

Tour report

12 November – 2 December 2019

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Brent Stephenson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Jules Eden, Angela Gherman, Eliot Grev, Derek Antropik, Brad Peyton, Glen & Barb Thomas

Images

Derek Antropik & Brent Stephenson

We had a great tour, saw a lot of really great things along the way, including some beautiful scenery, great mammals, and beautiful trees. Of course, this is not to mention the excellent birding we had along the way! On the whole our weather was pretty good, for what was a windy and wet Spring in New Zealand, with just a couple of damp days along the way. Although, I guess torrential rain and waterfalls from every direction in Fiordland was a little more than 'damp'!

We saw 161 species during our 21-days together, a number that is pretty high for recent tours. We had excellent views of almost all species, one which seemed to evade us on this tour, with just two brief inflight views was New Zealand falcon. Not an easy species to pinpoint, but normally one we see well at least once in a tour – or that is the hope. It certainly wasn't for the lack of trying with 'Falcon Squad' on watch at almost all times! Included, in the 161 bird species were 67 endemic breeding species, and 27 species of tube-nosed seabirds. So, over all we did exceedingly well! Our four excellent sightings of kiwi species were second to none, with some really amazing views of all four. And great to have prolonged views of two of them feeding in front of us for 10+ minutes. The little spotted kiwi that came in to investigate us, and BZ our friendly Okarito kiwi (Rowi) also created memories that will last forever.

We had some excellent pelagic trips, with most of the target species seen, and more albatross in the north than we expected. The pelagics can always be tricky, with weather playing a big part in what is seen. We were lucky in that we had good weather for birds on most of the pelagics, and so managed most of our expected targets. With our first pelagic being out of Marsden Cove, and this being the first time we had done this on a 21-day tour, I think the results spoke for themselves. Amazing views of two tricky species (little shearwater and Pycroft's petrel), and definitely making it a part of our future 21-day tours. As always finishing with hundreds of albatross off of Stewart Island will, I am sure, be a lasting memory for most.

We had some incredible views of other tricky species along the way – beautiful kokako singing and in view, blue duck with ducklings, orange-fronted parakeets feeding in front of us for minutes, multiple black stilt in multiple locations (and with chicks!), and stunning yellowhead in two locations.

The 'Bird of the Trip' results were interesting and are below. Southern brown kiwi just came in ahead of takahe, and yellow-eyed penguin – three really nice endemic species. And it was interesting to see a fair mix of birds from earlier in the trip as well as those later. Unsurprisingly, Derek voted the swim with dolphins as the tour highlight, and Jules voted a mince and cheese pie as number 6 on his list...

Brent Stephenson (leader and co-owner of Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ)

PS. I should just mention that all exaggerations, bad jokes, and artistically licensed information contained within the tour report below is solely and whole-heartedly mine!

species	derek	eliot	brad	angela	jules	barb	glen	total
Southern brown kiwi	5					5	3	13
Takahe	3	5					4	12
Yellow-eyed penguin	4	2		5				11
Bellbird				4			5	9
Black stilt	2		4					6
Little spotted kiwi					3	3		6
Yellowhammer			5					5
Southern Royal albatross		1			4			5
New Zealand storm-petrel					5			5
Okarito kiwi (Rowi)		4						4
Northern brown kiwi						4		4
Paradise shelduck	1		2					3
Wrybill			3					3
Weka (Stewart Is)		3						3
New Zealand pigeon				3				3
Australasian gannet			1				1	2
Tomtit				2				2
Little penguin					2			2
Fantail						2		2
Fiordland crested penguin							2	2
Kea				1				1
Kaka					1			1
Tui						1		1

12 November 2019 – Day One

The first day of a tour is always fraught with a mix of excitement, nerves, terror...well maybe not terror.... And when you pull back the curtain first thing in the morning and see big rain drops hitting the window pane, perhaps with a mix of hail in there, yeah that's terror! But that's the weather in Auckland, you just can't judge what it's going to do in the next hour.

So, we all met down by the van, everyone looking chipper and ready for a great adventure together. The small amount of luggage that was stowed in the rear compartment of the van had me slightly worried that perhaps we were missing half the group, but actually everyone was there, everyone was travelling light, so off we went. We had a quick chat in the van first, introductions, plan for the day, all that sort of thing, and then off we headed. First stop was across the city, and to a spectacular gannet colony. There were spots of rain on the way, and it really didn't look good. But we got there, jumped out and walked to the viewpoint and the sun came out. On the way we had views of silvereye, grey gerygone, tui, and lots of blackbirds, song thrush, and the introduced but beautiful Eastern rosella. We had spectacular views of the gannets nesting, with small chicks just visible occasionally below the adults. There were also nesting white-fronted terns, their chicks small and fluffy enjoying the sun after the rain.



We enjoyed the views, the birds, watching out to sea as a big surf rolled in, the odd pied cormorant flying past. A few variable oystercatchers on the beach, and kelp and red-billed gulls rounded things out. Back in the van not a moment too soon as it started to bucket down! Phew! Off to a nearby bakery, first training run, and pretty good time, with three pies in the first lunch.... These guys are going to embrace the kiwi pie I feel!

Across some rolling landscape with a mixture of native and introduced vegetation, and on to a nearby estuary. Within a few moments we had beautiful views of a hovering feeding fairy tern – the target bird – and then some nice views of a range of other species including NZ dotterel, white-faced heron, masked lapwing, paradise shelduck, black-winged stilt, and a glimpse of a buff-banded rail. Several more nice close flight views of fairy tern, then we headed to another location nearby, another fairy tern, so roughly 10% of

the NZ breeding population...not a good thing! We picked up ruddy turnstone, a few more bar-tailed godwit, and a lot more NZ dotterel and variable oystercatchers.

Northwards and a stop at a small lake brought incredible views of at least four nesting Australasian little grebes, several pairs of NZ grebes, a pair of NZ scaup, several Pacific black duck, and a couple of Australasian shoveler! Not a bad haul on waterbirds, plus a bunch of pukeko (purple swamphen), masked lapwing, a couple of black swan and more black-winged stilts. Excellent!

We checked in to our accommodation in Kerikeri, did a little grocery shopping, and then to dinner. After dinner we headed out for what we hoped would be the star of the show, and we were not disappointed! Five Northern brown kiwi, one within a few minutes of parking the van, and then two birds that absolutely gave themselves up! A male bird which fed and mooched through the grass for about 10 minutes right in front of us, until we left it be. Only to find what was probably his mate, a large female 30m away right in the open. We watched her with her massive bill for about 10 minutes as she fed and potted about right in the open, fully showing off every angle! There were loads of birds calling, both male and female, and we then had beautiful views of a morepork just a few metres away, sitting right out in the open – there had been a lot of calling activity and this one gave great views. It was all capped off with the fifth kiwi that showed well, and then crawled into the shrubbery and gave an absolutely honking series of calls, a female that was giving it heck! Amazing!



A pukeko (purple swamphen) in all its glory. Derek Antropik.



Beautiful sighting of a morepork on our first evening. Derek Antropik.

Dreams of kiwi and morepork tonight, and the pillow never felt so good!

Day total – Seen = 54 inc 3 heard (ring-necked pheasant, fantail and yellowhammer); new for the trip = 54; total for the trip to date = 54

13 November 2019 – Day Two

Up a little later on account of our awesome night out kiwi spotting, and a beautiful day began. Sunshine and light winds as we headed south towards Marsden Cove for our pelagic. We met our boat and skipper Steve and got a quick orientation before chugging slowly out in to the calm waters of the bay. We cruised along the shoreline of the Whangarei Heads before spotting a couple of white-fronted terns, fluttering shearwaters and little penguins. Steve slowed the boat and came around, and what!?! – those aren't fluttering shearwaters! We had three little shearwaters right there nearby, feeding away, and right close to the shore. Normally a super tricky species to get good views of, these birds just put on a show! Awesome start!

