

# Tour report

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**13 November – 3 December 2018**

**21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**



South Island saddleback. Lars Petersson.

**Led by Phil Hammond, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**

## **Participants**

Jonas Starck, Lars Petersson, Evamaria Ferm, Stefan Andersson, Hans Peter Johansson, Inge Karlqvist, Karl-Lennart Nilsson, Anders Rosell-Hultfeldt

## **Images**

Lars Petersson, Evamaria Ferm and Phil Hammond

There was some unsettled weather and thunder storms moving around NZ, but we managed to dodge that in the main, and were able to look for and find all of the birds we needed to see.

This group of excellent birders from Sweden saw 162 species during the tour, but more importantly saw a really great total of 67 species that breed only in NZ, and heard one other. So, total for the trip was 163 species, including Great Spotted Kiwi, which was heard only.

Even more important, was that with the exception of Mottled Petrel all of those endemics [and indeed just about all of the other birds seen, including some other natives that are endemic at sub-species level] were seen well by EVERY member of the group.

At the last dinner together, each participant chose their favourite 7 birds of the tour. With 7 points for first choice and 1 For seventh, 21 species made it on to one or other of peoples lists.

In order of points scored they were:

NZ Storm-petrel, Black Stilt, Rock Wren [South Island Wren], Okarito Kiwi, Wrybill, South Island Takahe, Northern Brown Kiwi, White-capped Albatross, North Island Kokako, Kea, Fairy Tern, Southern Brown Kiwi, NZ Wandering Albatross, Blue Duck, Little Penguin, White-faced Storm-petrel, Pycroft's Petrel, Fiordland Crested Penguin, South Island Robin, Yellow-eyed Penguin, and South Island Saddleback.

It was of course very difficult to pick just 7 birds when we had seen so many rare and/or iconic birds. For a couple of people White-capped Albatross got on the list ahead of bigger or more uncommon Albatross because White-capped was their first.

The difficulty of choosing just 7 meant that some rare or hard to see endemic birds that had plenty of votes for 'bird of the day' on the days we saw them, like Yellowhead, Little Spotted Kiwi, and Long-tailed Cuckoo didn't make it!!

In this report the FIRST sighting of an ENDEMIC is written in CAPITAL LETTERS

**Phil Hammond** (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

# 13 November 2018 – Day One

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Everyone was at the same hotel which meant we could get away to a good early start and head off to a nearby Australasian Gannet colony.

Along the way we stopped briefly at a high point overlooking an extensive Kauri forest. That forest is closed to stop the spread of a deadly tree disease and we respected that, but from outside the forest were able to pick out a flock of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, and also our first endemics TUI, and NZ PIGEON. We also passed a family group of the spectacular but common PARADISE SHELDUCKS, a species we were to see on 20 of the 21 days of the tour.

When we got to the Gannet colony we were almost within touching distance of the closest of hundreds of nesting Australasian Gannets, and not very far from hundreds of White-fronted terns that were also nesting. Both species gave us wonderful close flying displays and there were lots of cameras following them.

From there we headed to a bakery, as we did most days, where the group could collect a fresh sandwich or pie and perhaps be tempted by a cake, and we ate that lunch in a nice riverside location seeing a few of New Zealand's more common birds as we ate.

Then we headed from the west coast across to the east, passing a couple of sewage ponds and a small wetland along the way. We added Pied Stilt, Grey Teal, Australasian Shoveler, and some other waterfowl to our list and our first NZ FANTAIL put on a great show for us.

Further north we pulled into a very pretty estuary and soon added Buff-banded Rail, which Lars was first to see, and Royal Spoonbill and also got a glimpse of a disappearing NZ Fairy Tern. Fairy Tern is NZ's rarest bird taxon. There are only 39 or 40 of them in the world. At present they are separated from their Australian and New Caledonian cousins at sub-species level, but there is a good case for splitting at species level.

Regardless of their taxonomic status, we really wanted to get a better look at one of these very rare birds, and went to another estuary where I knew we would have a good chance. I think it was Karl that was first to spot it, and we all got an excellent view of one foraging and hovering right in front of us and could see the rich all yellow bill and other diagnostic features of this lovely small tern.

At that same estuary we also got great views of NZ DOTTEREL, VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER, SOUTH ISLAND OYSTERCATCHER, and RED-BILLED GULL.

We drove further north and settled into our very nice accommodation in a garden setting. After dinner, and doing our checklist in a good restaurant, we waited until shortly before dusk, and then headed off in search of our first Kiwi species. We drove for a while and then parked, and started a walk of a kilometre or so in a remote area of grassland and patches of bush. It took a while to find one, but we saw our first NORTHERN BROWN KIWI.

This first view was ok, there was no doubt what it was, but we wanted a better view and after another hour or so, the group was rewarded for standing very quiet and very still when another one carried on feeding just about 3 metres away from us, not disturbed by the red-filtered torch light that we used.

It had been a long day and we didn't get to bed until the early hours of the morning but an elated group headed to their beds very happily.

On these tours we each choose our 'bird of the day' each evening, but on days when we are out until late we leave it until the next morning. On this first day it had been after midnight before getting a good view of the Kiwi so votes for bird of the day, for day one, were split between Fairy Tern and Australasian Gannet.

## 14 November 2018 – Day Two

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After a late night, we were a bit later getting away this morning but the van was packed and rolling by 8.30. and we left the far north and headed back south. First stop was a small lake where we saw our first NZ SCAUP and four NZ GREBES, as well as Little pied cormorant, Black Swans, some other waterfowl and a feral Peafowl.

As on most days of the tour we drove past a variety of introduced birds, most of them first released between 100 and 170 years ago and now well and truly established. California quail, Brown Quail, several colourful finch species, Australian bell-magpies etc and also some self-introduced Australian species [now NZ natives] including Silvereye, Masked Lapwing, Welcome Swallow, White-faced Heron, etc.

We bought our lunches at an Italian bakery and took them to a pretty estuary to eat. There was an interesting flock of Variable Oystercatchers with a range of plumages from all black to pied for close inspection, but no new species, and we headed on.

At another pond we saw a species that is quite rare in NZ—Australasian Little Grebe, and at one stage had both one of those and a NZ Grebe in the same scope view.

