

Tour report

18 November – 8 December 2018

21-day Photography Tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Brent Stephenson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Greg Homel (co-leader), Ted Kinchloe, Jack Grimmer and Sue MacKnight

Images

Brent Stephenson

This tour was primarily a bird photography tour, and so our focus was on getting excellent images of as many species as we could during our time together. This meant we spent longer in each location, and visited fewer places each day. It often also meant getting up earlier than we normally would to get great light, and staying out longer in the evening, to maximise that lovely light at the end of the day. All in all, we had an amazing tour and all got some incredible images of the wonderful birds we encountered. Although landscape photography was not a priority, the time out in the field with cameras allowed us to get some really nice images of New Zealand's wonderful scenery as well.

Our total of 143 species over the tour included two heard only species. Unfortunately, our night on Tiritiri Matangi we only managed to hear little spotted kiwi, we just couldn't nail one down, and we also heard Indian peafowl on three different days, but didn't actually see one. Based on the fact our mission was photography, and the itinerary took a slightly different route to our 21-day birding tour, we saw most of the endemic targets, and the tour total of 143 species is an excellent one. This is especially in light of the weather we encountered during this tour, which has to be said was a bit of a challenge! The weather during this November and early December around New Zealand was much much wetter than normal, and one storm of 5-6 days seemed to track us in every direction. I can't remember a tour where we have encountered so many days of consecutive rain. That said, we made the most of what we could, and still had some excellent birding and photographic encounters during this time. And most importantly, kept smiles in place for most of it!

Definite highlights during the course of the trip included finding and watching a pair of kokako make a nest on Tiritiri Matangi, watching a pair of Takahe feeding with their two chicks, and then that evening having incredible views of morepork in multiple encounters. Absolutely outstanding views of long-tailed cuckoo perched, where we ended up walking away after prolonged scope views and photographs of it calling from inside a bush. Incredible prolonged views of bittern in the open allowing an excellent photographic opportunity. Beautiful light during an early morning Kaikoura pelagic and lots of wonderful albatross encounters. Absolutely incredible close views of a pair of black stilt in stunning evening light – we deserved that after the rain! And then an excellent encounter with a number of wrybill on their breeding grounds. Wonderful Ulva Island and an amazing encounter with a 'raft' of Fiordland crested penguins on the Stewart Island pelagic, after time with lots of albatross. A daytime kiwi on Ulva Island snuffling around and feeding in front of us. Rock wren even in very inclement weather and the scenery of the Eglinton Valley. Mount Cook (Aorangi) and amazing reflections in beautiful calm weather...again we deserved it!

The tour was made all the more fun, by the great humour and fun of a small group, who enjoyed each other's company. We had some great laughs, some amazing food, and saw some incredible sights. The images were not all that were taken with us, hopefully some incredible memories as well!

Brent Stephenson (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

18 November 2018 – Day One

The group gathered at the Hotel, we loaded the van and off we headed, to the rugged and wild West Coast. As we approached the coast, it certainly looked like it had been rough with salt spray hanging in the air making visibility reduced. But as the morning developed the air cleared and the light improved. But with thousands of Australasian gannets in front of us, who could worried about visibility? The colony was in full swing with eggs still being incubated, right through to chicks that were large and fluffy and at least 3-4 weeks old. And so much going on – adults filled the air, calling non-stop, ecstatic displays, and even copulation still occurring. Plenty to point the camera at. There were also a lot of white-fronted terns, also with a wide range of chicks from very small just hatched, through to juveniles taking their first flights.

As midday approached we headed to a bakery – the first of the trip – where only one of the group was tempted by a pie! On the road, we ate lunch at a scenic overlook with beautiful views out over rolling hillsides, covered by a mix of native and exotic vegetation. And then on to the East Coast to a small estuary where we had a quick look at the state of the tide before checking into the accommodation. A quick rest, and then out to the estuary at the height of the tide, hoping to watch it drop. We found a bunch of New Zealand dotterel as well as nesting variable oystercatchers. A shower of rain came in, so we decided to take some time to explore further down the coast, where we found another beach with more New Zealand dotterel. We spent some time there photographing and then headed back to our original location, where the rain shower had passed and the late afternoon light was getting very nice for photography. We had plenty to look at, with NZ dotterel, variable oystercatchers, Caspian tern, and white-faced herons all posing to differing degrees – who could pose more than a New Zealand dotterel though!



Really nice light and some lovely images were captured, before heading back to the vehicle. As the words 'I can't believe we haven't seen a fairy tern' left my mouth an adult fairy tern flew past! Not great views, but enough for most to get on to the bird before it disappeared off into the distance.

Pizza and burgers for dinner, with locally made beer! Life is good!



19 November 2018 – Day Two

Up early with a forecast of showers for the morning, and unfortunately it was right. We headed out to an estuary to make the most of the morning light, and we had nice success with variable oystercatchers, black-winged stilts, and New Zealand dotterels. But the showers came in and put a damper on things. However, another long-distance view of fairy tern and our first wrybill, which made a short guest appearance, raised spirits.

We decided to call it and went back to the accommodation, packed up and headed for the hills. Literally! After a short drive we had a pair of both Australasian little grebes and New Zealand dabchick right beside each other for close comparison and some nice images. Also, in nearby bushes were silvereyes, tui, and our first photo opportunities with New Zealand fantail. The showers had ceased and the light was pretty nice for photography, so we stayed and made the most of it.



Heading off, we grabbed some lunch on the way, pies made more than a guest appearance, and after a few hours' drive we were at a fantastic location for the afternoon. Paradise shelduck with ducklings started the afternoon, followed by brown teal, purple swamphen, and Eastern rosella – introduced but a pretty spectacular bird nonetheless. We decided to go for a walk and in the end had beautiful light with more brown teal and some great forest birds, including bellbird and more tui, whitehead, fantail and then some showy saddleback. They played hard to get to start with and then completely gave themselves up feeding in flax flowers in beautiful light.

All up a pretty nice day, with some stunning scenery and some great birds and photographic opportunities! Dinner was excellent and a happy team!



20 November 2018 – Day Three

It was up early, grab breakfast and some lunch at the local Bakery, and then to Sandspit. On the way we made a brief stop and had a look for buff-banded rail in the mangroves. We managed to see a bird several times, and although not photographable distance, we got reasonable views of this little skulker.