We had really good views, spotted the little penguins a few times, and then decided to carry on. We passed through a really large flock of fluttering shearwaters, getting excellent views of them as well, and incredibly no little shearwaters with them. Amazing. We carried on out and started to get into deeper water, gradually shelving out to the 100m mark, with more little shearwaters as we went. We carried on a

bit and with great views of the Hen and Chicken Islands and the adjacent coastline, put out the sea anchor and started to chum.

The winds were really light, and even after almost ten minutes there was one flesh-footed shearwater by the boat...hmmm. Almost too good! But gradually the birds started to arrive. A few little shearwaters passed, more flesh-footed shearwaters started to arrive, and numbers of white-faced storm-petrels started to put in an appearance over the slick, with fairy prions also coming in. Ok, this is more like it. We looked at every Cook's type petrel that was coming past and then one just looked different. It seemed slightly different in size, jizz, and as it swept around short in the bill – Pycroft's petrel! Everyone got on to the bird, and although not great views, it was seen by everyone. The numbers of birds continued to steadily increase, and they kept us busy examining every Cookilaria. Then, something strange happened, considering it was still the middle of the day – the number of Cook's petrels really slowed, and most of the birds seemed to be Pycroft's. We've seen this sort of thing happen before at Whitianga, but late in the day. This was still middle of the day, and suddenly, most of the birds were Pycroft's, and great views of them. We had a white-capped albatross come past and then come in a little later, as well as a Northern giant petrel – later on there were two of them!



Fluttering shearwater on the water on the way out. Derek Antropik.

We continued to chum, but nothing new was coming in, but certainly still some good numbers of birds coming past. So, we decided to head further out. We only went a short distance, but decided to start to chum again. A few more little shearwaters, the white-faced storm-petrels started to come in, as well as the flesh-footed shears, and then – Grey-faced petrel!! Yes, another of the targets, with a brief but good fly by. It was followed by several more over the next 45 minutes, so great views in all. And then a NZ storm-petrel decided to put in an appearance! Boom! Great views, although brief, but only to be followed by perhaps 4-5 more of them, giving awesome views and making a number of nice close passes of the boat! Then

suddenly a strange Cookilaria – what's that!? Mottled petrel!!! Another great bird, but not one that was expected. A bit longer, a few more Cook's, but mainly Pycroft's and the wind was getting up and making it a little bumpy. So, we decided to head back in, but as we turned the boat to head home a black petrel dropped into our wake! Score – the last of the 'probables' had turned up, making it really the time to head back.

We stopped in to have a cuppa in the shelter of some of the islands, listening to saddleback, bellbird, and spotting the odd NZ pigeon and red-crowned parakeet fly by. Beautiful. Back closer to shore we had another little penguin, before some oystercatchers, a fly-by reef egret, and dock. To our accommodation, a lovely dinner and a few celebratory drinks, and bed!

Day total – Seen = 55 inc 5 heard (ring-necked pheasant, NI saddleback, bellbird, fantail, and skylark); new for the trip = 24; total for the trip to date = 78

14 November 2019 – Day Three

Absolutely pelting rain as we woke... Oh boy! We left the accommodation and headed out to a rural area to start the search for one of the stars of the trip, Indian peafowl! Well the weather was really not great, drizzle and showers, and so we decided to kill a little time looking for a few things around the general area. Nice views of skylark, yellowhammer, Paradise shelduck with the World's cutest ducklings, and no peafowl! Hmmm, seems the tip off hadn't been a good one. We turned around and headed out, and boom there it was, a male strutting its stuff!

We carried on out to an estuary area and as we got out of the van the rain started to come down heavily again, so we decided to carry on and drive whilst it was raining, with the general forecast for improving conditions over the course of the day. We carried on past a couple of little beaches and got some more nice views of NZ dotterel, Caspian tern, etc. And some lovely rural areas with little patches of Kauri forest. The rain showers continued intermittently, so we continued to our next destination, by which time the rain had stopped, blue skies were starting to appear, and things were looking good.

We stopped and had a spot of early lunch as we watched a pair of buff-banded rails in the scope feeding their tiny little fluffy black chicks a spot of lunch also. Just cute as could be little fluff-balls, with beautiful scope views. Rails, chicks, scope views, not words that normally go in the same sentence! After everyone had had great views we watched another pair skirting the rushes and some of the group managed some photos. It was then time to move on and do a bit of walking to see what we could find. Jackets and fleeces were off by now, and it was a lovely day. We wandered along a few trails and had some good looks at tui, bellbird, New Zealand pigeon, fantail, fly over kaka, and some good views of brown teal. We heard and glimpsed a couple of saddleback, more to come, and whitehead, again more to come, and a short look at a North Island robin. We wandered a few paddocks looking out for Takahe, trying to ignore the hundreds of purple swamphens, and enjoyed the spectacular panoramas.



A buff-banded rail struts its stuff. Derek Antropik.

We spent time wandering a bit more, looking at whatever came along, and then headed to another spot, where we found more grey gerygones, and Glen and Barb spotted a spotless crane. We got everyone to the spot and ended up with really nice views of an adult feeding quietly along the edge of a small bit of water, watching it for some time, and even a little time for photo coaching which resulted in some nice images (ahem!).

We head off towards the accommodation for the night. Scanning for kookaburra on the way, a valiant but fruitless search. But a nice dinner and some great conversation, along with an early night!

Day total – Seen = 53; new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 84



A male whitehead peers back from the foliage. Derek Antropik.



A cracking spotless crake, found by Barb and Glen and beautifully photographed by Derek Antropik.

15 November 2019 – Day Four

Up early, and looking out the window...oh yeah! No rain, and the wind looked reasonable. The forecast had a little wind in it for later, but I reckon we will be ok. So, breakfast and then on the road, grabbing lunch on the way to the dock. We snagged two buff-banded rails on the way which was nice, and then on to the boat. After a slow cruise out through the channel, spotting pied cormorants along the way, we kept an eye out for little penguin, but no luck.

As we came out of the channel things started to pick up with regards to birds, with fluttering shearwaters zipping past, and a brief pass by some bottlenose dolphins. Cook's petrels and flesh-footed shearwaters started to come past, and the hurried wings of common diving petrels gave them away as they zipped past like little auks. We kept going, with a freshening wind and light swell we wanted to get into the zone before the weather deteriorated at all. A juvenile black-browed or Campbell albatross whipped past, but just didn't show well enough at a distance to work out identity.

We arrived at our first chumming location, with two huge flocks of fairy prions and smaller numbers of fluttering shearwaters in attendance, very very impressive to see. Two white-capped albatross also seemed not to realise that they and most of their brethren should be further south! We started chumming

and before long a good mix of birds coming past, with prions, flesh-footed shearwaters, and a couple of Buller's shearwaters coming in. Numbers of white-faced storm-petrels steadily increased and then our first NZ storm-petrel zipped in to feed on the slick! Excellent! We kept chumming for a while, with good numbers of Cook's petrels wheeling around as well.

We decided to head further out, with the weather still reasonable, so headed out to another location. As we neared the spot a Northern giant petrel zipped past, and then at the location small numbers of fairy prions were in the zone, but nothing like we had seen at the previous stop. We started chumming, and this time it was all a little slow, but then birds started to appear, both white-faced and NZ storm-petrels, more prions, and then the first larger bird came in – black petrel! Yes, the other target bird and reason for moving came on in giving a great view. We had several more, along with more flesh-footed shearwaters, and good numbers of Cook's petrels. Amazingly, despite the close proximity of where we were compared with the other day, 100-fold more Cook's petrels and NO Pycroft's petrels! Which is exactly what our experience over the last almost 20 years has shown us. We decided that we had pretty much seen it all, as the swell started to increase, so we decided to head for shelter.

We had a bit of a respite in the shelter of Little Barrier, hearing and seeing kaka and tui, and getting a snatch of long-tailed cuckoo call. A nice cup of tea, something to snack on, and then back out. We made another chumming stop near another large work up of prions and shearwaters, and there were literally hundreds of Cook's petrels wheeling around. And then out third albatross of the day, a juvenile Salvin's albatross flew in and landed! What! Crazy. Another juvenile albatross flew past, probably a young white-capped, and got lost in the hundreds of Cook's petrels.





A fairy prion gets up close attention. Derek Antropik.

