone**, and **NZ Fantail**. Endemic subspecies were Fairy Tern (distant views) and Sacred Kingfisher. Ended day with total species at 58, including additional common non-native species. Overnight at Kerikeri Woodlands Motel.

Day 2, Wed 17 Jan

Today we worked our way back towards Warkworth, trying for better looks at Fairy Tern at Waipu and Mangawhai but without success. We detoured to the famous Ormiston Road Pond, and found both small grebes, adding Yellowhammer and Peafowl with minimum excitement. On the way we visited Yvonne Stewart State Park and found both NZ and Australasian Grebes again at a much easier location and spent most of the rest of the day at Tawharanui Regional Park. This has become an amazing birding site, protected by a predator fence and offering a fine selection of endemic birds of both forest and wetlands. Due the quite strong easterlies, we spent some time sea watching, but nothing new. New endemics for the trip were **Brown Teal, South Island Takahe, Kaka, NZ Bellbird, North Island Saddleback, Whitehead, and North island Robin**. We also added a few intros to bring the Trip List up to 68.

The big news today was the weather. The strong easterlies felt on Day 1 and today intensified, requiring major changes in our itinerary. Our Day 3 (tomorrow) Hauraki Gulf Pelagic has become highly doubtful, but we'll see how tomorrow looks- skipper Brett will decide of course. Our Day 4 trip to Tiritiri Matangi for an overnight also looks doubtful- we will wait and see. Overnight at Warkworth Bridge House Hotel.

Day 3, Thu 18 Jan

Today was the planned Hauraki Gulf pelagic, a highlight of our trip, but the weather denied us- Brett canceled the trip, despite waiting as long as possible. Big losses therefore were NZ Storm-Petrel, Blue-gray Noddy, possible Black-winged Petrel, and possibly Parkinson's (Black) Petrel. We still have a very slim chance for these (except the noddy) off Whitianga on Day 6.

Today it rained heavily most of the time, with occasional brief let-ups, but we made the most of a wet clothes visit to Ambury Regional Park near Mangere to check out the mitigation shell banks there as well as having a look along the Puketutu Island causeway and the pond at its west end. The tide was near full, which resulted in large numbers and a good selection of roosting birds on the shell banks. Among these were a few hundred **Wrybill**, and low thousands of SIPO, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Red Knot. Also present were a few Ruddy Turnstones, tens of NZ Plovers and Roseate Spoonbills, many White-faced Herons, and assorted gulls and terns.

At the causeway and associated pond, we found a good selection of waterfowl including a Brown Teal, good numbers of Gray Teal, a few NZ Scaup, several Australasian Shovelers, two surprising west coast **Black-billed Gulls**, and new trip birds Mute Swan and a welcome fly-by Pacific Reef-Egret, the only one of the entire trip. Overnight at Warkworth Bridge House Hotel.

Day 4, Fri 19 Jan

On our planned schedule, today we would have taken the ferry across to Tiritiri Matangi Island, but the lousy weather caused cancellation of the trip. Thus we pottered around filling the day between rain showers, returning to Tawharanui and visiting Shakespear Regional Park. At Tawharanui we did another sea watch, adding Flesh-footed and several Buller's Shearwaters as well as Parasitic Jaeger. At Shakespear we heard a Spotless Crake close by but were unable to get a glimpse of it and saw a surprising **Red-crowned Parakeet**.

During the day, Sav was very busy with the challenging task of finding last-minute accommodations for 10 people on a busy weekend near Auckland due to the Tiri ferry cancellation. Thanks to Sav's expertise and persistence, we were delighted to stay in a new Ramada Inn at Albany- even had washers and dryers in each room! Perfect for our wet and muddy group. The cooking facilities in the rooms were very good and so we cooked up the meal we had planned for Tiri- all good. Overnight Ramada Inn in Albany.

Day 5, Sat 20 Jan

The weather had eased a bit by today, allowing us to ferry over to Tiri, but only for a day trip, meaning we would be shut out on Little Spotted Kiwi. Thanks to the nice endemic forest birds found at Tawharanui, we were able to focus on a few key species at Tiri. Most important were Kokako and Stitchbird, but also nice to bag early in the trip are Rifleman (North Island subspecies) and NZ Fernbird, recently established on the island. Of course, the spectacular numbers of the various endemics on Tiri are unmatched, plus the crossing was our first chance,

given the weather, for a penguin. We did indeed see 5 Little Blue Penguins, a new family for most of the group and one of the main reasons for coming to NZ, as well as 3 Parasitic Jaegers. There were high numbers of Red-crowned Parakeet and North Island Saddlebacks, as well as the ubiquitous Tui and NZ Bellbirds. We quickly picked up **Stitchbirds** at one of the feeders, eventually conservatively counting 9 in all. Fernbird and Kokako challenged us, unexpectedly for both. We found two **Fernbirds** but didn't get clear looks. **Kokako**, our prize target, proved elusive, although we heard snatches of calls and songs and eventually got onto one feeding quietly in the canopy foliage as they often do; the group was patient and eventually all got good looks at the bird. Kokako are apparently harder to find at this time of year than in December. Happy with our day on Tiri, but needing better looks at Fernbird, we returned to the mainland and headed south to Miranda, basically back on our scheduled itinerary at long last. At Miranda, we of course had the famous Kaiua "best in the world" fish and chips along with a few welcome and tasty beers and wine. Trip total is now 82, including 32 endemics. Overnight at Miranda Holiday Park.