We then headed to the boat and boarded, with the sun shining and light winds. On the way out we searched for little penguin in the Kawau Channel and had about 6 birds, with good views of three rafted up. A nice start with this being some peoples first penguin species! We then continued out into the open ocean, and things got a little bumpy, but not too bad. We headed out to the west of Little Barrier Island, on

the way seeing common diving petrel, a few fluttering shearwaters, and the first flesh-footed shearwaters. After a few hours of steaming we arrived at our first chumming location. We started to drift and chummed as we went, and within seconds had birds streaming in. Flesh-footed shearwaters were the first in, with white-faced storm-petrels close behind, and a lot of fairy prions. These were the main contenders for the day, but after maybe twenty minutes we had the first New Zealand storm-petrel, which disappeared without most getting on to it! No worries, a steady stream of New Zealand storm-petrels came past the boat for the rest of the day, with probably 15 or so individuals being seen. Awesome!

We had small numbers of fluttering shearwaters visit the chum, a couple of sooty shearwaters, and several black petrels. After lunch we decided to relocate back to the start of our drift, and although this brought more of the same, shortly after we arrived and started chumming again we had a white-capped albatross (the first albatross for many) come past the boat. Probably the strangest thing all day was the total lack of Buller's shearwaters – not a single bird seen all day!

But an amazing day nonetheless, and late afternoon we headed back to land, with a happy group! Massive rain showers that looked to have been passing the mainland throughout the day were building, but still we managed to dodge them as we searched (fruitlessly) for kookaburra on the way back to the accommodation.







21 November 2018 – Day Four

Waking up to grey skies and showers is not the ideal starter to a day on tour. But game on! We packed up, stores were grabbed from the supermarket, and with breakfasts and lunches in the van the pie crumbs flew. We drove to Gulf Harbour and got ready for the ferry to arrive, and then once it was there jumped aboard for the short ride to Tiritiri Matangi. There was a little swell as we crossed the channel, but not a lot of birds except for a group of fluttering shearwaters that flew past.

Getting off the ferry we heard saddleback calling us towards the forest. We had our briefing from the local ranger, and then headed off up the trail. There was a lot of bird song around, as there always is in this magical place. Saddleback, whitehead, red-crowned parakeet, bellbird, tui...lots of stuff happening. Just up the trail we caught snippets of kokako song. We hesitated, hoping they would come closer. But no luck, so after a while we moved on up the trail. Not too far and we had a North Island robin at close range – of course – and then heard another kokako. We waited, and after a little searching had a female that appeared to be collecting nesting material. She then disappeared into the crook of a cabbage tree right in front of us and added to her nest! Amazing! The male was nearby singing, so we zeroed in on him and got great views of him as well.

Carrying on up the trail we spent time with a New Zealand pigeon, and a few other feathered friends along the way. Lunch at the bunkhouse, and then a little rest, before we headed out to see Takahe – and we managed to find a pair with two small chicks. Right by the Bunkhouse!! We spent some time photographing them, and then a little wandering, resting, and an easy late afternoon.





Wine and cheese for starters and then BBQ lamb and steak for dinner, with new potatoes and salad! Heading out afterwards we had awesome views of one morepork and saw three others. We heard a few little-spotted kiwi, none really close, and then the rain started. Damn! Looking for kiwi in the rain is not something that normally ends well...we gave it a damn good go, but not our night! Back to the bunkhouse for bed!

22 November 2018 – Day Five

Some were up early to make the most of the morning light, whilst others had a leisurely breakfast and then headed out. The Takahe and chicks put in another appearance, as did the pukeko (Purple swamphen) and chicks, and the lone kaka that has been around landed briefly for a visit.

After breakfast and clean up, we headed back slowly down towards the wharf, birding and taking photos on the way. The weather was much better today, with sunshine, although cool. There was a lot of action in the forest with plenty of whitehead, saddleback, pigeons and we tracked down the kokako pair again. The female was still collecting nesting material, and we watched as she did so from the crowns of cabbage trees, before heading to the nest to line it. We also tracked down a few Stitchbird, not that easy this time of the year, as there is so much natural food in the forest, and they are not visiting the feeders very much at all.





We slowly made our way to the wharf, and then our water taxi was in sight, and unfortunately time to leave the beautiful Tiritiri Matangi. On the way back to Gulf Harbour we saw a single fluttering shearwater, but nothing else. Loading up the van we made a quick stop for fuel and grabbed some lunch to munch on on the way.

We made a brief stop at an estuary area, seeing a lot of black swan, our first grey teal, and a lot of mallards. We also saw a few cormorants and a New Zealand dabchick. Pied (black-winged) stilts showed off in front of us, and there were distant godwit on the mudflats, so we decided to head on to Miranda. We checked in to our accommodations, had a quick respite, and then down to the Miranda area to see what we could find. High tide was just before sunset, so pretty well timed, although not a big tide. However, it was big enough to make the shorebird flocks fly around, wheeling in the air, and gradually push them close to us. We spotted our first South Island oystercatchers, great cormorants, and a few other new things – like sharp-tailed sandpiper, red-necked stint, and red knot. But we had great views of wrybill! We spent several hours just watching the flock get gradually closer, taking photos as they flew, and enjoying the atmosphere.

It was then time for a slap-up fish and chip dinner, and home to bed! A long but productive day!





23 November 2018 – Day Six

It was up early and off back to Miranda to see what the morning light might bring us. The tide was well in and the godwit and red knot flock had started to roost in the Stilt Ponds. We settled in and more and more streamed across with some big flocks pouring in and landing. There were plenty of wrybill around as well, and four sharp-tailed sandpipers, plus the red-necked stint, and the light was really nice. We took some photos, and watched, but the flock was too unsettled and so to avoid disturbance we kept our distance. We found a few Pacific golden plover in amongst the smaller shorebirds as well, and then later as we left about another 25 or so roosting quietly by themselves.



We decided to head back to the accommodations to pack our gear, and then hit the road for Pureora Forest Park. It was a bit of a drive, but during the middle of the day was perfect. We arrived to a great spot in the forest around 1300 and munched on our lunches, with close fly-by kaka, a confiding North Island robin and lots of tui, whitehead, etc. We headed off to do a forest walk, and almost immediately found a group of about 5 yellow-crowned parakeets. They showed really well and we managed some nice images before they dispersed. We encountered a few more robins, and there was a lot of noise around the forest, with kaka seemingly quite abundant. We even had copulating kaka! And a snatch of falcon calling had us peering skywards, but too thick was the canopy and too far the bird.

We headed to another location and went for a short walk, having heard a long-tailed cuckoo on the drive, but failing to get a glimpse – at least they were here! We kept eyes peeled for falcon and then ducked into

another forest patch. More kaka, more robin, and then glimpses of rifleman that just seemed to vanish...damn.

