

Tour report

23 January – 11 February 2019

20-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



A New Zealand storm-petrel and a white-faced storm-petrel pad across the water. Nigel Grindley.

Led by Phil Hammond, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

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Images

Nigel Grindley & Phil Hammond

This was a private tour. It was to have mostly followed a standard 21 day tour but deliberately left some places out to set a slightly easier pace, at the wishes of the participants.

Unforeseen circumstances meant that the group arrived in NZ late and the tour didn't get underway until mid-morning on what would have been the second morning. So, the tour was essentially 20 days in duration.

A combination of those factors meant that we didn't go to the far north for Northern Brown Kiwi, we also cut out a pelagic to the Mercury Islands for Pycroft's Petrel and other possible seabirds of that area, and we didn't go to any of the birding spots on the south/west coast of the North Island.

Despite the slightly different itinerary, we did really well managing to see 152 species (plus heard Great Spotted Kiwi), and more importantly 64 of those were endemic NZ breeders. In fact with the exception of Mottled Petrel we saw every NZ endemic that we could have reasonably expected, and saw just about every one of them well and by every member of the group.

In this report the **FIRST** sightings of **ENDEMIC** NZ breeding birds are described in capital letters

At our last dinner together, each participant chose their 7 favourite birds of the tour---not an easy task! Of course rare and endangered endemics that we had seen really well, including insights into their behaviour and family interaction, featured highly.

The 12 most popular in order were;

1--Yellow-eyed Penguin

2--NZ Rock Wren

3--South Island Robin

4--NZ Storm-petrel

5--NZ Fairy Tern

6--South Island Saddleback

7--Buller's Albatross

8--Blue Duck

9--Southern Brown Kiwi

10--Great Crested Grebe

11--Morepork

12--Red-crowned Parakeet

Phil Hammond (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

23 January 2019 – Day One

We set off from central Auckland mid-morning and went first to a Gannet colony where we saw Australasian Gannets at very close range and chicks of all ages. As usual the gannets gave us wonderful displays showing their mastery of the air at close range ---the cameras were clicking!

From there we drove on to a small town, bought fresh sandwiches and other goodies at the local bakery, and ate them at a very pleasant riverside picnic spot. Some common species including Swamp Harrier [we saw them every day of the tour] were spotted while we ate.

Further north we stopped and scanned a field full of the spectacular but common PARADISE SHELDUCKS a species we would see on most days of the tour. Behind them on a farm with a difference were 8 massive sculptures, giraffes, zebras, and bison!

We drove a bit further north passing TUI and NZ PIGEONS, both species that we would see a lot of on the tour, and pulled in to a lovely estuary at low tide. One of the first birds we saw was NZ DOTTEREL in fact we found several as this is a post-breeding flock site for that species. There are only about 2000 of these in the world so it was great to get really good views and photo opportunities.



New Zealand dotterel running across the estuary. Nigel Grindley.

We also picked out VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER, as well as Ruddy Turnstones, Bar-tailed Godwits, White-faced Herons, BANDED DOTTEREL, and RED-BILLED GULL. However, we were not able to find the target we

had gone there for ---a very rare Tern. We hadn't given up on that rare Tern though, and headed a bit further south to another estuary. We found more NZ Dotterels, some Pied Stilts and White-fronted Terns, and then after walking up the estuary a bit, we found our target --- NZ Fairy Tern--- a bird that is hanging on, on the brink of extinction despite a lot of effort from a lot of people.

These birds are, at the present time, separated from Fairy Terns in Australia and New Caledonia only at Sub-species level but there seems a good case for separation at full species level. There are just 39 NZ Fairy Terns in total so it was great to find not just one but a family of three. The juvenile we saw was one of only two that fledged this year so it was pretty special to find it and watch it being fed by both parents.

We stayed far enough away to ensure we were not disturbing them and just stood and watched for about 20 minutes. Then to our accommodation and dinner at a riverside restaurant.

Each evening on the tour at dinner, as well as filling out our checklist for the day, we would each choose our 'bird of the day'. NZ Fairy tern got two votes but NZ Dotterel, White-faced Heron and Variable Oystercatcher each got a vote too.

24 January 2019 – Day Two

Today was our first pelagic trip of the tour and we were on the water by 8am and ready to venture out into the Hauraki Gulf. A few hundred metres from the dock we slowly passed a colony of Pied Cormorants which also contained a single Little Pied Cormorant.

As usual the first tubenoses that we encountered as we motored out into the gulf were the inshore species FLUTTERING SHEARWATER, BULLER'S SHEARWATER, and Flesh-footed Shearwater. As we got into deeper water we saw the first COOK'S PETRELS, a species that we would see several thousand of during the day, a few of them close.

Then out in blue water we stopped and started putting chum over the stern to get a fishy oil slick going and bring birds in to the boat. It wasn't long before we saw the first of one of our prime targets NZ STORM-PETREL. That species was considered extinct until about 15 years ago when it was rediscovered. You can read about Brent and Sav's part in that rediscovery on our website.

We saw several NZ stormies during the day, some coming in and flitting past the boat fairly closely. There were two other stormies, a Wilson's Storm-petrel put in a brief appearance and as usual there were also plenty of White-faced "stormies" around the boat---always a favourite!

Also around the boat were Fairy Prions, more Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters, and another target species for the day BLACK PETREL. We also got our first Northern Giant Petrel and a "fly-past" Little Shearwater.

Further out on a steep-sided rock stack we found 33 Grey Ternlets [Blue Noddies] and spent some time admiring them. Then we went out into deeper water for another chumming session. We had great birds again including more Black Petrels and NZ Storm-petrels but didn't add any new species.

On the way back we added Parasitic Jaeger [Arctic Skua] and Little Penguin. We stopped for the latter seeing 5 or 6 of them and getting good views and photos.

Over dinner NZ Storm Petrel and Fairy Prion both got two votes for bird of the day and Grey Ternlet one.



