

Tour report

14 January – 3 February 2008

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Roger & Gil Broadbent, Mel & Heather Billington

Day 1. 14 Jan.

Auckland to Trounson. 0830 pick-up from central Auckland hotel. First birding at a lake north of Auckland, Waiwera and Wenderholm where a good variety of commoner NZ species showed well. NZ Dabchick, NZ Dotterel, NZ Pigeon, both endemic Oystercatchers, Grey Warbler and Tui were the highlight species for the morning. Continued North to Trounson Park where we added (North Island) Tomtit, and a juvenile Shining Cuckoo being fed in the grounds of the accommodation. The night-time Kiwi walk with Herb provided good enough views of 2 North Island Brown Kiwis, and several Moreporks heard.

Day 2. 15 Jan.

Trounson to Warkworth. A relatively leisurely start after Kiwi night, starting at Tane Mahuta and the Waipoua Kauri Forest. Excellent views of Fernbird and another Tomtit in this area, and then cross-country to Waipu. En route stop yielded NZ Pipit and then we spent a relaxed afternoon at Waipu where a single Fairy Tern performed well along with all the expected shorebirds including 20+ NZ Dotterel and 17 Banded Dotterel.

Day 3. 16 Jan.

Warkworth to Warkworth. Hauraki Gulf pelagic. A full day on the water with Brett Rathe on the 'Assassin'. Excellent weather and Brett's local knowledge made for a great day, cleaning up on all the hoped-for species. Undoubted highlight for all was the brilliant display put on by about 10 New Zealand Storm-petrels

through the day, but this was backed-up by 500+ Cook's Petrels, 40+ Black Petrels, lots of White-faced Storm-petrels and 5 species of Shearwater. The only disappointing aspect of the day was the lack of decent views of Little Shearwater with only one bird seen briefly. Bonus birds were available in the form of a single Grey-faced Petrel, a very obliging Black-winged Petrel and about 20 Grey Ternlets. A brief stop just off Little Barrier Island produced 2 Long-tailed Cuckoos and Kaka.

Day 4. 17 Jan.

Warkworth to Tiritiri Matangi Island. Across on the ferry to Tiritiri in fine weather. Soon nailed all the usual suspects on the island, with lots of (North Island) Saddlebacks, Stitchbirds, Whiteheads and Red-crowned Parakeets. Kokako were a little more difficult, but eventually gave themselves up well, as did Spotless Crake and Takahe. The biggest surprise was the paucity of Brown Quail, with only a pair and a chick seen. Fernbirds were frustrating, but again eventually showed well. After dinner we trekked out for Little Spotted Kiwi, seeing a female fairly quickly and then having brilliant prolonged views of a male – also nocturnal Brown Teal in the forest. Only heard Morepork – must try harder!

Day 5. 18 Jan.

Tiritiri to Miranda. A leisurely morning on the island, with time spent variously picking off better views of those species that individuals wanted. Left the island at c1030 with everything satisfactorily gripped. No birding stops on the way down to Miranda. Outside the Shorebird Centre a family group of Banded Rails showed really well including 6 chicks. The Stilt Ponds area was excellent value, with about 1000 Wrybill giving fantastic views, along with 5 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, 2 Red-necked Stints, 3 NZ Dotterel, our first Black-billed Gulls and 3 Little Terns (and hordes of Bar-tailed Godwits).

Day 6. 19 Jan.

Miranda to Napier. First birds of the day were the Banded Rails at the Shorebird centre, then off to Whangamarino where we had our first dip of the trip. Unusually, there were no Australasian Bitterns on show, so it was off to Pureora and some more bush birds. Pureora itself was a little disappointing, with only a few (North Island) Tomtits, a handful of (North Island) Robins, 3+ Yellow-crowned Parakeets and some Kaka of any note. Onwards to Napier for the night – adding such megas as Mute Swan, Redpoll and Coot to the trip list.....

Day 7. 20 Jan.

Napier to Napier. Spent most of this day on the water in Hawke Bay. The going was a bit rough to start with and meant that the hoped-for journey out to really deep water was not to be. None-the-less a pretty successful pelagic with our first Albatrosses – White-capped, Salvin's and an immature Black-browed/Campbell and plenty of Buller's and Flesh-footed Shearwaters. A couple of White-faced Storm-petrels were a bit of a bonus, as was a single Cook's Petrel. Once back on dry land we birded the Ahuriri Estuary area, picking up Black-fronted Dotterel, about 20 Pacific Golden Plover, assorted ducks and 20+ Royal Spoonbill.

Day 8. 21 Jan.