A bit further away on a lonely dusty road we found our first NZ PIPIT.

Then we went to a fantastic bird sanctuary from which alien predators have been removed, and naive endemic NZ birds that have evolved without mammalian predators, can not only survive but actually thrive.

It wasn't long before we had two NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACKS feeding on a flax spike right in front of us, then the first of another rare bird --BROWN TEAL. We also got our first GREY GERYGONE, NZ BELLBIRD and WHITEHEAD, as well as more of the endemics we had already seen.

Dinner was at a riverside restaurant and bird of the day was unanimous—it was the Northern Brown Kiwi we had seen very early this morning.

## 15 November 2018 – Day Three

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On these 21-day tours we are on the water 12 times, sometimes just a short half-hour water taxi, but on other days we are out on the water all day in order to get us out in deep blue water for truly pelagic species. Today was our day in the Hauraki Gulf.



Leaving port we passed a nesting colony of Pied Cormorants and soon had our first views of the 'inshore' tubenoses FLUTTERING SHEARWATER, then BULLER'S SHEARWATER and Flesh-footed shearwater.

Motoring out into deeper water and stopping for our first chumming session we soon had a fish-oil slick going, and saw the first of our prime targets for the day NZ STORM-PETREL. These rare birds were thought extinct for more than 100 years before dramatically being re-discovered 15 or so years ago [read about Sav and Brent's part in that on our website].

It was one of at least 7 that we saw during the day, and they were flitting past the boat, sometimes coming very close for great views and photos.

Another black and white stormy showed up and we realised it was different—a Wilson's Storm-Petrel. We also had White-faced Storm-petrels around the boat and at one stage 3 different stormy species in one binocular view!!--fantastic.

There were also Fairy Prions and a WHITE-CAPPED ALBATROSS came in for close views. It was one of many of that species that we would see on the trip, but for a couple of people it was really special because it was their first albatross. We were also getting multiple close fly-bys of COOK'S PETRELS.

Another prime target for the day was BLACK PETREL and when we stopped further out for another chumming session, we had them sitting on the water right beside the boat. Little Shearwater is not a species that comes into the boat but we got at least 7 of the local sub-species of those seen on fly-pasts.

We also added Sooty Shearwater and Common Diving Petrel.



Flesh-footed shearwater in flight. Lars Petersson.



Fairy prions in flight. Lars Petersson.



Cook's petrel in flight. Lars Petersson.





Wilson's storm-petrel in flight. Lars Petersson.



New Zealand storm-petrel in flight. Lars Petersson.





New Zealand storm-petrel in flight. Lars Petersson.



White-faced storm-petrel in flight. Lars Petersson.

Dinner was again at the same riverside restaurant that was very popular with the group, and bird of the day for most of the group was NZ Storm-petrel. White-capped Albatross got a couple of votes and Wilson's Storm-petrel got one.

## 16 November 2018 – Day Four

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We were in for another big day today because we were heading for another bird sanctuary from which alien predators have been removed and endemic NZ birds thrive in endemic NZ trees. We were going to the famous Tiritiri Matangi Island and would stay overnight.

We had a bit of time before getting on the ferry and checked out a couple of ponds hoping for a Spotless Crake. We saw some more good birds including NZ Grebe and Brown Teal but didn't get the crake---no matter we got it later.

The ferry crossing was fairly quiet bird-wise but we did see Little Penguin and as we were docking I think it was Lars that drew our attention to the first of 5 Arctic Skuas that we totalled on the tour.

Once on the Island we listened to the ranger's introduction and started to walk up a bush track. We soon saw more NI Saddlebacks, Whiteheads, Bellbirds and Tui and then our first RED-CROWNED PARAKEETS, then the rare and endangered STITCHBIRD.

We sat near a water trough watching birds come in for a drink or bath, and while sitting there quietly I heard a single note from another bird that we really needed to find on this island. We quickly moved up the track toward where the sound had come from and got stonking views of two NORTH ISLAND KOKAKO. We were delighted because its nesting time, and at this time of the year Kokako can be very secretive and hard to find.



North Island kokako up close. Lars Petersson.



I think Jonas was the first to spot it, his sharp eyes and advanced birding skills certainly found quite a few of the birds we went to look for on this tour, and at some locations on the tour, he was already on a bird while I was still waiting to get everyone out of the van so I could lock it!

A bit further up the track we got close views of our first NORTH ISLAND ROBIN.

We settled into the bunkhouse after an induction from the ranger, sorted our bedding, and ate a leisurely lunch in the bunkhouse courtyard whilst being serenaded by a variety of endemic birds.

Then we were off in search of more rare birds. We took a track to one of several ponds on the island that are rarely visited by day-trippers, and had the place to ourselves. We sat down on dry grass overlooking the pond and quietly waited.

We were rewarded with more great views of rare endemics that we had already seen, but added a real 'skulker' that Evamaria was first to see when a FERNBIRD popped up and showed itself. As with just about every other bird on the tour everyone saw it.

Our quiet and still presence was also rewarded with several good views of another 'skulker'-- Spotless Crane, which Evamaria was also first to see.

For our next target we needed an area of open grassland near bush. The rangers on the Island had let the grass grow long in one area, so that our targets and their chick can have plenty of grass stems to eat and also hide themselves when they want to, but there are a couple of mown tracks, and a bit of patience rewarded us with great views of SOUTH ISLAND TAKAHE walking across the track. That is another NZ endemic species that was thought extinct until re-discovered, in this case in the 1940s. Later, we saw another one and its chick. A lot of time (by a lot of people), and a lot of money, has gone into saving this species from extinction, but it is not easy and there are still only a bit over 300 of them in the World.



Takahē – who's looking at who? Lars Petersson.



Back near the bunkhouse, an uncommon visitor to the island, and a nice surprise was a KAKA hanging around for great views.

The team had to put up with my cooking, but each got their steak cooked to order, and the rest of the dinner seemed to go down well and we relaxed, exchanged a few stories, did our checklist for the day [hoping for a retrospective tick later on from an adventure still to come tonight!] and waited for darkness.

