

## **TRIP REPORT- NEW ZEALAND TOUR**

**19 Nov-9 Dec 2019**

### **Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ/NZ Land & Pelagic Birding Tours**

By Ross Silcock

**Participants.** Wayne and Janece Mollhoff, Keith Camburn, James Huntington, Joe Grzybowski, Jerry Probst, Tom Labeledz, Bill Flack, Ross Silcock (organizer) and Sav Saville (guide)

**Day 1, Tues Nov 19:** All arrived the previous day, so a quick getaway from Rose Park Hotel after the obligatory safety briefing. Straight across to the ever popular, really scenic, Australasian Gannet colony, then across the peninsular to Waipu. Very high tide but found an actively feeding adult Fairy Tern, along with NZ Dotterel and Variable Oystercatcher.

A “new” site in Whangarei held an amazing selection of waterfowl, including breeding Australian Little and NZ Grebes. Also Brown Teal, NZ Scaup, and a bonus NZ Pipit. After dinner in Kerikeri we went out to search for Northern Brown Kiwi. There was a lot of kiwi activity, with around 30 calls heard, but despite much back and forth, we had absolutely no luck seeing one. An unwanted “first” for both Sav and Ross.

**Day 2, Weds Nov 20:** Left Kerikeri for the 90-minute drive to Marsden Cove for our 10 am pelagic with a brief stop at in Hikurangi. An excellent boat, great skipper, and a really top day out on the water. The pelagic went out past the Hen and Chickens targeting Pycroft’s Petrel which breeds there. Although Pycroft’s Petrel was the main target, there are heaps of birds out in this stretch of water – and we had great views of all. Top of the list would be the 30+ Pycroft’s because the chances of seeing this species again would be very slim, but that is very closely followed by about 8 New Zealand Storm-petrel and 10+ Little Shearwater. The shearwaters were particularly pleasing because they are not easy to find, and rarely give great views. All the other usual northern tubenoses were present in decent numbers, except a serious paucity of Buller’s Shears with only 2 birds seen.

**Day 3, Thursday Nov 21:** A relaxing day. Re-visited Waipu estuary again and found 2 Fairy Terns fishing near the rocky groin. Drove South to a park and had good success with the endemics there. We had plenty of Brown Teal, and great looks at North Island Saddleback, Bellbird, North Island Robin, Whitehead etc. A couple of fly-over Kaka were good. Also Banded Rail on the big lagoon.

**Day 4, Friday Nov 22:** Another great day on the Hauraki Gulf, this time on Norma Jean. Pretty decent weather meant that we were able to travel out as far as the Mokohinau Islands. Effectively the same set of species as we had encountered 2 days ago, but even being on a slightly different piece of water, the numbers were markedly different. Some big numbers of

birds today – 1000+ Cook’s Petrel, 1000+ Fluttering Shearwater and a massive flock of Fairy Prion which was variously estimated at 10,000 to 50,000!! Another highlight was 5 NZSP in sight at once over the burley slick. And everyone loved our first albatrosses of the tour – 2 White-capped Albatrosses visited us for a while. Strangely, no Buller’s Shearwaters at all, after only seeing 2 a couple of days ago. Maybe they are in the “honeymoon” stage, when they leave the water near their breeding grounds for a week or so?

**Day 5, Saturday, Nov 23:** Today we headed for Gulf Harbour for our morning ferry for Tiritiri Matangi Island- an “open sanctuary”- pest free, but public can visit. Made a brief stop on the way at another park, a nice spot and found our first Red-crowned Parakeet, plus NI Saddleback. After the mandatory briefing from the Tiri warden, we birded our way up to the Bunkhouse. After lunch, walked about 8 miles according to the Fitbits, and found all the specialties - with awesome views of a Kokako pair, a couple of Takahe, 2 Spotless Crake, and simply loads of Stitchbird and NI Saddleback. Fernbirds called and were eventually seen well by the bunkhouse.