Napier to Turangi. After a brief stop for NZ Dabchick and some Little Black and Little Shags, we spent a lot of the day waiting (and waiting!) for New Zealand Falcon at a known nest-site. A bird called just as we arrived, and then again as we were walking through the forest toward the nest – but that was all, for ages. Not until we had given up and got back into the vehicle did a Falcon flash across the road – presumably headed right to where we had been standing. Though it was obvious what the bird was, the view was so brief as to be un-tickable. Not all was lost though, as, while waiting for the Falcon, we had been treated to magnificent views of heaps of Riflemen, and a few Tomtits. On the way to Turangi we spent a while enjoying cracking views of several Fernbirds.

Day 9. 22 Jan.

Turangi to Feilding. Only one target bird today: Blue Duck. One would have to say it didn't turn out too badly (!?), with at least 10 adults/juveniles and 4 ducklings seen really well. We were also treated to the sight of DoC workers trying (unsuccessfully) to mist-net the juv birds in mid-stream. The only other noteworthy birds of the day were Tomtit and NZ Pipit.

Day 10. 23 Jan.

Feilding to Picton. First stop at the estuary of the Manawatu River, where 29 Wrybill were the best waders, along with fair numbers of both Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit. 3 Cattle Egret were slightly unexpected. Otaki sewage ponds produced several NZ Dabchicks and good views of 3 Black-fronted Dotterel, and a heap of assorted waterfowl. Then it was on to the ferry for the trip to South Island. The ferry crossing produced moderate numbers and variety – about 15 Albatrosses (White-capped, Salvin's and a couple of Wanderers which seemed to be Gibson's) lots of Fluttering Shearwaters, and 10 – 20 each of Flesh-footed, Buller's and

Sooty Shearwaters. Spotted Shags were new for the trip and there were a few hundred Fairy Prions in mid-strait.

Day 11. 24 Jan.

Picton to Kaikoura. The morning was spent on the Dolphinwatch Marlborough boat out to White Rocks and Motuara Island. Main target was the breeding colony of King Shags at White Rocks, and these birds duly obliged, with about 70 individuals seen. A handful of Arctic Skuas performed in the Queen Charlotte Sound and Motuara provided first looks at both (South Island) Robin and (South Island) Saddleback. Then on to the stake-out for a vagrant Black Kite near Blenheim. This bird did not really do as it was supposed to, allowing only brief views to some of the group – so we pressed on to Lake Grassmere (4 Sharp-tailed sands, 3 Wrybill, 3 Pacific Golden Plover) and then to Kaikoura.

Day 12. 25 Jan.

Kaikoura to Kaikoura. One of the highlights of any NZ tour is the Oceanwings trip at Kaikoura – the ridiculously close views of a range of pelagic species must be unrivalled in the world, and we were not disappointed. The 2.5 hour trip brought 7 Albatross taxa, good views of Hutton's Shearwaters, close comparative views of Westland and White-chinned Petrel and lots of the commoner species. Bonus birds for Kaikoura were the 2 White-faced Storm-petrels that stayed with us for a while and then I got very excited by the sight of a "cookliaria" gadfly Petrel. This bird turned out to be "just" a Cook's Petrel – but a very rare bird for this part of the world – indeed any other species of similar rarity value for Kaikoura would have been a lifer for someone on board! After the boat trip we turned inland for Brown Creeper and prolonged views of a black-phase Fantail, also ticking off Reef Heron just South of Kaikoura.

Day 13. 26 Jan

Kaikoura to Punakaiki. A long drive across the island punctuated by a couple of worthwhile stops. First into St. Anne's lagoon for feral Cape Barren Geese (6 seen), then the Waiau River for Black-fronted Tern (about 20 performing well) and into forest near Lewis Pass where we had our first (South Island) Tomtit as well as Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Rifleman and (South Island) Robin. Just prior to Punakaiki we stopped off at a road-side picnic area where we eventually picked up our first Weka. The reason for being at Punakaiki was to look for Great Spotted Kiwi, and so after dinner that is where we headed. We heard many Moreporks and were lucky enough to spotlight one, but the Great Spots gave us the slip. At least 3, and probably 4, Great Spotted Kiwis were heard calling, frustratingly close to the path (one maybe within 10m of it) but refused to show themselves. This was our first big dip of the trip – an endemic species that we could not hope to pick up at another location. Although this species is notoriously hard to see, it was still rather disappointing.

Day 14. 27 Jan.

Punakaiki to Franz Joseph. A fairly short drive down the coast to Okarito and Franz Joseph. Additional birds to the trip list were Great Crested Grebe and Great Egret, also another couple of Weka, excellent views of 2 more Long-tailed Cuckoos and more (South Island) Tomtits. The main event though was another night of Kiwi hunting – this time the rarest of the lot, the Okarito Brown Kiwi (only about 250 individuals in existence). Excellent weather helped and we were treated to brilliant views of these birds in the company of Ian Cooper – also lots more calling Moreporks. So 3 out of 4 Kiwi species so far had given themselves up, with the “surefire” Stewart Island Kiwi yet to come.....