We decided enough was enough and beat a track for home. The seas were not too bad, but the wind was fresh and we kept an eye out as we went. Back in sheltered waters we checked out a calm bay and found a couple of peafowl, and several weka, before heading back to the dock. A pretty awesome day on the water, with all the usual suspects and a few 'vagrant' albatross. Always nice to see masses of birds and of course the star NZ storm-petrel.

Day total – Seen = 46 inc 2 heard, (long-tailed cuckoo and bellbird); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 87

16 November 2019 – Day Five

Up and another beauty morning. A quick trip to get supplies from the supermarket, repack the van and then off to grab lunch, before heading off towards the Whangaparoa Peninsula. We were keeping eyes peeled, and the sharp eyes of Derek and Elliot spotted a kookaburra on a powerline. We spun the van around and got great views of a bird sitting on a powerline. Although an Australian introduction, this was new for a few people, so well worth looking out for.

We had a quick look around a nice little spot, seeing grey gerygone feeding chicks again, a pair of pied stilts with a youngster, and another (!) buff-banded rail. We arrived at the ferry terminal with loads of time to spare and unloaded our gear, and got ourselves situated. The ferry arrived, we boarded and off we headed. A very calm crossing with no tubenoses, but a very surprising brown (southern) skua flew past giving reasonable views, and then a Parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua) made an appearance as well. Awesome!

We landed at Tiritiri Matangi, unloaded our gear, had a briefing from the ranger, and then set off up towards to the Bunkhouse. We got most of the usual suspects on the way, with great views of saddleback, brown teal, a surprise fernbird right in the open briefly singing, lots of whitehead, North Island robins, and always on the lookout for kokako. We had lots of bellbirds, tui and NZ pigeons, and then a couple of stunning male Stitchbird showed really well.

We made it up to the bunkhouse, unpacked our gear and got settled in, and had lunch. A little rest during the middle of the day and then some time spent looking for Takahe. This time of the year they can be tricky, and today was proving no different. We headed out after a short respite, and wandered some of the hotspots, looking for kokako. Excellent views of Stitchbird, more pigeon and bellbird, red-crowned parakeet, and some brown quail. But not a squeak from a kokako. We managed to find a tuatara out sunning itself outside the burrow in the afternoon sun, a nice large animal about 2.5 ft long. Very cool animals! At another location we waited for Takahe, but nothing! So, we started to head back to the bunkhouse, and it must have been time for the kokako to start up because all of a sudden there were at least two males calling. Unfortunately, one was miles away, the other was just a touch too far. So, we decided to carry on, because if a couple were calling, surely more would be?! And a bit further on, sure enough another bird singing right beside the track. We couldn't spot it high in the cabbage tree, and then the shape of it gliding out of the back of the tree brought groans...mostly from the guide! We headed around to another trail we knew intersected with the direction the bird had headed and bingo. The bird was spotted, moved high up into a small pohutukawa tree and started singing right there in front of us! Beautiful views of the zoro mask, the wattles, and the haunting call of the kokako was ours for the moment. We all got good views, before it glided off, and then we realised there was another bird, a female, and her beak was full of nesting material. We lost her as she bounded along on the ground parallel to the track, but what a cool interaction.

We headed back to the bunkhouse happy, still more searching for the Takahe, and we needed to get dinner on the go also. Wine, beer, cheeses and sunshine, as the dinner was prepared and the BBQ fired up. A really lovely dinner with great company, a nice sunset and it was then time to eat NZ made chocolate whilst looking for Takahe and watching the night sky appear. No Takahe, but the chocolate was great.



A male North Island saddleback on show. Derek Antropik.



A tuatara warms outside its burrow. Derek Antropik.



A red-crowned parakeet feeds quietly on the ground. Derek Antropik.



So, we started our nocturnal mission. Only a short way into it several little spotted kiwi called, and the hunt was on. We had fleeting views of a bird zip across the road a fair way away, and it was excruciating hearing it stamp around in the leaves just inside the forest. But it was clear the bird was not coming out again, so we moved on. Another scuffling, and a bird disappeared into the forest.... Damn! There was quite a bit of calling of both kiwi and morepork, so they were out and about. We set off in a different direction and a bird zipped up off the track a wee way ahead and into the forest...not again! We got up level with it and could hear it stomping around, and glimpsed it again, but not enough. Then it moved to an area where we could see, and as we got into position its curiosity got the better of it and it came running in, sniffing the air and completely giving itself up! We got amazing views of this often tricky bird at just a few metres, before it turned and wandered off into the darkness! We floated back to the bunkhouse, and dreamt of kiwi.

Day total – Seen = 59 inc 3 heard, (little penguin, common diving-petrel, and takahe); new for the trip = 9; total for the trip to date = 96

17 November 2019 – Day Six

Up nice and early, the sun was up, but the island was still stirring. There had been a lot of stirring during the night also, with a lot of nocturnal noises in the bunkroom! We headed out to see the beautiful light and to look for our last endemic needed, Takahe. We got a bit of a leg stretch, seeing a number of our species from yesterday, and then started our vigil. Nothing, nope still nothing, damn still nothing. Then suddenly there they were! Walking rather quickly down a path, everyone got there only to see them disappear into the undergrowth! Oh no! But they were intent on something, and we knew what that was. So, we got into position and there they were again. We were able to watch them feed, nice and close and for an unhurried 20 minutes, just enjoying these awesome birds. The cameras were snapping.



We decided to head back to the bunkhouse, where we packed our gear, got sorted and then headed out again to wander down for our water taxi ride. We spotted a few things on the way – another fernbird, another rifleman, and lots more saddleback, stitchbird, etc.



A Takahē feeds carefully on grass seeds. Derek Antropik.



We boarded our water taxi and headed back to Gulf Harbour, loaded the van, and in quick smart time headed south. Pies and sandwiches along the way, and we were making good speed. We headed to Miranda to do a spot of shorebird watching, and the tide was already starting to drop, but we had wrybill in the scope pretty quickly. Not close, but there will be more. A big flock of bar-tailed godwit and red knot out on the shellbanks, as well as black-billed gulls and pied oystercatchers. None of the smaller vagrant shorebirds were visible, but we did manage to find a whimbrel (well done Angela). We went to another spot, more godwit and knot, but couldn't locate anything smaller there, but some grey teal – surprisingly our first for the trip, and a couple of brown teal. Kind of backwards when we have had brown teal on four days so far during a trip, and no grey teal, but that is a great sign of the success of brown teal recovery.

We spent some time scanning the birds and enjoying the song of the skylark, before piling back into the van to head to another location. Loads more godwits, a few knot and more pied oystercatchers and pied stilts. On the way a flock of 5 cattle egret in breeding plumage was a nice sight, and more importantly a small group of Royal spoonbill was new for the trip. Again, no smaller shorebirds, and so off to the accommodation for a rest and then dinner at a local pub. But not before seeing some black-billed and red-billed gulls at closer range. Another great day.

Day total – Seen = 55 inc 1 heard, (spotted dove); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 102

18 November 2019 – Day Seven

Up and out not too early. There had been a bit of rain over night, but the morning wasn't looking too bad, although a little low rain cloud around. We headed back to the shorebird site and the tide was still quite a way out, but we started scanning the mudflats. A magic scene of thousands of bar-tailed godwits and red knot out over the mud that remained as the tide crept in. Very spectacular to see. A few wrybill out there again, still not close, but a good chance to see them again. Two whimbrel this time in view. Then another small shorebird was spotted, roosting beside a wrybill...hmm sleeping, so no chance to see the bill...waiting waiting. Finally, it showed and bingo, a curlew sandpiper. Everyone got a look and then a bit more scanning, hmmm...another small shorebird...even smaller... BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER! The little beauty that had been around for a few weeks was there and showing well, and at times was with the curlew sandpiper and a wrybill or two giving nice views and comparisons.

We switched to a slightly different spot, grey teal, at least one brown teal, but nothing else of interest, so we decided to head off. On the way we had two more scampering buff-banded rails, wow. This species has been very evident on this trip, not always that way!