White-faced storm-petrel paddles across the surface. Nigel Grindley.



New Zealand storm-petrel about to touch down. Nigel Grindley.



The gang enjoying the pelagic. Phil Hammond.

25 January 2019 – Day Three

Today was our day to go to the famous Tiritiri Matangi Island sanctuary. Introduced mammalian predators were removed from this island last century and it is a place where endemic birds can thrive in endemic trees, and do so well that introduced bird species can't compete.

Before boarding the ferry to the island we made a detour to a swampy area and got good views of the NZ sub-species of Buff-banded Rail and Sacred Kingfisher from the van windows. We also visited a pond and got great views of the rare BROWN TEAL.

At the ferry terminal we saw our first SOUTH ISLAND PIED OYSTERCATCHERS. The water was pretty flat for the ferry crossing, as it had been yesterday and was for every ferry crossing and pelagic trip of the tour, and so not many seabirds were on the wing, but as soon as we got on the island we began to see rare and endangered endemics.

It wasn't long before we had good views of NORTH ISLAND ROBIN, NZ BELLBIRD and the rare STITCHBIRD. We sat for a while in front of a water trough watching Tui and Bellbirds bathing and had NI Robins around our feet, but then we heard a single note of a call from something we really needed to see and re-traced our steps back to where we thought the call came from.

Neil, another Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ Guide, was there and indicated where he had seen a KOKAKO and although difficult to see we got our first glimpse. We noted the direction they were headed in, and thought we might get a better view by doubling back to where we had come from and, following the faint calls, that plan worked well. We got great views of two of these difficult birds.

NZ FANTAIL is a fairly common species and there were plenty of these today and on other days of the tour, but RED CROWNED PARAKEETS are almost extinct on the mainland so it was great to get really good views of them. Another species that is extinct on the mainland except a few sanctuaries is NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK, and these too were seen really well.

All of these were seen from well-formed tracks as we made our way up to the top of the island and the bunkhouse, and on one of the grassier tracks we also saw a covey of Brown Quail. We eventually got really good views of WHITEHEAD along the track too.

Once we reached the bunkhouse we listened to the island rangers induction and safety talk, sorted out our bedding, and sat down to a leisurely lunch which we had bought earlier, from a bakery on the way to the ferry.

After lunch we found another rare and endangered species, TAKAHE. They are another species that was thought to be extinct for a long time until rediscovered in 1948. A lot of effort has been invested in trying to bring these birds back from the brink of extinction but there are still less than 400 of them in the world, so another great bird to add to our list.

Then we made our way to a corner of the island that not many visitors go to, and sat quietly watching over a pond that we had just to ourselves. [a common scenario on our tours]. NI Saddlebacks, Red-crowned Parakeets, Whiteheads, Sacred Kingfishers and others were showing well, and a pair of Brown Teal swam out of hiding in front of us. Then in the shadows we spotted what we were hoping for here, creeping along the other side of the pond a very shy skulking little bird---Spotless Crake.

The group were good at sitting quietly and watching and were rewarded in the end by seeing two adults , a fluffy chick, and then a brief dispute between what we think must have been one of the parents and an interloper. One Spotless Crake is a good sighting, seeing four of them was great.

Then it was time to go back to the bunkhouse. We passed a few of the ubiquitous Australasian Swampheas as we did, and then relaxed for a while. After dinner in the bunkhouse, we relaxed and waited for darkness to fall before setting off on another adventure. After a bit of walking on a well-formed track we all got views of LITTLE SPOTTED KIWI. The views were not as good as those we were to get of two other species of Kiwi later in the tour, but not bad.

After a bit more walking some of the group returned to the bunkhouse but others stayed out to look for an ancient creature, Tuatara, and we had excellent views of one of these.

We delayed our votes for bird of the day until the next morning and after so many great birds it was no surprise that the five of us each voted for a different bird---NI Robin, Red-crowned Parakeet, Spotless Crake, Stitchbird, and Little Spotted Kiwi all got votes.



A kokako looks back, it's beak full of nesting material. Nigel Grindley.



A male bellbird perched. Nigel Grindley.



An adult (left) Takaha feeds a chick (right). Nigel Grindley.

26 January 2019 – Day Four

Having seen everything that we needed to on the island yesterday [eg. birds like Stitchbird, NI Saddleback, and Takahe that we knew we wouldn't see later in the tour] we could relax this morning and gently wander back down one of the tracks to meet a water taxi that was coming for us at 10am.

As it happened we got more good views of Takahe and Kokako, and then sat quietly at one of the water troughs and waited to see what would come in. Stitchbird, Red-crowned Parakeet, NZ Pigeon, Tui, and Bellbird all came in and presented themselves.

Back on the mainland, we drove through Auckland without incident, but then were delayed south of Auckland with traffic.

We eventually arrived at Pukorokoro Miranda late, but in time to get great views of WRYBILL, BLACK-BILLED GULL, and more South Island Pied Oystercatchers.

Dinner was in a small local fish restaurant and again five different birds drew votes for BoD [bird of the day]---South Island Pied Oystercatcher, Black-billed Gull, Stitchbird, NZ Pigeon and Wrybill.

27 January 2019 – Day Five

We spent a lot of the morning around the Firth of Thames, going firstly to a flooded paddock that is not normally visited on these tours. We had only just stopped the van and climbed out when we spotted a Wrybill in a dry farm paddock fairly close to us and got more good photos.

In the flooded paddock, we found over 1000 Pied [black-winged] Stilts, several hundred Grey teal, and a few other ducks, as well as four Eastern Cattle Egrets which are winter visitors, and rarely seen in NZ at this time of year. All four were in breeding plumage. There were also Caspian Terns and a flock of Royal Spoonbills.