Back in the open we caught a good but brief view of a falcon flying with prey hanging from its talons. It seemed to land, but we lost it, and looking out over the area where it disappeared we could not refind it. So, we carried on. A flyover long-tailed cuckoo that was missed by all, and a few distant calling tomtit...sometimes the birds make you work. Late afternoon we drove some roads looking for pipit, and listening for cuckoos, but nothing. So, we decided it was late and we needed to head for our accommodation. We traversed a gravel road, windows still down in case, and then the call we had been waiting for – a long-tailed cuckoo that sounded pretty close. We jumped out, and there it was flying off down the road over us. It landed again and so we approached, but glimpses only of it moving through the tree, until it flew again and this time landed in a kamahi tree that was open enough to allow views! Wow, and this bird was fired up, with another calling a bit further away. We watched as it screeched with bill wide open, and then scolded with wings spread and pumping! In the end we needed to get going, who ever drives away from scope views of a long-tailed cuckoo!!! Amazing!

We checked into the accommodation, had a great dinner, and then fell into bed! A long, but amazing day!





24 November 2018 – Day Seven

We were up early to grey skies...bummer, but as per the weather forecast. We loaded up and headed out to a couple of sites. Aim was to spend a bit of time first thing looking for bittern and other lakeside things, and then look for ducks of the blue kind!

We checked a few likely spots for bittern before Greg said, 'I've got one'! And there it was sticking straight up like a stick, but standing on top of the old dead reedbed. It was completely out in the open, and literally 45m away! And it sat there, relaxed and pulled down its neck, and sat there and sat there! Every now and then as a harrier passed or something got it interested, it would raise its head skywards and peer. But incredible views and photographs of one of New Zealand's toughest native birds to photograph! Whilst all this was going on we had a spotless crane calling nearby, and a fernbird pop up and give itself up as well! Sensational! In the end a harrier or something agitated the bird and it flew, and the sound of shutters erupted...did we get it?

We moved on a bit and looked for more fernbird, and another bittern flew past several times. The original bird we had been watching had only flown a short way, but more obstructed, and even gave a number of booms from its new location!

Unfortunately, the weather forecast was accurate, and spots of rain started and steadily turned into pretty substantial rain. So, we checked a couple of places for other things we needed, and then searched a little of the river for blue ducks. Nothing at the first stop. We headed to another location, where the rain had almost ceased, nothing there, but the sound of a shining bronze cuckoo buoyed our spirits, although it never showed. We headed back to the original location for ducks, and after a little searching, bingo! There was a pair feeding on the other side of the river. We spent a bit of time with them, watching them feed in the shallow rapids, completely disappearing as they turned their backs and merged beautifully into the background.

We then decided to head back to town, grab some lunch and have a break during the middle of the day, get some washing done etc, and then head out again in the afternoon. But the show wasn't over! Arriving outside our rooms, a shining bronze cuckoo gave a few calls and there it was, completely showing off for us. Shutters raged into action again, and some nice images of the cuckoo were collected.

We had lunch, downloaded images, did laundry and hoped the weather would improve. In the mid-afternoon we headed out to a forest area, where it was a light drizzle. But under the canopy it was reasonably dry and we got reasonable views of rifleman and some better views of tomtit. Also glimpsed yellow-crowned parakeet and heard a number of kaka, as well as seeing fantail, grey gerygone, and a few other bits and pieces.

We then headed to a site for fernbird, but they did not show well, although fantails and whitehead were much more obliging. Before we then check another couple of sites on the river. Another pair of blue duck at a different site, this time a little closer, and although they really didn't want to wake up, they did eventually move off downstream after a brief bit of preening.

It was then time to head back to the accommodation, before another great dinner!





25 November 2018 – Day Eight

Up and out the door, with grey skies and rain...boo! But off we headed and within a few minutes we had one of the same pairs of blue duck as yesterday in view. They were a little further, so we headed off to look for some others, in the hope that we might get some photo opportunities.



We checked a couple of other locations, the first was again duckless, but the second we found a single bird, perhaps different to those we had seen yesterday. It was feeding and moving around the place, so we took a few photos, and then headed off. We decided that perhaps the weather was going to be a little better further south (according to the forecast at least), so we headed south early. It rained much of the first part of the drive, but we did manage glimpses of the base of the mountains there in the Central Plateau, and we did get a couple of pipit as well. As we drove over one of the beautiful mountain streams, we spotted a duck shape. Stopping, there on a beautiful fast flowing mountain river, was a blue duck standing in all its glory! Nice one!

We carried on through to the south, arriving to the Manawatu Estuary just before midday. It was spitting a few spots of rain but mostly pretty good. The tide was a huge high tide, so we couldn't access the birds, and changed tack as the rain started to fall. We watched the birds from another location, managing to spot the curlew sandpiper in amongst the red knot. Nice views of that, and we then headed on for some gull photography. Nice to have both red-billed and black-billed really close and side by side! So, with a few spots of rain the van made a perfect mobile hide to take photos from!

We then moved to a few different locations, finding a very nice pair of Australasian shoveler with youngsters, then some scaup with tiny little ducklings that showed off their diving skills. And then the rain really decided to come down! So, we decided that discretion was the better part of valour and headed to the Motel a little early. We checked in and got some well earned rest, did some image downloading, etc.

Despite the easy afternoon in parts, the tummies were still rumbling, and so we headed out for a great dinner at a small local restaurant, adding Royal spoonbill to the day list on the way! Another excellent day!

26 November 2018 – Day Nine

When you hear rain on the roof all night, you know it is probably going to still be raining in the morning...and it was. Oh well, let's just get on out there! We drove back out to the Estuary, stopping at a couple of places and checking things out, and using the van as a mobile hide. We managed some nice photos of some new species for the trip photo list, and the rain couldn't dampen spirits! Now let me just tell you that this is not normal! Three days of near constant rain at this time of the year is pretty darn unusual, and I have never in 15 years had a streak of weather like this...especially when the forecast for the next week is for constant rain! Jeepers!

So, the rest of the morning we hit a few good spots down the Wellington coast. We stopped in at a spot for black-fronted dotterel which we got scope views of, before then doing a spot of shopping! Then a couple of wetland areas where the rain eased a little and we got some nice views of NZ scaup, Australasian shoveler and black swan...all waiting for us to take photos of them. We searched and searched for dabchick, something we had seen a few times, but not good photo opportunities...and wouldn't you know with about 25 minutes to spare we had cracking views of a single bird! Excellent! Shutters were clicking and all was right in the World!