Day 6, Sun 21 Jan

Today is a big day, with visits to the world-famous Miranda shorebird area on the Firth of Thames as well as an afternoon pelagic out from Whitianga.

Miranda usually attracts a crowd of birders at high tide, especially on weekends, and today was no exception. With that many eyes, not much is missed. High tide was around 9.30, good timing for us as we needed to be in Whitianga by 1 pm. There were the usual huge numbers of roosting birds on the shell banks, dominated by low thousands of SIPO and Bar-tailed Godwit, with lesser but still good numbers of White-faced Herons, Variable Oystercatchers, Pied (White-headed) Stilts, Wrybills, Pacific Golden-Plovers, NZ Plovers, Red Knots, Black-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns. The big prize however, was a continuing NZ mega Black-bellied Plover roosting with the Pacific Golden-Plovers, picked out by Sav.

After this great show of shorebirds (aka waders in NZ) were zoomed off to Whitianga, about two hours away. We arrived around mid-day, checked into our motel, picked up takeout lunches, and headed for the marina for our afternoon pelagic out past Red Mercury Island. This trip is designed to get us to the area off Red Mercury late in the afternoon to intercept returning Pycroft's Petrels which breed there. Pycroft's is a rare bird in the Hauraki Gulf, tough to identify given the large numbers of Cook's Petrels in the Gulf and their range of plumage variation. We travel out about 25 miles. Spend time chumming at a couple of locations, then return to the vicinity of Red Mercury. As we return, we usually see numbers of Cook's Petrels heading north past Red Mercury, then a bit later numbers of Pycroft's heading in the direction of Red Mercury. We had a good pelagic, happily picking up two **Parkinson's (Black) Petrels** and several White-faced Storm-Petrels that the cancelled Hauraki Gulf pelagic cost us, as well as, of course, a number of **Pycroft's**. Other birds we picked up in numbers that we usually see in the Hauraki Gulf were Fairy Prion, Buller's, Flesh-footed, and Fluttering Shearwaters, and 3 more Parasitic Jaegers. Unfortunately, no NZ Stormies showed up. To the delight of many, we had 10s

of Little Blue Penguins in the outer harbor. Back in town, we ate at Dino's, our favorite Italian restaurant in Whitianga, and headed for bed after a great day.

Black and Pycroft's Petrels were the only endemics for the day, and our Trip List stands at 88, with 34 endemics. Overnight at Whitianga Peninsula Motel.

Day 7, Mon 22 Jan

We left Whitianga around 8 am for the drive to Pureora, location of an amazing 2000-year-old stand of lowland North Island Podocarp forest that escaped milling due to the efforts of determined protestors who chained themselves on to some of the huge trees. When we arrived it was drizzling, but we found some nice birds, including new **endemics Yellow-crowned Parakeet** and (North Island) **Tomtit**, and new for the trip Shining Bronze-Cuckoo and Long-tailed Cuckoo; Pureora is arguably the most reliable place in NZ for the latter due to the high numbers of Whitehead in the area. We tried hard for NZ Falcon, but were unsuccessful.

On our way, we picked up a few Australasian Coots at Whakamaru, new for the trip, as well as other waterfowl and shags.

For our next trick, we headed down the west side of amazing Lake Taupo for Turangi, where our target is the curious localized endemic Blue Duck, which is doing well almost as an urban bird on the Tongariro River as it passes by residential Turangi. A local group has undertaken to protect the birds through publicity and predator control.

But first, we headed for the "Old Wharf" at nearby Tokaanu to look for our second NZ mega, a stakeout Whiskered Tern. Sure enough, there it was looking tiny roosting with gulls on the wharf railing. We were unable to locate any bitterns however in the extensive marshes here, but there were two NZ Grebes and a few Australasian Coots on the lake along with numerous other expected waterfowl.

Back to the Blue Duck search. Strangely, we were unable to locate a Blue Duck on our first pass through the various famous fly-fishing pools, and so invoked Plan B and headed south a few miles to the Tongariro Power Plant, where the outlet has great Blue Duck habitat. Soon we located a couple and had great scope views as they did their **Blue Duck** thing. We returned to the pools at Turangi, and finally located a pair roosting on a small ledge which provided fair scope looks. Noteworthy around the area were 5 Spotted Doves, marking the southern edge of their rapidly-expanding range.

Our Trip List is now 97, including 36 endemics, and 2 megas for NZ! Overnight at Turangi Parklands Motor Lodge.

Day 8, Tue 23 Jan

Today we detour to beautiful Hawkes Bay, where Havelock North, a wonderful town near Hastings is the home of Sav Saville and his lovely wife Jodie. A highlight of our trip is a sumptuous evening meal at Sav's and Jodie's house, but more later, since we have places to go.

Our first stop, however, was a return to the marshes by the new Tokaanu marina, where we heard both Australasian Bittern and Spotless Crake, but were unable to get a look at either one. We did, however, relocate the Whiskered Tern, again on the wharf railing.

We then drove up to our favorite Fernbird spot on Frethey Road, and soon got great looks at about three of these odd-looking skulkers, typical of the grass-bird family.