Once the light had faded we set off again. After an hour or so of listening and walking we heard some footsteps and snuffling on the forest floor very close to us, right beside the boardwalk that we were on in fact, and we got the red-filtered torchlight on a LITTLE SPOTTED KIWI. Unfortunately, it was too close --only about 2 meters, and trotted off before some of the team at the back had seen it, so we needed to find another one.

Whilst out in the dark we saw a Morepork. An hour or so later, on another part of the island we heard more footsteps in the bush. This time it was a bit too far away. We knew where it was, but it was back behind trees and lower vegetation. I knew there was a small patch of open short grassland behind where it was. We turned torches off walked around as quietly as possible to the open area, and with the people who had missed the other one at the front, turned the red spotlight back on, and there she was, out in the open, a female Little Spotted –fantastic!

A tired but elated group made our way back to the bunkhouse for a well-earned sleep.

We left the task of choosing a bird of the day until breakfast the next morning. It was pretty hard to select just one of the great birds we had seen. Kokako, Takahe, and Little Spotted Kiwi all got votes but Takahe got the most.

## 17 November 2018 – Day Five

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All of the group had seen all of the rare species we needed to on the island and had seen them well, so it was a chance for a leisurely breakfast, a few more photos, and a stroll down to the wharf seeing Kokako and other rarities along the way before meeting the water taxi that we had booked for 10am, and heading back to the mainland.

There was no point in diverting to the Manukau harbour because the tide was out, so we crossed Auckland and headed directly down to Pukorokoro Miranda.

We were there in time for high tide, but it was the smallest tide of the month and no birds of interest were pushed anywhere near the main hide.

Over on the 'Stilt Ponds' though it was a very different story. We were able to get great close views and photos of our prime target WRYBILL, as well as Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, Grey Teal, and a single Ruddy Turnstone.

Pectoral Sandpiper is an uncommon vagrant to NZ but we had one of those foraging right under our noses and not far away a couple of the slightly more common Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, one of those being a Juvenile in lovely fresh plumage. We also saw our first BLACK-BILLED GULLS.



The bent beak of the wrybill. Lars Petersson.

We ate fresh fish for dinner at a small seafood place and almost everyone voted for Wrybill for bird of the day, the one exception being for North Island Kokako that we had seen again first thing this morning before leaving 'Tiri'.

## 18 November 2018 – Day Six

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We had another pelagic trip booked today but the boat would not need to leave until 1pm and the departure point was only 2 hours away, so we had time for some land-based morning birding.

We drove to a high point overlooking a vast area of swamp. There were plenty of the common natives such as Swamp Harrier, Australasian Swamphen, the NZ sub-species of Sacred Kingfisher, Great Cormorants, and various ducks but nothing new and in particular no Australasian Bittern which was what we had come to look for [we found one later in the tour though].

Then a 2 hour drive firstly through farmland then through tall mature podocarp forest, and then up the very pretty east coast of the Coromandel Peninsula.

We had time to check into our motel, and buy lunches and then it was 1pm and time to set off on another pelagic adventure, this time for 6 hours on the water.

As usual the first tubenoses seen were the inshore species Fluttering, Flesh-footed, and Buller's Shearwater. We stopped briefly at a fish 'boil-up' with hundreds of Fluttering Shears, Fairy Prions and Red-billed Gulls but nothing new.

We motored out a couple of hours to Islands where our prime target for the day breeds and we found a minimum of 8 of them--confirmed PYCROFT'S PETRELS.



Pycroft's petrel in flight Lars Petersson.

At distance Pycroft's are not easy to separate on the wing from Cook's Petrels which were also present, and as usual none of either species came and sat on the water beside us, but the 8 we ticked were clearly Pycroft's and we had good close looks at them, and some great photos were taken.

We had a close fly-over of a GREY-FACED PETREL, and another 10 flypasts by Little Shearwaters.

Flesh-footed and Sooty Shearwater, Black Petrel, Northern Giant Petrel, White-faced Storm-petrel, and Fairy Prions were around the boat, and we passed a Little Penguin.

Back in Whitianga at an Italian restaurant for dinner, most of the team voted Pycroft's bird of the day, but Little Penguin got one vote and so did White-faced stormy.



## 19 November 2018 – Day Seven

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We drove back over the peninsula through more great scenery and headed for the central North Island, with a stop at the wonderful Pureora Forest for 3 hours.

That stop got off to a great start, we had only just arrived and from almost the first tree I heard the screech of a LONG-TAILED CUCKOO. We stopped the van rather hurriedly and all piled out as quickly as we could. Hearing this species is one thing, but seeing it is another matter altogether, they are expert at concealing themselves, but today was our lucky day.



Long-tailed cuckoo – it doesn't get any better than this...or does it? Lars Petersson.

We were able to get absolutely stonking views of the bird in full, perched in 3 different parts of the tree at 3 different times over a ten-minute viewing. It also flew right over our heads twice --- on one of those occasions it was being chased by an angry Tui. The whole experience was about as good as you could possibly expect with this normally very difficult species and the photographers got some great shots.

As we walked and drove through the forest there were lots more Kaka, Whiteheads, North Island Robins, as well as the more common forest birds, but unusually no Yellow-crowned Parakeets [we eventually got them, but not until late in the tour].

Jonas spotted a NZ FALCON, and then we picked up a second one. One of them spiralled above us for several minutes.





Yep – fly-over long-tailed cuckoo – what a shot! Lars Petersson.



A pair of blue duck. Lars Petersson.

After leaving the forest we stopped briefly at a wetland with a good array of waterfowl and cormorants but the only addition to our list was Eurasian Coot.

We drove further south and then began a search for another iconic and very special bird, a rare endemic duck that lives and feeds only in fast flowing torrent rivers, almost always surrounded by native forest. We found two on the Tongariro river --- BLUE DUCKS. They were close enough for great views and photos and after watching them for a while, we headed for our hotel in high spirits.

Another great dinner, this time in the hotel and the votes for bird of the day were split between Long-tailed Cuckoo and Blue Duck, although NZ Falcon got one vote too.

## 20 November 2018 – Day Eight

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Before leaving the southern end of Lake Taupo, we spent some time around the lake shore seeing more NZ Scaup, NZ Grebe, Black-billed Gulls, 100s of Black Swans and other waterfowl. At one stage there were 3 different cormorant species all side by side on a jetty; Little Pied, Little Black, and Great.

