

Tour report

21 November – 12 December 2010

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Brian and Nicky Leach, Mark and Becky Lystig, Karen Simon, Mark Miller, Josie Woodham and Janet Avery

Day 1.

Picked up Mark M from the airport and then the rest from their hotel, and made our way across to The Cascades for an introduction to NZ bush birds. Then to the West Coast for Gannets and on to Waiwera and Wenderholm. All the usual suspects collected en route including NZ Grebe, NZ Scaup, Reef Heron, NZ Dotterel, Variable Oystercatcher, Grey Warbler, Tui, NZ Pigeon, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Barbary Dove.

We made it to Trounson by late afternoon, and with time to find a Shining Cuckoo before dinner. The weather was just perfect for Kiwi-watching that night, and several were heard, but inexplicably we didn't get to see one at all. Lots of Moreporks calling as well, but not seen.

Day 2.

A reasonably late start after a late night and we first set off to see one of the non-bird highlights of the trip: the giant Kauri tree, Tane Mahuta. Not a very birdy place, but we did find North Island Tomtit here. Leaving the Kauri forest behind, we made our way across to the east coast - with a brief stop for NZ Pipit en route, and a pond near Waipu where Australasian Little Grebe and NZ Grebe breed side-by-side. The target at Waipu is Fairy Tern, and they showed pretty well in the end along with some more NZ Dotterel and a sprinkling of Arctic shorebirds.

Continuing south, we nailed Kookaburra at Matakana before checking into the motel in Warkworth.

Day 3.

A brilliant day on the water in the Hauraki Gulf aboard the “Assassin” with skipper Brett Rathe. Everything that one might expect showed really well (with the exception of Little Shearwater) and we had a couple of bonuses with 2 very early Grey Ternlets and good though brief views of a Pycroft’s Petrel. New Zealand Storm-petrel is really the key bird on this pelagic, and they didn’t disappoint!! To cap off an already great day we were treated to extended views of 3 Bryde’s Whales in the late afternoon. As usual, the hordes of Cook’s Petrels, White-faced Stormies and Common Diving Petrels had become almost humdrum by the time we set off for Sandspit and home.

Day 4.

Off on the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island. What a great place - all the important endemics gave tremendous views by the time we had left the island next morning: Kokako, Stitchbird, Saddleback, Takahe, Rifleman, Red-crowned Parakeet, Brown Teal, Whitehead. The only disappointments were the nonappearance of Spotless Crake (the wharf pond was renamed “Crakeless Spot”), and the fact that only 2 of us saw Little Spotted Kiwi. The Kiwi was good enough to give us a fantastically loud set of calls from about 2m away, but refused to come out into the open. Tiredness eventually beat us and so the Kiwi was left to it....

Day 5.

We left the island mid-morning by water taxi, after mopping up the few species that hadn’t provided sufficiently good views the previous day. Then it was off to Miranda where an early evening high tide produced amazing light to view the masses of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knot - as well as about 50 Wrybill, and Curlew Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Red-necked Stint, Pacific Golden Plover and the vagrant Semi-palmated Plover that has been present for a few weeks. Fish and Chips on the beach was a success, and there were our first Black-billed Gulls as well.

Day 6.

Another crack this morning at the shorebirds before setting off to the Coromandel Peninsula and another pelagic. Sailing from Whitianga out towards the Mercury Islands, this trip is mainly for Pycroft’s Petrel but for some reason today they just didn’t show - which made us even more grateful for the one we had seen in the Gulf! In fact there were precious few Pterodromas around, and none that looked even a bit like a Pycroft’s. We did get some half-decent looks at Little Shearwater, our first Albatrosses (Salvin’s and White-capped) and a few Grey-faced Petrels.

After dinner I was lucky enough to find a Morepork hawking insects around a massive spot-lit Norfolk Island Pine.

Day 7.

Back down the Coromandel, and across to Whangamarino where we found a couple of Australasian Bitterns, and then a rather long drive down to Pureora Forest. The afternoon in the forest was excellent. Good views of a female NZ Falcon, and a few looks at Long-tailed Cuckoo were supplemented by lots of Kaka, a very showy Shining Cuckoo, Tomtits, Robin, Rifleman and Yellow-crowned Parakeet. From there it was across to Taupo for the night.

Day 8.

