

Tour report

28 March– 9 April 2017

13-day tour of the North Island and North & East South Island with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Led by Phil Hammond, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Private tour

SUMMARY

This tour was for a British couple, spending 13 days covering the North Island and the top Northeast corner of the South Island, before a Sub-antarctic Voyage on a ship.

They had travelled and birded in a lot of other countries, and having seen most species introduced to New Zealand, and many of the native species elsewhere, the tour concentrated on the endemics and some of the more difficult natives, such as Australasian Bittern and Spotless Crake which they had not seen.

In addition we made sure we saw those native species that occur in New Zealand as endemic sub-species, such as Banded Rail. The tour also managed a couple of rare vagrants to New Zealand that have not been previously recorded on the mainland on a Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ tour before (Red-footed Booby and Erect-crested Penguin).

We saw every endemic landbird that could be expected in the North Island including rarities, and all that we needed to see in the upper South Island. We saw 130 bird species in the 12 days including 49 that are endemic at full species level.

The tour was mostly about birds but we also got stonking views of Tuatara and Hector's dolphin.

In this report the FIRST sighting of an ENDEMIC species is reported in CAPITAL LETTERS.

28 March 2017 – Day One

From the collection point in Auckland city we headed north. At the end of the Whangaparoa Peninsular we got great views of 4 Banded Rails, one of them out in the open and close enough for great photos. Then we found 2 Spotless crakes and our first endemics ---- TUI, NZ FANTAIL, and GREY WARBLER.

Then it was time to board the ferry at Gulf Harbour and go to the wonderful Tiritiri Matangi island. We had not been on the island long before I heard a single note from a KOKAKO song, and after a few minutes searching we got great views of a pair of them, and then close by, our first WHITEHEADS. Making our way up a well formed track we found more rare and endangered endemics ---male and female STITCHBIRD, and NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK, more great views of Kokako and the more of the common NZ BELLBIRD and NZ PIGEON.

When we reached the bunkhouse we listened to the rangers' induction, sorted out our sleeping arrangements, ate an early lunch, and then headed for an area of long grass where we found a group of 4 of the very rare and endangered TAKAHE—2 adults, 1 immature from last year, and a chick from this year. We were able to get great photos of these primitive looking birds which were thought to be extinct until re-discovered in the 1940s. There are fewer than 300 of them in the world.

Then we headed for a dam on a part of the island rarely visited by day trippers and settled down to sit quietly and see what would come in for water. We were rewarded with great views of RED-CROWNED PARAKEET as well as BROWN TEAL and more good views of endemics already seen. Sitting quietly and not moving, we also got stonking views of a couple of Spotless Crakes out in the open.

In the afternoon we walked along the top of the island and down through bush that included some trees up to a thousand years old that had been spared in the farming days. By then the day trippers had left the island and there was just us and a handful of researchers and volunteers left. We got great views of FERNBIRD and NORTH ISLAND ROBIN as well as a kokako down on the ground for super photo opportunities, and another Spotless crake!. We normally manage to get a view of that shy and elusive crake somewhere on our 21-day tours, but seeing them in 3 different places on the same day was a first for me and possibly for Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ---they just aren't that easy!

We worked our way along lovely bush tracks being serenaded by endemic birds in endemic trees, but also seeing Brown Quail along the way, and got back to the bunkhouse where we cooked dinner and relaxed waiting for dusk and our next adventure. On some tours, we may be out until midnight or later looking for LITTLE SPOTTED KIWI, and on uncommon occasions don't see one at all, but not tonight. By 9.50 I had my red-filtered torch on a female in the forest, and 20 minutes later a male out in the open beside a path. He was happy to ignore us while we stood very quietly watching, and he kept probing for food in the soft torchlight for 15 seconds or so before slowly walking off into the bush---doesn't get much better!

We decided to stay out a bit longer and look for a reptile that is endemic to NZ and is the only surviving member of an order that was at its zenith something like 200 million years ago. We headed for a track where I had a tip that one had been seen recently and sure enough found a TUATARA about 60cm long. It walked off the track as we approached but stayed put only a meter or so off the track and we got super views of this ancient creature in filtered torchlight.

Before going to bed we also encountered a Little Blue Penguin. It seemed a bit confused and although we got great views we left it alone and headed for the bunkhouse.

29 March 2017 – Day Two

We had seen everything that we needed to on the island, so had a leisurely breakfast and stroll down the Wattle track to meet our mid-morning water taxi. Along the way we saw more rare and beautiful species that we had already seen, including more Kokako. We actually saw 10 Kokako in our 24 hours on “Tiri”.