We also checked out extensive reed beds and watched an Australasian Bittern make a long slow flight for all the group to see. They are rare and critically endangered so it was great to get a good view of that.

Then it was time to leave the lake and head to the east coast, but we detoured to another forest sanctuary, high above Hawkes Bay.

On the way to the forest and while still on a 2-lane highway, there was the very unusual sight of a NZ Pipit walking on a busy tar-sealed road.

After some winding unsealed steep roads, we arrived at the forest and ate our lunches in a shelter surrounded by very old *Nothofagus* trees, some of them hundreds of years old, and then set off for a walk of a bit over an hour through that lovely forest.

Another close North Island Robin, and then our first RIFLEMAN, a screeching NZ Falcon in flight caught our attention, and then we saw our first NZ TOMTIT.

Apart from birds we also stopped to inspect some large and primitive insects --- Cave Weta, and Tree Weta, as well as a pretty, endemic butterfly-- NZ Red Admiral.

Before leaving the forest, we had seen both male and female of NZ Tomtit and Rifleman as well as more Bellbirds and other common forest birds.

At a pond near Napier we visited a Little Pied Shag nesting colony, took the opportunity for some close-up photos of Black-billed Gulls and added a rather spectacular duck to our list---Plumed Whistling Duck. The latter is a rare vagrant to NZ and the two we saw are the only two currently known to be in NZ.

Then to a wetland to look for more waders and we added a couple, BANDED DOTTEREL [Double Banded Plover] and Black-fronted Dotterel. The former was in full breeding plumage, and both are really quite stunning.





The Gang. Phil Hammond.

We had seen a good array of birds again today, and over dinner at a harbourfront restaurant five birds got a vote for bird of the day. Australasian Bittern got most votes but NZ Tomtit, Rifleman, Banded Dotterel, and the quite striking Black-fronted Dotterel all got votes too

## 21 November 2018 – Day Nine

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While still on the North island east coast we spent the morning around local wetlands, ponds, lakes and a river mouth and saw more NZ Dotterels, Banded Dotterels, Black-fronted Dotterels, and other waders and waterfowl.

Whist at a River mouth a Bittern boomed from a reedbed across the river for most of the hour or so that we were there.

During that morning we added Pacific Golden Plover and Mute Swan to our trip list but no more endemics, in fact today was the first day of the tour that we didn't add any new endemics, but by then we had seen every endemic on the North Island except Spotted Shag and Yellow-crowned Parakeet, and we would have another chance at both of them on the South Island.

Then there was a longish drive across to the Manawatu Estuary on the east coast, but we added Rook to the list along the way, when Jonas spotted one in a field to the side of the van while I was driving and watching the road ahead.

In Foxton our fantastic hosts at the Celtic Motel collected our washing and got that laundered, while we went away for more birding---a service that was much appreciated by all.

At the Manawatu Estuary there were more good views of Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots, and Caspian Terns and we added Little Egret [uncommon in NZ] and Curlew Sandpiper to our list. There were also more Pacific Golden Plovers.

At dinner Black-fronted Dotterel and NZ Grebe got most votes for bird of the day but NZ Dotterel, Mute Swan, and Little Egret got votes too.

## 22 November 2018 – Day Ten

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The main event today was to be the ferry crossing to the South Island, but the ferry wasn't until early afternoon and we had some mileage to get from Foxton to the ferry terminal in Wellington.

We checked out the Manawatu Estuary again and got a closer look at a couple of species, and then inspected some lakes, estuaries, and a sewage pond on the way to Wellington. A flock of about 50 Little Black Shags fishing cooperatively on a lake was interesting and there were some more good birds but nothing new until a fly-past of a SPOTTED SHAG seen from a beach. We were to get much closer views of that endemic species later in the tour.

While parked beside Wellington harbour waiting for the ferry we got good close views of a Little Penguin swimming close to shore. There was also a Little Pied Shag foraging very close and further out Fluttering Shearwaters.

We didn't add anything from the ferry while it was winding its way out of Wellington Harbour, but once out in the deep water of Cook Strait we began to add some pelagic species --- more White-capped Albatross and then our first NORTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSSES.

There were also Sooty and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, some probable but not confirmed Westland Petrels, and lots of Fairy Prions and Fluttering Shearwaters. We also saw Northern Giant and our only Southern Giant Petrel of the trip, one of Lars photos confirming the mint green bill tip of the latter, and we saw our first Cape Petrel. Unusually, we also saw some Cook's Petrels, again confirmed by photos, uncommon to see them here!

There were more inshore birds --Fluttering Shearwaters, Red-billed Gulls, etc. as we wound through the Marlborough Sounds and an intermediate phase Arctic Skua.

The most unusual sighting was as we wound down the spectacularly scenic Tory Channel where we spotted a pod of 3 Killer Whales!!

Over dinner in Picton, Northern Royal Albatross and Cape Petrel got most votes but a couple of people thought the Killer Whales were the sighting of the day.

## 23 November 2018 – Day Eleven

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We had our bags packed in the van by 7.30am and then left the van in secure parking in the motel and walked down through the picturesque little town of Picton and down to the waterfront to board the boat we had chartered for the morning.

After about 45 minutes of motoring up the very pretty Queen Charlotte Sound we found some of our first targets, a small mixed flock. Some were Spotted Shags and it was good to get a close look at them, but more importantly 9 of the birds were NZ KING SHAGS. These birds are very range restricted, living and feeding only in part of the Marlborough Sounds and nowhere else in the world. It is thought there are about 600 of them.

The skipper is very experienced in approaching them and knew how to back the boat in close with the sun behind us for great views and photos, all without disturbing them.

By the end of the morning we had seen a total of 14, as we also saw some fishing, and others flying.

From there we headed to another island that has no introduced predators, to look for more rarities. The skipper set us ashore and we had the island to ourselves. As we stepped on to the beach a big flightless rail walked right up to us, WEKA.

We were to see two different sub-species of these, and these ones the Western Weka would be right at our feet in several places in the South Island, but we had come here in the hope of seeing something much rarer. We were looking for a little green parakeet that is quite a shy species and is about the same size and colour as thousands of leaves in some of the trees it forages in! It is also rare and critically endangered.