Then it was time to return to Miranda because the tide was coming in. It was about the smallest tide of the month and it was clear when we arrived that none of the waders were going to be pushed close to the main hide, but at a nearby pond we had really great close views of Wrybill, Banded Dotterel, Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Pacific Golden Plover, and 4 different Sandpipers---Sharp-tailed, Curlew, Pectoral, and Broad-billed. Pectoral Sandpipers are uncommon in NZ, and Broad-billed very rare.

Then it was time to head for a central North Island forest. We stopped along the way for a quick break, and ate lunch in a local park, and also stopped briefly at a lake where we saw our first NZ SCAUP.

Once at the lovely Pureora Forest Park we went first to a couple of clearings in the ancient Podocarp forest and saw plenty of flypasts of YELLOW-CROWNED PARAKEET, as well as our first LONG-TAILED CUCKOO, and some other species that we had already seen on the tour. We did a short walk through the forest, seeing NI Robins, and Whiteheads along the way. From a vantage point we had wonderful views over, and into, the canopy of this splendid forest and saw our first RIFLEMAN fairly close---only a glimpse but we were to get absolutely stonking views of those tiny birds later in the tour.

It was pretty special when a Long-tailed Cuckoo flew across the opening in front of us and we were able to follow it to a perch, where we could get full-frontal views of a normally very shy and difficult species. We watched its bill opening and closing as it let out its raucous screeches. We also saw our first KAKA, getting great views several times, and more Yellow-crowned Parakeets.

Then we drove further south through lovely forest, through farmland, swamp, and down the western side of Lake Taupo, to our accommodation in Turangi.

Dinner was at an Italian restaurant, and once again we had seen a lot of great birds, so five different species got votes for BoD---Royal Spoonbill, Banded Dotterel, Wrybill, Kaka and Broad-billed Sandpiper.



A wrybill hides amongst the grasses. Nigel Grindley.

28 January 2019 – Day Six

This private tour varied a little from a standard 21 day tour and we were to spend two nights in Turangi instead of one, giving us all day to explore the area. First on the agenda was to look for a rare and very special iconic NZ duck that lives and feeds only in fast flowing torrent rivers, usually surrounded by old native forest.

Those conditions were exactly what we had to the south of Turangi. I had asked the group to search through hundreds of rounded blue-grey boulders for a rounded blue grey shape about the same size, but with a whitish bill!! And we found a total of 6 BLUE DUCKS in 3 different locations. It was a great experience watching them swimming, feeding in torrents, and hopping up on rocks. Three of the Blue Ducks were a family group.

At one of the spots along the Tongariro River where we had seen Blue Ducks, I heard a couple of Tui making loud alarm calls and suggested that we scan for a falcon or owl. It wasn't long before we found the Tui cause of concern, a rare NZ FALCON perched in a tree, right where we could see the whole bird.

It stayed a long time so that I could get my scope on it and everyone got great views. We were able to get pretty good photos on cell phones through the scope as well. Another difficult species well and truly in the bag!!

From there we went to the southern shores of Lake Taupo, and got great views of our first NZ GREBE [dabchick], added Eurasian Coot to our list, and saw our first Little Black Cormorants. Surprisingly we had been on tour for 5 days and had not seen one of the more common endemics, but here we got great views of GREY GERYGONE [Grey Warbler]. Out on the lake were more NZ Scaup, NZ Grebe, Little Pied, Little Black, and Great cormorants, Black-billed Gulls, and hundreds of Black Swans.

On this particular tour with more time in the Turangi area than usual, we had time to explore an environment up on a high plateau of desert and low desert shrubs quite different to any other environment we would see on tour. Our target was our endemic Pipit. We didn't find one today, but saw them in four places later in the tour. There were some false alarms today, but each was a Sky Lark!!

Although on this occasion we didn't find what we were looking for, the group thought it was good just to be in that environment, and the views of snow-capped volcano cones across the desert in bright sunshine were pretty stunning too.

That evening we ate dinner in the hotel [very nice]. As was often the case on the tour it was hard to pick out just one bird for BoD but NZ Falcon got 4 votes, and Blue Duck one.



An adult blue duck swims across a fast flowing river. Nigel Grindley.

29 January 2019 – Day Seven

Before leaving the Turangi area that morning we spent a bit more time birding around the lake shores and took a few more photos.

While there we heard the weak little call of an endemic that we had not seen yet, a skulking little denizen of thick cover usually in swampy areas. It flew weakly across the track in front of us—FERNBIRD. But that wasn't the end of our experience with the Fernbird, very unusually, and to our delight, it hopped out onto a branch in full view right in front of us, and began singing!!

It didn't stay there long before diving back down into thick cover, but long enough for great views and photos of a normally difficult little bird.



The normally skulky fernbird shows itself. Nigel Grindley.

After getting our lunches to take with us, we headed east. At first it was a drive with pretty spectacular scenery up the eastern side of Lake Taupo, and then through a mixture of forest and farmland on increasingly narrow and steep roads until we reached a forest sanctuary where a lot of trapping of alien predators gives the natives a chance of survival.

We ate our lunches on benches in a fantastic forest setting and then set off for a walk of about 2 hours. We walked fairly slowly taking lots of photos along the way. We were of course mostly focussing on birds but endemic Weta, butterflies including NZ Red Admiral, and vegetation, took some of our time too.

We saw more Whiteheads, NI Robins, and the more common endemics and got fantastic close views for a long time of a group of three Kaka. We also saw our first NZ TOMTITS, getting great views and photos of male, female and two juveniles, one more advanced than the other.

We pushed on towards Napier and headed for some ponds where we got more great views of Black-billed gulls, Grey teal, Australasian Shoveler, Grey Duck, and a rare vagrant from Australia—Plumed Whistling Duck.

From there we headed to an inland wader site to look for Black-fronted Dotterels. We didn't find any [got them next morning] but we did have a good array of birds---A flock of Royal Spoonbills, Bar-tailed Godwits, other waders that we had already seen, and a nice surprise, our second rare vagrant to NZ for the day, White-winged Black Tern.