The late evening saw us off down towards the beach for views of the rare endemic reptile - the Tuatara. Little Spotted Kiwi was the other nighttime target, and as with Brown Kiwi earlier, it was tough going, but we heard a few and finally had a good though brief look. Half the group went in around 11 pm and the other half did another round, but with no further luck. A nice view of Morepork was some extra consolation.

**Day 6, Sunday Nov 24:** Early morning birding took folks to various previously visited spots, and many of yesterday’s species performed well again. We took a water taxi to Gulf Harbour at 10.30 am, had lunch at the Highway 1 service center near Drury. Arrived at Miranda Holiday Park around 2 pm with a plan to get to the limeworks at 4 pm, two hours before high tide. Took a welcome and cleansing soak in the hot pool and then to the hides at Miranda. Not a great tide, and not a great suite of bird species – plenty of Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit and Pied Oystercatcher, but few of the semi-rarities that often show here. Best birds were the 25 or so Wrybill, along with 3 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and 3 Far Eastern Curlew.

**Day 7, Monday Nov 25:** Started early and hit another shorebird site near Miranda. Lots of shorebirds and other waterbirds which included 2 more species for our total – not particularly inspiring but Whimbrel and Eastern Cattle Egret are not birds we always see on these trips. The egrets must surely be the next species to breed in NZ – these were in perfect (gaudy) breeding plumage.

Next stop Pureora Forest where we explored several different trails and tracks, picking up some much desired species and having pretty good views of all – Yellow-crowned Parakeets were numerous, as were Kaka. Several calls of both Shining and Long-tailed Cuckoo were heard and one each of them also seen. The old forest at Pureora is amazing, and we spent some time admiring the wonderful, gigantic, old trees.

We pressed on towards Turangi which was where we were staying that night. Turangi = Blue Duck, and we had great luck with one in town and a further 2 pairs with broods of 6 and 4 ducklings further upstream. Good to see them with surviving young.

**Day 8, Tuesday Nov 26:** Got up at dawn to look for Australasian Bittern – and had good success with 4 seen, including 3 flying around together, one of which did a long, slow, close flyby for us! Back to the motel for breakfast and then checked out some nice forest which held most of the central North specialties including Tomtit and Rifleman, as well as more Long-tailed Cuckoos calling. Then a quick stop for Fernbirds on the edge of Lake Taupo - has to be the best place to get a good look at these skulkers – before heading across to Hawkes Bay.

Wetlands near Napier gave us great looks at both Banded and Black-fronted Dotterel, and we made the pilgrimage to what seems to be the sole surviving Plumed Whistling Duck at a municipal park in Taradale. One more day on the North Island then across Cook Strait on the ferry. Trip list is 118, in great shape to challenge the record! Most of the group have seen 40-50 lifers, and there are 3 possibilities for Ross to add to his NZ list, which is amazing.

**Day 9, Weds Nov 27:** The morning started with us heading across the North Island to Foxton Beach and the Manawatu Estuary. A 5-minute detour was made to a spot where there is a good population of Peafowl- saw some nice males!

We also stopped and had our lunch at a place where NZ Falcon have been seen recently, but no joy today.

The tide was high at the Foxton Beach, but there were not many shorebirds to be seen, mostly because a bunch of researchers, led by Phil Battley, had been cannon-netting godwits! They had captured 7 godwits but should have got more except the cannon net they fired over the birds malfunctioned and caught fewer than it should have. We saw them attach transmitters and the iwi folks then released the birds. A Little Egret was a welcome bonus species.

We checked a few more local areas for NZ grebe and other waterbirds, without much to report.

**Day 10, Thursday Nov 28:** Drove down to Wellington and had about an hour and a half at Te Papa Tongarewa National Museum, always an incredible place. On to the ferry with no problems and a smooth crossing, which might explain the almost complete lack of seabirds. We only saw one albatross (a White-capped), usually we get several of 2-3 species. A couple of Westland Petrel were good to see as insurance, and we had views of 2 King Shags way up the Tory Channel, where they just wouldn't have been seen a few years ago.

Arrived in Picton and drove just South of Blenheim to pick off the Glossy Ibises that have started breeding there, this the third year now. Cirl Bunting and Dunnock (!!??) were also additions to the trip list.