From the water taxi we saw several FLUTTERING SHEARWATER and some BULLER’S SHEARWATER plus an Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger) sitting on the water. Back on the mainland, our first stop was at a beach beside a river mouth, where we got great close views of NZ DOTTEREL, VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER, SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTERCATCHER, and RED-BILLED GULL. Caspian Terns were also present and our attention was drawn to a Pacific Reef Heron in flight.

Not far away on a pond we saw NZ DABCHICK, PARADISE SHELDUCK, Australasian Shoveler, Pied Stilt, Little Shag, and Grey Teal. On another nearby pond we got Little Black Shag, and a family of NZ SCAUP with young ducklings. We drove further north, and at an estuary near Mangawhai we saw 2 NZ Fairy Terns. These are endemic in NZ at sub-species level and are our rarest taxa---there are just 43 of them left in the world so we were pretty pleased to get on to them.

We had a couple of hours to drive further north to our destination of Kerikeri, a pretty town where we stopped at a lovely restaurant overlooking the Kerikeri inlet for dinner. After dinner we checked in to our rooms in a very nice garden setting. We had a bit of time before dusk and our hosts showed us a pair of Moreporks in bush on the edge of their garden. We had super views of these nocturnal owls at their roosts before dusk.

As dusk fell we drove for about half an hour to a remote area of rough farmland near scrubby bush to look for our second Kiwi species of the tour, and after a twenty minute walk found our first NORTH ISLAND BROWN KIWI--- in all we saw 8 of them that night---male, female, and a juv'. It's hard enough to find just one of any Kiwi species. 8 in one night was extraordinary. We were lucky that we were in a patch where there was a concentration of food that night

A very clear night sky with incredible stars rounded off the night.

30 March 2017 – Day Three

After being out late 2 nights in row looking for Kiwi, we started a bit later this morning, and met our great hosts in their home for breakfast at 8.15 and didn't get on the road until 9am. We checked out a local small wetland, and then a high grassy area but didn't find anything new.

Further south we walked all around a small lake, where we added Australasian Little Grebe to our tour list and saw more Dabchicks and Little shags, as well as a good selection of introduced finches and the spectacular Eastern Rosella.

Another hour or so south got us to a small coastal estuary, and we went to two sites. At the first one we saw another Pacific Reef Heron and our first BANDED DOTTERELS as well as more NZ Dotterel, Caspian Terns, and we added Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, and Ruddy Turnstone to the trip list. At the second spot we saw another NZ Fairy tern roosting and then hawking up the estuary, as well as a feeding Royal Spoonbill.

Dinner was at a riverside restaurant in Warkworth.

31 March 2017 – Day Four

It was our day to be out on the water for 10 hours today in the beautiful Hauraki Gulf. Some other birders, mostly New Zealanders, joined us and we headed off in the comfortable “Norma Jean”. The water was flat calm as we left port at Sandspit, and I feared that we might be in for a pretty quiet day, but in the end we got all the target species that we came for.

We passed a Pied Shag nesting colony and headed out into deeper water, but whilst still close to the coast we got the usual inshore shearwater species ---Buller’s, Fluttering, and our first Flesh-footed Shearwater. Once we got out to deeper water we saw the first of many COOK’S PETRELS.

We stopped over an underwater reef surrounded by deep water, and began throwing chopped fish and burley over the stern to get an oily slick going and it wasn't long before we got our first sighting of our prime target for the day NZ STORM PETREL. This species was considered extinct until their re-discovery only a bit over a decade ago [read about Brent and Sav’s part in that on our website]. Their numbers seem to have increased a bit and we normally find at least one on each of our Hauraki Gulf pelagics, but they are still rare and always great to see, we saw 3 of them here ---some views really close as they flitted past the stern. Another rare endemic that we needed to find on this day was BLACK (PARKINSON’S) PETREL and we had several sitting on the water almost within touching distance. At this stop we also got White-faced Storm Petrel, and Fairy Prion.

We motored further out into deeper and deeper water, passed the Mokohinau Islands, and found a GREY-FACED PETREL sitting on the water, and on quite spectacular rock stacks rising almost vertically out of very clear blue water, there were about 35 Grey Noddys perched on tiny ledges. After motoring further out into blue water we stopped at a depth of 130m and set up another fish-oil slick. More pelagic birds came in including one more NZ Stormy but no new species, and then it was time for the roughly 2 hour trip back to port.