I knew we were in a territory and it was a matter of waiting patiently and quietly. While we were waiting we were entertained by lots of Tui, Bellbirds, NZ Pigeons etc and a couple of Weka at our feet, and eventually after a wait of about one and a half hours we heard a quiet parakeet chatter, and honed in on where it was coming from. Everyone got a view, mostly through bins through vegetation, of an ORANGE-FRONTED PARAKEET feeding.

The skipper brought the boat back to the island and we set off back to Picton in high spirits, with another difficult bird seen by everyone in the group

Motoring back towards Picton we encountered a pod of Dusky Dolphins, but this was no ordinary pod. The main pod was much larger and made up of adult males and females and was several hundred metres away. This pod beside our boat, was just mothers, helping aunts, and very young calves just a few days old. With our motor switched off they stuck around and our skipper told us he was sure the mothers and aunts know every boat in the neighbourhood, including which boats have external props etc, and he thought the adults were teaching the calves which boats to trust.

After getting back to shore we headed off in the van again, bought more take away lunches, and stopped to eat them on the side of the road in one of Marlborough's famous vineyards. We hadn't just stopped at random! The only Black Kite in the South Island and one of only two known in NZ is seen here from time to time, and sure enough we had it sighted before we had finished our sandwiches and pies, and once again it was Jonas that was first to spot it.

We carried on further south, stopping along the way at a sewage works, where we saw another good array of waterfowl and scanned a breeding colony of Royal Spoonbills. We added Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, and Cirl Bunting to our trip list, all of those being uncommon in NZ.

Travelling further south we stopped at a lake and added Great Crested Grebe [an Australasian sub-species that keeps its crest all year round], and also added our fourth Grebe species of the tour, a rare vagrant to NZ which has now bred on this lake-- Hoary-headed Grebe. We also saw a third grebe species on this particular lake –NZ Grebe.

Another really nice dinner, this time in Kaikoura, and Orange-fronted Parakeet got 6 votes for bird of the day with the others going for King Shag.

## 24 November 2018 – Day Twelve

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We were booked this morning on another pelagic but the boat didn't leave until 9am so we drove out to Kaikoura Point. There were various waders, all repeat species out on the reef, as well as lounging NZ Fur Seals. Further out just beyond the reef we could see some White-capped Albatrosses and thousands of HUTTON'S SHEARWATERS streaming past.

Then it was time for our morning pelagic. We all got on board the boat while it was still on its trailer, a very large tractor pushed the boat with all aboard down the boat ramp, and we were away. Very deep water, a kilometre deep in fact, comes in very close to Kaikoura in a trench and we had only been at sea for minutes when we were seeing our first pelagic birds.

One of the key species to see here because we probably wouldn't get another chance is Hutton's Shearwater and although we had already seen them at distance, we obviously wanted a better view and we certainly got that.

There was virtually no wind at all today and although that's normally bad news on a pelagic, it was great for this species today because we came up to a huge raft of them sitting on the water and we were able to get really good views of a species which is often only seen in a fly-past [they don't come in for chum]. Gary, our famous skipper, reckoned there were something like 4000 Hutton's in the raft. They breed only in the Seaward Kaikoura Mountains which we could see, just inland.

Gary spotted a fishing boat a kilometre or two out, and we headed for that. There was a good selection of birds around the fishing boat and we pulled up and got the berley over the side. We had great birds sitting on the water, some within touching distance.

At this spot and further out in deeper water we had Northern Giant Petrels, 26 of them in total for the morning, right beside the boat. Also, very close were our first NZ WANDERING ALBATROSSES [ANTIPODEAN ALBATROSS] [all of them were Gibson's sub-species]. There were also SALVIN'S ALBATROSSES, as well as more Northern Royals and White-capped.

Another key species that we needed today was WESTLAND PETREL and we got great views of 22 of those on the water close to the boat. We also got our first White-chinned Petrels, more Cape Petrels, a couple more Buller's Shearwaters and another single Grey-faced Petrel.





Watching 'distant' seabirds! Phil Hammond.



A NZ Wandering albatross with a couple of Northern giant petrels. Lars Petersson.



A NZ Wandering albatross sweeps over the water. Lars Petersson.



A Salvin's albatross in flight with a Westland petrel. Lars Petersson.



Unusually we had 4 Northern Royal Albatross, but no Southern Royals! Never mind we got them a few days later.

On the way back to port Gary cruised past some rocks to get close views of young NZ Fur Seal pups, and then we were back in Kaikoura for a sit-down cafe style lunch. The afternoon was scheduled for a rest, but after a late afternoon meal of fish & chips and deserts [and a couple of drinks] at the motel picnic tables, we did go out just for an hour before dusk and saw some more bush birds and added BROWN CREEPER [PIPIPI].

Most votes for bird of the day went to the huge NZ Wandering Albatross that had been so close, but Salvin's got a couple of votes and one for Northern Royal and another for Hutton's Shearwater--- all endemics of course.

## 25 November 2018 – Day Thirteen

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It was time to head for the mountains!

Driving south down the spectacular coastline south of Kaikoura and then into farmland we came across our next endemics in a field beside the road just north of Parnassus. We parked on the side of the road and admired a flock of 8 BLACK-FRONTED TERNS hawking for insects over a newly sown crop field. They were all in beautiful breeding plumage. Some were hovering right beside us very close to the van. We just sat and enjoyed them for about 20 minutes and got some great views and photos.



A beautiful black-fronted tern in flight. Lars Petersson.

Further south we stopped first at a large lake and then for lunch at a river estuary—more great birds but no new species---we would have to wait for the mountains for that, and just north of Christchurch we turned inland and headed west.

At first it was flat farmland and small towns and then increasingly alpine scenery as we wound up into the Southern Alps and our destination at Arthur's Pass. Once at the Pass we carried on to the highest point that we could drive to and pulled off into a very small carpark above the road.

We didn't have to wait long before Inge and Evamaria spotted a KEA flying along the walls of the alpine valley we were in, and we all got on to it. A couple of the group spotted another NZ Falcon and not long after that another kea appeared, this time a juvenile sailing down and landing on the roof of our van.