From Taupo we went east towards Napier, and then up into the Boundary Stream Reserve. The drive would have been worth it for the amazing views we had of a female NZ Falcon perched not more than 20m away, but we also got great looks at Rifleman, Tomtit and Robin in the forest. Around lunchtime we headed into Napier and had the world's quickest ever Art Deco tour before visiting the Westshore lagoon area. The hoped-for Grey-tailed Tattler was not found, but everyone was captivated by the Black-fronted and Banded Dotterels that were present.

Back through Taupo we stopped for Fernbird, with great success, and then down to Turangi.

Day 9.

After a couple of brief stops by the lakeside for NZ Grebe, shags and waterfowl in general we made our way to Lake Rotopounamu. We had already seen all the species that might be found here, but were still wanting really good looks at North Island Tomtit for a couple of people. What should have been a really easy day turned into a nightmare when we realised that the van had been broken into and a bunch of things had been stolen. The resultant loss of time to sort everything out meant that we only had about 1.5 hours to find Blue Duck. That should never be a problem, normally one might expect to find them in the first 10 minutes.....but, today they just hid!! It wasn't until I had used up 1 hr 25 mins of my allocated time that I eventually found 2 birds, much to everyone's relief. We then high-tailed it down to Feilding and more things to be sorted including fixing the broken window in the van.

Day 10.

A late start while the van was being fixed meant that we just didn't have time to visit the Manawatu Estuary, but a quick stop at Otaki Sewage Works was productive, as was Lake Horowhenua, before checking in for the Cook Strait Ferry.

The ferry crossing was pretty good for birds with Northern Royal Albatross among the more numerous White-capped and Salvin's, 100's of Fairy Prions, and Westland Petrel being the most noteworthy. We also had our first Spotted Shags, and the first Arctic Skuas were in the Tory Channel.

Day 11.

The morning was spent on the Queen Charlotte Sound and was a resounding success. An obliging pod of Dusky Dolphins put on a show, King Shags gave really close looks, along with more Spotted Shags, the water-hole on Motuara Island was excellent with South Island Saddleback and Yellow-crowned Parakeet both bathing for about 10 mins, and South Island Robin pottering about around our feet. Stopping off at Ship Cove for a cuppa was good value as well, since the Wekas there are tremendously confiding.

Once back in Picton, we set off towards Kaikoura. There were a couple of diversions though - excellent performance by a bunch of Black-fronted Terns on the Wairau River, an unsuccessful look for the long-staying Black Kite at Renwick, and a rather more successful look at the Royal Spoonbill colony at Wairau Lagoons which also provided 2 Glossy Ibis.

The seal colony at Ohau Point is always worth a look, and there were plenty of NZ Fur Seals present today.

Day 12.

Another day, another boat trip, but this one is always rather special. We took the 0900 Oceanwings trip with Gary Melville. It was a reasonable trip, without too much extraordinary: both taxa of Royal Albatross, plenty of Westland and White-chinned Petrels, excellent views of at least 3 Grey-faced Petrels, a very pale Wandering Albatross that Gary convinced me was a Snowy, and the rarest bird for Kaikoura - a Cook's Petrel which Mark Miller called (might be only the third ever for Kaikoura).

The afternoon was spent in different ways by different people but the 2 that walked the Peninsula Walkway found a Cirl Bunting.

Day 13.

Quite a long driving day, but plenty of good short stops en route, starting off with St Anne's Lagoon for Cape Barren Goose and other waterfowl. Lunchtime found us at Arthur's Pass, the mandatory Keas patrolling the cafes provided amusement (and another tick!), and we got tremendous close-up views of Brown Creeper and Rifleman. Several Weka found along the way and even in the garden of the Punakaiki pub where we were staying.

It was another perfect night for Kiwi watching - the weather calm and dry, but the odds against finding Great Spotted Kiwi are always high. Tonight was no exception, and although we had a male calling very close by, we failed to see it. I was beginning to think that this was going to be a bad trip for Kiwi.....

Day 14.

Started with a quick stroll around the Pancake Rocks where at least 5 Hector's Dolphins put on a good show. There was nothing much at Sewage ponds further south, but we did add Great Crested Grebe at a lake further south, and Great Egret close to Hokitika before arriving at Okarito. We took a stroll through nearby forest, seeing an immature male South Island Tomtit but the bush here was very quiet. A bonus was seeing a Bush Giant Dragonfly.

Back to Okarito after an early dinner to meet up with Ian Cooper and go to look for his special birds - Okarito Brown Kiwi. The walk in brought a Kea calling loudly from a tree above the path. Finally our bad Kiwi luck changed and we all had spectacular views of one bird, a male, reasonably quickly. Happy campers!!