On the way back to the Sandspit wharf we detoured to cruise close into a bay on Kawau island where, on the foreshore, we saw 3 of the rare North Island sub-species of WEKA.

1 April 2017 – Day Five

We set off from Warkworth at 7.45am but as we were loading the car we heard sirens, and then when we got onto State Highway 1 to head south towards Auckland, the traffic was almost at a standstill. We thought there must be some sort of incident and I decided we would go the long way around and headed for the west coast.

Along the way we detoured, and on an unsealed rural road on the edge of the Kaipara harbour we got great close views of a couple of NZ PIPITS, as well as lots of Skylarks and Yellowhammers. Further south the famous Muriwai Gannet Colony is a great place to see 100s of Australasian Gannets at their nests, some almost within touching distance. We were treated to wonderful flying displays from the gannets as well as White-fronted Terns, that also breed there. A bonus was a close view of a much-photographed Red-footed Booby. The reason for so much attention from NZ birders is that it is the first of this species ever recorded on the NZ Mainland. It was also a first for one of our tours!

In the extensive Waitakere forest we got good views of male and female NZ TOMTIT. In this forest just about all of the trees are native and 80% of them are endemic, It was one of many native forests we were to visit on the tour.

We crossed Auckland city without too much traffic hold-up and headed south to the Whangamarino Swamp. We saw plenty of birds there including several perched Australasian Harriers, but no new species for the trip, and in particular no Australasian Bittern which is what we came for ---we will have to get up early in the morning and come back! Before checking into our accommodation and going for a seafood dinner we called into a spot near Miranda and found WRYBILL feeding. They were fairly close to us and we were viewing them in fantastic late afternoon light that was coming from behind us.

2 April 2017 – Day Six

Having missed Australasian Bittern the day before we got up early this morning and went back to the Whangamarino Swamp and set up my scope at a high point. I knew there would be some here somewhere, but even though they are very big birds, this is a huge swamp with lots of cover, and these are very shy birds.

We had to work hard but eventually got onto one. We only saw the top half of the bittern, but had it in the scope off and on for half an hour. A second one was briefly glimpsed.

We headed back to the shoreline of the Firth of Thames and went first to Kaiaua where we bought black doris plums, and green tea ice-cream in cones. While we enjoyed them, we looked through a mixed flock of Red-billed and BLACK-BILLED GULLS and could see the diagnostic difference in bill length and shape and subtle difference in shade of grey with the 2 species side by side, fairly close to us. Both species of NZ mainland oystercatchers and a flock of White-fronted Terns were also there.

The tide was coming in so we headed back to Miranda, where close photos of a flock of Wrybill roosting on a dry mudflat were taken, and a flock of Pacific Golden Plovers were roosting nearby.

On the “stilt ponds” we found Pectoral and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, as well as more Wrybill, Banded Dotterels and Pied Stilts and 4 more NZ Dotterels. Out on the mud in front of the main hide were thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knots and when an Australasian Harrier put them all to flight it was pretty spectacular.

We drove south to our accommodation in the rose garden town of Te Awamutu.

3 April 2017 – Day Seven

We loaded up the wagon and headed south towards the Pureora Forest, stopping along the way at a bakery in Mangakino to buy our lunches, and also to check out the local lake---good birds, but no new species.

At Pureora the first place we visited was at the forest edge with ancient podocarp forest on one side and rough farmland the other. Within the first half hour we had at least 15 fly-overs of YELLOW-CROWNED PARAKEET and a wonderful flying display by a NZ FALCON that lasted 15 seconds or more. At that spot we also saw our first LONG-TAILED CUCKOO and a KAKA. These first views of those two species wasn't great but we got much better views of both later.

Then we drove to a small parking space within the forest and took a walking track where we had close encounters with N I Robins, NZ Fantails and Whiteheads. As well as this we saw some beautiful trees --- Rimu, Miro, Totara, Tawa---and many other endemic trees 100s of years old---absolutely stunning with Kaka flying past for good views.

When we heard a high-pitched “pit pit” call, we concentrated on the crown of a small tree just below us, and before long we were rewarded with great views of the very small male and female RIFLEMAN. Back at the clearing where we had parked, we found a Shining Cuckoo high in a tree.

We wanted a better view of Long-tailed Cuckoo, so we headed to a forest road, where I knew from previous visits, that we would have a good chance. I drove slowly with the window down and before long, heard the unmistakable screech. We stopped and waited and within 20 minutes or so had good views of multiple close fly-overs and reckoned there were at least 4 of them. We also briefly got on to one surreptitiously creeping along a branch.