We got back to the accommodation, packed the van and then headed south. A bit of a drive ahead of us, but no worry, it was raining and hopefully would clear by the time we got to our destination. We made a short stop at a lake on the way, nice NZ scaup, Caspian tern about as far from the coast as you will ever see it in NZ, and our first (!) great cormorant of the trip. Onwards and a bit later we arrived at our forest destination. It was raining, a little more than drizzle, so a damp lunch break. Good kaka flying, and in the trees, and glimpses of flying yellow-crowned parakeets, whilst a male tomtit perched well for us and posed. We then headed on to do a forest walk. Beautiful podocarp forest with huge old growth trees in this pocket of forest saved by activist's who understood the value of it to future generations (of birds and



A pied stilt poses. Derek Antropik.

humans!). We got views of North Island robin, heard yellow-crowned parakeets, as well as whitehead, kaka, and fantail. We wandered the trail, which just seemed to be longer than last time.... Seems the guide took a slight left and ended up on a different route to usual. Ah well, still beautiful forest, and a chance to see fuchsia, mosses, ferns and a lot of lovely botany.

We got back to the van and then headed to another spot, overlooking an area, we spent a few moments. Dunnock was added to the list, as well as a distant perching pipit, and lots of flying kaka. Then after parking at another spot a long-tailed cuckoo was heard, and then a beaut flyover with excellent views of the falcon-like profile and long tail. Nice one. Another short walk in the forest, more nice views of the trees, a few kaka. And then it was time to head for Turangi. We took the scenic route, with lots of nice forest, and a yearling red deer standing in the middle of the road! Not something you see every day!

We checked in, had another great dinner and then to bed, by which time we had almost dried out!

Day total – Seen = 60 inc 1 heard, (grey gerygone); new for the trip = 7; total for the trip to date = 109



19 November 2019 – Day Eight

We were up pretty early, and out the door, with blue skies, but a very crisp feel to the air! We headed out to a spot where we hoped we might find Australasian bittern. We parked the van and headed out, and within a short time heard booming off in the distance. Then a very close boom, including the inhalations at the start of the boom clearly audible. Very cool. We were scanning the reeds and looking looking, but nothing obvious. Nearby a spotless crane called, and fernbird also. Then all of a sudden a bittern took off from fairly close, only to drop back down into the reeds after about 80m of low flying. Everyone got onto it, but not ideal views.

We stayed and watched for more action, but nothing, and so decided to try a slightly different vantage point. We had nice views, but still no more bittern action. So, we enjoyed great close views of dabchick, scaup, and various cormorants and waterbirds.

We then headed off to find blue duck, a key target of the day, and something that can either be found first off, or absorb a pretty good part of the morning. We got to a great location and started checking likely spots, but nothing was obvious. After a good bit of searching still nothing, but then we managed to start adding other things. Nice views of a couple of dunnocks, lots of finches, a shining bronze cuckoo that did a number of flybys, but never sat still for long, and several more cormorants.

We scanned and scanned likely areas, but nothing of a blue duck. Until, we came down onto the river bank and there was a pair of blue ducks right in front of us with two small ducklings! Yes! Awesome views at very close range, watching them paddle in the fast-moving water, feeding, preening, and going about their business. Very happy with such lovely views! We enjoyed the moment, and then headed off, back to the accommodation, packed the van, had a bit of brekkie, and headed off towards Taupo.

A quick stop to look for fernbird, which we had already seen a couple of times, but why not see it again! And redpoll showed well also. We carried on through to a forested area, passing through some pretty magnificent scenery. We had lunch and spotted another shining bronze cuckoo, then went for a walk through the forest. Great views of tomtit, whitehead, rifleman, and robin, and some nice botany along the way. Even a NZ red admiral or two. We posed for a photo, and then head off towards the coast.

In Napier we checked out a couple of sites, finding the long-staying plumed whistling duck (down to just two now), as well as a big little pied shag colony, black-billed gulls, shovelers, and various other waterfowl. Then on to a wetland habitat, where we quickly got on to several black-fronted dotterel, stunning as always, and then three sharp-tailed sandpipers. A nice shorebird to claw back! Perhaps the biggest surprise was a mute swan – where was that from?!

It was then time to head off to the accommodation, check in to the rooms, and then off to dinner, but not before a quick look around the Art Deco sights of Napier. Another lovely dinner and then a quick sleep!

Day total – Seen = 66 inc 3 heard, (peafowl, pheasant, spotless crane); new for the trip = 9; total for the trip to date = 118



A blue duck adult and duckling paddle across the turbulent water. Derek Antropik.





A male North Island tomtit collecting food. Derek Antropik.



A New Zealand red admiral suns itself. Derek Antropik.

20 November 2019 – Day Nine

Up early and off in the search of more waterfowl and a bittern if possible. We arrived at a wetland area and started our search for creeping skulky things, by being creeping (not creepy) and skulky! But after a damn good search of the area, there was nothing visible. A nice assortment of ducks, with grey teal, shoveler, etc, and good views of a few other common things, including Royal spoonbill.

We then headed to a gravel area, and within a few minutes had a nice female banded dotterel in the scope, and then two black-fronted dotterel. A rather surprising find was a pod of common dolphins going past the beach! Off we went, heading to a lovely lookout spot, and along the way finding excellent up-close pipit. We had had distant perched and flight views, but this was beyond comparison. And a friendly skylark also came in and sat beside for contrast, so that was nice.

A quick laundry collection stop netted clean laundry and a pair of barbary doves. And we were then off again, with black crows on the mind. And sure enough a pair were spotted by the keen experienced rook spotting eyes of Jules. We whipped the van around and had flight views of two as they flew across the road. A lunch spot was rather windy, but a surprise fly-over falcon caught us off-guard and showed briefly to most of the group. No second chance was given during lunch.

We then carried on towards our target location, a large estuary on the west coast. We arrived, and wandered down to an area where the shorebirds usually congregate as the tide comes in. Tides were perfect, but unfortunately there was not a lot of variety around. We had nice views of the bar-tailed godwits accumulating, along with some red knot, and South Island pied oystercatchers. The sunshine was welcomed, and it was nice to enjoy some banter and watch the tide come in.



With no influx of birds, we decided to head to the accommodation before dinner and check in. Dinner was at a nice little restaurant, and an earlyish night, our last on the North Island.

Day total – Seen = 55 inc 3 heard, (pheasant, Eastern rosella, dunnock); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 121

21 November 2019 – Day Ten

Up a little later, to have a relaxed start to the day. A beautiful morning as everyone met at the van to start to pack, and we then headed off, back out to the estuary...you never know what might be around, right? And as the tide was dropping we scanned the mudflats, hmmm... bar-tailed godwits, red knot, pied stilts...bingo! Pacific golden plover! Excellent, we had nice views of the bird amongst the other shorebirds, and then out on its own. A quick scan revealed nothing else of significances, so off we headed, checking another location quickly, before getting on the road towards Wellington.

We had a nice drive down the coast, stopping in at a couple of little spots along the way. We were able to pick up a few waterfowl, including some nice close views of scaup, shoveler, black swan, and then the target bird – little black cormorant. Funny how things get missed along the way, even relatively common birds that you normally find in a few spots. So, we targeted this one and it came to us, flying in and landing right in front of us, and feeding right there. Nice! Also, nice views of Royal spoonbill as well.

We continued south, grabbing lunch, and arriving at the ferry terminal nice and early, where we had great views of a little penguin just off shore. We loaded up onto the ferry, and departed around midday, heading out in blue skies and calm conditions. Another couple of little black cormorants waved at us from the wharf beside the ferry – of course!





A little penguin swims past as we have our lunch. Derek Antropik.

We got out into the open ocean and the wind started to pick up, but very little swell. Nothing really to see except the odd fluttering shearwater, until we got out of the lee of the North Island and really into the windy zone. And then some great birds – Salvin's, white-capped and a probable Campbell albatross all showed reasonably well. Probably around 25 Westland petrels, several Northern giant petrel, and a possible Southern giant petrel, as well as a super little Cape petrel. Not a lot of diversity, but some nice birds anyway, and a few new to the trip and the group!