Day 15.

There was a Tomtit and a Shining Cuckoo in the grounds of the motel before we left this morning, and another Tomtit at Franz Joseph Glacier (where we heard but didn't see a Kea). Lunch was taken at a beach spot, where a tremendously high tide stopped us seeing Fiordland Crested Penguin. Just offshore there was a mass of birds feeding which included 20+ White-capped Albatross, 40+ Sooty Shearwaters and, much to my surprise, 20+ Buller's Shearwater which were a long way from home. More Tomtits were in the forest here.

Next stop was near Haast Pass - the bush here has been quiet the last couple of times that I have visited, and it was again today. Really good news though was the appearance of 2 Yellowheads right over our heads - the first I have seen here for about 2 years. Buoyed by this success we set off down the road to Wanaka.

Day 16.

A flyover NZ Falcon near Queenstown was far too brief for all to see, but the large Black-fronted Tern colony that we found on a small river was a different story. These birds performed brilliantly, really close and quite unconcerned. A quick pit-stop in Te Anau to pick up lunch and we were off towards Milford Sound and the search for Rock Wren. I had only just about deployed all the troops when there was a shout from Mark and Becky at the very start of the trail - yep, they had a Rock Wren right there after less than 5 minutes!! How cool. The little gem bounced around for us all to see and admire. We then did the tourist thing and went through to Milford, before back-tracking to Te Anau. Various stops en route added Kea, Kaka, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Tomtit, and Robin to the day list and we heard NZ Falcon and Long-tailed Cuckoo. Plenty of Black-fronted Terns were in the Eglinton Valley after being absent last year.

Day 17.

Not much to report in the morning as we called in at a small wetland, Whakapitu Beach and Awarua Bay on the way to Bluff. We had a few Cape Petrels and our first Stewart Island Shags at Stirling Point before boarding the Foveaux Strait ferry. The crossing was interesting from a bird perspective - more White-chinned Petrels (20+) than I've ever seen there, 3 Southern Royal Alberts, a Black-browed/ Campbell Albert and a Brown Skua were the highlights.

That evening we went on Phillip Smith's Kiwi tour - an absolute high point of any trip to New Zealand. On the way to Ocean Beach we had several Blue Penguins, and a porpoising Yellow-eyed Penguin (and there was another actually on the beach), but it was the Stewart Island Brown Kiwi that rightfully stole the show. Two birds were seen well - a male on the beach and a female in the bush, absolutely marvelous.

Day 18.

Another pelagic this morning, with the first target achieved in very short order as there were 2 Fiordland-crested penguins on rocks not far from the wharf. Another 3 were seen at sea later on as well. As far as Stewart pelagics go this was a fairly average one, with no real surprise birds. Good numbers of Albatross made up for everything else - at least 70 White-capped and 10 Southern Royals were in attendance, along with a couple of Buller's and a handful of Salvin's.

The afternoon was spent on Ulva Island where pretty much everything appeared on cue - at least 6 Yellowhead, several South Island Saddleback, Tomtit, Robin, lots of Brown Creeper, both Parakeets, Kaka, Weka.

Day 19.

An extremely disappointing Foveaux Strait crossing produced next to no decent birds, and we made our way northwards in drizzly rain. The small shelter overlooking a beach seemed like a good place to have lunch, though I didn't really expect to see much at such an early hour. How wrong was I?! We had 6 Yellow-eyed Penguins come ashore over the next hour or so, all showing off to the cameras.

Also, just offshore was a fishing boat that had good numbers of birds around it - White-chinned, Northern Giant and Cape Petrel, White-capped Albatross and Sooty Shearwater. On to Oamaru for the night.

Day 20.

Only one really important bird to go - Black Stilt. I decided to go almost straight to a site we see them regularly, and it proved to be a good decision! Two Black Stilt were present at the furthest point and allowed brilliant scope views. All over by 1000!!

There was one other bird required that day, and so we made for a spot for the normally very elusive Baillon's Crake. This particular place almost always does the business and it did again today - more happy campers....another look for Black Stilts up a nearby river produced two, and there were heaps of NZ Scaup and Great Crested Grebes on local lakes.

Day 21.

The final day, and we finished with a success on the way to Christchurch with 4 Chukar giving themselves up easily, and then a bit of a failure when we went looking for a Hudsonian Godwit which had been reported at the Avon-Heathcoate Estuary.

All up a really good trip - a total of 154 species, all the available endemics seen well except 2 of the Kiwi species, and great weather virtually throughout.