Dinner was in a harbourside restaurant and NZ Tomtit got two votes, while White-winged Black Tern, Plumed Whistling Duck, and Fernbird each got one.



New Zealand tomtit male perched. Nigel Grindley.

30 January 2019 – Day Eight

It was our day to cross Cook Strait and spend our first evening on the South Island, but before leaving Hawkes Bay we had some unfinished business, we had not seen a Black-fronted Dotterel yesterday.

We headed for a wetland south of Napier, and found a nice little flock of eight of these very attractive little fresh-water waders looking very smart with the morning sun behind us. Then a longish drive down to Wellington to catch our early afternoon ferry to Picton.

There were a couple of diversions for road closures, but we had enough “contingency” built in to our days plan to still have time for a couple of comfort stops along the way, a walk around a lovely wetland with well-formed boardwalks, and plenty of time to get to the ferry terminal on time.

As we sailed out of Wellington harbour we saw our first SPOTTED SHAGS and in deeper water we were accompanied for a while by a big pod of at least 50 Short-beaked Common Dolphins. Once out in the Strait, it wasn't long before we saw our first Albatross of the tour---a species that we would see very closely later in the tour—NZ WHITE-CAPPED ALBATROSS. There were dozens of Sooty Shearwaters, a single Fairy Prion, some Australasian Gannets, and several Fluttering Shearwaters but with very calm conditions it was a fairly quiet Cook Strait crossing bird wise.

We enjoyed stunning scenery as we cruised through the Marlborough Sounds, We didn't add any new species but did see our second Parasitic Jaeger [Arctic Skua] for the trip. After checking into our motel and having a rest, we had a short walk to our restaurant.

Over a very nice dinner White-capped Albatross and Black-fronted Dotterel each got two votes, and there was one for Gannet for BoD.

31 January 2019 – Day Nine

We had a really big day ahead of us looking for some of NZ's rarest birds and a rare mammal. We packed our van, left it in secure parking at the motel, and walked down to the pretty water-front at Picton.

Paul, our skipper for the morning, gave us a briefing and we were on the water by 8am in a very comfortable boat that we had to ourselves. Although we had seen Spotted Shags yesterday, we wanted a closer look and Paul backed the boat up to some rocks where a flock was roosting to give great photo opportunities. A cute NZ Fur Seal pup caught the attention too. We didn't stay long because there were much rarer cormorants to look for.

We motored further up Queen Charlotte Sound and found what we were looking for—a group of NZ KING SHAGS. These birds are very range restricted. There are around 700 of them in the world and the Marlborough Sounds is the only place that they live.

There were 29 of them in the flock that we found, and as they are quite nervous we didn't want to disturb them. Paul is expert at backing the boat in quietly without disturbing them, and we all got really great views and photos.

Hector's Dolphin is a very small endemic Dolphin that is critically endangered, so it was great to spot a pod of those. These animals know which boats they can trust. The pod, including some babies, came up beside our boat, and stayed with us for several minutes. We had fantastic views.

Then it was time for one of the biggest challenges of the tour. We were going to look for a small green endemic parakeet that tends to quietly and surreptitiously feed in trees with leaves, thousands of them, about the same shape size and colour as the parakeets!!

To do that we had to land on an island where alien predators have been removed so that these and other endemic birds can survive. The first signs, as we stepped ashore were not good as a group of people had been camping where we wanted to search in an area near where I knew there was a territory.

The campers left after a short time, and we had the island to ourselves. Eventually everyone in our group managed to see the extremely rare ORANGE-FRONTED PARAKEET. The views for most were only fly-pasts but they were fairly close, and at least everyone saw one or two.

Also whilst on the island we saw, at very close quarters, our first WEKA. The big flightless endemic rails were walking around foraging within a meter of our feet. There were lots of Tui, NZ Fantails, NZ Pigeons and Bellbirds, and we had good views of the South Island sub-species of NZ Tomtit.



A weka comes in for a closer look. Nigel Grindley.

When we returned to Picton at about midday, we bought lunches to take away and headed south. After lunch in a little park that didn't produce any new birds, our next stop was a sewage settlement pond. Lots of Royal Spoonbills, and a good array of waterfowl including NZ Scaup, Australasian Shoveler, Coots, Grey Teal, Black Swans etc but again nothing new.

Further south we stopped at a lake and began scanning from a platform and saw our first Great Crested Grebes and another good array of water fowl but not, at first, a rare bird that we were looking for.

Then Nigel drew our attention to a small grebe right in front of us. The rest of us were scanning further out on the lake at the time and if Nigel hadn't spotted it down below us we may well have missed it because it completely disappeared into willows shortly afterwards. Hoary-headed Grebe in the bag! Everyone saw it and there was just enough time to get some good photos.

There had been no record of this species in NZ for many years until a couple or more turned up as vagrants two or three years ago and now they are breeding here, and there may be four or five of them at this site now, but none have been seen anywhere else in NZ.

We pushed on further south to our motel in Kaikoura, had a short rest and went to what several of the group thought was the best restaurant of the tour. Over dinner five different birds were nominated for BoD—Great Crested Grebe, King Shag, NZ Fantail, Hoary-headed Grebe, and Orange-Fronted Parakeet.

1 February 2019 – Day Ten

This morning we had a pelagic trip booked but that was not until 9am and before that we checked out Kaikoura point. We found Turnstones, Banded Dotterels, both species of Oystercatcher, White-fronted terns and NZ Fur seals, but nothing new and then it was time for the boat.

We all climbed aboard our boat while it was still on the trailer, and a powerful tractor rolled it with all of us aboard down a ramp and we were off.

Very deep water, more than a kilometre deep in fact, comes close to shore at Kaikoura and within minutes we had oceanic birds following the boat. We stopped to chum at a couple of different spots and had a fantastic selection of pelagic birds almost within arms-reach, including five different albatross species, all endemic NZ breeders, sitting on the water beside the boat.