At the entrance to the Tory channel, we had a pod of three killer whales go past the ferry! Awesome! And then a bit further in we had lots of fluttering shearwaters, a very pale Parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua), gannets, red-billed gulls and then some spotted shags. A little while later we spotted at least four King shags on a rock, so that was nice to get them, although better views desired. We then had huge numbers of fluttering shearwaters, and a few dusky dolphins, so a pretty darn good crossing.

In Picton we drove off the ferry, setting wheels on the South Island, and headed to our accommodation nearby. Even a couple of hours to relax before a lovely dinner! Tomorrow will be a big day!

Day total – Seen = 51 inc 3 heard, (pheasant, bellbird, yellowhammer); new for the trip = 7; total for the trip to date = 128



Killer whale from the ferry. Derek Antropik.

22 November 2019 – Day Eleven

We woke to another beautiful morning. Almost no wind at all and high cloud greeted us as we headed out on to the water for our morning in the Marlborough Sounds. Lovely calm conditions and the sun was shining, and our first little penguin was waiting just outside the harbour. Nice start!

We headed out on to the water, and having not been keeping up with the news, was surprised to see the masts and rigging of the replica 'HM Bark Endeavour' ahead. We closed in on it, and the various other boats around it to have a look. A beautiful ship, which was built over a five-year period from 1988, she is in New Zealand currently for the 250th anniversary of Cook setting foot on New Zealand. We had a nice close view of her, and then headed off out after our main quarry, the NZ King shag. In fact, we managed to get a

photo or two of our first King shags, with the Endeavour in the background! We had two King Shags, an adult and an immature, surrounded by about 20 spotted shags, so nice views of them also. We enjoyed them for a bit, and then headed off in to the outer part of the sound.



On the way we came across a lot of fluttering shearwaters, a few Australasian gannets, and a number of small pods of dusky dolphins. Great views of them, which is always nice. There were scattered little penguins along the way, but we pressed on.

We approached a small predator free island, and took the boat in, and disembarked on the beach. A pair of weka were there to greet us and welcome us to the island. We headed up to a location that we knew had been successful before, and within about 30 seconds of being there had an orange-fronted parakeet in view, but it flew and could not be found. We waited and could hear them nearby, and then suddenly a bird appeared, then flew out onto some dead branches, but was partly obscured. It paused there for maybe 20 seconds or so, but then flew off and disappeared. Most had seen it well, a couple not so well. So, we stayed put and continued the vigil. We heard more nearby, but only the odd flight view briefly. Then it happened, there appeared a pair of them, feeding low in a tutu bush quietly, and we had absolutely epic views of them for about eight or more minutes. Just spectacular and probably some of the best views I have ever had! Eventually they moved off, and we headed to the beach a little earlier than our suggested pickup time, so we signalled and the boat came back in for us. Climbing back aboard, we then headed off to a spot we have been lucky with Hector's dolphins before, and although this is not a great time of the year for them, why not give it a go?



King shag perched. Derek Antropik.



Orange-fronted parakeet feeding in the foliage. Derek Antropik.

We pulled up and stopped the boat, and poured cups of tea, etc. And then a few minutes later we spotted distant rounded dorsal fins. There were plenty of dusky dolphins around, but these distinctive Hector's were our target. We slowly moved towards them, and got reasonable views, before they all just suddenly vanished. Not a sign of them again, but everyone had had reasonable views. We finished our cups of tea, and then slowly started to make our way back to the dock. On the way another ten or more small groups of dusky dolphins, really amazing to see this number here – and lots more fluttering shearwaters. We also had another swimming King shag.

Back at the dock the Endeavour was alongside a wharf and there were hundreds of people on the shores. We made a bee-line for the local bakery, grabbed our lunches and then headed off out into the countryside. We enjoyed our lunch (!) beside a sewage ponds, where we did a short walk and managed to see a lot of Royal spoonbill, and finally one glossy ibis. Next stop was a small lake, with a big target – Northern shoveler. This was going to be a New Zealand tick for me, so the pressure was on! We parked in the carpark, walked 10m and BOOM! There it was, a stunning male Northern shoveler, in full breeding plumage, paddling amongst the Australasian shovelers. After so much searching over the last few years, this was almost surreal! We searched the lake for other birds, finding Australasian coot, Australasian crested grebe and a couple of dabchick, but no hoary-headed grebes which have been here. Oh well!



We headed on further south towards Kaikoura. On the way we stopped to look at a massive raft of Hutton's shearwaters just offshore, clearly feeding in close to the beach. We were enjoying watching them when Eliot spotted a couple of Hector's dolphins. For the next ten minutes or so we had an awesome display of them frolicking in close to the beach and a couple really put on a show with huge leaps from the water. Very nice!

We carried on, checking in to our accommodation, and then had a beautiful fish and chip dinner in the garden. Nothing better than massive fillets of blue cod and chips, with a couple of beers and wines. After dinner as the sun went down, we went out and found a couple of little owls, getting really nice views of one perched on a road-side fence post. What a great way to end the day, a spectacular red sunset reminding us of the terrible fires in Australia.

Day total – Seen = 54 inc 1 heard, (peafowl); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 134

23 November 2019 – Day Twelve

Up and off after breakfast. We did a little stop to check some farmland for Cirl bunting, no luck but a cornucopia of European birds, with skylark, chaffinch, yellowhammer, etc all putting in an appearance. We then headed down and boarded our boat for the morning with Gazza Melville and Albatross Encounter. The weather looked a little choppy out there, but not a lot of swell and the winds were not too bad, so off we went. Of course, within a few minutes we had a couple of Northern giant petrels following us, and the game was on.

At our first stop the Northern giant petrels didn't take long to land and start to squabble as a NZ wandering albatross also came in. The odd Hutton's shearwater also passed. Cape petrels slid in between the bigger birds, and then the first of a handful of Westland petrels turned up. The odd Salvin's and white-capped albatross came in too, and before long we had a nice little flock at the back of the boat.

We decided to move out a little deeper, and many of the first birds followed us out, with a sooty shearwater doing a quick flyby as we steamed. Once we stopped we had a good number of birds, mostly the same, until shortly after a Southern Royal and then a Northern Royal albatross came in. White-chinned petrels also came in, along with Westland petrels, giving them a chance to be seen together. A single grey-faced petrel did a brief fly-by, as did a Hutton's shearwater, coming a lot closer but then heading off. We did one more different stop, but nothing new or different, and it was time to head back. A pretty great morning, with some nice looks at things, and a couple of new birds for the trip. Always nice to get more albatross, and stunning close views.

Back on land we grabbed lunches and whilst some braved the frigid waters and had amazing interactions whilst swimming with dusky dolphins, others caught up on rest, took a walk, etc. A nice afternoon for everyone and then a lovely Thai meal, before an early night.

Day total – Seen = 37 inc 3 heard, (grey gerygone, bellbird, dunnoek); new for the trip = 5; total for the trip to date = 139





A couple of New Zealand wandering albatross chatter to each other. Derek Antropik.



Dusky dolphins frolicking. Derek Antropik.

24 November 2019 – Day Thirteen

Out the door, not too early, but not too late. We headed out for a little scenic look around the area, with a few fur seals, and of course some good looks at European birds...but not the one we wanted. We had a nice look along the coast, and then decided it was time to head south. The views of the coast were pretty spectacular as we drove the coast road. Even spotted a fishing boat washed up and hitting the rocks with a fisherman wearing a lifejacket standing on a rock nearby....hmmm! That's not normal! A quick 111 call, well quick I guess for a Sunday morning as it took the Police a while to answer, and alerted them to the situation.