Onward across to Hawkes Bay, where our first stop is Boundary Waters Area, a native podocarp forest northwest of Hastings that is predator-controlled and has had most of the suite of endemic forest birds re-introduced there. Also, there, is one of our major trip targets, NZ Falcon, which we missed at Pureora. After a winding drive on a gravel road, during which we located a few **NZ Pipits**, a sometimes hard-to-find endemic, we arrived and took the loop track through nice NZ bush. Best bird was a **Rifleman**, which had eluded us on Tiri and in the rain at Pureora, so a good catch-up. Also present were a nice range of forest endemics, including another Tomtit, sometimes elusive in the North Island. Despite much trying, the falcon eluded us again, heading for the top of our list of potential concerns for the trip, as is usually the case.

On our return to civilization, we stopped at Anderson Park, between Napier and Hastings, to tick the long-staying Plumed Whistling-Ducks that are now down to two from the original five. It was pouring rain, but we made rapid forays out and back to see them, located by Sav, who is impervious to rain.

Finally, after a great but wet day, we checked into our motel, close to Sav's home in Havelock North. We soon headed over to Sav and Jodie's, where we were thrilled by the great meal they had prepared for us, as well as visiting a real Kiwi residence! Main item was NZ Lamb Chops, deliciously grilled, along with typical NZ roast vegetables and salad. And the dessert was that iconic NZ (sorry, Oz) creation, a Pavlova. So, all round a wonderful evening with a classic NZ menu. We even downed some really nice wine and a few beers.

We added two more endemics today, along with a few new trip birds, for a Trip List total of 101, with 38 endemics. Overnight at Havelock North Wine Country Motor Lodge.

Day 9, Wed 24 Jan

Our first stop was at a nice wetland area, Waitangi Regional Park, near Clive where we were amazed to get awesome looks at a bittern wandering nonchalantly along the shore of the pond there. Finally! Also, there were a few Black-fronted Dotterel, fairly common in the area, but local in distribution and so a good pickup, our first for the trip.

Our main stop today is the Manawatu Estuary, a great shorebird location with an easily accessible high tide roost and sandy beaches protected from vehicles by bollards, a sort of mini-Bolivar, Texas. We parked by the campground and walked north to the high tide roost, on the way finding a Common Tern, well-photographed by Paul; this species winters in low numbers in NZ and breeds in southeast Asia, subspecies *longipennis*. Further along, at the high tide roost, we found 100+ each of Red Knots and Bar-tailed Godwits, 4 Pacific Golden-Plovers, 25 Wrybill,

and the usual array of waterfowl, shags, gulls and terns on the estuary. At the Palmer Road ponds, we had our last NZ Grebes for the trip and a couple of coots. The only other new trip bird we found was a Dunnock near our motel

No new endemics today, but a few really nice trip birds, for a Trip List total of 104, with 38 endemics. Overnight at Foxton Celtic Motel.

Day 10, Thu 25 Jan

Today we cross Cook Strait and start the South Island part of the tour. The Interislander ferry leaves in mid-afternoon for the 3-hour crossing and carries, as well as cars and small campers, large semis and trains! We made our fairly leisurely way south on our way to the ferry terminal at Wellington Harbour, stopping on the way at Lake Horowhenua at Levin and the Otaki Sewage Lagoons. Lake Horowhenua is known for a large variety of waterfowl and shags, as well as a large population of Feral Chickens, optimistically termed Feral Red Jungle Fowl, which actually counts as a trip tick! Among these birds we located a Peafowl and a Ring-necked Pheasant; the only previous pheasant as a single observer drive-by, so this one counted for the group.

We finally arrived at the ferry terminal and lined up waiting to drive aboard the ferry. Wellington Harbour is beautiful, and we have a panoramic view of the world-famous harbour from the ferry waiting lines. The ferry departed after the lengthy loading process and we brushed off our pelagic birding skills hoping to add some new birds, especially albatrosses. Unfortunately, the crossing was very calm for one that has a reputation as one of the roughest regularly-scheduled ferry crossings in the world. This meant tubenoses were few and far between, but we did pick off our first albatross, a single **Shy (White-capped)**, a few Sooty Shearwaters, and a Pomarine Jaeger spotted by Sav and seen by a few members of the group. The usual large numbers of Fairy Prions were near the Tory Channel entrance and a few Flesh-footed Shearwaters passed by. The highlight of the ferry crossing was the **8 Rough-faced (King) Shags** in Queen Charlotte Sound just after we exited Tory Channel; this rare endemic species is being found more often now further south in the Sound, rather than require a long and usually rough boat trip out to White Rocks, as we used to do 10+ years ago. We also picked up **Spotted Shag** (one at Wellington Harbour, three more in the Sound), and saw two Parasitic Jaegers and many Fluttering Shearwaters in the Sound. We arrived uneventfully at the Picton dock, drove off the ferry and checked into our motel in downtown Picton, a picturesque waterfront town catering mostly to the tourist trade but not overcrowded as most tourists head off immediately to see the rest of the South Island.

With the three new endemics today, the total is 41, and the Trip List rose to 110. Overnight at Picton Gateway Motel.

Day 11, Fri 26 Jan

Today we started out with a cruise up Queen Charlotte Sound to Blumine Island where an array of South Island endemic forest birds has been reintroduced. On the way we looked for Hector's

Dolphin, a very rare, tiny NZ endemic. The boat trip was very successful. On Blumine we hang out a few yards from the landing spot around a small creek where the specialties all occur, albeit taking some patience. The main target is the Orange-fronted Parakeet, which is extremely rare on the mainland in Fiordland, and established on only a few predator-free offshore islands. It took us quite a while, but a couple of sharp-eyed members of the group finally spotted an **Orange-fronted** perched quietly about 40 yards into the bush in an area where we had heard the chattering call a few times, suggestive of a pair in the vicinity. The other important endemic on Blumine is the **South Island Saddleback**; we had good looks at this species which calls loudly and is not very afraid of people. A bonus was a look at a couple of **Yellowheads**, another rare South Island endemic that has been translocated to Blumine. Last but not least, Blumine hosts numerous **Weka**, an endemic rail that is definitely not shy; several wandered around the landing site and around us as we waited on the trail. On our way back to Picton we searched for Hector's Dolphin in a bay and followed a small pod around watching their activities- a great showing of this iconic, highly endangered endemic NZ mammal.