We then headed for the Ferry Terminal, basically drove straight on to the Ferry and it left...phew...Dabchick in the bag! The crossing was looking pretty good weather wise – some wind, but reasonable seas. As we left Wellington Harbour a couple of shearwaters flew past, fluttering, and then hang on! Buller's shearwater!?! No wonder we didn't see any in the Hauraki Gulf...they are down here. We ended up seeing about 6-8 of them on the crossing, so everyone was happy. A few more fluttering shearwaters and even a few Hutton's shearwaters for comparison. Looking much darker above and the longer bill obvious with more contrasting underparts. Excellent. Also a few Northern giant petrels, our first Westland petrels, and two Salvin's albatross – our second species of albatross for the trip. We had a sprinkling of fairy prions and sooty shearwaters to round things out.

Into Tory Channel and the cloud was so low there was no sign of the tops of the mountains. A couple of Parasitic jaegers around, as well as the usual gannets, fluttering shearwaters etc. And the first spotted shags. But the most incredible thing was the colour of the water in close to Picton – brown!!! It was the colour of the Amazon – amazing – they must have had some horrendous rain here, and it wasn't letting up.

We docked in Picton, drove off the ferry and 4 minutes to our accommodation before an excellent dinner and then a great night's sleep!

27 November 2018 – Day Ten

We were up and the rain was easing. We wandered down to the Picton waterfront, and after a quick introduction to the area and the birds we hoped to see, we climbed aboard our boat with Skipper Andy and off we went. The wind was much reduced from the night before, but there was a little wind over the water, so we headed straight out to where we hoped we might find some King shags. The rain had certainly eased off and it was looking a little brighter.

We started to see a few fluttering shearwaters, and then a few gannets, but we wanted the prize, so kept going. We stopped for a good look and some images of spotted shags that were roosting on a small cliff. They were all spread out and their chicks had already fledged, but there were a mixed bunch of juveniles, immatures and adults around. Such a beautiful shag, even in the post breeding plumages.

We then carried on out to where we hoped we were going to find King shag...and bingo! There were eight, mostly adult, with a couple of juveniles. Andy brought the boat in nicely and we had excellent views of these very stocky and powerful cormorants. The shutters clicked and we all got some images we were happy with, before we moved out slowly and headed on our way.



There was a bit of wind out in the outer sound as we got close to an island we planned to land on, and certainly although the rain had eased right off, it was going to be tricky to find our target of orange-fronted parakeet. They can be difficult at the best of times, let alone when it has been raining. We landed on the beach and a weka was there to greet us, so we spared a moment and took some images. We then headed up to a location where we had had some success previously, and watched and waited. We moved around a bit, exploring different corners, and then decided on a little overlook area. We heard a little bit of

chattering, and then an orange-crowned parakeet swooped into view. It landed inside a bush, and was barely visible, then moved to another perch and we could see it jumping around inside the bush. It paused for a bit and then zipped out the back and out along the coast! Gone! It was brief, but everyone had seen it!

We spent a bit more time in the same place, and then checked another couple of locations, before it was time to call Andy back in with the boat to board and start heading back. Andy had heard there was a pod of bottlenosed dolphins so we started to head towards them. Pretty soon we found a large pod of around 50+ individuals, with some huge adults and even a few small calves with mums! They cruised along the coast beside us, and some even came right in to the boat! Awesome!

We followed them for a bit and then broke off and left them to do their thing. We spotted another couple of King shags on the way back, and as the light had improved even more spent a bit more time with the spotted shags and then with some little penguins bobbing around in the water. What a beautiful morning!

Back on dry land we grabbed some lunch, and then ate it amongst some vines, with some local fresh cherries to boot! We looked for the long-staying black kite, but it hadn't shown after a while, so we continued on our way. It was pretty windy near the coast, but we did manage to see a female cirl bunting at one location, and then at a lake we had a distant pair of hoary-headed grebes and a pair of great crested grebes. Of great surprise were at least two nests with spoonbills sitting on them! Very cool!

As we hit the Kaikoura coast the weather deteriorated significantly, with very strong winds and torrential rain. So, we made a bee-line for the Motel in Kaikoura, witnessing the huge amount of destruction and uplift the earthquake a few years ago has wrought on the Kaikoura area. At the Motel we settled in, and then had a beautiful dinner before a good night's rest. Hoping tomorrow the seas will have dropped to allow us to do our thing!





28 November 2018 – Day Eleven

A little bit of a sleep in, and then we were back out there into a still damp Kaikoura. But the wind had certainly dropped and the seas hopefully with it. The call from Gazza, our awesome skipper, was that we were going to head out and see what it was like. So that is what we did. We slowly made our way out, and it was a little bumpy, but certainly not too bad. And before long there were a few Northern giant petrels and Cape petrels following the boat. A bit further and our first wandering albatross showed up, and then a bit further and it was time to stop and put out some chum. We were just at the start of the canyon, so not that far out, but we were already into the thick of the birds!

With the chum out it didn't take long for a small group of Northern giant petrels and Cape petrels to arrive and settle at the chum – squabbling and arguing. The first big wandering albatross did a couple of passes and then came in and landed behind the boat. Over the next couple of hours, we had a steady stream of birds to keep everyone interested, with a few Salvin's and white-capped albatross swinging by (but never landing), at least 5 New Zealand wandering albatross, probably 4 Northern Royal albatross and 3 Southern Royal albatross. Pretty impressive to see these gigantic birds so close. We also had good views of both Westland and white-chinned petrel, sometimes side by side in flight, which was great. And Hutton's shearwaters made moderate to distant passes of the boat throughout the morning. A couple of other birds new to the trip cruised through as well, with an immature black-browed albatross doing several passes, a single grey-faced petrel taking one pass, and we also had a single Buller's shearwater and sooty shearwater do a couple of passes. So, over all a great pelagic with some good diversity.



The rain actually eased during most of the morning, and the light and visibility improved. But as we neared time to leave, it closed back in on us. We slowly made our way back to South Bay, and with our group having not succumbed to sea-sickness, everyone was pretty chuffed with the morning. We headed to Albatross Encounter where we had a lovely café lunch and relaxed for a bit, before heading back to the Motel to await news on our Whale Watch trip this afternoon. Unfortunately, Whale Watch cancelled their trip – understandable – but not quite so understandable was why they didn't both to contact us! Grrrrr! So, we headed out anyway, deciding to check out the Seal colony. A few individuals around, but the rain was very wetting and after a few images, it was time to go.

An excellent dinner – this time Thai – before an early night! Up early for another pelagic in the morning!