We carried on south, calling into a small set of ponds on the way. A few scaup, shoveler, and a pair of Cape Barren geese with a newly fledged gosling. Nice to see these birds well, as they really are quite stunning. We then carried on south, making a quick coffee stop, and then calling in to an estuary. It was pretty darn windy, but the rain was holding off, and so we wandered out to see what we could find. With reports of a few vagrants in the area we were hopeful we might find something. A few bar-tailed godwit, pied stilt, Royal spoonbill and banded dotterel showed well. But no wrybill or black-fronted terns visible which was a bit of a surprise. We wandered the edge of the estuary keeping a sharp eye, and then spotted a small shorebird. Thinking it could be the sanderling that has been seen here we got it in the scape. We then realised when we spotted the sanderling and got some relative size that the first bird was a red-necked stint...in the wind a long way off...ah well. So that was two new birds for the trip, nothing special, but still nice to see. We scanned all the terns present, but just white-fronted still.



A male double-banded plover looking beaut in breeding plumage. Derek Antropik.

We scanned out into the distance, but couldn't see anything else. So, we started to head back to the van. Another shorebird flew in that showed really briefly but looked like a golden plover. It kept flying and disappeared, which was a bummer. We had lunch back at the van overlooking the estuary, but nothing new. So afterwards we carried on, this time heading inland. The wind was still pretty strong, but the warm winds were a lot more pleasant than they could have been! We stopped at a couple of scenic locations, and everyone (ahem!) was keeping a sharp eye for raptors. We passed through Arthur's Pass, making a quick stop and getting great views of a kea, always good to get nice views of these guys. A walk through the beautiful beech forest here not only examined the botany and mosses, but we had great views of brown creeper (pipipi), both male and female South Island tomtits, both male and female rifleman, awesome views of a yellow-crowned parakeet, and a black and pied New Zealand fantail side by side. So, a really nice afternoon! The shock was seeing tens of house mice running around on the forest floor, not a good sign for the birds!

We headed on to our accommodation, checked in, and enjoyed the stunning scenery. We have been really lucky with the weather today...let's hope it continues! A beautiful dinner, and then headed out to see if we could hear a kiwi. We waited for over an hour out in the dark, but unfortunately it wasn't to be tonight. Not a sniff from a kiwi. So, we headed home for a short sleep!

Day total – Seen = 57 inc 3 heard, (Eurasian coot, South Island robin, dunnoek); new for the trip = 7; total for the trip to date = 146



A lovely little male rifleman captured perfectly! Derek Antropik.



A kea looking inquisitive. Derek Antropik.



25 November 2019 – Day Fourteen

Up with a leisurely breakfast, after a slightly later night. And a beautiful sunny day greeted us. We headed back up to Arthur's Pass and had a look around, but no kea on show. We stopped and enjoyed some beautiful scenery and the lovely sunshine, and then headed on over and down to the West Coast. We were on the scan, looking out for falcon, every snag and tree scanned and every inch of the sky...

We made a couple of quick stops along the way. Checking out a sewage ponds which didn't have too much out of the ordinary. A few black swan, some Pacific black duck look-alikes, mallards and NZ scaup. Then into a town where we grabbed some bits and pieces for the coming days, then scored some lunch. We drove a short way and enjoyed an early lunch in the sunshine, watching five great egrets in breeding plumage. Very nice!

We did a short walk in the forest, getting brown creeper, tomtit, some lovely greenhood orchids, and finished off with a rambunctious weka. All very good.

Onwards down the West Coast, enjoy spectacular rimu forest and beautiful views, and then in to Okarito to meet with Ian Cooper from Okarito Kiwi Tours. On the way Derek showed his extraordinary talent of sleeping and chewing nuts at the same time, and all whilst looking for falcon from the front passenger seat!! We checked in with Ian and caught up on the plan for the evening, always great to establish a plan, and working with Ian is always a great honour. He really does know his craft and the kiwi that we hope to see this evening!

A short walk in some of this beautiful coastal rimu forest had excellent views of South Island robin, more tomtit, and spectacular views out over the coast. The weather was absolutely stunning and looked perfect for the evening...





On to our accommodation for the evening, checked in, a quick respite and then out for a lovely dinner. We then headed out, got brief views of fernbird, and met with Ian. We went through our training regime, got to grips with how we were going to operate, and then got into position. The bird we were focused on was already up and moving by the time we were in position, well before dark. So, we slowly moved to keep abreast of him, and could every now and then hear him moving in the undergrowth. A pretty exciting situation, knowing there is a bird right there. A few minutes later the first morepork started to call, and then as it got a bit more dark, one flew and landed right above us and called, still visible in the fading light. But our focus was on the kiwi just inside the forest. It sounded like there was also another bird there nearby, but we tracked our target, and after about one hour in total, Ian had us perfectly positioned as BZ walked out right in front of us, paused, posed for us, and then trod off into the forest again! Amazing! Ian had put us into the right place at the right time and all of us had awesome views of a very very special bird! Job done, we headed back to the van, said a massive thanks to Ian and headed to our beds...I bet everyone dreamt of kiwi!

Day total – Seen = 46 inc 2 heard, (kea, dunnoek); new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 148

26 November 2019 – Day Fifteen

Up a little later after the night out, dreams of kiwi fresh on our minds. What an awesome night! We packed the van, nice sunshine with some clouds in the mountains that would hopefully allow views of the big ones later on? We headed to a nice little forest walk where we had lovely greenhood orchids, filmy ferns, and tomtits. We even had a male tomtit feeding chicks at a lovely little nest. Nice views of where the Franz Josef Glacier used to be, and a shining bronze-cuckoo calling and being harassed (as it should) by a pair of grey gerygones.

We then headed south along the coast, beautiful views in every direction, lovely forest with big emergent rimu trees. Surely there would be a falcon perched in the top...yes, no, no, no.... We made a few scenic stops, got beautiful views of both Mt Cook and Mt Tasman (yes the cloud allowed). We grabbed some lunch and then continued down the coast. We stopped at a spot and had an early lunch, and then walked out through spectacular moss and fern covered forest to a beautiful West Coast beach. After just a few minutes a penguin ran down the beach and into the water. Fiordland crested penguin in the bag. A little while later another bird appeared and took a more leisurely approach, standing on rocks for a short time, then heading down over the sand to disappear into the rough surf. A trawler a short way off the coast had a few birds in tow, including a good number of white-capped albatross, Northern giant petrel, and a few Westland petrels. We headed back to the van, seeing pigeon, more tomtits, and hearing a shining cuckoo or two. We loaded up and head onwards.



A male South Island tomtit with food, these tomtit always seem to have a mouth full? Derek Antropik.



What remains of the Franz Josef Glacier. Derek Antropik.

More stunning scenery, a few scenic stops, and then a walk in the forest where we saw more rifleman, tomtits, grey gerygones, yellow-crowned parakeets, and brown creeper. And off in the distance heard yellowhead...then another group, then another group. All were a little way off, and then another shining bronze-cuckoo. We scanned and searched the distant tree tops for the yellowhead, and then suddenly heard another group, perhaps the fourth in the area, that sounded like they were near the track. We headed back up, searching the tree tops, suddenly realised they were almost on the ground just a few metres away! Beautiful – two males, really nice views as they were low down and easily watched as they busily fed. They slowly moved off, but great views of these really stunning birds.

Back to the van and then off towards Wanaka. We skirted some beautiful lakes, changing from lovely temperate rainforest to drier shrubland in almost the blink of an eye. We kept scanning as we went, and arrived into Wanaka to our accommodation early evening. A beautiful dinner, a chance to have a few drinks and enjoy each other's company and do the checklist, and then to bed! Another day tomorrow!

Day total – Seen = 47 inc 1 heard, (morepork – during the day!); new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 150

27 November 2019 – Day Sixteen

Up early and on the road through to Queenstown. We had dry skies until there, but shortly after the odd spot of rain, that steadily set in as the morning progressed. We did spot another falcon, brief but ok views as it flew across the road in front of us and then out over some fields.



We called in to Te Anau, grabbed some lunch and then started to make our way towards Milford Sound. It was pretty obvious that today was not going to go to plan, with areas of the roadside closed due to avalanche danger, and the fact that it was tipping it down with rain. As we drove the road we enjoyed the still stunning scenery and made a couple of stops to enjoy and scan.

