

Tour report

5 – 25 November 2019

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ & Sunrise Birding LLC



Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Gina Nichol & Steve Bird (Sunrise Birding LLC), Ruth & Mark Henry, Bettina & Bob Arrigoni, Brenda Inskeep, Duane Heaton and Tom Fiore

Images

Matt Jones, Gina Nichol



It really was such a pleasure to show New Zealand to the Sunrise Birding group. We had an incredible 21-days, even when the weather did not always play ball. We missed seeing Pycroft's Petrel due to a storm out of Whitianga; no Rock Wren due to heavy snowfall at Milford.

With a total of 165 species for the trip (inc Great Spotted Kiwi heard) it's personally the highest total for me on a 21-day Wrybill tour.

Every bird that we went for we saw; everyone found a bird; everyone saw every bird; and we had fun the whole way.

Matt Jones (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)



Mount Cook (Aoraki). Matt Jones.



Matt working hard (or hardly working). Gina Nichol.

5 November 2019 – Day One

We all met at 7.30am at an Auckland hotel to begin our 21-day birding tour of New Zealand. This was Sunrise Birding's inaugural trip to New Zealand and we were joined by owner/operator Gina Nichol and Steve Bird.

Kicking off birding in the car park as we packed luggage into the van, the first trip ticks were Tui and Eastern Rosella spotted in the morning sunshine. Navigating the morning Auckland traffic to reach an Australasian Gannet colony, things were in full swing with chicks begging for food and adults obliging. White-fronted Tern, Red-billed Gull, Kelp Gull and Variable Oystercatcher joined the list for a good morning's birding.

A cross-country drive and a stop in a layby got us our first Kookaburra sitting on overhead wires and a second bird just a few minutes later. These birds are not commonly seen on these tours so it was good to get one in the bag early.

New Zealand North Island Dotterels (Red-breasted Plover for the Americans) put on a great performance for the photographers as we ate lunch. As we headed north New Zealand's rarest bird joined our trip list; close views of two Fairy Terns with a supporting cast of Bar-tailed Godwits and Turnstones. A stop at a small suburban pond for New Zealand Dabchick, Australasian Little Grebe, Australasian Shoveler and New Zealand Scaup gave us a respectable first day list. There was one more target before the day ended - after dinner we headed out to search for our first kiwi species of the tour.



New Zealand dotterel posing for the camera.



Australasian little grebe amongst pond weed.

As we arrived at the site we heard a couple of birds distantly calling. Along the grassy track a rustle to my left and some movement revealed a male Northern Brown Kiwi. I flicked my torch off and waited a few minutes listening to him move in the long grass. With my torch on red beam the whole group enjoyed the next ten minutes watching this awesome iconic New Zealand endemic. The group were fantastic; really nice and quiet as we walked. A few more birds called but no more were seen and given the long day we'd all had we decided to head back to our accommodation. In the van as the group began to doze off I spotted a Morepork sitting on a streetlamp. I slammed the brakes on which woke everyone up with a start, but they all got out to watch this owl catch moths in the glow from the streetlamp. At 23.54 our first birding day was complete.

6 November 2019 – Day Two

The day began at a coastal estuary reacquainting ourselves with Fairy Terns at low tide. Watching Caspian Terns we were aware of a distant Reef Heron feeding in the shallows. Not everyone got on to it but it didn't matter because the bird took off and landed right in front of us along with a White-faced Heron showing the structural differences between the two. We also had good looks at Paradise Shelduck, Sacred Kingfisher and Pukeko (Purple Swamphen).



Looking out over the estuary. Matt Jones.



Fairy Tern in flight against a blue sky.

At the entrance to a forest reserve a pair of New Zealand Pipit showed well. Brown Teal, Whitehead, North Island Saddleback, and New Zealand Pigeon joined the list as did a pair of Shining Cuckoo that played hide and seek with us. Everyone connected with a pair of Kaka that called and flew overhead. At the car park we got Brown Quail and Eastern Rosella and heading out of the reserve good views of two Buff-banded Rail and our third Kookaburra for the trip.

7 November 2019 – Day Three

At Sandspit harbour prior to boarding our boat we scanned for Buff-banded Rail without much joy but had good looks at Grey Warbler. It was a foggy day for our Hauraki Gulf pelagic with hardly any wind. We got our first South Island Pied Oystercatchers as the skipper steered us out of the harbour and once in deeper water our first encounter with a large pod of bow-riding Bottlenose Dolphins. Fluttering Shearwaters were the first seabirds to arrive, our first look at Little Blue Penguin, occasional Buller's Shearwater and plenty of Flesh-footed Shearwaters.