29 November 2018 – Day Twelve

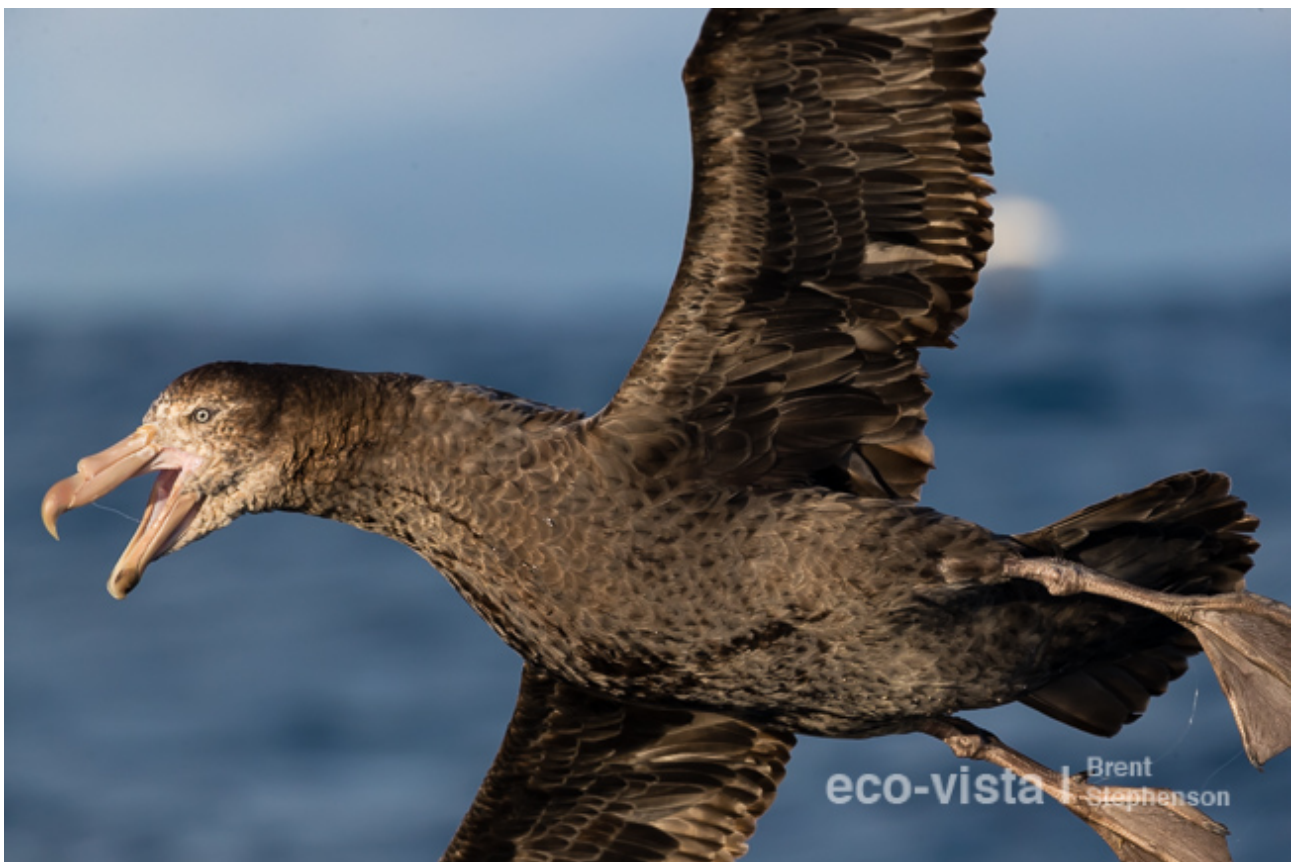
We were up super early this morning. But my goodness was it worth it! We saw something we had not seen for a while – sunshine!!! We headed out to South Bay after hearing the word from Gazza that all was a go, and we were on the boat and off out onto a much calmer sea just on 0600. Conditions had certainly ameliorated and the light was spectacular. A first stop at a fishing boat, where we picked up a couple of wandering albatross, the usual Cape petrels and Northern Giant petrels, and two very beautiful adult black-browed albatross. Excellent!

We then decided to head out into deeper water and see what we could find. After stopping with the chum out for a bit we had amassed a nice selection of birds, again with both Northern and Southern Royal albatross, New Zealand wandering albatross, and Salvin's and a Buller's shearwater made a nice appearance, as did a Cook's petrel. We had good numbers of white-chinned petrels, and a couple of Westland, sometimes side by side which was nice, and a couple of Hutton's shearwaters whizzed past. Adding to the list we had a short-tailed shearwater do a couple of nice circuits, and as if then to provide a comparison several sooty shearwaters.

We headed out to another location, where we didn't see anything different, but more nice views of things, and the light diminished a little, but boy had it been nice.

We decided to head on back in, and arrived back to the dock around 0830, time to head back to the Motel, pack the van, grab some lunch and then get on the road for the day. We found a couple of big pods of







dusky dolphins along the coast which we stopped and watched for a bit. We also called into a small lake where we had a nice assortment of waterbirds, and then on further to an estuary. Our target was wrybill, and with the recent (and current) flooding, we figured that many of the birds would be washed off the river and sheltering in the estuary. We were right, but the little blighters were out in the middle of the estuary on small islands, and none were close enough for photography. Still it was a nice walk and the sun was shining! We saw a few other bits and pieces, including our first black-fronted terns – such little stunners! We had lunch in the sunshine and then continued our big drive.

Just on 1800 the light was perfect and we pulled into our first spot for a mega endemic – black stilt! Would it, wouldn't it?? There was a pair where we wanted them, and in the end stunning full frame pictures in beautiful light! Wow! There were a number of double-banded plovers around as well, and they were coming in really close at one stage, so some beautiful shots of them as well. We spent some time with the stilts, before leaving them where they were. Amazing end to a great day!

Although a nice craft beer and lamb curry was the real end to the day!





30 November 2018 – Day Thirteen

Another early start, and off we headed to a spot where we hoped we might find more shorebirds. Shorebirds of the endangered, endemic kind. And we did. We parked the van (more on that later) and then walked a short way before we had some double-banded plovers nice and close, and then we spotted our true quarry – WRYBILL! We had seen these guys in the north, but they had not been possible to photograph at close range, and of course those up there were non-breeding birds, most of which didn't show the characteristic breeding plumage. So, we approached and sat, and they approached, and got closer and closer, and closer! In the end too close to focus! But what a problem to have. Over the next two hours we had excellent fun with this awesome little shorebird, getting the required 'full-frontal' shots. We enjoyed just watching their antics. They were feeding rapidly, but were also still maintaining territory, so there was quite a bit of chasing going on, which was all part of the fun.