We had been in this lovely forest for about 4 hours but now it was time to head further south to Turangi on the southern shores of Lake Taupo. We stopped for a leg stretch at a dam and wetland with a good array of waterfowl but no new species, although a pair of black Swans with very young cygnets were nice. We also stopped briefly for photos of snow-capped volcano cones.

We needed to push on to Turangi and beyond to start searching for one of the main targets of the trip---an amazing, rare, and endangered endemic duck that lives and feeds in fast flowing torrents. At the first three places that we checked along the Tongariro river, all spots where I had occasionally found our target before, we saw stunning scenery and some good birds that we had seen before, but not our target. Then at a fourth stop we found them, first a male then female BLUE DUCK. The male was perched on a rock and the

female was swimming---2 blue/grey blobs, easy to miss among the hundreds of rounded blue/grey rocks of similar size! We were able to get excellent views without disturbing them and just sat quietly watching them feed and hearing their “whio” whistles. In a very clear torrent river surrounded by lovely native forest it was a wonderful experience with these iconic New Zealand birds

4 April 2017 – Day Eight

Before leaving the Tongariro River we wanted to try for another view of Blue Ducks and found another pair, this time a bit closer to Turangi, and spent 20 minutes just watching them feed.

We spent another hour or so on the shoreline of Lake Taupo photographing wildfowl on the lake as well as a very close Fernbird in vegetation on the lake edge, and we added Eurasian Coot to the trip list before heading east toward Hawkes Bay.

We drove the lonely Napier/Taupo highway for a bit over an hour and then on to a forest reserve. We ate our lunches on benches within the forest and then took a loop track for a bit over an hour through the forest seeing 4 more Riflemen, 3 or 4 more Kaka, Whiteheads and good views of NZ Tomtit male and female. We also got 7 or 8 more views of NZ Falcon, all of them overhead flights. The Falcons were very noisy today with lots of “kecking” and screeching, especially when one of them caught a passerine.

After that we wound back down the hills to Napier where we briefly met Sav at a lakeside, and took photos of another couple of rare vagrants to NZ –Plumed Whistling Ducks. Dinner at a harbourside restaurant.

5 April 2017 – Day Nine

Whilst still in the Napier district we visited a couple of shorebird sites and got a good range of waders and added the very pretty Black-fronted Dotterel to our trip list.

Then we drove to a lookout spot where we got wide views of Hawkes Bay but no new species. We counted 8 NZ Pipit and got great photos of one posing on top of a rock very close to us with pretty stunning backdrop.

We ate lunch at small wetland sitting on a bench on a very nice boardwalk. There were plenty of wetland species present but nothing new. A NZ Dabchick came closer than any other had for great photos with nice background.

We drove from the east coast to west coast today and stopped at the Manawatu Estuary when we got there. Here was another good array of shorebirds and terns but the only new species for the trip was an uncommon bird in NZ –Little Tern.

6 April 2017 – Day Ten

The main thing on the agenda today was to be a 4 hour ferry crossing out of Wellington Harbour, across Cook Strait, into the Marlborough Sounds and down to Picton, but our car ferry didn't leave until early afternoon and there were some interesting spots to visit between Levin, where we had spent the night and the Wellington ferry terminal.

First was a lake stop where there were 100s of waterfowl but all species we had seen elsewhere. A tightly packed flock of 130 Little Black Shags caught the eye and Black Shags (Great Cormorant) were also showing. A pair of Black-fronted Dotterels were foraging on the edge of the lake close to us, and allowed some great photos.

There were more waterfowl in big numbers at several other locations and we ate our lunch in very nice surroundings at one of these.

We drove on down to Wellington, boarded the ferry and made our way to a deck where we could look for seabirds. We were still in Wellington Harbour when we saw our fifth cormorant species for the trip SPOTTED SHAG. We hoped for a good array of seabirds but this crossing was below par. We did add Sooty Shearwater to our list, saw more White-faced Storm Petrels and we spotted our first albatross for the trip--- NZ WHITE-CAPPED ALBATROSS. We also saw Common Dolphins and NZ Fur Seals.

Once we entered the Sounds we were back to inshore species with lots of Fluttering shearwaters and Red-billed Gulls. We also picked up a dark morph Arctic Skua.

7 April 2017 – Day Eleven

It was to be a big day today with a boat trip in the Sounds this morning and a long drive this afternoon. We packed our bags in our vehicle, left it in a secure park at our motel, and walked the short distance down to the pretty Picton waterfront where we boarded the comfortable boat we had chartered just for ourselves, and were motoring on the water by 8am.