A Buller's Shearwater skims the surface.

As the chum slick entered the water White-faced Storm Petrels appeared and after a few minutes the star of the show, our first New Zealand Storm Petrel! Little Shearwater was seen distantly and good views of Fairy Prions, plenty of Cook's Petrel and a fly-by Northern Giant Petrel (quite unusual at this time of year this far north). A Black Petrel (Parkinson's) finally turned up to join our growing list of seabirds along with Common Diving Petrels, one White-capped Albatross and as we headed back to the harbour another Little Shearwater.

The weather was not the best for this pelagic but all the birds we hoped for we saw.

8 November 2019 – Day Four

The day began with a quick stop at small reserve for excellent views of Buff-banded Rails with chicks before heading to catch the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi. This predator-free reserve is a highlight for any birder's visit to New Zealand and we were fortunate to be spending the night there.

There are so many new species (most of them rare endemics) for the list that the first hour of birding on Tiritiri Matangi can seem quite frantic! One of the most difficult birds to find is North Island Kokako, but amazingly it was one of the first birds we saw as we entered one of the walking trails. We picked up a bird calling and it hopped towards us and sat in a tree above our heads. Next was North Island Robin, the mega rare Stitchbird and North Island Saddleback. Red-crowned Parakeets were heard and briefly seen as we walked along a productive birding trail. A high-pitched call had the group scanning treetops and Gina spotted New Zealand's smallest bird. A pair of Rifleman fed in the canopy. I think there are easier places to see Rifleman than Tiritiri Matangi but nevertheless it's good to get it on the list early.



A male Stitchbird peering through the vegetation.

Further along the trail an epic battle ensued between a North Island Saddleback and Giant Weta. This went on for some time until both disappeared from view.

Plenty of Pukeko (Purple Swamphens) fed on the short grass as we headed for our own lunch break back at the bunkhouse. After lunch and with Spotless Crake, Brown Teal and Fernbird on our wish list we ventured to a small pond. Fernbird and Spotless Crake were calling as Brown Teal sat dabbling on the pond. Fernbird eventually gave itself up and sat on a bush looking at us and the crake played hide and seek with us and only a few of the group got to see it.



New Zealand pigeon sitting in the canopy.



A male Bellbird sits quietly for a change.

Moving on with hopes for better views of Spotless Crake and also Takahe which breed at this time of year and can be secretive when they have young. Our walk produced more North Island Robin, Whitehead, Stitchbird, North Island Saddleback, incredibly vocal Bellbirds and an attractive New Zealand Pigeon. Every Pukeko was closely scrutinised but resulted in zero Takahe. We were however very fortunate to find a day time sighting of a large Tuatara basking in dappled sunlight. This prehistoric reptile was around when the dinosaurs were (not this particular one, but the species!).

With plenty of Red-crowned Parakeet flying overhead and brief stops to find more cryptic Fernbirds hiding in the scrub, the next pond we stopped at rewarded us with mega views of Spotless Crake - and this time everyone saw them!

It was all hands-on-deck for preparation of our BBQ dinner which consisted of salmon, lamb, potatoes and salad... and wine & beer! Brenda had the important task of keeping eyes peeled for Takahe which do have the habit of appearing when the island goes quiet. Midway through dinner prep Brenda casually reported that a Takahe was around the corner. Ten people hastily grabbed bins and abandoned all other tasks to get a look of this prehistoric looking bird. With the pressure off for the moment we rescued our meal and sat down to enjoy the fruits of our labour. Our alfresco BBQ meal was accompanied by wine, beer and effortless conversation.

Staying overnight at Tiritiri Matangi provides the chance to see Little Spotted Kiwi. So, after dinner we tidied up and slipped our boots back on to search for our second kiwi species of the trip. Walking up steep steps towards the wharf I found myself almost at eye-level with a kiwi at the top of the steps heading away. The group were behind me, so everyone got into position before I raised my red beam for everyone to see our first Little Spotted Kiwi. He walked off the path and the whole group were then able to climb the rest of the steps to the top and we heard him again, literally just off the path looking at us, although not many of the group saw its spots.

Further down the trail we heard Cook's Petrel calling above us and had our first good views of Little Blue Penguin coming ashore. On a beach track we encountered a number of Tuatara of different sizes and heading uphill we got an incredible view of a Morepork that literally sat above our heads calling. To top off the night our second Little Spotted Kiwi showed well and this time everyone saw the spots! An epic day's birding on Tiritiri Matangi.

