

Tour report

Chatham Islands 15 - 19 December 2010

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

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Day 1

A delay of 18 hours in Christchurch due to weather had us arriving just before lunch on the 15th December. We were met at the airport by Ben and our vehicle, plus a packed lunch. So off we went! We headed off up towards Waitangi West beach and the promise of Chatham Island Oystercatcher, but our first endemic was spotted en route with 2 Chatham Island Pipits by the roadside. They turned out to be very numerous in the northern part of the island with about 15 seen that day. The Oystercatchers showed well - 5 birds on the near part of the beach including one sitting on a nest.

A detour into Port Hutt produced at least 8 Pitt Island Shags, and there was another Pitt Island Shag in the Waitangi Harbour right outside the hotel when we eventually arrived - and 3 Chatham Island Oystercatchers on the beach. A fishing boat brought 4 Buller's Albatross in with it.

The plan for the evening was to take a boat out to "The Horns" and hope for a Magenta Petrel to skim by. The weather was OK, but the sea was fairly choppy, making it a not terribly comfortable ride. Just around the corner from the wharf we stopped by a colony of 30+ Chatham Island Shags, so another endemic in the bag!

Some Blue Cod was caught in pretty quick time for our dinner on board, and then as dusk approached we set ourselves up. A few seabirds had been seen already - Cape Petrel, Northern Giant Petrel, Sooty Shearwater and Buller's Albatross, but as we got to a decent drop-off about 2 miles offshore there were more birds all of a sudden - a couple of Northern Royal Albatross, a White-faced Storm-petrel, and then the impossible happened - a Magenta Petrel came in and circled the boat a few times!! It was still quite light and the bird gave tremendous views, maybe as close as 10m, but the bird was moving so fast that the photographers on board just couldn't capture it. Over the next 15 minutes or so the bird showed really well 3 times - at one point there were certainly 2 individuals present and my impression is that we actually saw 3. Everyone on board was deliriously happy, and we set course for home with a following sea and broad grins.

Day 2.

A day on Pitt Island - almost bound to be a massive anti-climax after yesterday. Oh how wrong you can be!! There was a Pitt Is. Shag and an Oystercatcher just outside the hotel again, and another Oystercatcher and 3 Pitt Is. Shags at Owenga as we launched the boat. We didn't see many birds on the crossing but the variety was remarkable : Cape Petrel, White-faced Storm-petrel, White-capped and Buller's Albatross, Northern Giant petrel, Brown Skua, Sooty Shearwater, and 3 big surprises.....a Cook's Petrel flashed past twice (a real rarity in the Chathams), a Prion that I think had to be a Fulmar Prion taunted me (it wasn't a Broad-billed, though it flew more like one, and it was nothing like any Fairy Prion that I've seen), and great views of a Sub-Antarctic Little Shearwater.

Once on Pitt we were taken to the Caravan Bush Reserve which was teeming with birds. Before we were even in the reserve there were Chatham Island Gerygones and Tomtits in view, with many of each inside the reserve. We had several Chatham Tui, and Red-crowned Parakeets around the reserve, heaps of Chatham Fantails, and even a Broad-billed Prion walking through the bush - but the real treat was at the Chatham Island Petrel breeding site where a quick glance into one of the artificial burrows gave us our second mega-rare seabird in 2 days. What a fantastic place!!

Not much to report on the return boat journey.

Day 3.

So this day had to be an anti-climax.....NO!! Brilliant weather and we were off on the boat again to Mangere, The Pyramid, and South-east Island. Another sighting of Sub-Antarctic Little Shearwater (4 birds) was the most notable thing on the journey across Pitt Strait. Forbe's Parakeets showed well on Mangere, but even though the conditions were perfect there was no sign of Black Robin. On the way out to The Pyramid we passed lots of Common Diving Petrels, several Little Penguins (which look very different to their mainland cousins), and many Buller's Albatross. The sight that greeted us actually at the rock will stick in my mind for a long while - thousands of Chatham Island Albatross beaming around the island like bees around a hive. Salvin's, White-capped and Northern Royal Albatross were also present in small numbers. We hung around for quite some time before making for South-east Island and it's Shore Plovers. The Plovers showed brilliantly - at least 8 individuals were seen over the next hour or so. Also there were Red-crowned Parakeets, Chatham Gerygones and Tuis. Eventually we left for a really fast ride across Pitt Strait again and back to Owenga.

Day 4.

The first 3 days have been so good that we are left with almost nothing left to find - except one very "big" bird - Chatham Island Pigeon. So this morning we are off to the Awatotara Valley to meet up with Liz Tuanui and look for these monsters.

They didn't disappoint, with at least 7 being seen, including 2 which were grazing in a paddock at close range. Also Tui, (recently re-introduced) Fantail and Gerygone up there.

We spent the afternoon around Te Whanga Lagoon, adding a few things to our Chatham trip list.

Day 5.

Yes, this is the anti-climax day! There is nothing left to find, so we trawled all around the lagoon to the far north-eastern edge. Notable birds were a flock of 45 Turnstone, and about 20 Chatham Pipits. Odd Oystercatchers and Pitt Shags added to the interest, as did Northern Royal and Buller's Albatross and a lot of Sooty Shears at the north-eastern tip of the island.

Day 6.

Heading back to Wellington - final addition to the trip list is a flock of about 300 Bar-tailed Godwit by the airport.

Final tally 60 sp. All the Chatham endemic species seen well except Black Robin and Chatham Snipe which are virtually impossible for visitors to see. The sightings of Magenta Petrel were one of the absolute highlights of my birding life.