**Day 11, Friday, 29 Nov:** This morning started with a boat ride out on Queen Charlotte Sound. There are 2 main target species – King Shag (which we had seen rather distantly from the ferry)

and Orange-fronted Parakeet. The shags performed well, though there were only 9 individuals present. Lots of Spotted Shags were also seen, and a couple of Arctic Skuas, Little Blue Penguins and unusually a couple of Flesh-footed Shearwaters among the numerous Fluttering Shearwaters.

On arrival on an island, we were greeted by 4 or 5 Weka right on the beach. It took a while, with some quick glimpses, but we finally were treated to a great frontal view of the orange forecrown of an Orange-fronted Parakeet- one of NZ's rarest birds. There was also a South Island Saddleback calling, but we just couldn't get to see it.

After getting back to Picton around lunchtime we set off for Lake Elterwater for Hoary-headed Grebe (the only NZ breeding site) and found two right away, but the other target, a vagrant Northern Shoveler which Ross needed for his NZ list eluded us despite the presence of a good number of Australasian Shovelers.

On down to Kaikoura via the amazing seal colony at Ohau- several brand-new pups, with a placenta being picked at by gulls. Went out to the point of the peninsula, but nothing much there. After dinner we headed out to look for Little Owls which come out at dusk, but no luck there either. Tomorrow we head out to sea again expecting to see a lot of albatrosses.

**Day 12, Sat, Nov 30:** Lovely Kaikoura! Had a bit of a sleep in before our 8.30 departure for the pelagic trip, always a highlight of the tour. The great Gazza Melville was our skipper, and we were soon knee-deep in albatross – of 6 species including both Royals, and Black-browed among the more numerous NZ Wanderers and Salvin's and White-capped. A Buller's Shearwater and a Grey-faced Petrel (about the only species that we had missed up north) were less than fully expected, but there were also plenty of Westland Petrel, only one White-chinned (?) and only a couple of Cape Petrel. We were pleased to pick out a Southern Giant among the 20+ Northern Giant Petrel.

Everyone enjoyed the pelagic so much we went out again on the 1 pm version- birds about the same but great looks at another iconic NZ species- Hector's Dolphin, indisputably the cutest dolphin of all. There were about 15 and they put on a great show for us.

After dinner we had another go for Little Owl. This time success! Joe spotted one on a tree branch about 200 yards away but in the fading light we couldn't make out much detail, although no question it was a Little Owl, species #137 for the trip.

**Day 13, Sun, Dec 1:** Left Kaikoura at 7.30 am with the idea of checking a pond for the bizarre resident Cape Barren Geese – a pair with a near full-grown youngster were soon seen.

Next stop was an estuary for a couple of stakeout shorebirds, but when we got there the tide was a king full tide- no shorebird habitat at all! So, since we had some spare time, we decided to head for Lake Ellesmere, where there has been an eclectic mix of shorebirds reported in recent days. Unfortunately the strong winds had dried up the pools used by the shore birds. Ellesmere can be the most frustrating birding destination! So- two busts for the day so far. For

consolation we headed towards the mountains with an obligatory stop at The Sheffield Pie Shop, home of NZ's best pies.

Rain was expected as we neared Arthur's Pass and we weren't disappointed- it was heavy with very strong wind gusts which blew our van around a bit. Needless to say, birding was impossible although we did drive up to the pass to see if any Kea were around- these are iconic montane parrots, found only above timberline in the South Island. These days they don't frequent the restaurant in Arthur's Pass and steal pies off folks' plates, and, being intelligent (more so than us it seems?) they weren't out in the rain and wind. Back to the Bealey Motel, and relaxed while the rain continued. In lulls we did see a few endemic Black-fronted Terns. Had a great dinner and a couple beers at the adjacent Bealey Hotel but any thought of going out at night to look (listen?) for Great Spotted Kiwi was washed away by the torrential rain.