9 November 2019 – Day Five

With all of the Tiritiri Matangi birds on our wish list ticked, we were up early to enjoy relaxed birding for the last couple of hours. We got better looks at Takahe as we strolled around listening and looking at Saddleback, Stitchbird and Kokako. While waiting for the water taxi back to the mainland, Steve spotted a distant Arctic Skua, and then a few Fluttering Shearwaters and a fly-by of Northern Giant Petrel, from the Water Taxi.

Once again navigating the Auckland traffic we headed to Miranda, New Zealand's wader hotspot. It was windy and rainy at Miranda but it didn't prevent us from getting great views of Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, our first Wrybills and three distant Far Eastern Curlews. In-between showers we changed to a different hide and found the long staying rare Broad-billed Sandpiper along with three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers on the stilt ponds. Plenty of Pied Stilts yapped constantly. Good looks at Black-billed Gulls, South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers.

After some retail therapy at the shorebird centre we checked into our accommodation and headed for a fish and chip supper.



Steve and Gina enjoying their time on Tiritiri Matangi.



A Takahe struts past.



A red-crowned parakeet feeds on the ground.

10 November 2019 – Day Six

The previous evening I'd had a phone call from the Whitianga pelagic skipper advising that the weather was looking pretty dreadful for the pelagic planned for today. So, we got some early birding in back at Miranda - only one new bird for the list (two Whimbrel and some more Brown Teal on the stilt ponds) and better views of Broad-billed Sandpiper and Wrybill.

Heading inland and south via another wetland area we got better looks at Pacific Golden Plover but apart from Ring-necked Pheasant and Yellowhammer not too much else. The weather got worse and it's fair to say that the wiper blades on the van earned their corn that day. At large forested site we scoured the old growth forest, finding our first Yellow-crowned Parakeets, more Kaka, North Island Tomtit, plenty of Bellbird, Tui and the occasional New Zealand Pigeon.

Driving really became a challenge as the roads became rivers. Relieved to check into our accommodation and change into some dry clothes, we headed back out to a restaurant for a well-earned meal.

11 November 2019 – Day Seven

Up with the dawn chorus or possibly before, to look for Blue Duck. The heavy rain had made the river the fullest I'd ever seen it. Running fast and brown there were not many places for Blue Duck to sit up on but amazingly by 6.15am we found one sitting in the open. Great to get this rare endemic under our belt before breakfast. At a nearby wetland we got a flyby view of Australasian Bittern and a few minutes later a second bird gave prolonged views as it flew over the reed beds. A supporting cast of New Zealand Dabchick, New Zealand Scaup, Little Black Shag along with Little Pied Shag, Black-billed Gull, Redpoll and Dunnoek ... all before 7.30am!

Back to the accommodation for breakfast and, as we had a day to spare due to the Whitianga pelagic being cancelled, we headed back to a forested area. At the same spot as we'd been yesterday, a male New Zealand Falcon appeared over the treetops. The sun was shining and we had good views of Yellow-crowned Parakeet and two Long-tailed Cuckoos flying above our head. What a difference a day makes!

12 November 2019 – Day Eight

Back at the river the next morning for one more look at Blue Duck before heading towards Napier and Hawkes Bay. A quick stop at the base of Lake Taupo for some very obliging Black-billed Gulls; this very pleasant looking gull is one of three New Zealand gulls and is rapidly becoming one of the rarest gulls in the world. Definitely worth doing a u-turn and a stop-looksy.



Up close with a black-billed gull.

Up into our last North Island forest for looks at our last North Island Robin, Rifleman, Whitehead. High canopy views of a pair of Kokako, but no falcon or cuckoos heard as we headed down into Napier accompanied by a massive thunder and lightning storm. At a city park we found one of the two Plumed Whistling Ducks – this rare vagrant from Australia has made this park its home for the last few years. A surprise find was a stunning Cattle Egret in breeding plumage in amongst the Little Pied Cormorants at the park. At nearby wetlands where we found our first Black-fronted and Double-banded Dotterels along with Bar-tailed Godwits, Spoonbills and Black Swans.

The day was finished off with a fantastic Thai meal in town as we entered our second week on tour.

13 November 2019 – Day Nine

With most of the North Island birds in the bag we had a leisurely start leaving Napier. At a small pond on the outskirts of town we got great views of Australasian Bittern, Royal Spoonbills and a fly-by from Australasian Swamp Harriers. A scenic stop provided us with New Zealand Pipit and views over Hawkes Bay.