We got to the Hollyford area and the rain was torrential and the rivers flowing very fast. It was clear that a search for rock wren just wasn't going to be doable in these conditions, so we headed on through to Milford Sound to at least get a look at that. And wow, the waterfalls and scenery were unlike anything seen before. Waterfalls pretty much covered every cliff face, still large patches of snow clinging to the tops and even down low. It has been a very unseasonal Spring with much more snow than normal, and then a lot of rain recently. Road closures have been fairly frequent, so we were lucky to at least get through and see this part of the World.

At Milford Sound we had a quick stop to peer into the very thick low cloud, unfortunately not a lot on view here, but still worth coming to see. We then headed back up the road, again marvelling at the spectacle that is Fiordland, and then back through to Te Anau. Again, we made a couple of quick stops along the way, a chance to stretch the legs, and enjoy some nice close views of black-fronted terns. But the rain was still coming down.

We checked in to our accommodation in Te Anau a little early and had a well earned break. A chance to catch up on a nap or do some laundry. Then off to a beautiful dinner, with the rain still coming down! Our first day without a new bird for the trip.

Day total – Seen = 35 inc 1 heard, (weka); new for the trip = 0; total for the trip to date = 150



28 November 2019 – Day Seventeen

Up early again and the weather looked a LOT better than it had been the previous day. Breakfast and then van packed and on the road. We were aimed at Bluff for our ferry across to Stewart Island, a pretty special part of New Zealand. On the way we kept our eyes peeled, making a couple of quick stops along the way. One was a small lagoon and estuary, where we did a short walk and checked the large numbers of waterfowl that were around. Lots of black swan, shoveler, grey teal, and paradise shelduck. Of course, this is all nice, but we had a target in mind, and it was spotted almost straight away! There was a pair of chestnut-breasted shelducks feeding in shallow mud, showing quite nicely. We walked down to another vantage point, hoping to get the light slightly better, and found them again. We then found another perched up on a post with a pair of paradise shelducks for comparison. And, hang on, there is another pair, sheesh and another. So, in all we had six chestnut-breasted shelducks, always nice to see.

We looked through the other waterfowl, nice views of everything there, spotted a few bar-tailed godwit on the estuary and several Royal spoonbills, and then headed off. We carried on our way to Bluff, checking in to the ferry terminal, and scanning for shags out the window. A few spotted shags flying past, and then a distant Foveaux shag on the water...more to come.

We boarded the ferry, a light drizzle stopped as we stepped on and positioned ourselves on the back deck. As we cast our lines and headed out it was looking pretty calm. And indeed, as we got out further the conditions were pretty light. We spotted a few more Foveaux shags and then a bunch of common diving petrels. The numbers of these just increased as we got out further, so a nice chance to see these great little birds flying fast and low to the water with their rapid little wing-beats. Two sooty shearwaters showed distantly, then a couple of white-capped albatross, and then a single Cook's petrel whipped past and across the wake. Was hoping that it was going to be another more exciting *Cookilaria* petrel, but oh well.



As we got in closer to Halfmoon Bay we scanned the rocks and coastline. A couple of Fiordland crested penguins showed briefly, again more to come. The ferry docked, we disembarked, grabbed our bags and up to our accommodation. A quick lunch and then on a water taxi across to Ulva Island, getting nice views of a perched Foveaux shag on the way.

The weather was certainly better than the day before, with high cloud and a pretty reasonable temperature. We started our walk, netting weka, red-crowned parakeet, and pigeon pretty quickly, with distant heard saddleback a little tantalising. We spotted some beaut little spider orchids, greenhood orchids, and a lot of other really lovely forest. A tip off from Matt Jones had us on to a roosting morepork with really nice views. Brown creeper, grey gerygone, bellbird, tui, kaka, and then yellow-crowned parakeet and yellowhead. Really nice views of the yellowhead and lots of calling around the place also. Then finally we had a South Island robin...yep, it took this long for a robin to come in to view!

We carried on out to a lovely little beach, the tide was right in, but still a couple of variable oystercatchers in attendance, and some weka. We then wandered back, seeing pretty much the same suite of birds, and then a lovely view of a pair of South Island saddlebacks. Singing right in front of us, and hopping around and feeding. Excellent. We headed back to Post Office Cove, had a look at the sleeping male (!) Hooker's sea lion on the beach, and then went for a quick jaunt to another beach. Little penguin off the beach, with a few spotted shags around. Then back to the wharf, an early water taxi back towards Oban, with a search for Fiordland crested penguin on the way. We search a few spots, lots of poop, but no birds...good to know where they have been right?! We then got to a great spot where we had two almost fully grown Fiordland

crested penguin chicks – looking very blue and with just small smudges of crests. Probably only a week or so before they will be heading off on their own. Then we spied a distant adult, and moving the boat we got into a great position where we had another pair of adults in a cave. Really nice views of them at pretty close quarters with the diagnostic white striping on the cheeks visible. Cool!



A female paradise shelduck takes a break. Derek Antropik.





Getting to grips with weka photography. Derek Antropik.



So, it was beer o'clock, and we headed in, had an hour or so rest, and then dinner. But that wasn't it. After dinner we headed out with Matt Jones who guides for Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ, but also lives on Stewart Island and leads for Ulva's Guided Walks and does kiwi trips for Beaks and Feathers. We headed out to a location where they conduct their tours and although it was very windy, the rain was holding off. We wandered with Matt, looking and listening as we went. And before long we had our first Southern brown kiwi in view. Nice close and prolonged views of a female feeding quietly and ignoring us completely. We had awesome views, as she fed and then raised her bill a number of times to sniff the air. It was clear with the wind direction the way it was, that she was actually smelling something up ahead of us, so we left her be and soon discovered what she had probably smelt, another bird up wind. We had great views of this also, and then carried on as we could see a black cloud looming ahead and feel the moisture in the air. In the end we turned and found another bird, and had all three within 50-60m of each other. Pretty darn nice. After getting all the views we needed, we decided to head back towards the vehicles. We got there just as big spots of rain started to fall, and as we drove we spotted another bird, bringing the tally to four birds for the evening, and awesome views. Bed never felt so good!

Day total – Seen = 63 inc 1 heard, (rifleman); new for the trip = 4; total for the trip to date = 154

29 November 2019 – Day Eighteen

So, it seemed that we woke up before we went to bed, or it kind of felt like it! Short night, but today was looking good for our pelagic. It had been pretty windy overnight, with some rain, and we were hoping this would have stirred the birds up a little.

We all met up on the dock and boarded 'Aurora' with skipper Ian and chum-master Matt Jones...again...he gets around ;). The weather was supposed to be warm and calm, but there was a bit of a breeze running, and we hoped if we got out further we would encounter enough wind to keep the birds flying. First stop was to check out some sites for Fiordland crested penguins, and we managed to find two adults sunning themselves nicely on the rocks. Then one of the large chicks we had found yesterday was also visible, so we spent a moment watching it also. Everyone had nice views and was happy, so we decided to carry on out, hoping that the wind wouldn't suddenly drop out.

We started to attract a few white-capped albatross as we steamed out, so that started the cameras clicking. And the light was pretty nice as well. We carried on out to a couple of islands where we had found yellow-eyed penguins before. Local knowledge is important with these sorts of things, and so we checked out places we had previously found them. First beach nothing except a lot of fur seals, including a lot of small pups. Second beach area, bingo – four birds sitting halfway between the water and the bushes – looking as if they were having a conference! And they were, they sat there calling to each other and doing a little posturing. Really lovely to see these birds here, they have had a pretty tough time over the last few seasons, with most of the chicks failing to fledge due to disease. We spent some time with them, the photographers happily clicking away and everyone else getting really nice views.



Two adult Fiordland crested penguins get ready to head to sea. Derek Antropik.



But we had places to be and things to see, so we carried on. Another island and three Southern brown skuas – Matt’s pets – came in to say hello and get a hand out. Throwing fish scraps into the air, the birds swooped in low and snatched them out of the air. Fun for all and great to see these impressive birds up close. They decided they had had enough and headed back to their island roost, and we carried on out to our pelagic destination. We had just under an hour steaming time to a place we have been many times. As we got further out the swell started to build as we got away from the shelter of the land, and the winds picked up a little also. Just what we needed! There were a lot of common diving-petrels around, and great views of them during the course of the day.