They were NZ White-capped Albatross, SOUTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS, NORTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS, [the only one we would see on the tour] SALVIN'S ALBATROSS, and NZ WANDERING ALBATROSS. Other new endemics were WESTLAND PETREL, and HUTTON'S SHEARWATER. We had great views of the Westland, several of them in fact, but only a fly-past of a single Hutton's [we got better views later in the tour]. We also saw our first White-chinned and Cape Petrels, more Northern Giant Petrels, a few Fluttering Shearwaters, and a small group of Little Penguins.

A bonus among the Northern Giant Petrels, was a Southern Giant Petrel. Gary our famous skipper who is out on the water 2 or 3 times a day, commented that it was only the second one that had been seen here this summer. It was certainly the only one on our tour. It sat on the water close to the boat for everyone to see the diagnostic mint green tip of its bill.

Before going back to the boat ramp we had a pod of Dusky Dolphins go past us, and we cruised past some rocks where in a small pool, we had a close view of a group of Fur Seal pups just 6 weeks old ---the cameras were clicking!!



A New Zealand wandering albatross unfurls its giant wings. Nigel Grindley.



A beautiful Salvin's albatross sits on the water nearby. Nigel Grindley.



A little penguin swims across the surface. Nigel Grindley.

After getting back on land, we added an uncommon [uncommon in NZ that is] species to our list—Cirl Bunting. After a sit-down cafe lunch, the program was for a rest, and a chance to catch up with laundry, etc. but in the evening after fish and chips and a tasty desert at picnic tables we did go out at dusk on one more adventure, this time to look for a Little Owl. We found one on a post in a farm paddock.

When our clients vote for their bird of the day each evening, it doesn't have to be the rarest bird, just the one that they personally enjoyed the most. Tonight there were again five different birds nominated—Little Penguin, Salvin's Albatross, Cape Petrel, Yellowhammer and Westland Petrel.

2 February 2019 – Day Eleven

Before leaving Kaikoura we had another look at Kaikoura point. We saw big numbers of Hutton's Shearwaters streaming past the point and took more photos of birds around the reef but didn't add any new species.

Driving south we stopped at one of the few places that stopping is possible at the moment south of Kaikoura, and enjoyed a spectacle of hundreds of Dusky Dolphins, some leaping clear out of the water and even doing somersaults. Whilst there, we also saw our first Pacific Reef Egret of the trip.

A bit further on, we stopped at a group of lakes briefly. There was another good selection of waterfowl, a lovely setting and some more good photos taken, but nothing new and we continued south. We stopped to

eat our lunches beside an estuary, viewing birds as we ate and got a great bonus, a feeding BLACK STILT. This is probably the rarest extant wader in the world with only 100 or so adults known. We were always planning to go for it near their breeding grounds later in the tour, but seeing one here was great.

There was another endemic that we hoped to see here and after lunch, we began looking for it up and down the estuary. A couple of normally reliable spots didn't work, but it wasn't long before we found our target-- three or four BLACK-FRONTED TERNS hawking up and down the river. We sat down on the river bank and just watched and photographed these beautiful Terns working back and forth in front of us, sometimes close, for ten or fifteen minutes.



A black-fronted tern flies against a dark background. Nigel Grindley.

Then it was time to head inland and up into the Southern Alps. The scenery became more and more stunning as we drove to higher elevations. We drove through Arthur's Pass village and up even higher in the mountains and stopped at a breath-taking outlook. At first there were no new birds but it wasn't long before we got our first view of KEA. Although these cheeky, intelligent, parrots can be seen in some places at lower elevation, many of them live up here in the mountains and a couple of them put on a great show. At first we had to crane our necks to view them on a high perch but it wasn't long before their curiosity brought them down to explore the rubber bits on our van with their impressive bills.

Before checking into our hotel we did a short bush walk in a beautiful Mountain Beech forest, and saw some more endemic bush birds including Rifleman but nothing else new.

After dinner in an alpine hotel we rested and chatted over a beer for a while, and then at dusk headed out again, and back into the forest with torches. We didn't see a Great Spotted Kiwi, but we did hear both male and female calls, the female quite loud and probably within 50m of us. These birds are shy and forage in

dense vegetation. The probability of seeing this species without hours or days of trekking is pretty close to zero and I think the last time a tour group saw one was ten or so years ago, but knowing that female was so close was exciting---you never know your luck!!

The three new endemics seen today shared votes for BoD, two for Black Stilt, two for Kea, and one for Black-fronted Tern.



A kea comes in to land showing its spectacular underwing. Nigel Grindley.

3 February 2019 – Day Twelve

While we were still in the mountains and before leaving Arthur's Pass National Park, we wanted to go for another walk in the beautiful Mountain Beech cloud forest. We got more good views of Rifleman and other forest passerines but nothing new.

It was time to head for the West Coast. Driving down the western side of the Southern Alps provided more stunning scenery and then when we started to get into high farmland we spotted a Weka with 3 chicks in a grass verge on the side of the road and stopped for about 15 minutes to watch and photograph them.

While we were stopped a few other birds presented themselves, among them a male NZ Tomtit sitting on a fence close to us, and showing the yellow wash on its breast that distinguishes the South Island subspecies from its North Island cousin.

As we headed south we stopped at a couple of sewage settlement ponds and the mouth of the Hokitika River, inspecting hundreds of birds without adding anything new. There was a probable Common Tern among a flock of White-fronted on the other side of the estuary at Hokitika but we decided to keep concentrating on species the team had not seen elsewhere in the world, so didn't go for a closer inspection.

The next stop was a short drive through a coastal rain forest to a lake surrounded by the forest---more endemic birds and a lovely spot to eat the lunches we had bought in Hokitika, but nothing new.

The main thing on the agenda for this day was to be tonight, when we would go out to look for another species of Kiwi---this time the rarest one! We drove on to Okarito where there were more good birds including a Great Egret that was new for our list, but the main reason for going to Okarito this afternoon was to be briefed by a local expert [Toby--one of Ian Cooper's excellent team] on what we would need to do tonight to give us a chance of seeing our target.