One of the more glamorous introductions to New Zealand is Indian Peafowl and this was our first new bird of the day, seen in quite a few paddocks as we drove the back-country roads.

A sit-down lunch was enjoyed at a local café, instead of the now obligatory kiwi pie for lunch, and even some time for the group to do Christmas shopping. By now we were getting to grips with Tom's habit, or perhaps "skill" is a better description for his speed shopping. Wherever we stopped for lunch he managed to find a new item of clothing to buy...

Onwards to a west coast Estuary where we reconnected with Wrybill and Double-banded Plover, a few Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot and a particularly showy Pacific Golden Plover that got the cameras clicking.

It had been a big driving day and we checked into our Foxton accommodation early. Tomorrow would see us head to the South Island by ferry from Wellington.



A Pacific Golden Plover showing well.

14 November 2019 – Day Ten

Today began with a brief stop at a sewage ponds, just to keep it real! Australasian Shoveler, New Zealand Scaup and New Zealand Dabchick to name a few.

At a brief bakery stop, which happened to be next to a shop selling merino and possum clothing, Tom needed no encouragement to make a purchase or two, nor indeed did the rest of the group... but New Zealand's capital city beckoned and the Wellington ferry terminal was our next destination.

This ferry crossing has to be one of the best rides in the world - if you're into birds! The weather wasn't too bad and we added Spotted Shag to the list, along with one juvenile New Zealand Wandering Albatross, a brief appearance from a Grey-faced Petrel, four Westland Petrels and one Sooty Shearwater. As we entered Tory Channel we got four White-capped Albatross, one Northern Giant Petrel, a couple of Arctic Skuas, and ever present Fluttering Shearwaters.

15 November 2019 – Day Eleven

Our first full day on the South Island and we were on the water by 7.45am heading into Queen Charlotte Sound, where we quickly found a pod of Dusky Dolphins feeding with Australasian Gannets and Fluttering Shearwaters. Three King Shags roosted on rocks (one of our main target species for the day). We disembarked the boat at a small island and were met by "customs", otherwise known as Western Weka! They were very curious about the reason for our visit and performed well for the camera.



New Zealand King Shags roosting.

This island provided our only chance for Orange-fronted Parakeet on this tour, and they can be tricky to see. I headed for a location that I'd seen this rare endemic previously when Bob asked, "Is this one here?"



The curious and confiding Weka.



Orange-fronted Parakeet feeding quietly in the sub-canopy.

Within minutes the whole group were watching an Orange-front sitting in the open. It flew above the path to meet its mate where they proceeded to interact with one another and feed right above our heads for the next 20 minutes. Magic!

As the boat returned to Picton we saw a couple of Arctic Skua and four Pacific Reef Heron did a couple of circuits around the boat. Our lunch stop usually offers a chance to see Black Kite but unfortunately not today. Next destination was a sewage ponds, where we found a pair of Cirl Bunting. This cryptic and quite shy introduced Bunting is always a firm favourite and everyone had a good opportunity for scope views of this bird's humbug patterned head.



A New Zealand King Shag in flight.

At a Royal Spoonbill breeding colony, we picked out at least four Glossy Ibis that were breeding there also. This is a new breeding bird to New Zealand and is still quite rare here - always nice to get them on the list.

A roadside lake provided distant views of Australasian Crested Grebe, a new trip tick, but then we found our fourth and rarest grebe species of the tour – a pair of Hoary-headed Grebes hid amongst the dead trees on the fringe of the lake. This rare Australian vagrant has bred in this location for the last couple of years and it's incredible how they can just disappear! More of a surprise and a bit easier to find was the drake Northern Shoveler that swam in front of the viewing platform giving us excellent views. This is a bird that we hadn't counted on seeing even though it's pretty common in North America and Europe - in New Zealand it's a bit of a mega. So, this little roadside lake had given the tour three new species.



A vagrant drake Northern Shoveler paddles about.

Heading south on the coastal road, which still bears the scars of the earthquake in 2017, we stopped to admire the sight and (briefly) smell the New Zealand Fur Seals that are re-colonising the rocky coastline as we headed into Kaikoura.

Bit of a challenge to get a meal tonight as it was Canterbury anniversary weekend and everywhere was booked up or busy. We managed to find sustenance at a local bar before heading out to look for Little Owl. What a way to end our first full day on the South Island, a great sighting of a single Little Owl sitting in a dead *Macrocarpa* tree.