**Day 14, Mon, Dec 2:** We were hoping for a break in the rainy weather before we left the Arthur's Pass area and got lucky. We picked up the few endemics that we needed – South Island Robin, Brown Creeper and Kea, then headed out to the West Coast. A huge storm is in the Southern Ocean southwest of NZ, and very heavy rain was forecast. For once the forecast was accurate- as we got to Okarito and discussed the evening's kiwi excursion with Ian Cooper, the rain began. Needless to say, the kiwi excursion was canceled, and rechecking the forecast, 400-500 mm of rain is expected in the next 24 hours, centered on, you guessed it, Franz Josef, where we are staying. As we returned to the motel at 7 pm, streams were running high, and it's possible we may not be able to get through to Haast because of flooding and even possibly bridges washed away, not that unusual in the southern West Coast. Oh well, we'll put this down as another experience. We have had really bad luck on kiwis, usually a strength of our tours. But we still have Stewart Island, generally by far the most reliable for seeing kiwi. Here's hoping!

**Day 15, Tuesday, Dec 3:** Listening to the torrential rain last night I was afraid we might be trapped in Franz Josef by flooding north and south of us, but we took off and made it all the way to Wanaka. The only impediments were a couple of one lane spots where the road had been eroded and a few fallen trees that were cleared fairly quickly or we simply drove around them. All the rivers were full and very angry looking, so we were lucky no bridges washed out. It was also lucky that we made a quick getaway from Franz, because the road was closed to all traffic about 30 mins after we went through!!

We had great success with three important targets - Fiordland Crested Penguin, NZ Falcon and Yellowhead. The penguin was at one of the West Coast beaches where we normally score. We didn't stay long there because of continued rain, but good to get this in the bag. The falcons were a pair, flying about and one perched atop a tree for a while, at a site where they were often seen a few years previously, and during a brief pause in the rain. At Haast we had 2 Yellowheads calling loudly at the parking area, along with a flock of about 25 Yellow-crowned Parakeets! Pretty happy, and not too wet, we headed for Wanaka. On arrival we ticked off a few Great Crested Grebes at the marina where they have artificial floating nesting platforms.

**Day 16, Weds, Dec 4:** The locals are concerned about the water levels in the lakes because of all the water flowing down from the mountains - in Wanaka the waterfront street is flooded, and they are sandbagging businesses along the street. On our way from Wanaka to Milford, via Te Anau, we experienced – drizzle, rain, heavy rain, torrential rain, sleet, snow, hail, thunder and lightning! A few more Kea, some South Island Robin, Rifleman and tomtit were about the only birds of note today, but on our way back to Te Anau, we had great looks at Black-fronted Terns, which nest on stony islands in braided rivers, but unfortunately it looks like their colony had been swamped by the high water.

**Day 17, Thurs Dec 5:** This was an amazing day. Headed out from Te Anau early at 6.30 am for our 9.45 am ferry across Foveaux Strait to Stewart Island. Brief stop on the south edge of Invercargill for the Australian Shelducks that have been there a while – 5 birds seen, a NZ tick for Ross! All went well on the ferry crossing, the usual 10 ft swells, and a few albatrosses but not a great variety or number of seabirds. Arrived before our rooms were ready so walked around and picked up the specialties around town like Kaka and Dunnock (!). After lunch, we got a water taxi over to Ulva Island, stopping to see three Fiordland Crested Penguins on the rocks just out of the bay. And then..... James said, quite calmly, “Is that a swift?” and there it was! The unmistakable shape of a Pacific Swift flashing about a headland above us. The first NZ record since 2002, fewer than 20 records in total for NZ! A very happy Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ guide!!

We had a very nice time in the beautiful forest on Ulva, with only minimal rain, getting all the expected forest birds including great views of 20+ Yellowhead, and scoring the South Island Saddleback that had eluded us earlier in the tour. Back to the hotel (South Seas Hotel) for blue cod and chips (it doesn't get any better than that). After dinner a great experience with Matt Jones who took us out to look for Southern Brown Kiwi. Matt put on quite a show of kiwi whispering for us. We saw five kiwi including an absolutely stunning pair which were calling in duet in full view - a very rare thing to see. Lots of other great views including one wandering right past us in full view. A happy group back to the motel, looking forward to a good sleep and the usually amazing pelagic off Stewart Island.