We then decided it was time to head back to the Motel to pack the van and head to the coast...or was it. Seems our parking spot had not been the best choice (ahem!), and we had a little difficulty with grip. Not to worry, there will be someone along soon. Walking towards the road a 4WD with fisherman was coming in and as luck would have it had a tow rope and snagged us out of our predicament! Awesome – thanks so much to them! They headed off to wage war with the fish, and we headed towards the road, only to find three immature black stilts. So, we couldn't pass that opportunity up, with beautiful light and reflections, we spent a few moments taking some more images of these magic birds – one of the rarest shorebirds in the World.





Then it was time to head back, pack up, and head to the coast. We stopped at a pond on the way and found a bunch of very confiding scaup and a pair of great-crested grebes with a chick! Nice! Then it was lunch time, standing looking for a falcon to rush, past, alas – no luck on that one.

At the coast we headed to an excellent spot to observe and photograph the recently split Otago shag. Seeing both the pied and the black morphs and able to compare them side by side. We also were able to spot some recently fledged young, still with wispy down. Then on to the accommodation where we checked in and had a quick respite, before getting back out there for our target bird for the afternoon – yellow-eyed penguin. So, from one of the World's rarest shorebirds, to one of the rarest penguins. We walked along the coast, and the wind was really blowing. But almost immediately we had three penguins in the scope and nice views. We decided to wait it out and see if we could get some closer, and at almost the eleventh hour a penguin came up out of the surf, nice light and relatively close, so that we were able to get some nice images and great views. Excellent! What a day.

Back to the accommodation, and then off to dinner nearby. Another great day!



1 December 2018 – Day Fourteen

We had a relaxed start to the day and then started to head south. We stopped at a couple of spots as we headed south, getting more great looks at Otago shag, and then put in a bit of driving. As we got further south the sun started to poke through the cloud, and good grief, it actually came out sunny and warm! We made a stop just before midday and walked along a beautiful beach in the sunshine. We watched as one and then two male Hooker's (New Zealand) sea lions came up out of the water and onto the beach. The one spent a bit of time rubbing itself in the sand and then throwing sand over itself with its fore-flippers. And then the bigger second one came along and ruined its solitude and they both ended up disappearing back into the water. There at the right time!

We carried on south and had a nice lunch in a café, and then continued, with spectacular views across Foveaux Strait as we approached Invercargill along the coast. Amazing weather! We called in to a wetland area and scanned, looking for a couple of vagrant targets. Within a minute we had a great pair of chestnut-breasted shelducks feeding in the shallows, before they moved out into deeper water. We searched the area for a Northern shoveler that has been seen there, but to no avail. Lots of other waterfowl though, and in the sunshine a lovely spot to spend a half hour.

We headed on towards Bluff and to the Ferry Terminal. We checked in and waited for the ferry, before boarding and then heading across a very calm and flat Foveaux Strait. The seas were all of a foot in height and there was little breeze, so very few birds flying. As we got closer to Stewart Island we started seeing common diving petrels at a distance, with perhaps up to 20 of these, and about 5 white-capped albatross, all resting on the water. A single sooty shearwater and a probable Cook's petrel, plus one brown skua was it. But a lovely crossing none the less. Coming into Halfmoon Bay we had our next cormorant species, with several Foveaux shags on a rock.

We arrived, headed up to our accommodation, seeing NZ pigeon, kaka, and a few tui on the way, and then a beaut dinner in the Hotel. A quick rest and then it was out for our evening's activity – kiwi spotting! We headed out with Matt Jones – who is one of our guides, as well as being an awesome guide for Ulva's Guided Walks, pelagic trips with Aurora Charters and sundry other birding options on Stewart Island. We got kitted out and then headed up the hill, walking slowly and listening and looking. It was barely 5 minutes and we had our first looks at a Southern brown kiwi. A smallish male fed towards us, showing all the features we needed to see. Awesome! It gave us a few minutes of viewing pleasure, before it then stomped off into the undergrowth. We continued on, keeping eyes and ears peeled, and in the process we managed to see another three kiwi, several of which gave excellent prolonged views. And then a great morepork to top things off! An awesome night.



2 December 2018 – Day Fifteen

The morning started a little later than usual, as we had been out till late the night before. So, we were up, breakfasted and heading to our water taxi at 0745. We headed off around to Ulva Island – our location for the morning, where we hoped to clean-up...and we did!

We headed up the path and almost instantly had a South Island saddleback. Target bird number one and the critical one that could not be found elsewhere on our coming journey in the bag. We carried on wandered along the trails, admiring the beautiful vegetation. We soon had red-crowned parakeet, tui, bellbird, and a pair of morepork roosting side by side in a tree near the trail. Amazing views of these sleepy birds, possibly a nest nearby with large young, so the adults were camping out roosting together nearby. We then had our second target – yellowhead. We had great views of these stunning birds, their heads glowing lemon yellow even in the dim light below the canopy. They foraged in front of us, hanging upside down and using their strong legs to grip the branches and trunks. We spent some time with them, and then carried on, looking for more yellowhead, finding more saddleback, and then some brown creeper. Hard to believe we had seen yellowhead on this trip before their closely related cousins! Further on we found some kaka feeding in the blooms of kamahi trees, and had great looks at the way they fed with their tongues, clearly gathering nectar from the flowers.

At a beach we watched several weka running along the tideline, and then spotted a couple of tiny little black chicks following one of the adults. The adult was not keen to let them out into the open, so we had to make do with views through the vegetation.





We decided to head back the way we had come, seeing more red-crowned parakeets and saddleback, and a pair of copulating kaka! Talk about déjà vu!!! We had seen North Island kaka copulating in Pureora Forest Park, and now here were some South Island kaka doing the same! Once they had finished, and seemed exhausted with their antics, we carried on. We then managed to find a rifleman nest that Matt Jones told us about, and saw the male come in several times. Nice, I think we had pretty much cleaned up!

We decided to head back towards the jetty, as it was getting towards midday, and we had a very important rendezvous with Aurora Charters. The boat was there ready and waiting, so we climbed aboard and started to munch on our lunches as we headed out towards Wreck Reef. On the way we spotted a few little penguins, pausing briefly for them, before getting out into open water. Matt was onboard and started to throw a bit of chum over the side and we soon had a few white-capped and Salvin's albatross following the boat as we steamed. We made a quick pause at an island for a brown skua – a couple of birds came out to take a look, and we then continued. As we got further out numbers of albatross started to increase, and then a few common diving petrels were seen – flying but of course never coming in that close. A few sooty shearwaters started to appear, but conditions were really calm, almost too good, with only a light breeze and mostly just a couple of feet swell.