These big Parrots are highly intelligent, and this one entertained us mischievously looking for parts of the van it could get its beak into [many people have stories of windscreen wipers or rubber seals being damaged by Kea!].



A kea lands on the roof of the van. Lars Petersson.

Our van survived, everyone got great views and photos, and we headed off for our next adventure. The forest up here just below the snow line is mostly *Nothofagus*, mostly Mountain Beech. This high, as you might expect, there is a lot of moss and a walk along a forest track is pretty special. We didn't add any new species but the drizzle held off [it had rained a bit in the last couple of days] and it was a very enjoyable walk. A female Rifleman flew between Stephan and I and landed on the trunk of a mossy tree right in front of us. Those in the group that didn't see that one certainly got great views of other Riflemen, and we retired to check in to our hotel.





A male South Island tomtit clings to a mossy trunk. Lars Petersson.

After dinner in the hotel we had a bit of time to relax before going out again after dark to look for another Kiwi species that we really didn't expect to see. It is extremely rare for a birding tour to see a Great Spotted Kiwi – I think the last was about ten years ago and a lot of NZ birders have never seen one. Nor have most of the people that live up here! Still we might at least hear one. We walked for an hour or so on one track and then a few minutes on another but didn't see one. We did clearly hear a call and then everyone was content to go back to the hotel after what had been a long but great day.

Rifleman got one vote, and Black-fronted Tern a couple, but the winner was clear with all the other votes for bird of the day going to Kea.

## 26 November 2018 – Day Fourteen

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There was still low cloud up in the mountains, but before leaving the Arthurs Pass National Park and wonderful Beech forest, Lars spotted a SOUTH ISLAND ROBIN from the van window. It hung around while we stopped the van and got out, and again everyone got stonking views.

We saw another Kea in flight, and wound our way back down out of the mountains and over to the West Coast.



A South Island robin perched. Lars Petersson.

Sewage Ponds are always worth stopping for, especially as we drive past them anyway. Some pretty good examples of what looked like pure Pacific Black Ducks, plus Grey Teal, NZ Scaup, Australasian Shoveler and other waterfowl but nothing new. A check of the Hokitika River Mouth, another bakery to buy lunches, and onwards to the south.

We ate our lunches beside a lake surrounded by native forest and were amused again by Weka at our feet and another good array of endemic forest birds, but nothing new. The sky was clearing and we were driving through fantastic scenery on our way to Franz Josef and Okarito for the main event of the day, which would be tonight.

Late in the afternoon we met up with local Kiwi expert Ian Cooper who dedicates much of his life to conserving the local species and he gave us a briefing on what to expect tonight when we would try to see the rarest of the five Kiwi species. Then we made our way to our motel.



After dinner in Franz Josef township, we headed back to Okarito at dusk and met up with Mike who works with Ian, and would be leading us tonight. We lined up on a small remote road in the hope of spotting our shy target when it crossed the road.

It was essential to wear the right soft clothing, and especially to avoid any nylon or other garments that might make “swishing” sounds when we moved, and to stand very still and quiet. We could hear a Kiwi's footsteps in the dense undergrowth beside the road and then a very loud call of a male with a female further away replying. We tried to move very quietly and then stand absolutely still and quiet, and did that pretty well.

We had to be very patient but eventually were rewarded when a male OKARITO KIWI walked out on to the side of the road, stood in front of us in the red torchlight for a moment, and then trotted across the road right beside the group. Everyone had a great view of it and we returned to our motel very happy.

No doubt about bird of the day today ---it was unanimous---Okarito Brown Kiwi.

## 27 November 2018 – Day Fifteen

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The grey skies had cleared overnight and for the next couple of days we had blue skies and sunshine for driving through some of the most beautiful scenery in the World. We pushed on further south through ancient forest, occasionally coming out beside a beach. At one of these we stopped for a break and saw a large pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins close to shore.



The Penguin spotters. Evamaria Fern.



Later in the morning we stopped in a forest car park and set off for a great walk of about 45 minutes each way through more ancient forest. We passed Greenhood orchids and more endemic birds including Kaka overhead and close views of the South Island sub-species of NZ Tomtit, noting the yellow wash on the breast that is absent on the North Island birds.

At the end of the track we came out on a pristine beach that is only accessible through that forest track and a long way from roads. We were there for something special. We settled down and waited, and after 15 minutes or so, it was Hans that saw it first but all of us were on it quickly, a FIORDLAND CRESTED PENGUIN emerged from dense forest and waddled down the beach to swim out to sea --- fantastic these are one of the two rarest penguin species in the World. We were at a distance that would not disturb them or interfere with their breeding.

Two more followed a few minutes later, but the best view was of one who came the other way. We spotted it in the surf and watched it come out and stand on the beach for a while and then waddle up the beach and disappear into the forest.

We walked back through the coastal rain forest, ate our lunches in a clearing, and pushed on further south through more stunning scenery. Eventually we turned inland and began winding our way up into the mountains and over Haast Pass.

In the mountains we stopped for another forest walk which we had to ourselves. We were walking very slowly hearing and seeing plenty of birds including at least 8 Riflemen, some very close, and other forest birds that we had already seen. I heard a call that I had been listening for, and asked the group to stop and concentrate on where it was coming from and we got our first view of YELLOWHEAD. As usual on our tours, those that had seen them helped those that hadn't, and before leaving this forest, mostly of Mountain Beach, we made sure everyone had a good view of the rare Yellowhead.



A yellowhead peers down from the canopy. Lars Petersson.



Our accommodation for the night in a garden setting was at Wanaka, and after a rest we went to dinner in a really nice lakeside restaurant with views over the lake. Fiordland Crested Penguin got most of the votes for bird of the day but there were a couple for Yellowhead as well. Another day when it was hard to pick just one bird!

## 28 November 2018 – Day Sixteen

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Our main target today was another pretty special little bird, but we had a lot of driving ahead of us to get to it. It would be hard to think of a better day for a longish drive, the sun was shining and the scenery stunning.

Leaving Wanaka, we wound up 1000m and over the Crown Range, onwards with lake on one side of the van and snow-capped mountains the other, through remarkable tussock country and on to Te Anau where we stopped to buy lunches.