Once back in Picton, we headed for Kaikoura, one of my favorite stops on our tour; it's a welcome two-nighter, we have a free afternoon on our second day there, and the world class Albatross Encounter pelagic trip is on. However, the Kaikoura area and coast to the north was hit by a very serious magnitude 7.8 earthquake a couple months earlier on 13 Nov 2017 and we're anxious to see what things look like.

But first, we made the obligatory stop west of Blenheim for the legendary long staying lone Black Kite. It took a while, but we eventually spotted it flying north, followed it, and were lucky (some of us) to see it attack a Swamp Harrier that was carrying food over a swamp area. Next, we stopped at Lake Elterwater and picked up our THIRD trip mega, a continuing Hoary-headed Grebe! This is another small grebe that has established a tenuous but unpredictable foothold in NZ. Also at the lake was our first Great Crested Grebe, in fine breeding plumage, putting the rather dull Hoary-headed to shame.

The trip to Kaikoura along the beautiful coast was flabbergasting. Most amazing was the 7 ft or so uplift along the coast and landslides that destroyed long stretches of the road and adjacent railroad and exposed a large area of previously-submerged rocky coastline. The "new" rocks were pale and easily discernible; the seal colony at Ohau Point was greatly changed, although there were numerous seals along the coast, mostly on the old rocks. The road had been closed for about two months, requiring reconstruction and a complete re-alignment of the road and adjacent railroad in many places. We were amazed at how much had been done in such a short time, during which Kaikoura had been inaccessible. A sobering drive indeed, especially for Sav and I who were familiar with the appearance of the coast prior to the quake.

We arrived in Kaikoura mid-afternoon and drove to Kowhai Bush, a great place to see the endemic **Brown Creeper**; it was easy to see the birds moving, but not so easy to get a good, whole bird look! Also, a nice find was the black phase of NZ (South Island) Fantail, which is

entirely blackish-brown, even the tail feathers, a very cool-looking bird along with our first (South Island) Tomtit.

We checked into our motel, relaxed a bit, and after dinner drove out west of town into farmland where we looked for the introduced South Island specialty, Little Owl, sometimes a frustrating exercise with a short dusk window before it gets too dark to see much. Luckily, we found one sitting on a fence post for all to see well.

On this exciting and varied day, we added five endemics, for a total of 46, and the trip list reached 119. Overnight Kaikoura Alpine View Motel.

Day 12, Sat 27 Jan

The Albatross Encounter pelagic is similar to the Monterey Bay, California trips in that a deep canyon reached close to the land, allowing many deep-sea tubenoses to be reached without an all day 25-mile trip offshore. The area is also famous for hosting young male Sperm Whales, but franchise rules do not allow taking folks to see both on the same boat. We checked in at the very nice office-restaurant-gift shop on the main waterfront boulevard and drove around to South Bay, where the albatross and whale-watch boats depart. Our boat is on a trailer hooked to a farm tractor and we climb on and then are backed into the water until the boat floats off. The “harbour” here was greatly modified by the earthquake uplift, with many new rocks to navigate, but the new channel is well-surveyed and well-marked. We sped out towards the open ocean, and soon encountered large flocks of endemic **Hutton’s Shearwaters**, which breed on the mountains just inland from Kaikoura. We estimated about 5000 birds in several rafts; only a very few were seen once we were a mile or more offshore. We soon were about 4-5 miles out and began chumming and it took only a few minutes before we were surrounded by several species of albatross as well as other tubenoses. After a couple of amazing chumming sessions, we checked out a few fishing boats with flocks of birds. The pelagic was amazing; we added endemics **NZ Albatross** (both subspecies- one Antipodean, 14 Gibson’s), both Southern and **Northern Royal** Albatrosses, Shy (White-capped) and **Salvin’s** Albatrosses, Northern Giant-Petrel, both subspecies of Cape Petrel, a surprising 36 Buller’s Shearwaters, a single Short-tailed Shearwater, White-chinned Petrel, **Westland Petrel**, and a surprising offshore juvenile **Black-fronted Tern**.

After such an exciting trip, we were free for the afternoon. Some folks went downtown, a nice one-mile walk, and others did laundry and relaxed at the motel, some walking down to the adjacent beach.

The trip and endemic lists took a jump today, endemics moving to 52 and the Trip List to 130. Overnight at Kaikoura Alpine View Motel.

Day 13, Sun 28 Jan

From Kaikoura, feeling refreshed, we were ready to journey into the scenic interior of the South Island. Traveling south from Kaikoura, though, we stopped in at the interesting Ashley River

Estuary, just north of Christchurch, before turning west and uphill. Sav had heard about a fairly long-staying Black Stilt and a Great Egret seen there recently. Just as we parked, the Great Egret flew up for an easy trip tick, but it took a bit of scoping to find the Black Stilt, but we were able to walk out quite a bit closer to get good scope looks at it. There was the usual array of waterbirds present as well, but we were glad to have both new birds (“a bird in the hand...”)