After a break in our motel rooms and a great dinner in Franz Josef township, we headed back to the Okarito area as the light faded. We needed to listen carefully in the darkness for footsteps or other sounds in the bush to locate our target and then stand very still and quiet and hope one would walk out into the open where we could see it. We had to be patient for a couple of hours, occasionally shuffling back and forth as quietly as possible to get in the right place at the right time.

A morepork was screeching close behind us and we could also hear Kea calling but the group was good at staying still and quiet, and we were rewarded with four good looks, in the filtered torchlight of local guide Mike, at an OKARITO BROWN KIWI. They are shy, range restricted and rare so we were elated to see one out in the open. To add to the experience we had heard the very loud and very close call of the male that we had seen, and a bit further away a female.

It was no surprise that the Rowi [Okarito Brown Kiwi] was unanimously chosen as bird of the day.

4 February 2019 – Day Thirteen

On these tours we leave it to the group to decide whether or not to take some time out of birding to drive up to see what's left of Franz Josef Glacier. My group on this trip decided they would like to, and who knows we are still in forest as we walk to the lookout and maybe we would see a new bird!

The lookout to the glacier is pretty spectacular, there is a nice walk up to it through lovely forest, and the information boards about the glaciers rapid retreat in recent years is interesting so the group enjoyed the diversion.

We pushed on south driving for hours through stunning Nothofagus Beech and Podocarp forest, stopping at a couple of pretty lakes, and a spectacular coastal lookout point. More endemic birds, another endemic NZ Red Admiral butterfly and more photos, but no new bird species.

We stopped for lunch at a picnic table in endemic forest with Tui and Bellbirds serenading us, NZ Fantails flitting around, and another NZ Tomtit seen well. That was followed by a short walk along a stream through endemic forest, and then we were back in the van pushing on up over Haast Pass.

We stopped at a point high in the Mount Aspiring National Park and set out to walk for a couple of hours along a well formed track through endemic Nothofagus forest and found a couple of new endemic birds. We had really great views of PIPIPI [NZ BROWN CREEPER], as well as great close views of male and female Rifleman, male and female NZ Tomtit, and other more common endemics. Two of us saw a YELLOWHEAD [but the rest of the group got super views of those later in the tour]. Once again we had the track pretty much to ourselves.

After returning to the van, we drove through more lovely forest, and then along the shores of a couple of very pretty lakes, and checked in to our lodging for the night in Wanaka.

Dinner was at a nice restaurant across the road from Lake Wanaka, where NZ Brown Creeper and Rifleman both got two votes and Yellowhead one.



Standing amongst beautiful NZ Beech forest. Phil Hammond.

5 February 2019 – Day Fourteen

We were by now starting to run out of endemic NZ birds to look for inland, but there was one very special and iconic little endemic that we would target this day. It lives above the tree line and just below the snow line in mountains, and we were going to have to drive a few hundred kilometres today to get ourselves back up into the Southern Alps, further south than we had been. There was also another endemic forest species to look for.

The drive was far from boring with many changes of scenery--- over a mountain range [the Crown Range] down hairpin bends, along lakesides, through high tussock country, stunning forest, and finally winding back up into mountains.

Along the way we stopped for coffee in one pretty village, a toilet break in another, bought our lunches at a famous pie shop in Te Anau, and ate them in a forest clearing. When we got to our destination we were on to our target within a couple of minutes—absolutely stonking views of two ROCK WRENS!

We just stood and watched and took heaps of photos as the birds bobbed up and down on rocks in front of us, flew in close to us, and carried on foraging in moss close to our feet as if we were not there. Fantastic! These birds can be very difficult, sometimes when we take visitors up into the mountains to look for them we stand in cold wet conditions for a couple of hours and only get a glimpse. Today was sunny, and the Rock Wrens showed brilliantly.



A rock wren shows itself off. Nigel Grindley.

On the way back we had time for another bush walk in the beautiful Eglington Valley and saw more endemic bush birds, They were species we had already seen, except a couple of SOUTH ISLAND ROBINS that came in so close to us that we had to be careful not to step on them.

Over dinner in Te Anau Rock Wren got four votes and South Island Robin got one.



A very curious South Island robin. Nigel Grindley.



Who is watching whom?. Phil Hammond.

6 February 2019 – Day Fifteen

Today would be another variation from a normal 21 day tour and we would be in Te Anau again tonight, giving us a relaxed day exploring the lovely Fiordland National Park and Milford Sound.

Earlier in the tour I had seen a Pipit from the van window, but by the time we stopped and I tried to get the group on to it, it flew and all the group saw was the bird flying away, so we really wanted to get a better look at one of those. Another Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ guide who lives locally, had told me where a pair had bred, and after a short drive down a dusty road we found a NEW ZEALAND PIPIT walking along a stony stream edge.

Whilst in the Eglington Valley we did three walks through the Beech forest, getting lovely close views of SI Robin, Rifleman, NZ Tomtit and other bush birds and adding more photos. We also walked on a boardwalk down to some very still and pretty small lakes where there were Little Pied Shag, NZ Scaup, NZ Fantail, NZ Tomtit and others.

Along the road we passed another Kea and spent some time at the World Heritage site of Milford Sound. It was a quiet day bird-wise seeing only 32 species, but we had been surrounded by spectacular high waterfalls, snow-capped mountains, stunning forest, and much more breath-taking scenery. Thirteen of the birds we saw today were endemic, the very close views of some of them pretty special, and we had at last had a good view of a NZ Pipit

Over dinner there were two votes each for SI Robin, and Rifleman and one for NZ Pipit.

7 February 2019 – Day Sixteen

We had a big day ahead of us and were on the road by 6.30 am—the earliest start of the tour, we wanted to make sure we were at the ferry terminal in good time for a mid-morning ferry to Stewart Island. As it happened there were no delays along the road and we got to the bottom of the South Island with about 40 minutes to spare and had time to explore a local lagoon—100s of waterfowl, waders and other good birds but no new species.