We stopped again in a bush clearing to eat lunches without adding any new species and pushed on through the beautiful Eglinton Valley and started to climb back up into the Southern Alps. As we climbed higher and higher the scenery became more mountainous and at one point we had to stop for a temporary red traffic light for road works. Down below the van was a cascading mountain stream of melted snow and in it right below the van was a Blue Duck! The red traffic light stayed red long enough for all in the van to see it.

Further up the road as we began to climb above the tree line we passed another Kea, but pushed on. We reached a point where I knew there was a territory for our little bird and we began scanning the surrounding tumbled rocks, mountain daisies, and low shrubbery just below the snow line. We had 9 keen pairs of eyes looking for any movement from a tiny bird.

We had been there for about 15 minutes with each of us facing in a different direction and scanning different parts of the habitat when Lars spotted the first one --- woohoo -- ROCK WREN. Our luck was in we got absolutely stonking views of two of these tiny iconic New Zealand endemics that live their entire lives, including winter, up here above the tree line.

They kept popping up very close to us bobbing up and down on the top of rocks, and we decided to retreat in case we were disturbing a nest. A couple of times one of them stayed on top of a rock long enough to get a scope on it. This species is related to, and slightly larger than Rifleman and is part of an ancient endemic family. With everyone very happy with the views and photos of the Rock Wrens [also sometimes called South Island Wren] we started to wind down the mountain road.

While still high up in the mountains, but now back down amongst trees, we stopped at a lookout and spotted some Kaka flying above the forest but also heard a call that we had been expecting much earlier in the tour, a Shining Bronze Cuckoo. It was surprising that we had come so far on a November tour without hearing or seeing one of these, but we got good views of the lustrous little bird here.



A rock wren calls from the top of a boulder. Lars Petersson.



Stunning scenery near the Hollyford Valley. Phil Hammond.



Once back down in the Eglinton Valley we had time for another forest walk and did so among tall ancient Beech trees. We saw two more South Island Robins, at least 8 more Riflemen, and more good forest birds but no more new birds and headed back to our motel in Te Anau.

Rock Wrens can be very frustrating, as can the weather in their habitat, and it is certainly not a guaranteed species on a birding tour of NZ for everyone in the group. There is not even a guarantee that the road will be open, so it was not surprising that Rock Wren was unanimous as bird of the day for a very happy group.

## 29 November 2018 – Day Seventeen

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It was time to go to Stewart Island. The final check-in time for the ferry from Bluff at the bottom of the South Island wasn't until 10am but there was no way we wanted to miss it, so I built in some contingency time in case of a flat tyre or other hold-up, and we were on the road by 6.30am.

We drove almost directly down to Invercargill just stopping for a bathroom break and got to the deep south early enough to check out a lagoon for a rare vagrant, and we found a couple of them---Chestnut-breasted Shelduck added to the list and plenty of other waterfowl to scan.

I dropped the group and our reduced baggage at the ferry terminal, parked the van and most of our luggage in secure parking, and walked back to the terminal. We were on foot now for a couple of days on Stewart Island.

While waiting for the ferry we added another endemic—FOVEAUX SHAG. As soon as the ferry pulled out of Bluff harbour we started to see pelagic birds – White-capped and Salvin's Albatross, Sooty Shearwaters, and a lot of the local sub-species of Common Diving Petrel which always look to me to be much whiter underneath than the northern birds.

About half-way across Foveaux Strait the ferry skipper slowed the ferry to give everyone a good view of three huge SOUTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS sitting on the water. Once ashore on the Island we checked into our hotel, ate lunches on the waterfront, and set off on a walk of about 20 minutes over a saddle and down to a small bay to meet our booked water taxi to take us to Ulva Island. Ulva is another island without alien predators where endemic birds can thrive. There are a number of rare endemics on this island and we really needed two of them because we hadn't seen them yet, and had no chance of either of them elsewhere on the remainder of the tour.

We had great views and a close encounter with one of them within minutes of stepping ashore. Hans saw it first; a SOUTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK. That's birding! On one previous trip it had been really hard work to find one of these, but today we got great views of several. Speaking of hard work, we had, surprisingly not yet seen a YELLOW-CROWNED PARAKEET on the tour and this was our last chance, but we got good views for everyone of that too before leaving the island.

There are a couple of birds that are Stewart Island endemics at sub-species level; the local Robin and Weka, and we certainly got good views of both of them --- we had to be careful not to step on at least six Stewart Island Robins during the afternoon and we found the Weka on a beach at the end of a track. While on the island we also got more great views of Yellowhead and Brown Creeper [our best views yet of both of those two species], as well Kaka, Red-crowned Parakeet, and Tomtit.



A South Island saddleback calls from the shrubbery. Lars Petersson.

After an early start that morning, it was already a big day, and we had a night time adventure ahead of us, so we had a couple of hours relaxation and a leisurely dinner before heading off again at 10pm! Matt Jones, a Wrybill guide who lives on the island, collected us from the hotel and took us to a private property that they have access to, to look for another species of Kiwi and we were only just out of the cars when we saw our first SOUTHERN BROWN KIWI.

Over the next hour and a half, we saw three others, all close encounters, and because the whole group stood very quietly, we were able watch them vigorously feeding right in front of us and we even saw an attempted copulation. The whole time was another great experience.

For three of the group Yellow-crowned Parakeet was bird of the day, but for the rest it was Southern Brown Kiwi.





A Southern brown kiwi pauses whilst feeding. Lars Petersson.

## 30 November 2018 – Day Eighteen

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We had another all-day pelagic trip planned for today, and the group was really looking forward to it. On the way out, our skipper knew a spot where we might get a glimpse of a Fiordland Crested Penguin hiding in a cave and we saw that.

There were some Little Penguins in the water and then a bonus –three Fiordland Crested Penguins swimming beside the boat.

We headed to an island and had a close encounter with three Southern Brown Skuas, and spotted a rare YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN standing on a beach. We had now seen both of the two rarest Penguins in the world, and had seen three Penguin species within a couple of hours.