16 November 2019 – Day Twelve

Up bright and early the next morning for some pre-pelagic birding around Kaikoura, where we got a few distant Fur Seals and even further out, our first Hutton's Shearwater.

We had two pelagics booked at Kaikoura for the whole group. Doing the numbers thing, pelagic number one:

1 Southern Royal, 1 Northern Royal, 6 New Zealand Wandering Albatross (Gibson's), 1 White-capped Albatross, 4 Salvin's Albatross, 1 juvenile Black-browed Albatross, 12 Westland Petrel, 1 White-chinned Petrel, 1 brief look at Short-tailed Shearwater, 1 Buller's Shearwater from the north, 1 Grey-faced Petrel,

Hutton's Shearwater whizzing past the boat. Northern Giant Petrels and Cape Petrels fought over the chum at the back of the boat. 1 Reef Heron fed in the shallows of South Bay.



A Northern Giant Petrel flies past the boat.



A New Zealand Wandering Albatross cruises past the boat.



A juvenile Black-browed Albatross in flight.



A Northern Giant Petrel postures for chum at the back of the boat.



A New Zealand Wandering Albatross washes itself after feeding.



A Hutton's Shearwater takes off.

After an excellent lunch at Encounter Café it was back out on the water with our charismatic and amusing skipper Mr Gary Melville, aka Gazza. Numbers for pelagic number two were:

5 New Zealand Wandering Albatross, 4 White-capped Albatross, 4 Salvin's Albatross, 2 Northern Royal Albatross, 1 Short-tailed Shearwater, 7 Westland Petrel. Northern Giant Petrels and Cape Petrels still squabbled over their lunch. Better looks at a flock of (close) Hutton's Shearwater that only breed in the Kaikoura range, a special bird in a special area. A mega pod of Dusky Dolphins including calves plus two Arctic Skua on the way back to the harbour.

Kaikoura really had done the business!

17 November 2019 – Day Thirteen

Leaving Kaikoura after breakfast we did a brief search for Brown Creeper (Pipipi), but came up short, no sight nor sound. We did find Redpoll, obliging Grey Warbler and black morph New Zealand Fantail. From the back of the van as we headed south, Steve spotted a pair of Cape Barren Geese with one gosling. These prehistoric looking waterfowl are a sought after introduction to New Zealand, and they put on quite a show along with some NZ Scaup, Pukeko and Mallards.

At a small estuary stop the tide was incredibly high, but with a bit of patience and perseverance the birds started to appear. As the tide began to drop, first Black-fronted Terns appeared at a distance then a few Bar-tailed Godwits and Double-banded Plovers. The long staying vagrant Greater Sand Plover along with three Wrybill, plus Caspian Tern, Black-billed Gulls and Ruddy Turnstones.

Next stop was not so much birdy, more eaty! Back track to our first days on tour when the group were not very sure about the staple New Zealand food group – pies! Two weeks on tour they had earned their "pie stripes" and, like a well-oiled machine, did me proud. At the famous Sheffield Pie Shop near Arthur's Pass they rattled off their pie order just like any proud kiwi!

Savoury and sweet pies were devoured and only a few pie crumbs remained as evidence as we drove towards the mountains and stunning scenery of the Southern Alps. I usually stop at a forested area nearby, but it became obvious that the once small trickle of water was now a full white-water river and we could not cross the ford. We did get good looks at a Black-fronted Tern hawking up and down the swollen river though.

In to Arthur's Pass township where unusually there was no sign of Kea. At a car park where they usually hang around there were two birds which flew off almost immediately. In the distance we watched a battle between a large female NZ Falcon and Kea on a high ridgeline above us; the Kea would fly up and the Falcon would go into a large stoop; quite spectacular to see.

Back at our hotel for a nice evening meal we were having a quiet drink when a Kea appeared on the back deck of the hotel, willing to have its photo taken by all in sundry.

After the sun went down we went in search of Great Spotted Kiwi, by far the most difficult of the kiwi to see. A couple of locations resulted in a blank for kiwi but we did find a Brush-tailed Possum. From the other side of the valley a distant male Great Spotted Kiwi called. It was midnight and we thought we'd quit while we were ahead.

18 November 2019 – Day Fourteen



Walking through beautiful forest.

Breakfast at our hotel surrounded by some of the most stunning scenery in New Zealand. As I packed the luggage into the van I heard a Brown Creeper calling behind me and quickly rallied the troops out of their rooms to get the first looks of this NZ endemic.