Happy with our Ashley experience, we headed inland, our first stop not for birds but the world-famous Sheffield Pie Shop. Although the basic mince (aka ground beef) and steak hot pies are to die for, mainly because of the exquisite crusts, there was an amazing selection of weird combinations of flavors such as blueberry-carrot etc. I made that up, but you get the picture. Being a Kiwi myself, I haven’t adjusted to these new-fangled flavors. Anyway, onward and upward, gradually climbing until passing over Porter’s Pass, third-highest in the South Island (939 meters, 3081 feet) after Lindis Pass (971, 3186) and the Milford Road (940, 3084); we cross all of these on our tour, as well as, in the next couple days, Arthur’s Pass (920, 3018). Our first stop is at Cave Stream Scenic Reserve, where we try (again) for NZ Falcon; we have seen it here before, but no luck this time. Not too much further is our overnight location, the iconic Bealey Hotel, reputed to still have Moa, a clever promotion by the owner; there is a lifelike statue of one on the hotel grounds, much-photographed. The motel overlooks the well-known Waimakariri River, a large braided river system that has breeding Wrybill and SIPO. The motel is basic, but a great base for exploring the area and the food at the adjoining Hotel is as good as anywhere. We checked in and drove up to the Arthur’s Pass village expecting Kea at the restaurant, but none were to be seen in town, possibly as laws against feeding them are being strongly enforced. Nevertheless, we drove the short distance up to Arthur’s Pass itself, where we found about 5 **Kea**. They are very entertaining mountain parrots to watch. We did pick up our first **South Island Robin** at the pass.

In the evening, after a great dinner at Bealey Hotel, and despite the drizzle, par for the course up here, we attempted to find Great Spotted Kiwi, the toughest of the kiwi species to see. We were unsuccessful, however, not surprisingly.

After this mostly driving, rather quiet birding day, we added only Kea and South Island Robin for the endemic list, now totaling 54, and the trip list crept up to 134. Overnight at Bealey Hotel.

Day 14, Mon 29 Jan

Today we drove from the interior at Arthur’s Pass out to the west coast and south along this spectacular and rugged coast to Franz Josef Glacier, a drive of around 3 hours and 150 miles, quite long on NZ roads.

We departed Bealey and back-tracked a few miles to cross the Waimakariri River at the Hawdon River Valley bridge on the off-chance we might find parakeets, including Orange-fronted, which occur here in very low numbers. Unfortunately, the trail up river soon required a river crossing which weren’t up for. We did locate a few (South Island) Riflemen and Brown Creepers as a consolation, the Riflemen our first for the South Island.

We saw 3 Kea as we descended from Arthur's Pass into the Otira Valley with its spectacular viaduct that straightens the formerly very twisty road, a major NZ road-building achievement through this rugged area. Our next stop was at the Hokitika Sewage Lagoons, a good site for waterbirds. We were not disappointed, with a good mix of expected species, but no rarities. We drove on into Hokitika for an opportunity to look around and check out the greenstone manufacturing stores. We took a look at the nearby beach, but nothing unusual was found. We had lunch at the beautiful Lake Mahinapua picnic area, and departed towards our overnight at Franz Josef Glacier, the official town name, usually shortened to Franz Josef.

Our goal in the area is Okarito Brown Kiwi, but more on our night-time excursion later. After driving south from Hokitika we took the road to Okarito to check in with Ian Cooper, the biologist who guides the kiwi tours, and took a look at the nearby beach which yielded the expected species but including large numbers of Black-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns apparently nesting. We drove back along the Okarito Road towards the main highway but pulled off at the parking areas where the kiwi tours begin. Nearby is a pakihi swamp, reeds with scattered manuka; this is a good place for the (South Island) Fernbird and we found at least two singing. We also found several Dunnock and Common Redpolls in the area, with our best numbers for the tour.

We finally arrived at Franz Josef Glacier and checked into our motel. After dinner, we departed to meet Ian Cooper at the kiwi spot. Ian is a legend for his iconic kiwi tours and very high success rate, a true "kiwi whisperer". His methods are unusual to say the least, but who can argue with his success rate? He has a couple of telemetered birds that usually cooperate well and show themselves sooner or later, but tonight both left their day roost burrows and promptly headed away from us. Ian's Plan B required a long drive to another area where sub-adults are being released, but despite a long walk and much standing and waiting for a telemetered bird that was only 1-2 meters from us we did not see it as it chose not to come out onto the trail. This is the first time in 6 trips with Ian that I have not had good looks at this species; however, we did hear at least two **Okarito Brown Kiwi** calling.

Our tired group was happy to get to the motel and bed after a long day, the first of a few typically long South Island drives in search of far-flung key endemic species. We added a single endemic, Okarito Brown Kiwi, albeit heard only, bringing our endemic total to 55 and Trip List now stands at 135. Overnight at Franz Josef Glacier View Motel.

Day 15, Tue 30 Jan

Today we drove from Franz Josef Glacier to Wanaka, just under 4 hours and around 170 miles through some spectacular west coast ocean scenery, crossing the Haast Pass, another Kiwi road-building feat, and descending to beautiful Wanaka, located on the eponymous lake.

Our first stop was to view from a distance at a nice overlook the Fox Glacier, just up the road from Franz Josef Glacier. Both glaciers are receding fairly rapidly and have been doing so for at least 100 years but are still spectacular to see.