We motored off into deeper water south and east of Stewart Island and began the first of several chumming sessions during the day. At one stage we had 80 Albatrosses sitting on the water around our boat – one young Black-browed albatross was new for the trip. There were 27 Salvin's, 6 of the big majestic Southern Royals, and the rest were White-capped albatross.



Two Fiordland crested penguins swim beside the boat. Lars Petersson.

There were lots of Sooty Shearwaters, and at least 15 Cook's Petrels flew by, some of them quite close. Another great bird for the day was Grey-backed Storm-petrel and we had 4 or 5 good views of them flitting past the boat, quite close. There were also Fairy Prions, White-chinned, Cape, and Northern Giant Petrels, and lots of common diving Petrels. We had a couple of fly-bys of MOTTLED PETREL but neither came very close to the boat. What did come in and sat right beside the boat was a big surprise, a Grey Petrel, only the second one ever recorded on one of our tours!

On the way back to port we pulled up to a rock with about 40 Foveaux Shags on it and we came up to it at a good angle for the photographers and great views. The flock contained both colour morphs. Then we tried again for the Fiordland Crested Penguins and found one out on a rock, out in full view for great photos and views.

Dinner was again in our hotel, where the blue Cod was as delicious as ever, and surprisingly neither of the rare endemic Penguins featured in the bird of the day list! Black-browed Albatross got one vote, Grey-backed stormy another, but all of the other votes were for the Grey Petrel.





An immature black-browed albatross sweeps over the sea. Lars Petersson.



A white-capped (left) and Southern Royal albatross (right) in flight. Lars Petersson.





A white-capped albatross low over the water. Lars Petersson.



Surprise of the day – grey petrel. Lars Petersson.



# 1 December 2018 – Day Nineteen

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After breakfast in the hotel we were at the wharf by 7.30 and away on the early ferry back to the South Island. We spent a bit more time at a lagoon near Invercargill with a lot of waterfowl on it, but didn't find anything new, and pushed on.

There was more stunning scenery driving through the Catlins coastal rain forest, and a couple of stops, and then lunch at a remote beach which we walked along and found a very big endemic NZ Hookers Sea-lion lounging on the beach.

We pushed on further north and then detoured off to an area on a rugged, and beautiful coastal spot. There were about 20 OTAGO SHAGS roosting here so worth stopping. Both colour morphs were in the flock and the light and scenario was perfect for fantastic views and photos.

We drove further north and then made another detour on a dusty unsealed road. We were going out to look for penguins but along the narrow road there was a shout from the second row of the bus from Lars "owl". He had spotted a Little owl in a concrete pipe in a paddock---it was in broad daylight. It flew up into a tree, and once all of the group had seen it we rolled on.

At the end of the unsealed road we parked the van and set off on a short walk out to the coast where I expected to find something special, and we did. We had already seen a Yellow-eyed Penguin but wanted to get a better view and we found two of them standing on a grassy hilltop above a beach giving us great views and photos.



A pair of yellow-eyed penguins. Lars Petersson.

We drove further north, checked into our motel in Oamaru, had a rest, and then went for dinner at another good restaurant. The rare Yellow-eyed Penguin got most votes but there was also one vote each for Otago Shag, Little Owl, and Hooker's Sea-lion.

## 2 December 2018 – Day Twenty

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There was now only one endemic NZ bird left to look for, but it was one of the most important of any NZ bird tour, a very rare wader with only about 100 adults in existence. To find it we wouldn't be staying on the coast, but heading inland and up into the lonely Mckenzie high country.

Before leaving the Oamaru area though, there was something else that I wanted to show the team. We stopped at a spot on the coast and there we saw 100s of Spotted and 100s of Otago Shags all roosting. Then it was time to drive up into the high country. After a bit more than an hour's drive we pulled into a great little wetland, about which I had some info from friends!

We walked a short distance and began scanning. There were Black-fronted Terns hawking, a Great-crested grebe on a nest, Banded Dotterels and then Stephan saw one first, and then we found two more of the rare waders we were looking for --- 3 adult BLACK STILTS.



A black stilt feeding. Lars Petersson.



With no more endemics to look for, we drove up a steep winding mountain road looking for a Chukar. We didn't find any at first but stopped at the top of the road and had a break for lunch with panoramic views of blue lakes and high tussock country. On the way down, I stopped at what I thought would be a likely spot and found a couple of the colourful but cryptic partridges. Once again everyone got to see them.

From there we still had some time so went to another wetland, this time a huge area where we found 8 more Black Stilts and had the opportunity to watch them feeding in a fast-flowing little stream and get some great photos. Other endemics present were Wrybills, [yet another good spot by Jonas], Banded Dotterels, Paradise Shelducks, South Island Oystercatchers, and Evamaria drew our attention to a NZ Pipit that gave the best photo opportunities of the tour for that species.

Before calling it a day we decided to look for one more fairly difficult species—Marsh Crake. This is the NZ sub-species of Baillon's Crake. We went off on more unsealed roads and into another swampy area. A spot that had been successful on Wrybill Tours in previous years didn't work, so we tried other nearby good habitat where I had seen one before, and at our third attempt Anders spotted a Marsh Crake, which shortly afterwards flew across a pond. We went to where it flew and found it. The views were not great as it never came out in the open, but we certainly all saw it and saw it well enough to see what it was. We ticked our 162<sup>nd</sup> bird for the tour.

Dinner in Omarama was a buffet in a hotel for a change, and was popular. It had been another great birding day, and it was no surprise that Black Stilt was everybody's choice for bird of the day.

As described in the summary at the start of this report each participant selected their favourite 7 birds of the tour---- it wasn't easy!!

## 3 December 2018 – Day Twenty-One

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On these tours the last day is primarily for getting everyone to Christchurch safely and on time to catch planes or check in to hotels, but we did have time to go back to that super little wetland where we first saw Black Stilts yesterday and we had time to view them again.

We had a last lunch together and still had a bit of time to scan an extensive area of settlement ponds before saying our goodbyes at the airport and hotels.

It had been a great tour with a great group of people, and a great group of very good birders. They had always been at the van on time, were always helpful with loading up etc which had given us more birding time. That and their spotting skills from the side windows of a moving van etc had been big factors in the excellent total that we had on our list.

A special word of thanks to Jonas who had gathered the group together and who's spotting skills were exceptional.