A quick stop at the DOC office and then to a bush walk where we connected with Rifleman, our first South Island Robins, South Island Tomtit and a distant Kea. Leaving the mountains behind us we headed to the West Coast with only a brief stop to see Western Weka feeding in a field.

Greymouth supplied fuel for the van and lunch for us. On route to Hokitika we stopped at sewage ponds to see Pacific Black Duck, Black Swan and New Zealand Scaup. Lunch was enjoyed, not at the sewage ponds, but at Ross on the stunning West Coast.

At Okarito we met Ian Cooper who was going to guide us later that night to search for Okarito Kiwi, the rarest of the kiwi species. After a briefing from Ian and a quick look at the lagoon we headed into Franz Josef to check in to our accommodation and have an evening meal before we headed back out to look for Okarito Kiwi. We had brief views of Great White Egret thanks to Bob's sharp eyes.

During our night time adventure, a male kiwi called "BZ" led us on a merry dance. Ian sent me on a recce up the road where I stumbled across "Bo" who is the son of "BZ" but unfortunately, he ducked back into cover before the group could see him. For what seemed like a lifetime, Ian said, "Good news, BZ is walking straight towards us, I think it's going to happen..." and just like magic, the male Okarito Kiwi called "BZ" walked out on the side of the road in front of everyone. He proceeded to walk up the road without a care in the world as we slowly trailed behind. This was one of the best views I've had of Okarito Kiwi. The relief that everyone had got stunning views of this shy and elusive bird was incredible.

19 November 2019 – Day Fifteen

We left Franz Josef in heavy rain with a quick stop at Fox Glacier to give the wiper blades a rest and for us to get caffeine. Rain gear was put on as we attempted a 40-minute hike along a beach track in the hope of seeing our first Fiordland Crested Penguin.

At the end of the track the usual stream we'd cross was a raging torrent which meant nobody could cross safely today. Fortunately, we had a couple of scopes between us and Tom was able to locate three or four distant Fiordland Crested Penguins that thankfully everyone got on to. The trudge back through the rain to the van was a slog with only an occasional Tomtit for company. Back in the van as the heater went on full blast and sodden coats were removed, talk got around to wet weather gear made in the UK, NZ and the US should be tested at the West Coast! Everyone was soaked. And that's why it's so green on the West Coast!

We had a brief stop at Haast for a bite to eat and cup of tea to recharge our batteries before heading even further south in search of the sought-after Yellowhead (Mohua), cousin of the Brown Creeper. We had brief views of this stunning bird which called and hopped above our heads with Yellow-crowned Parakeets and Rifleman. When we reached the lakeside town of Wanaka, our destination for the night, the rain had finally stopped. Time for a curry!

20 November 2019 – Day Sixteen

Today was another big drive day from Wanaka to Milford. Our target bird was Rock Wren but due to heavy snow and high risk of avalanche, the Milford Road was closed. This was especially hard for Steve because this was his second trip to New Zealand and also the second time this diminutive alpine bird had slipped away from him.

Undeterred, we drove the scenic route through the Cardrona Range looking down on bustling Queenstown before heading through to Te Anau for our now obligatory pie stop (and pee stop!). With some time on our

hands we checked out the lake at Te Anau and got excellent views of Australasian Crested Grebe doing a nest change, one of the birds even swimming right in front of us.



Great-crested Grebe paddles across the surface.



A South Island Robin gets up close.



A Brown Creeper (Pipipi) in the Beech forest.



The group enjoys great views of Black-fronted Terns.



A Black-fronted Tern hovers whilst feeding.

On the Milford Road we drove as far as we could before vehicles were prevented from going any further. A forest walk gave great views of Rifleman (male and female), Brown Creeper, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, and Kaka flying overhead. An incredibly approachable South Island Robin with young made photographers in the group incredibly happy. At another location we saw at least 30 Black-fronted Terns hawking up and down the river and the occasional South Island Pied Oystercatcher.

Today there were no new birds for the trip list apart from the Fat Duck, the restaurant we ate at that evening!

21 November 2019 – Day Seventeen

A slight change of plan today, due to the postponement of our scheduled ferry to Stewart Island, meant that we decided to catch an earlier ferry. Leaving Te Anau we headed through the farmland of the deep south before a quick fuel stop at Invercargill and down to Bluff. Always time for birding, so an impromptu stop we added a pair of the long staying Chestnut-breasted Shelduck that had been in the area for a few years now.