The first part of this drive is through forests and is a slow windy drive, but then pops out to the coast to follow the rugged West Coast south to Haast, where the road goes inland. On our way to Haast, along the narrow strip of coastal dairy farming paddocks, in perhaps the most amazing spot of the trip, Sav noticed a bird perched at the top of a tall tree as we passed by at high speed. We screeched to a halt and Sav confirmed his suspicion that it was a **NZ Falcon**- often a very tough bird to find, as earlier attempts on our trip had demonstrated. We piled out of the van and had great looks. Soon after we noticed a second bird, almost certainly paired with the first. A great find indeed for a very excited group!

We made a couple of stops along the coast in the tourist mode, at the spectacular overlook at Knight's Point, where there is a seal colony far below and usually a few albatrosses passing by in the distance, and Ship Creek, where there was the expected mix of coastal beach birds. At Haast, the road turns inland following the Haast River and then winding up and over Haast Pass, a spectacular drive via the Gates of Haast; one wonders how the road-builders were able to squeeze a road into this vertical-walled canyon. At Haast Pass, we took a walk into the very nice beech forest despite the drizzle but could not locate Yellowheads or Yellow-crowned Parakeets, no doubt because of the lousy weather. We descended from Haast Pass into the Makarora River Valley and soon the head of Lake Wanaka. This is a suddenly-arid region, a result of clouds losing their moisture as they pass over the 10,000-foot high coastal mountains. The road follows Lake Wanaka for a few miles then crosses over the ridge to Lake Hawea, follows it south, then back to the foot of Lake Wanaka and the pleasant tourist town of Wanaka. At Wanaka, we checked out the marina, which has several artificial floating nest platforms tied to the docks; the platforms were being used by at least 13 Great Crested Grebes. Also there were several Black-billed Gulls.

The exciting addition of NZ Falcon increased the endemic list to 56, and the Trip List to 136. Additions in this segment of our tour are high quality but few and far between. Overnight at Wanaka Archway Motel.

Day 16, Wed 31 Jan

Our drive today from Wanaka to Te Anau is around 3 hours and 140 miles, with a further distance of up the Eglinton Valley to Homer Tunnel, where we hope to find Rock Wren.

We only stopped once, at the Red Tussock Reserve, which was very interesting with good signage. We arrived as planned in Te Anau with enough time to drive to 60 miles or so to Homer Tunnel, a spectacular rocky cirque pierced by the mile-long tunnel, the only place one can actually drive to Rock Wren nesting habitat. The route is the Milford Road, usually clogged in mid-morning and mid-afternoon by tourist buses originating mostly in Queenstown, and, to boot, it was raining. Rock Wrens usually are impossible to see in rain, but we gave it a shot. As we arrived, we pulled up beside a car occupied by a group of Finns who had been more or less following our route, prompted by Sav. They were very excited as they were at that moment looking at two **Rock Wrens!** Of course, we jumped out of our van into the rain and had great

looks at these iconic birds, part of an endemic NZ family, the most ancient branch of Passerines. We were very lucky to see the wrens and decided the only reason they were out in the rain was to feed nestlings; they made repeated trips to the nest site about 75 yards distant, which (thank you) had been flagged by Dept Conservation employees. There was also a lone Kea in the parking area. Sav and I were hugely relieved to see these birds, since we only have a short, single window of opportunity to see them and it was raining.

In happy and relaxed mode, we trundled down to the famous Milford Sound for a look around, although Mitre Peak, usually right in front of us along the side of the sound, was mostly covered by clouds. Due the rain, however, the drive both up and back was spectacular, with hundreds of waterfalls on the sheer rock faces that we passed by. Although we looked for Blue Ducks at a few spots along the Hollyford River, we were unsuccessful. We made the 80-mile drive back to Te Anau, mission accomplished, knowing we didn't need to go all the way back up to Homer Tunnel the next morning!

As in the last few days, we added only a single endemic per day, but how great they were: Okarito Brown Kiwi, NZ Falcon, and NZ Rock Wren! Sure did make up for the long drives. Our endemic list notched up to 57, and the Trip List to 137. Overnight at Te Anau Parklands Motel.

Day 17, Thu 1 Feb

Our goal the next day was to ferry across to Stewart Island and fit in a short boat trip to Ulva Island, the South Island equivalent in terms of South Island endemic species to Tiritiri Matangi Island off the North Island. After the 190-mile, 3-hour drive from Te Anau, we arrived at Bluff, the ferry terminal. Departure was around 1 pm for the one-hour crossing over Foveaux Strait, which challenges, if not exceeds, Cook Strait's reputation for rough and sometimes downright scary seas. The crossing is rarely cancelled, so despite the forecast of up to 3-meter rollers, we took off; "took off" is the appropriate term, as the skipper of large, squat catamaran ferry yanks the throttle to full position and we all hold on, rolling from side to side as pass over the southwesterly swells. Actually, I love this ride- very exhilarating. However, today the swells were the biggest I've crossed over in; in fact, the skipper actually had to move the throttle off of full speed a couple times to avoid swamping as we encountered maybe 12-foot waves in the middle of the strait! Because of the rollers, it was difficult to see any birds, and of course it was raining, but we picked off a few albatrosses, including 2 Southern Royals and tens of White-capped, a surprising southerly group of tens of Hutton's Shearwaters, and hundreds of Sooty Shearwaters. But we arrived safely at beautiful downtown Oban, a quaint fishing and tourist village on Half Moon Bay. We quickly were assigned our rooms, made a few brief clothing adjustments, and water-taxied our way around Ackers Point from Half Moon Bay into Paterson Inlet, where Ulva Island is located. Rounding the point was a bit rough for this 14-foot taxi, but we were seasoned big-wave sailors by now.