We did however add a new endemic at Bluff wharf while waiting for the ferry, FOVEAUX SHAG. The crossing of Foveaux Strait was once again on abnormally flat water and there were not as many tubenoses on the wing as normal, but there were still 100s of Sooty Shearwaters, a few White-capped Albatrosses and Fairy Prions, a Salvin's Albatross and a nice bonus a Broad-billed Prion!

On the Island we checked into our hotel, ate our lunches beside a beach with Variable Oystercatchers, and a family of Paradise Shelducks, and then strolled back down to the wharf to get our water taxi to the beautiful Ulva Island. On the way the water taxi driver took us to a cave where FIORDLAND CRESTED PENGUINS were tucked away moulting. We didn't want to disturb them but still managed a few photos and carried on to the Island.

Ulva is another Island without introduced predators where endemic birds can thrive, and as on Tiri and other pest-free islands nature takes its course, endemic birds are more efficient in endemic trees and you don't see many introduced birds.

There were at that stage of the tour still two endemic forest birds that we needed to see. One of them [Yellowhead] had only been seen briefly by two of us, and the other endemic had not been seen on the tour at all. Both of those species are on that Island, but it was our last chance, and if we didn't see them here we would dip.

It took almost 2 hours before we saw the first, but then we got really good views, and half an hour later absolutely stonking views of Yellowhead and in the end we probably saw 12 or 15 of them, fantastic!

For the other endemic that we needed we really did leave it till the last minute! We had been searching all afternoon for one but it was only a few minutes before we were due to leave the island when Cathy spotted a SOUTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK. It came in very close and was completely ignoring us and intently pecking away at a small hole in a tree at eye level where there must have been a bug it wanted—a very memorable experience with a bird that was once on the brink of extinction and is still rare.

We had a great time on the island. In addition to the Yellowheads and South Island Saddleback, we had the local [Stewart Island] sub-species of SI Robin and Weka at our feet, took a video of a Red-crowned Parakeet bathing in a bush stream, again right at our feet, had Black-fronted Terns hawking out from a picturesque beach, and more super views of NZ Brown Creeper, Kaka, and the more common forest birds.



A tui peers at us from the forest. Nigel Grindley.



A red-crowned parakeet looks down from the canopy. Nigel Grindley.

Also with help from a friend [thanks Ulva!] we saw a roosting Morepork in daylight. There was still another adventure for the day, we were going to look for another species of Kiwi, but down at this latitude at this time of year it doesn't get dark until after 10pm and Kiwi of course are usually nocturnal, so there was time for a rest before and after dinner.

Dinner in the hotel was great and the locally caught Blue Cod was as good as ever. Then when it was dark we drove off with local guide Ange to a private field that we had access to.

Over the next hour we had great views of a two month old chick, and then a fourteen year old male SOUTHERN BROWN KIWI [this one being the Stewart Island sub-species]. We tried to be as quiet and still as possible, no flash photography is allowed, and we stood and watched in the red-filtered torchlight as the older bird ignored us and carried on vigorously feeding in fairly short grass and every now and then throwing its head back to swallow a tasty morsel. Wow what a day it had been!

The Southern Brown Kiwi got two votes and there was one each for South Island Saddleback, Red-crowned Parakeet and Morepork for bird of the day.

8 February 2019 – Day Seventeen

This day we were out on blue water again on a pelagic trip, this time in the most southerly water we would see on the tour, out from Stewart Island.

By 8am we were all aboard. Ty, our excellent skipper gave his safety briefing and we were off on another grand adventure. Before heading out into deep blue water we had some things to look for in shallower water. First we went back to the caves we had visited yesterday and got another look at Fiordland Crested Penguin. This time we could see three of them. The photographers got reasonable shots but we didn't want to get too close to moulting endangered birds.

Next we headed for some small islands to see if we could find a Yellow-eyed Penguin on a beach where we often see them at this time of year, but despite careful searching we couldn't find one. We heard one but it was hidden in vegetation and didn't come out ---we would just have to find one the next day on the Otago coast! We did spot a Weka foraging on the beach though, as well as small NZ Fur Seal pups.

Then to another island where Southern Brown Skua breed and we got very close views of them when a couple flew out and made several passes over our heads.

The first Albatrosses we encountered as we motored out into deeper water, were NZ White-capped but a little further out while still motoring we saw our first BULLER'S ALBATROSS, our sixth Albatross species of the tour, and considered by many the most beautiful. Ty stopped the boat and we began chumming. The Buller's came in and sat beside the boat and after we had been there for a while getting plenty of fishy smell on the slick, we had a good selection around us but we pushed on further out and made a longer stop. After chumming again for a while we had more than 50 NZ White-capped Albatrosses sitting on the water around the boat, plus 9 Buller's, 1 Salvin's, and a couple of the big Southern Royals.

There were thousands of Sooty Shearwaters flying past but only one or two landed. I noted feet hanging out beyond the tail tip on a couple of dark birds that looked a bit like Sooties but were not. The feet out the back, and then, when they landed, shorter bill and more rounded head identified them as Short-tailed Shearwaters, easier to pick up when they were close to the boat.

Among the “fly-pasts” were six or seven Hutton's Shearwaters and at least 15 Cook's Petrels, some close. Other Petrels sitting on the water were several Cape and White-chinned and another Northern Giant, plus Fairy Prions and we saw plenty of Common Diving Petrels. We were hoping for Grey-backed Storm-petrel and got them. The first of them was a distant glimpse, but by the end of the day we had seen at least 7 with some excellent close views. There were also White-faced Storm Petrels –a different sub-species to the ones we had seen in the Hauraki gulf earlier in the tour.