**Day 18, Fri Dec 6:** Up and breakfasted and on the boat at 8.30 am for the Foveaux Strait pelagic - on the Aurora. It was a good day, although a bit too calm for a great pelagic- the birds sit on the water if there isn't enough wind for gliding flight and they are harder to find. Nevertheless, we managed 17 species of tubenoses including 150+ White-capped and about 30 Southern Royal Albatrosses around the boat at one time. A single Buller's and 2 Campbell Albatrosses were welcome, as was a brief Mottled Petrel. All three of the expected species of penguin were found too, but a complete lack of any prions, and no storm-petrels was most unusual. Matt Jones was our deckhand and chummer-in-chief and he did a very good job – the Brown Skua interactions were awesome.

**Day 19, Sat Dec 7:** Up for 7 am breakfast then onto ferry for 8 am departure for Bluff and the South Island. Crossing was calm, uneventful, with only 3 albatrosses seen. Back to our van and the long drive to Oamaru. Stopped at a coastal headland to see a couple of very cool Yellow-eyed Penguins close up, then to Oamaru itself where the CBD is made up of incredibly beautiful limestone buildings from when Oamaru was very prosperous from wool and meat. Quick stop at an iconic colony of endemic Otago Shags, about 100 breeding pairs, closely related to the Foveaux Shags on Stewart Island. Trip list is 158, with three possible tomorrow, to crack the Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ goal of 160. Three of our four endemic misses were from heavy rain (including 2 kiwis and the Rock Wren) and the other was North Island Brown Kiwi - heard 30 didn't spot one!!??. This is by far our worst kiwi record, although Stewart Island helped ease the pain. The South Island is experiencing terrible weather- heavy rain and wind with lots of flooding. We dodged a bullet by getting off the West Coast in the nick of time and have escaped the worst of it except for our kiwi and wren rainouts.

**Day 20, Sun Dec 8:** Left Oamaru after finding a young, lost Blue Penguin huddled up in a crevice on the sidewalk near our motel and moving it into some nearby bushes. Hopefully its parents will find it tonight. Headed out for Tekapo where we looked for Chukar with no luck. Decided that Black Stilt was much more important and headed up the road a few miles to a (normally) reliable site. The rainy weather had raised the lake's level so there was no margin, and no Black Stilts were there. We then headed for another reliable site, near Twizel, but again high water levels were a problem until a juvenile was spotted at the very far end pond there. Sigh of relief! We decided then to go to perhaps the best site, expecting the area to be inundated, and it was!! However right along the track we had driven in on were 8 Black Stilts hunkered down, 7 juveniles and one nice black adult. On our way back towards Twizel, as we zipped past a lavender farm, there were three adult Black Stilts on bitty rainwater ponds- not their usual habitat, but anything would do with their regular haunts under water. So- a great total of 13 birds out of the entire world population of about 200.

The next site always feels like a long shot. However, we spread out, waited for a while, and amazingly two Baillon's Crakes appeared, one giving us great prolonged looks as it wandered around in the open. Quite un-crake-like. Number 160 for the trip and a quick find for a change.

Most of the group were due to fly out to Auckland from Christchurch tomorrow afternoon, but currently there is no road access to Christchurch from the south due to major river flooding covering the main highway bridge approaches. We'll have to see what happens in the morning. These storms have been devastating to the southern South Island and West Coast, where hundreds of people are stranded in Franz Josef, Haast, and Fox Glacier. We were very lucky to have made it through a few days ago!

**Day 21, Monday Dec 9:** Up early at 6 am to assess the situation. Roads still closed and not expected to open till at least this afternoon. Which will be too late for onwards flights. So, no real option but to charter a flight to Christchurch. We high-tailed up to the Air Safaris airport at

Tekapo and were able to get hold of flights a little later. This was not the end that we had hoped for, but devastating weather across the South Island has played havoc with many plans.

My thanks to all participants for their company, good humour and birding skill throughout the journey.