We were on Ulva for about 4 hours in the persistent drizzle, so got a bit wet. Some folks returned to the shelter at the dock and watched while the very high "king" tide covered the

floor of their shelter and much of the dock. Nevertheless, through persistence, Sav's guidance, and the helpful presence of another off-duty Wrybill tour leader, local resident Matt Jones, we managed the island specialties, although we missed the hoped-for occasionally diurnal Southern Brown Kiwi, aka Tokoeka, and Yellow-crowned Parakeet. Parakeets were very secretive, probably because of the rain, and we only found a single Red-crowned. We will have a great shot at the kiwi on the beach tomorrow night though. We did find the Ulva specialties, including 5 (Stewart Island) Weka, 8 (South Island) Kaka, 4 Riflemen, 7 South Island Saddlebacks, 3 NZ Bellbirds, a welcome 6 Yellowheads, 6 Brown Creepers, single fantail and tomtit, and 6 (Stewart Island) South Island Robins. The water taxi arrived on time, helped to fish a large floating plank, a hazard to shipping, from the water, and took us back to our warm and cozy hotel. In Half Moon Bay we found a few **Foveaux Shags**, an endemic recent split from former Stewart Island Shag. We will look for the other splittee, Otago Shag, on our way back north to Christchurch in a day or two.

We finished the day at the excellent South Sea Hotel on the waterfront, dining on the world's best Blue Cod, an iconic southern NZ white fish (the Chatham Islands might question whose is best).

Since we scratched together the South Island endemics on Ulva on our way to Stewart Island, the only endemic we added today was Foveaux Shag, for number 58. The Trip List also rose by one, to 138. Overnight at Stewart Is South Sea Hotel.

Day 18, Fri 2 Feb

This was a day we have looked forward to for a while. There are two major highlights, the world-famous pelagic to Wreck/Big Reef and the almost equally world-famous night-time trip to Ocean Beach for kiwi. The latter was run for many years by Phillip Smith, whose pickup license plate says "C KIWI", no lie, since his success rate is in the high 90% range.

With great anticipation, we boarded the great pelagic trip boat "Aurora", skippered by the knowledgeable Ian Wilson, around 9 am for our all-day pelagic out to Wreck Reef, about 25 miles southeast of Half Moon Bay. The sea was a bit choppy, resulting in various degrees of seasickness among a few folks, but the species list was remarkable. We headed directly for Wreck Reef and cruised around with a few chumming stops for several hours. The tubenose list was its typical tick-fest; highlights were led off by 5 albatross species, including both Royals, hundreds of White-capped, tens of Salvin's, and 6 **Northern Bullers**. Other goodies were 3 **Gray-backed Storm-Petrels**, thousands of Sooty Shearwaters, a surprising northerly **White-headed Petrel** that hung around the boat for good looks, two **Mottled Petrels** generally well-seen, and 6 **Common Diving-Petrels**. On our way back, we headed for a major Foveaux Shag breeding colony on Whero Island, numbering in the hundreds. We then cruised the shorelines of some islands offshore from Half Moon Bay and eventually tallied 8 **Yellow-eyed Penguins** along with a few **Brown Skuas**. Closer to home, we looked along the rocky shoreline on the west side of Half Moon Bay and sharp eyes finally spotted a couple of **Fiordland Crested-Penguins**; we

ended up with four. On our way we saw several Little Blue Penguins, for a mainland NZ penguin sweep.

We (especially those who had suffered sea-sickness) were happy to be back on land after a fantastic pelagic trip. We ate dinner, many of us sampling the delicious baked Blue Cod, and got ready for the night-time kiwi trip.

The trip began with a briefing by Dept Conservation folks (Phillip Smith has recently retired) on the life history of South Island Brown Kiwi, before departing on the now-familiar Aurora with Ian again as skipper, into Paterson Inlet and south to a nice new dock at the far south end, by now late twilight. We were issued with flashlights, not to be used except for traversing the trail; our two leaders carry the serious flashlights for spotting kiwi. The trail from the dock crosses over a narrow peninsula to the east-facing sandy Ocean Beach; sometimes we encounter kiwi on the trail, but by far most likely are kiwi feeding on the abundant sand-hoppers, small crustaceans, that feed on seaweed wrack along the high tide line. Our two leaders split the group in two, the groups going in opposite directions along the beach. Luckily, our group soon found a large **South Island Brown Kiwi** out in the open, giving us amazing views. We signalled the other group, who quickly caught up and we all approached a bit closer. The bird was seemingly unaware of us (we were very quiet) and gave us the longest view of a single bird I have ever had. We had a brief look at another, smaller kiwi, on our way back along the beach to the track. Very excited, the group re-boarded the Aurora and motored back to Half Moon Bay, arriving a little after midnight.

This was a long, but great day- from hundreds of albatrosses, three penguin species, rare tubenoses, to great looks at a South Island Brown Kiwi. Our endemic list took a big jump, up to a very respectable 67, and the Trip List correspondingly rose to 148, lower than our expectations by this point in the trip due to the bad weather at the start of the trip. Overnight at Stewart Is South Sea Hotel.