We arrived at Wreck Reef, and started chumming in earnest. In the end we had probably 40+ albatross around us, mostly white-capped, a few Salvin's and at one time seven Southern Royal albatross. We also had a few Northern giant petrels come in, and at least one Westland petrel. Probably the most surprising though were a good number of Cook's petrels, probably over the course of the day 50+, with some of them coming right in and landing on the water at the back of the boat and taking fish scraps. This happens very

rarely in our Hauraki Gulf trips, but multiple birds repeated this over the course of our chumming. They were clearly very hungry. We had a couple of fly-by Hutton's shearwaters, and a single fairy prion and Buller's shearwater also came in to have a look at the boat. But unfortunately, no sign of anything along the lines of mottled petrel. But still a lovely day out and some great views of albatross! And we had a 3m+ shark come in and investigate the chum slick giving quite nice views.

We started to steam back in towards the Muttonbird Islands, and checking the coastline. There were a lot of NZ fur seals up on the boulder beaches, and we scanned and scanned, but no yellow-eyed penguins. But just off one of the reefs we spotted some Fiordland crested penguins floating and preening. There looked to be about 7-8 of them, and as they drifted around the corner we moved slightly to get a better look. They were 70m+ away as we watched them, and then all of a sudden something spooked them and they came porpoising towards the boat! They stopped about 15m away, surfaced and sat there posing for their pictures, before then suddenly porpoising off in another direction and out to sea! Awesome! We found a couple more up on land at several other locations, before getting back in to port after an outstanding day!





3 December 2018 – Day Sixteen

So, up and at 'em, after hearing rain during the night, it was another beautiful morning. Wow! Stewart Island you are really turning it on. We headed down to the wharf and again met with our water taxi and headed across to Ulva Island, this time spotting a couple of wary Fiordland crested penguins in the water. They weren't keen on having a chat, so off we headed.

We arrived at Ulva and decided on our route, and off we went. The forest smelt fresh after the nocturnal rain, and it was so lovely to see all the filmy ferns and mosses plump with liquid rejuvenation. The forest was a little quieter than yesterday, but we soon picked up a singing South Island robin, spotted our morepork pair in the same roosts, probably the same yellowhead group in a similar spot, and then a jack-bird for Jack! Historically known as jack-birds, an immature South Island saddleback fed quietly beside the trail showing really well. We hadn't seen one the day before, and being one of the major differences between the South Island and North Island saddleback, this unsaddled immature was a great find.

We carried on along the trail, spotting a few things, and then stopped by the rifleman nest again. The bird came in a few times, but we didn't stay long before moving on and finding a red-crowned parakeet perched nicely, and a couple of adult saddleback. We were just ambling slowly along when it happened! I have been to Ulva probably almost 40+ times, I've heard the stories and seen the videos – "Oh it was my first time to Ulva and we saw a kiwi'...blah blah blah! And there it was! A flippin kiwi!! In broad daylight. I know it happens with this species here on Stewart Island, but for me this was a first! Epic! It fed quiet just

off the side of the track, snuffling under ferns and investigating rotten logs. Right there in front of us, and we didn't even need a flashlight!

It fed for about 10 minutes, and we watched intently. Then a couple of other people came along, and it got a little too much, so the bird ambled off into the shrubbery! Amazing.... We continued on...gobsmacked! And it didn't get any less surreal. We watched a rifleman low to the ground, got some images, and then a weka we had been watching decided some chemical stimulation was needed and as it walked up to the fly agaric I knew exactly what it was going to do! The rain during the night had pooled in the cap, and with an 800mm lens I had to do a few quick paces to get far enough away. I needn't have bothered though, as in the end the weka drank the water from top of the toadstool for several minutes. Who knows what weird dreams that little guy will be having now, but what a cool picture!

We carried on back towards the jetty, seeing a few things long the way, and soon our water taxi arrived to whisk us back to Oban. We cruised back on beautiful seas, seeing a few little penguins on the way. Back at Oban we grabbed our bags and then checked in for the midday ferry back to Bluff. The crossing was very quiet with a few white-capped albatross and a good number of common diving petrels, but not a lot else. Too calm for birds, great for poor sailors, although our group was now unmedicated and ready for anything!

We loaded the van and started to head towards Te Anau. A couple of quick stops to look for waterfowl, and then a beautiful beach with expansive views where we spotted some distant rounded black dorsal fins – Hector's dolphins. We arrived into Te Anau, checked into our accommodation and had a rest before dinner. Another amazing day!







4 December 2018 – Day Seventeen

Surely it can't be...I know what the forecast said, but surely we brought the sunshine from Stewart Island. Nope rain on the roof during the night. We woke to grey and drizzly skies, but don't panic, it will be ok.

We quickly stopped at Miles Better Pies (nom nom nom) and then on the road super early, the pies were only just out of the oven! We headed straight through to our first stop, a few rain showers on the way, and parked the van. There was definitely some moisture in the air, but we donned our wet weather gear and headed out. We had only just paused, when Jack said 'Is that one there' and there in the corner of some rocks was a male rock wren!!! Right there in front of us, and we had only just got into place! With warnings of "It could be several hours" this all seemed like a bit of an anti-climax! We soaked in the views as it perched atop rocks and showed itself off, calling every now and then. It gradually moved off up the hill and disappeared. We waited and watched for another 45 minutes before it showed again, this time for a few minutes, and again then disappeared. Fantastic! We had all had great looks and managed to get some lovely images.

Pretty soon the rain came in hard, so we decided to head back to the van and try for something a little different. We drove a short way, and there it was – our prize. If not THE, one of the smartest birds on our planet – the kea. We jumped out of the van, guarding it against the attack of a bill capable of tearing out windscreen rubber in the blink of an eye! It was fun to watch the antics of several of these birds, jumping around the place, investigating various vehicles, etc. And it was even more fun to watch the owners/hirers of the vehicles grinning and laughing to start with, only to change into stern faces and scolds as the birds started to pry rubber from places it was never going to fit back into! Gold!

We got some nice images and spent some time just watching and enjoying, before then continuing on our way. We headed down into Milford Sound to take a look at this spectacle of nature, and enjoy a coffee and snack. The weather had really improved and lulled us into a false sense of security, so we headed back up into the mountains. We again stopped and made a walk to see if we could spot the rock wren again, after enjoying more antics of the kea. But this time no sign of the wee green gems.