Our prime targets were some pretty special birds but there was also a special mammal to see ---a rare and endangered little endemic dolphin, and our skipper who is out here most days reckoned he knew a good bay to look, where some had been seen in recent days. As we entered the bay he and I were scanning and it wasn't long before we got onto a pod of them—HECTOR'S DOLPHINS. They put on a fantastic display for us swimming right beside the boat, and on several occasions jumping clear out of the water. We also got close views of NZ Fur seals lazing in the sun on rocks.

The Hector's were great but we needed to get further out in the S ounds to look for our prime bird target for the day while they were still roosting and we found them— KING SHAGS---6 of them on one headland and 2 on another. The latter offered the best views and the skipper backed the boat in close for super views and photo ops. These large, rare, and endangered endemics live all of their lives here, and only here, in the outer Marlborough Sounds. There are about 900 of them.

Next we headed to an island that has no alien predators on it and there is a small population of a small rare parakeet. It is not much bigger than a budgie, is green and often sits quietly among a million leaves of about the same size and colour, it's also critically endangered. While we were searching we saw Weka—one picked at our shoes—NZ Tomtit, NZ Pigeon, and lots of Bellbirds but couldn't see or hear our target. After more than an hour searching I heard one chattering about 80m away and we went to look for it but it was out of sight in an inaccessible place. We finally got a sighting of one—ORANGE-FRONTED PARAKEET and then another but both of the sightings were high fly-overs---just about “tickable” but no more.

We would have liked better views of the little parakeets, but at least we saw them, and the King shags and Hector's Dolphins could not have been better. We motored back through the spectacularly beautiful Sounds and were back in port at Picton by midday. We walked back to our vehicle, bought some sandwiches and hot pies (the butter chicken pie was super!) and headed off to Kaikoura.

The main road from Picton to Kaikoura was closed so we had a drive of over 7 hours ahead of us. We made a few short stops along the way, passed magnificent scenery, and saw good birds but nothing new until we got close to Culverden where I stopped for a field full of birds---lots of Banded Dotterel and other good birds but what drew my attention were beautiful BLACK-FRONTED TERNS hawking over the field for insects and at times flying close to us.

We didn't get to Kaikoura until 8.15 and having phoned our accommodation to arrange late check-in, went straight to dinner at a very nice water-front restaurant.

8 April 2017 – Day Twelve

The main event today was to be a pelagic in the morning at 9am, but unfortunately a gale force wind forecast caused our skipper to cancel. If the wind would drop a bit we would have a chance to go out in the afternoon.

We had a look at the end of the Kaikoura Peninsular where NZ Fur Seals were lounging, and we saw Turnstones, Banded Dotterels, and both species of oystercatcher plus a rarity on the mainland---an ERECT-CRESTED PENGUIN standing on a rock platform to moult.

Throughout the morning I was keeping in touch with the boat operators “Albatross Encounters” and around mid-day they decided that it was safe enough to go ahead with their 1pm trip. We headed for South Bay got onto the boat where we were joined by other keen birders, and a big tractor launched the boat with all of us aboard.

Very deep water comes close to land at Kaikoura and it wasn't long before we had Northern Giant Petrels, and Cape Petrels behind the boat and then there were fly-pasts of one of our prime targets for the day---HUTTON'S SHEARWATER.

Another breeding endemic that we would only see here was WESTLAND PETREL and when we stopped to chum we soon had some of these near the boat and near enough to see the minor differences between those and White-chinned petrels which were also on the water in nice and close.

These Kaikoura pelagics are always an unforgettable experience with huge birds within touching distance around the boat and today that included 5 albatross species, 4 of which were new for the trip. All of them are endemic NZ breeders--- NZ White-capped, SALVIN'S, NORTHERN ROYAL, the huge SOUTHERN ROYAL, and NZ WANDERING [ANTIPODEAN]. A Short-tailed Shearwater flew past and landed a bit away from the boat, but we could see enough to separate it from the similar Sooty Shearwater which also visited along with Buller's Shearwater. We returned to port in high spirits.

We had enjoyed our dinner last night and returned to the same waterside restaurant.

9 April 2017 – Day Thirteen

This was mainly a travel day through to Christchurch Airport from Kaikoura. However, on the drive from Kaikoura to Christchurch we managed a bit more birding. Before leaving Kaikoura we added Cirl Bunting to the trip list.

Driving south we called into a dried lake and a couple of rivermouths, before eating our lunches at the Ashley Estuary. And we ended our excellent tour just after lunch.