Day 15. Jan 28.

Franz Joseph to Wanaka. What was to become a rather frustrating day started well with Kea calling and eventually visible from our accommodation – we ended up with good views of 4 birds. The other target for the day was Yellowhead, but the forest there turned out to be strangely quiet with no sign at all of any Yellowheads and precious little else showing except a few Riflemen, Yellow-crowned Parakeets, Tomtits and a couple of Kaka.

Day 16. Jan 29.

Wanaka to Te Anau. One of the best days of the whole trip. Scenery was spectacular, the weather fine and the birds conspired to put on quite a show. First up was a very obliging male NZ Falcon which was first seen flying across the road at the viewpoint overlooking the valley down to Queenstown. This bird was tracked down to allow great views on the ground and then sitting on a fence post – everyone was thoroughly happy after the non-existent showing through the North Island. This was backed up by stunning views about an hour later near the small town of Athol where we were lucky enough to see a pair of Falcons actually transferring a prey item in flight (from male to female, who then appeared to go to the nest site and deposit the prey there). Suitably full of the joys of spring we carried on towards Milford Sound to look for Rock Wren. This is one of the most sought after species of the trip, and one which is always a great relief to pin down. After a slightly anxious wait we finally found 2 birds foraging together which allowed simply fantastic views for all. Add to this 6 Keas in their natural car-park habitat – on, under and all over the cars and vans parked there. A brilliant day all round.

Day 17. Jan 30.

Te Anau to Stewart Island. The day started well with another NZ Falcon soaring over the road near Manapouri, and a stop at wetland where we saw a Baillon's Crake and heard a couple of Fernbirds. This

looked to be a prime spot, just oozing with rarity potential. Down then to Bluff and a quick seawatch before the ferry to Stewart Island. We were able to add Stewart Island Shag and Buller's Albatross to the list from Bluff, and then had a reasonable crossing with 10+ Buller's and 10+ White-capped Albatrosses, along with Cape Petrels, 2 Brown Skuas and 2 Common Diving Petrels. That night we had a go at the last of our potential Kiwi species – Stewart Island Brown Kiwi, and were not disappointed. Though we unfortunately never got to see one on the open beach, there were brief, but close views in the forest. A Mottled petrel was heard overhead in the darkness.

Day 18. Jan 31.

Stewart Island. A pelagic trip in the morning took us out to Wreck Reef and the birding was good. Southern Royal Albatross, and an immature Campbell Albatross (showing a pale eye) were among about 50 Albatrosses of 6 taxa. We had excellent views of 3 Brown Skuas, multitudes of Sooty Shearwaters and a single Little Shearwater, 50+ Common Diving Petrels and a Mottled Petrel – and Mel had a frustrating brief view of an unidentified tubenose which defied attempts to place it in any species. The afternoon was spent on Ulva Island with all the specialties performing well. Yellowhead proved the most elusive, and after hearing a few singing it was a great relief to find a family party of 2 adults and 2 immatures really showing well just over our heads.

Day 19. Feb 1.

Stewart to Oamaru. We spent most of this day in persistent rain. Nothing much of note on the ferry crossing except another Mottled Petrel, and not a lot through the day until we got near to Oamaru for one of the last remaining endemics – Yellow-eyed Penguin. The weather was still fairly poor, but the 2 adult Penguins and one chick that we saw made up for that.

Day 20. Feb 2.

Oamaru to Omarama. Only one big bird left to find – Black Stilt. We drove along a river to “the” spot only to find the cupboard bare! A NZ Falcon calling was the only bird of any note, but we left without tracking it down in favour of looking for the Stilts somewhere else. One of the quotes of the trip was from Roger a few minutes later: “There's something black in this field, it might be a tussock though”. Turned out to be a fantastic pick-up of a single Black Stilt on a tiny puddle in the middle of an arbitrary road-side paddock! Having found one Black Stilt of course others just threw themselves at us – another at one spot and 2 more at another gave excellent views and photographic opportunities. Also very obliging were 3 Baillon's Crakes and 40+ Black-fronted Terns (a species which appears to be on a sharp decline).

Day 21. Feb 3.

Omarama to Christchurch. Our final day, and in many ways a bit of an anti-climax. Roger's Black Stilt was seen again, and we had 7 Chukars on the way, but nothing of any note at Lake Ellesmere except for a big flock of Banded Dotterel. So the trip came to a close.

All of our targeted birds had given themselves up (with the exception of the Great Spotted Kiwi that had taunted us and the Australasian Bittern which simply failed to show), and all had given great views. No-one else gets to see 4 Kiwi species and all the other available endemics in a 3-week trip, so another highly successful trip for Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ.

Thanks to Roger, Gil, Mel and Heather for making it all such good fun.