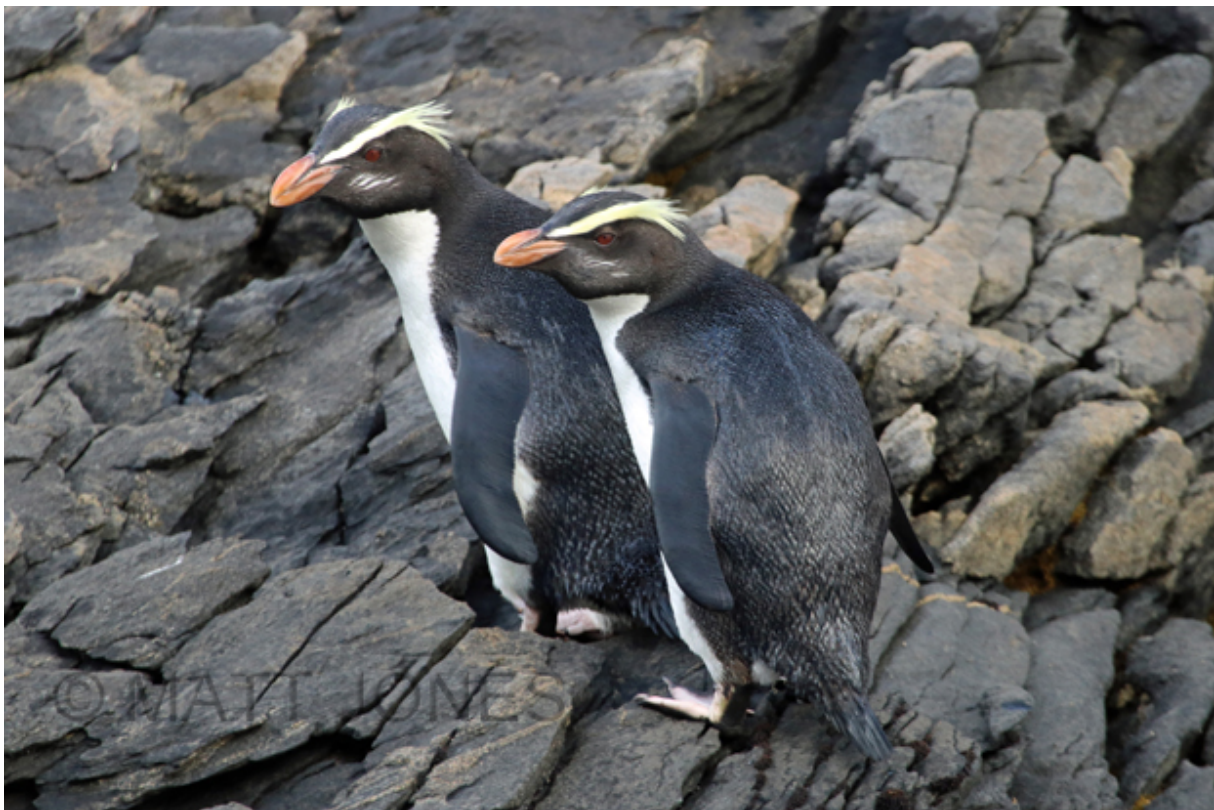
A windy ferry ride across Foveaux Strait and the first good bird was Foveaux Shag followed by one Buller's Albatross and two Southern Brown Skua. That's the way to start Stewart Island! On arrival into Halfmoon Bay we picked up a distant Fiordland Crested Penguin roosting on the rocks. After checking in to our accommodation and a caffeine hit we jumped on a water taxi to Ulva Island and got a brief look at Fiordland Crested Penguins on the way. The only bird we needed at Ulva Island was South Island

Saddleback which we got. Three hours at Ulva Island passed quickly but we had fantastic views of at least five South Island Saddleback, plus mega looks at Yellowhead and Brown Creeper, Yellow-crowned and Red-crowned Parakeet, Kaka, Weka and Robins.

That evening we headed out to look for our final kiwi species of the tour, the Southern Brown Kiwi. Six birds were seen and showed quite well, plus a Morepork all seen before midnight! A big but rewarding day.

22 November 2019 – Day Eighteen

Today was one of those special Stewart Island pelagic days; a very strong north west warm wind rising to 40 plus knots in the afternoon. We started with better looks at Fiordland Crested Penguins. No joy with Yellow-eyed at some of the islands, but the Southern Brown Skuas performed incredibly well. South to our normal chumming location, where within ten minutes we had 100+ White-capped Albatross, Salvin's and at least 20 Southern Royal Albatrosses. Grey-backed Storm Petrel was in the slick and a few minutes later a stonking Broad-billed Prion showed very well. A lone Buller's Albatross arrived for better views than yesterday's bird seen from the ferry, our seventh albatross species of the tour. Other birds seen were 30+ White-chinned Petrel, 1 Westland Petrel, 4 Short-tailed Shearwater in amongst the thousands of Sooties. On to a new location and everyone got on to the only Mottled Petrel of the day that cruised past us.