Day 19, Sat 3 Feb

This morning we dragged ourselves over to breakfast and got ready to ride back over to Bluff. The ride was so calm that we had trouble seeing many birds, ironically for the opposite reason to our first crossing! We re-united at Bluff with our trusty van and headed for a lagoon near Invercargill to look for a stake-out female Chestnut-breasted Shelduck, an Australian species sometimes found with the ubiquitous NZ endemic Paradise Duck. Despite some serious scoping we were unable to locate the bird, although there was a nice selection of the expected waterfowl.

Our only other stop on the way to Oamaru was Shag Point, where we saw a few Yellow-eyed Penguins in the Scenic Reserve and picked up our first **Otago Shags** as fly-bys. But there were many more Otago Shags to come. We drove into Oamaru and down to the harbour, where, lo and behold, there was a large nesting colony of Otago Shags on an abandoned wharf. We estimated around 450 Otago Shags, accompanied by at least 70 Spotted Shags, along with other

expected coastal waterbirds. There were a large number of almost-grown chocolate-colored fuzzy dependent chicks and a good number of “Bronze” adults, which are lacking in the Foveaux Shag, one of the reasons for the split.

We headed for our motel and dinner in downtown Oamaru, which has amazing and impressive limestone buildings from the nearby quarry. We added the Otago Shag to our endemic list for a total of 68, and the Trip List added that species also, for a total of 149. Overnight at Oamaru Thames Court Motel.

Day 20, Sun 4 Feb

Today we left Oamaru and headed inland to the fabled MacKenzie Country, a high plateau surrounded by several mountain ranges. It is a center of controversy these days as dairy farming has installed huge center-pivot sprinklers to grow sufficient grass for the dairy cows. It is also, more to the point, the only place in NZ that Black Stilt occurs in its original breeding habitat, albeit maintained by annual releases of captive-reared juveniles.

Our first stop was at the Ruataniwha Wetland near the delta of the much-altered for electricity generation Ohau River to look for Marsh Crane. Usually reliable here, we gave up after a couple hours with no sight or sound of these elusive rails.

We drove the miles north past Twizel to Tekapo, and turned off on the road to Mt John, an astronomy site owned by the University of Canterbury. The drive up to the observatory and car park, which has become a serious tourist attraction, even with a fairly new café, is a reliable area for Chukar, an introduced game bird. As bog as they are, they can be hard to spot among the rocks and brush. We looked around for quite a while with no luck, however, and decided to drive down the hill slowly hoping for a sighting. As our hopes were falling, suddenly sharp-eyed Sue spotted a group of 7 Chukar pretty close to the road. We were glad to see this bird, one of our last trip ticks.

And now down to the real business in this area, looking for Black Stilt. We continued north past Lake Alexandrina, checking ponds along the way without success, until we arrived at Lake Murray. Here we found two beautiful, all black, adult Black Stilts. Much more satisfying than our sighting of that lost bird at Ashley Estuary! But we weren't done yet. We drove back to the highway and turned back south, until at Lake Pukaki we turned west on the Mount Cook Road. Lake Pukaki is a beautiful turquoise color due to the dissolved limestone ground up by glacial action. Usually the foot of Lake Pukaki is a great place for views of Mt Cook, NZ's highest peak, but cloud cover gave us only fleeting glimpses of the summit. We drove up the Mt Cook road to the Glentanner Airstrip and turned into the track taking us into the wetland there, essentially the delta of the Pukaki River, which feeds the lake. We scoped the area and saw several Black Stilts in the distance along the edge of the lake. We decided to follow a minimal but quite passable trail towards the lake edge, where we were able to get reasonable views of a few juvenile/immature Black Stilts.

Having hit our goals for the day (except for Marsh Crake), we headed back to Omarama for dinner and our overnight stay. The MacKenzie Region is interesting, and we had a good time exploring it. As we tour around NZ, we count Swamp Harriers each day and today turned out to be our high count, an impressive 30.

As in recent days, we added one trip tick, Chukar, but no endemics, although close were our great sightings of Black Stilt at Lake Murray. So, our endemic list stays at 68, and Trip List edges up by one also, to 150, a reasonable total for most tour companies, but a bit disappointing for us- our record is 168, the Wrybill record 170. But considering the lousy weather in the north and rain many other places, we're doing OK. Overnight at Omarama Ahuriri Motel, our last overnight as a tour group.

Day 21, Mon 5 Feb

Today is essentially a driving day to Christchurch, where the group disbands and goes its separate ways. The only stop we made was a visit to Lake Ellesmere via Embankment Road in the hopes of adding a shorebird or two. Throughout the trip we encountered very few of the small shorebirds, missing such regulars as Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, and Red-necked Stint, all of which were likely at the end of Embankment Road. We straggled out the mile-long walk to the ponds and short grassy areas and found a few Red-necked Stints, but neither of the other two we were looking for. There were a large number of Double-banded Dotterels there, as well as several Wrybill, and the usual thousands of Black Swans in the distance on Lake Ellesmere itself.

Somewhat disappointed, we trekked back to the van and headed for the Christchurch Airport for lunch at the nearby International Antarctic Center. Finally, we dropped some of the group, including myself, at the airport for our flight to Auckland and on through to the USA. The others stayed overnight in Christchurch, ferried to their motel by Sav, for flights out the next day.

We only added Red-necked Stint today, so our final counts were an impressive 68 endemics and a mediocre for us 151 trip ticks.