We had hoped for Mottled Petrel. That species never comes and lands on the water beside the boat but we often get “fly pasts”. A young couple, Hiro and Shoko, who had joined us on the boat, did see a distant one briefly but just at that moment our group were in the cabin and so we couldn't put it on our list. Up to that point we had seen every species of endemic bird that we could reasonably expect to see on our modified tour, but Mottled Petrel was our first “dip”. A surprise, 7nm out at sea, was a juvenile Black-fronted Tern.

As we cruised back we stopped for a group of the local Little Penguins and we also went to some offshore rocks for a group of 30 or more Foveaux Shags. Both colour morphs were in the group and the light was great for photography. We inspected several flocks of White-fronted Terns looking for vagrants among them but didn't find any. On this tour we had dodged a couple of weather fronts and had sunshine pretty much all day, every day, and very little wind. That absence of wind was great for land based birding, but not so good on ferry crossings and pelagics because fewer birds were on the wing. Despite that our chumming had still brought in a good selection of birds for each pelagic including this one.

Fiordland Crested Penguin got two votes for bird of the day, and there was one each for Northern Giant Petrel, Buller's Albatross, and Grey-backed Storm Petrel.



A Buller's albatross lands behind the boat. Nigel Grindley.



A white-capped albatross swings high against a blue sky. Nigel Grindley.



A tiny grey-backed storm-petrel comes in for a pass. Nigel Grindley.

9 February 2019 – Day Eighteen

It had been really great on Stewart Island but there were no more birds to look for and it was time to go back to the mainland. We took the 8am ferry and again there was not much wind and we didn't add any new birds. We saw just 3 White-capped Albatrosses, 1 Fairy Prion, 1 Hutton's Shearwater, lots of Sooty shearwaters, and a few Common Diving Petrels.

Once ashore, we inspected a lagoon, again plenty of birds but nothing new, and also made an unplanned stop just outside Invercargill at a freshly ploughed field which held about 20 roosting Black-fronted Terns and another 20 hawking. There were also South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Black-billed Gulls, White-faced Herons and about 30 of the ubiquitous Masked Lapwing.

We drove through lots more open countryside, seeing very few people except in cars along the way, stopped in a town to buy lunches in a bakery, and after a while diverted down a narrow unsealed road to a lovely long sandy beach where we ate our lunches.

We had another reason to visit that beach, and after a walk we got excellent views of a big endemic mammal—Hooker's Sealion. There were seven of them spread along the beach and we saw both male and female lounging and snoozing.

There were still a couple of endemic bird species that we could add and we pushed on further north until turning off the highway again and back out to the coast on another narrow dusty road. We walked the last half kilometre or so and found what we had come for ---we saw a roosting YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN, and then another. We could see that they were an adult and juvenile and the team was able to get some great photos. We stayed and our patience paid off when a second adult, the other parent, came ashore and waddled up the hill to join it's family.

All three greeted each other by lifting their heads and braying and then the newly arrived parent fed the youngster. Then it was time for change over and the original parent waddled down the hill right in front of us, stopped for a minute or two to wait for a fur seal to get off of its path, and swam out to sea. Staying there for almost an hour meant that we would be a bit late for dinner, but no-one cared , it had been a fantastic, very memorable, experience with a family of endangered birds. A bonus while watching the Penguins was the addition of another endemic species when several OTAGO SHAGS flew past.

Over dinner at another great restaurant, this time in Oamaru, Yellow-eyed penguin was everybody's choice for bird of the day.



A yellow-eyed penguin calls to its mate. Nigel Grindley.

10 February 2019 – Day Nineteen

We were to head inland today, but before leaving the Otago coast there were some things to do. We had seen Otago Shags yesterday but only in flight so I took the group to a roost site first thing in the morning before the birds all went out to sea for the day. This site holds hundreds of Otago Shags and beside them hundreds of Spotted Shags ---pretty spectacular--- lots more photos were taken.

Also while we were still on the Otago coast we spotted another rare Fiordland Crested Penguin hiding away in moult. Obviously we didn't want to get too close and took our photos through telescopes or telescopic lenses, but I did have to have a word with a dog walker with his large dog off the lead!

Then we were away driving inland and up into the central Otago high country, again in quite different habitat and scenery. There were no more land-based endemics for us to look for –we had seen all that we could hope for already, but there were some native species we wanted to see better. We had seen a Great Crested Grebe [the Australasian sub-species] at distance earlier in the tour, but the guys were keen to get good photos and so we visited some lakes where we stopped for that. There were also NZ Scaup,

Australasian Shoveler, Grey Teal etc on the water and Grey Gerygones, NZ Fantails, Bellbirds etc in the trees around us.

We went to a swampy site in search of more Black Stilts and did manage to get one in the scope but it was never as close as the one we had seen earlier in the Ashley Estuary. On a winding mountain road we spotted another NZ Pipit on the side of the road which stayed long enough for us to get out of the van for better views.

Over dinner the moulting Fiordland Crested Penguin got three votes for bird of the day and Great Crested Grebe two.



A moulting Fiordland crested penguin gives us a surprise. Nigel Grindley.

11 February 2019 – Day Twenty

This last day was primarily a day for driving to Christchurch and dropping the group off at their hotel. We did spend some time looking for the introduced Chukar without success, stopped at a number of places with stunning scenery for photos, and had a coffee break at a quirky spot with all sorts of curiosities.

We passed a Black-billed gull breeding colony, and made a detour to a lake with some great birds but no new ones. At one stop the photographers got great shots of a juvenile Banded Dotterel.

We ate our lunches in a park with more very close views of Black-billed Gulls and Nigel was able to get good views and photos of more dragon-flies---all in all a fairly gentle, relaxed last day.

There had been a lot of laughter in the van during the tour, and this had been a very nice, very interesting tour with a great group.



A confiding banded dotterel. Nigel Grindley.



One of the non-avian wildlife seen on the trip – Blue damselfly (*Austrolestes colenonis*). Nigel Grindley.