Some nice close Fiordland Crested Penguins to start the day!



Beauty little Grey-backed Storm Petrel whisks over the waves.

After a lunch stop in calmer waters we headed back out and another three Grey-backed Stormies fed together, plenty of Fairy Prions along with Northern Giant Petrels and Cape Petrels. I picked out a White-faced Stormie and two Cook's Petrels. Just about to head home when I spotted a Black-bellied Storm Petrel heading towards the slick – mega!

We looked for Yellow-eyed Penguin on the return journey but our good fortune had run out. It was an incredible pelagic - everyone was happy and no one lost their lunch!

23 November 2019 – Day Nineteen

We left Stewart Island on Saturday morning in much calmer weather than when we'd arrived. No new birds during the ferry crossing until we got to Bluff and a distant Yellow-eyed Penguin was spotted - unfortunately not everyone got on to it.

We re-found the two Chestnut-breasted Shelduck before our drive through the Catlins. We didn't see any New Zealand Sea Lions. Just south of Oamaru, we had our last chance to find Yellow-eyed Penguins, after some searching, we were rewarded, when Gina spotted a couple of adult Yellow-eyed. Two birds came ashore and then two birds went out to sea. It was excellent to see these critically endangered penguins. Into the Victorian town of Oamaru, then to a roost for Otago Shag along with a few Spotted Shag.



A post-breeding Spotted Shag still with spots.

24 November 2019 – Day Twenty

Our last full day's birding and into MacKenzie country. A pie stop at Fairlie and then on to Tekapo and a nearby spot in search of Chukar. This introduced partridge can be surprisingly elusive. Bob spotted a distant bird and we enjoyed fantastic views of the MacKenzie Plains. On the drive back down the hill a Chukar sat beside the road and stayed even when I opened the side door of the van.



A Chukar poses for the group.



Birding in beautiful scenery.

Our lunch stop was in the company of a nice pair of Black Stilt (Kaki). There are less than 200 of this incredibly rare wader left in the wild. Lunch surrounded by snow-capped mountains, Black Stilts on a small pond with their Pied Stilt cousins, bleating Merino Sheep... could it get any more New Zealand?!



A pair of Pied Stilts fly across the pond.



Merino sheep look at us hoping the pies are vegetarian.



An adult Black Stilt, one of the rarest waders in the World.

At another site we had another five very showy juvenile Black Stilt feeding along the river, along with one Wrybill, one New Zealand Pipit picked up by Mark, two Black-fronted Tern showed well and at least four Double-banded Dotterel plus a couple of South Island Pied Oystercatchers. All this, with Mount Cook as a backdrop. At a site just outside Twizel we searched for Baillon's Crake but had no joy. A pair of Black Stilt showed up right next to us and proceeded to feed in a small puddle, completely oblivious to our open-mouthed gazes and snapping cameras. We'd seen 10+ of these endemic dainty waders - definitely one of my favourite birds.

Our last evening together was in Twizel and we laughed as we relived the highlights of the past twenty days.

25 November 2019 – Day Twenty-One

Our final morning and it was destination Christchurch.

We hadn't seen Red-necked Stint on this tour and I really wanted to get this bird onto our list before the end the trip. Brenda and Duane were booked on early afternoon flights out of Christchurch Airport, so no pressure!

We got Mute Swan without even having to leave the van and at the lake edge of Ellesmere we got more Wrybill and a few Double-banded Dotterel... and our first Red-necked Stint appeared in front of us – brilliant! Some of the birds in front of us flew up and away to the right to join a larger flock of Red-necked Stint. Everyone got on to them and while Gina was scanning through her scope she said, "One of those

stints is ginger...”. Boom!! Little Stint. This was a New Zealand tick for ME and a great bird to end our tour with! The bird had been reported a few weeks earlier hanging around with a flock of red necks - a mega for NZ - in full breeding plumage, go figure. Amazingly, during the last two hours of birding before we reached the airport we'd added three new birds to the list and one of them a much sought-after vagrant.

Buzzing as we drove the busy roads of Christchurch, we dropped Brenda and Duane at the airport and everyone else at their Christchurch accommodation. Having made new friends, we said our goodbyes.