Our first chumming location brought in a bunch of white-capped albatross, a few Salvin’s albatross, several Southern Royals and a couple of fly-by Northern giant petrels. There were a few Sooty shearwaters also cruising past, and Cape petrels coming in also. A good number of albatross was building, probably 50+, but there was not a lot of other new things coming in, so we decided to move. We ended up over the course of the day spending time at 5 different chumming spots. As we got further out, we picked up different things, with a short-tailed shearwater and a bunch of white-chinned petrels coming in for nice close views. At the later stops we had at least 8 really nice views of mottled petrels that really came in for great views. Sometimes this species can be distant brief views, but this was far from that. And the last couple of stops we managed to get great views of fairy prions as well, but no broad-billed prions showed themselves. Never mind, we had excellent views of everything seen during the day, which is always a key thing, and by the end of the day had seen well over several hundred albatross!

We decided to start heading back towards Oban, albatross in tow, more common diving-petrels, sooty shearwaters, etc as we headed in. We stopped at an impressive Foveaux shag breeding site, where there were several hundred pairs and fairly large chicks on show. Also a few spotted shags.



A Salvin’s albatross comes in for a look. Derek Antropik.



A beautiful eye-level white-capped albatross. Derek Antropik.

Back in port it was time for a quick rest before another beautiful dinner, and then a quick walk to see if we could spot some long-tailed bats. We managed to see one really well, and as the temp was pretty cool we felt pretty lucky! Of to bed to get some sleep!

Day total – Seen = 34; new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 156

30 November 2019 – Day Nineteen

Up and at'em, another lovely morning on Stewart Island. Breakfasted, packed and then on to the wharf to check in for the ferry. The crossing looked to be fairly calm and it was, with a bit of a breeze, but not much. We spotted three Fiordland crested penguins on rocks and one in the water on the way out, and then a couple porpoising all over the place a bit further out. Now that was a nice start. A distant perched Southern brown skua, and a few Foveaux shags and then we were in the Foveaux Strait proper. Light winds, confirmed by the fact that over half of the 10 or so white-capped albatross seen on the journey were sitting on the water. No other birds of note, except a couple of sooty shearwaters and common diving petrels. As we arrived back in Bluff, a few spotted shags and white-fronted terns amongst the gulls.

We loaded the van, and then headed north. It was a beautiful day and the sun was shining, the scenery picturesque. We made a couple of quick stops along the way, then grabbed some lunch in a town and ate it slightly early at a nice little road side stop. Mild amusement when a cop stopped a poor elderly lady just near us for speeding.



A kaka in the early morning light. Derek Antropik.

We continued north, and headed to a location that is quite scenic and has a small number of yellow-eyed penguins. The wind was fair pumping here – amazing what a few hundred kilometres can do! We had lovely views of the coastline and got to a good over view to hear a penguin calling. Moments later we spotted a bird, but it was too far off to have been the one calling. But we had good views of it as it headed back up to its nest site on the hill. Then not far from us another bird called and moments later a bird appeared from the bushes, walked down on to the beach and trundled down to the water and dived in. Perfect! Couldn't have time that any better! A few Otago shags flew on past, as well as some spotted shags. Fur seals basked on the rocks nearby.

With the wind the way it was we decided to head off, so slowly headed back to the van and on to the next spot. Here we were able to watch several hundred pairs of Otago shags at relatively close proximity, with a lot of big fluffy chicks. A lot of coming and going by adults, and a lot of feeding going on also. We had the scope on them and able to get some really nice views of these birds, both the pied and the bronze morph. We spent some time enjoying them, and then decided to continue on.

We headed on to our accommodation, checked in a little early and rested up for a bit before dinner at a nice pub, and an early night! Tomorrow will be a big day!

Day total – Seen = 45; new for the trip = 1; total for the trip to date = 157



A yellow-eyed penguin prepares to head for the sea. Derek Antropik.

1 December 2019 – Day Twenty

Up and on the road early with overcast conditions, but hopefully some good birds ahead. We drove straight through to Omarama where we picked up some coffee, lunches, etc. We had been on falcon squad red alert the whole way, but only a couple of false alerts with harriers.

We headed on and suddenly spotted a black shape as we drove. Whipping the van around we scanned a small pond and bingo! The prize was there in the form of two adult black stilts in all their glory! We got the scope on them and everyone had a look, before they suddenly took flight and flew directly across the road and out of sight.... Wow! Beautiful views of our target bird for the day and it wasn't even 0900!

We carried on, stopping at some ponds for nice views of several Australasian great-crested grebe chicks, as well as several adults and a lot of scaup. Several coot also in evidence. Carrying on we drove to a spot where we searched for more black stilt, a false alarm with several pied and then a single black object squatting in a field. Hmmmm. Looks kind of like a black stilt, but strange posture. Several pied oystercatchers around also, so out with the scope. Indeed, it was a black stilt, but it seemed to have sprouted two small pairs of legs from its breast as it squatted low over the ground! It ended up standing up and showing off three tiny little chicks! Super cute, as the bird moved off the tiny little chicks followed and then fed in a nearby bit of water. Very nice.

We carried on to another location, and the wind was absolutely honking by this stage. The weather was closing in a little and the views of the mountains disappearing. But we came across three juvenile black stilt that were super confiding and gave excellent views and photo opportunities. And then went for a bit of a walk, more a side-ways shuffle in the wind, and found at least four wrybill that also showed really well. Our best views of these great little birds to date, and on the breeding grounds with nice plumages as well. There were several banded dotterel also that posed nicely.



We decided the wind was going to beat us, so headed back to the van and headed on to our next stop. This was a little more sheltered, but only just. And a great place for lunch as we watched yet another pair of adult black stilts. Superb! Some took a chance to get some photos of the adults to go with those of the juveniles, and just a lovely setting to enjoy our lunch. We then retraced our steps, checking all likely areas for falcons, but falcon squad was still drawing a blank. We bounced down the road, with the wind buffeting the van, and called into a wetland area to look for skulky crakes. We ended up hearing a Baillon's crake, and searched and searched, but nothing showed. So, it goes on the list as a heard only, rather underwhelming...

We headed to the accommodation, checked in and then on to a lovely last dinner. Some of us started to formulate our top five birds of the trip, we all had a lovely dinner, and then celebrated Romania's Independence, 101 years to the day!

Day total – Seen = 37 inc 1 heard, (Baillon's crake); new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 159



A wrybill braces itself against the wind. Derek Antropik.



An adult black stilt posing perfectly. Derek Antropik.

2 December 2019 – Day Twenty-One

Up and out the door pretty early, with a lovely sunny but crisp morning. The weather yesterday had deposited some new snow, but the peaks were now clear and visible, so beautiful views of Aoraki – Mount Cook as we drove past. A couple of quick photo stops and then on through to Fairlie. A quick bathroom break and then a stop at the Fairlie Bakehouse, home of the most amazing pie in the World – the Salmon and Bacon pie! Delicious. The shop was almost bought out of pies as we headed off towards Christchurch.

We drove on towards Lake Ellesmere, our planned stop for the morning. There had been recent sightings of little stint and a range of other vagrant shorebirds there, so what better way to finish the trip than with a new shorebird? There was not a lot of wind and conditions were nice, so we checked out a couple of locations. We found good numbers of black swan, pied stilt and more skylarks than you could shake a stick at! There were a few shorebirds, and the first we looked at was a Hudsonian godwit! Wow, that was a good start. We kept scanning and found a few bar-tailed godwit, wrybill, banded dotterel, but nothing smaller. Then a small tern was found amongst a group of roosting bar-tailed godwit, a little tern – a strange place for this bird, but we'll take that as well.

Time was ticking, but no small peeps could be found, so we headed for the city to start our good-byes. We dropped everyone at various locations around the city and said our farewells. It had been a great three weeks together, we had seen almost all of the endemics we hoped for (and perhaps a few more), and on the whole had encountered pretty amazing weather.

Day total – Seen = 38; new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 161



Aoraki – Mount Cook striking the rising sun. Derek Antropik.