We carried on back towards Te Anau. Stopping at a couple of spots along the way. A beautiful walk through magical moss covered Nothofagus beech forest was gorgeous in the slight rain, but fairly quiet for birds. We carried on back towards Te Anau and kept eyes peeled for the ever-elusive falcon, before having a break at the Motel and then another lovely dinner in town! Rain on the roof top as we crawled into bed...





5 December 2018 – Day Eighteen

We decided to have a little lay in this morning, not a bad idea on a tour that has had some early mornings, and with the forecast as it was, it made sense also. We awoke to more rain, but that's ok, we were heading to Wanaka, and the sun always shines in Wanaka! We left Te Anau and headed out of town, and in several places north of Mossburn had water right across the road, and people controlling traffic. Clearly the rain during the night had been pretty substantial in an already soggy district.

We made a few short stops along the way, and kept an eye out for falcon the whole way. Beautiful scenery and the weather was certainly improving as we headed north, with lovely views across Lake Wakatipu, with clouds shrouding the mountain tops.

We checked in to our accommodation, and then went for a burger lunch. And then headed out of town to a site where falcons have been in the past. But no sign of anything, so we headed to a spot on the lake where we knew there were some grebes and took a few shots of them doing their thing. With a few late afternoon hours, a lazy afternoon was called for, before dinner at a superb local Indian Restaurant (Ashraf's).

An early night and looking forward to a busy day tomorrow, after a somewhat restful one today.



6 December 2018 – Day Nineteen

We were up early and away, stopping at a bakery to grab some lunch, before heading out of town. We skirted around Lake Hawea and then made a stop in the lovely early morning light to look for falcon. Well no falcon, but we did have some lovely scenery to look at and a few common species to keep us occupied.

We carried on passing Lake Wanaka again and heading towards the West Coast. Another scenic stop before a stop in the forest to walk a trail through some spectacular beech forest, with mosses galore and some nice birds. We had good views of rifleman, and a family of yellowhead feeding two newly fledged chicks, plus heard yellow-crowned parakeet and tomtit. Was lovely to walk through this beautiful forest and the sun was shining.

We headed on along the road, enjoying the stunning scenery and taking it all in. We made a stop at Haast township, where Sav had found a falcon chasing birds just a couple of days earlier, but nothing seen. So, we carried on to Jackson Bay and enjoyed more beautiful scenery and managed to get great views of South Island tomtit. We also scanned from a small beach and located at least a couple of Hector's dolphins out in the surf, so nice to see these little guys a little bit closer. We carried on up the coast, carefully searching for falcon along the way, but nothing seen. The weather continued to be stunning and as we pulled into our Motel in Fox Glacier it was the start of a beautiful evening. The views from the motel were pretty special, so we took photos of Mt Tasman and Mt Cook (Aoraki) looming above us. Then we headed to a spot with equally stunning views, looked for falcon as this was a site where we had seen them in the past, and then had dinner with the mountains as a backdrop. Gorgeous as the sun got lower! What a great day on the often wet, West Coast!







7 December 2018 – Day Twenty

We were up early, and could still see the tops of Mount Tasman and Mount Cook (Aoraki) as the sun started to colour the sky. We headed across to a site where we hoped a still night might have rendered a small lake perfect for reflections. And indeed it had. Walking through the forest on the way, we could see the crystal clear surface of the lake reflecting the surrounding forest. From a viewpoint we had stunning views of the mountains, and their reflections, with just enough time before the sun peaked over the mountains. Stunning.

We wandered back through the forest, enjoying a few birds as we went, with tomtit, fantail and a few other bits and bobs. We headed back to the Motel, finished breakfast and packing our bags and then got on the road to head further north. The sun was shining and it was another stunning day on the West Coast. We drove through to Franz Josef and went for a little walk through more beautiful forest. Lots of green-hood orchids in flower, and nice views from the top of a viewpoint area. The Glacier really looks like it is receding fast, I wonder how long before it won't even be visible through the valley?

We carried on up the coast after a quick coffee stop, and drove the beautiful road surrounded by huge trees and spectacular forest. A detour out to a coastal lagoon brought a new bird for the trip – great egret – but not the hoped for fernbird...they were quiet today. Eyes were peeled for falcons, but again they were hiding. We called in to another area with a short forest walk, and enjoyed more lovely forest and some great views of brown creeper and fantail, plus a weka came in to say hello.

We decided it was time for lunch, so we stopped in at a café and had a sit-down lunch, a rare occurrence on trips like this. But we had a great lunch and a chance to relax before getting back on the road. Now the road was more coastal, giving us in many places with views up or down the coast, and so we made a couple of short stops to scan the sea. Nothing much happening out there, but beautiful none the less.

We arrived at our Motel in Punakaiki, checked in and then relaxed for a little bit, before heading out to walk the Pancake Rocks walkway. This beautiful piece of the coast was popular with other people, but the weka family (mum, dad and four small fluffy chicks) didn't even seem to notice! We had great views of them before heading on around the walkway...I wonder how many tourists thought they were kiwi?! The white-fronted terns and red-billed gulls were nesting out on the rocks, and there were a lot of fluffy chicks of both species scampering around the place. We enjoyed the coastal views, scanning for Hector's dolphins, but nothing spotted.

After a bit more time at the Motel enjoying the scenery, we had a lovely last dinner together at a local café, and finished it off with local ice-cream. An excellent last dinner and a great time to reflect on what an amazing trip we have had. A real mix of weather, but some excellent photographic opportunities with many of the 143 species encountered on this tour!





8 December 2018 – Day Twenty-One

Another early start, as we left the Motel and headed back down the coast, the wind had risen and the cloud cover had increased. We had milked the best weather the West Coast can have, and it was on the change. We headed up towards Arthur's Pass, and the cloud gradually increased as it built up against the Southern Alps. Driving up into Otira, it blocked our views. We made a quick stop, but distant calling kea were as close as it got. Even they felt it wasn't worth putting in an appearance. But by the time we got to Arthur's Pass town, the sky was blue and the sun was shining! And there were a couple of kea there to amuse us momentarily. We enjoyed watching them play on the roof, before they then flew off. A distant calling long-tailed cuckoo reminded us of our encounter in Pureora...that seems so long ago. We have covered so much countryside since then, and seen so much.

We carried on down towards Christchurch, with sun shining and temperatures gradually warming. We were still on the lookout for that elusive falcon, but it just wasn't going to happen for us! As we entered the outskirts of Christchurch we had to resign ourselves to the fact a glimpse was as good as it was going to get for us.

We unloaded the van at a Motel, said our goodbyes, hard to believe we had seen the country in 21-days together. An excellent adventure, and one filled with memories and some incredible images.