

Tour report

11 February – 2 March 2020

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Neil Robertson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Janice and Walter Knausenberger, Martin and Gill Schofield, Sarah Swank, Jon Kastendiek and David Thomas (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ co-leader)

Images

Martin Schofield, Niall Perrins (who joined us on the Whitianga pelagic) and Neil Robertson

11 February 2020 – Day One

A dry and sunny start to the third Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ 21-day tour of 2020, we left the Hotel in the centre of Auckland and headed to the west coast, to an impressive Australasian Gannet colony. On the way we had our first views of some of the more common birds, Swamp Harriers, Masked Lapwings, Pukeko (Purple Swamphen) and Paradise Shelducks; all of which would be seen regularly over the next three weeks. The location didn't disappoint and gave us excellent close views of huge numbers of Australasian Gannets and a few distant White-fronted Terns.



Australasian Gannet in flight. Martin Schofield.

We then started our journey north to the first of a couple of locations on the east coast. Here we had a great introduction to some of New Zealand's special shorebirds, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers and our first highlight of the tour, some very confiding New Zealand Dotterels. A distant Eastern Reef Egret was also spotted feeding on the edge of the estuary.

After lunch we headed further north, stopping at a secluded east coast beach. We were immediately rewarded with good but distant views of a New Zealand Fairy Tern. A short walk gave us closer views of various shags and a range of shorebirds, including bar-tailed godwit, red knot and banded dotterel, and many more New Zealand Dotterel. Returning to the vehicle we were rewarded with closer views of the fairy tern directly in front of us, foraging over the outgoing tide. With fewer than 50 NZ Fairy Terns in total, it was great to catch up with one of New Zealand's rarest breeding birds.

Continuing our journey north we stopped at a reserve with a small inland pond where we picked up a range of water birds including New Zealand Grebe, Australasian Little Grebe and Brown Teal, before we continued our journey north to our final destination for the day.

Following a pleasant evening meal, we headed out to another coastal site in search of nocturnal birds. During an enjoyable evening walk we were fortunate to have great views of eight Northern Brown Kiwi, as well as hearing Morepork and a number of more distant kiwi calling. Back at the car park our return journey was somewhat delayed by a very confiding kiwi foraging along the fence line. Eventually we tore ourselves away and returned to our accommodation, tired and happy.

12 February 2020 – Day Two

Our journey south allowed us to briefly revisit one of the coastal sites to check out the waders and other shorebirds.

After a stop for lunch we headed out to a predator free sanctuary occupying a long east coast peninsula, where we searched for forest and other endemic birds. A short walk allowed us to add a number of new endemic species to the list. Most notable were North Island Saddleback, North Island Robin, Whitehead, Brown Teal, New Zealand Pigeon, Grey Warbler, Fantail, Bellbird and Tui.



North Island Robin taking a look at us. Martin Schofield.

Overnight accommodation was in Warkworth, where we enjoyed an excellent dinner.

13 February 2020 – Day Three

Rising early for a café breakfast, we prepared ourselves for the first pelagic of the tour, a day out on the Hauraki Gulf in search of some of New Zealand's very special seabirds. We set sail from Sandspit just after 8.00am and very soon we were treated to excellent close views of Little Penguins and a good number of Arctic Skuas and small flocks of Fluttering Shearwaters. As we sailed further from land, the first Buller's Shearwaters, Black Petrels and Flesh-footed Shearwaters started to appear. As we approached the area just north of Little Barrier we soon were surrounded by huge numbers of Cook's Petrels. This was our first chumming spot and soon we had a nice slick going and were entertained by a regular stream of seabirds. Very quickly our main target, a New Zealand Storm Petrel appeared, which was quickly joined by White-faced Storm Petrels and Fairy Prions. Eventually we had at least five NZ Storm Petrels circling the boat.



Cook's Petrel flying against a calm sea. Martin Schofield.

The calm sea conditions meant we were able to head further out to sea, towards some of the outlying islands and rock stacks where we counted a good number of roosting Grey Ternlets and witnessed some amazing boil-ups where many thousands of seabirds were actively feeding. The journey also gave us excellent views of at least four Bryde's Whales, Mako Shark and a huge Oceanic Manta Ray. Returning to harbour we had the company of a large and very playful pod of Short-beaked Common Dolphins. Overnight in Warkworth and a good dinner capped off what was a great day's wildlife watching.

14 February 2020 – Day Four

After another early café breakfast we headed south once again to Whangaparaoa. The early start gave us time to do some birding before we boarded the ferry for Tiritiri Matangi. A quick search of some coastal wetlands gave us excellent views of Buff-banded Rails and a brief visit to a sanctuary allowed us to observe a Spotless Crake with a very young chick.

After a short ferry trip we arrived on Tiritiri Matangi, a wonderful predator-free sanctuary, which was to be our home for the next 24 hours. We soon off-loaded our overnight bags and started our slow walk along one of the many trails on the island. Very soon we started to add new species, Red-crowned Parakeets were everywhere, and it wasn't long before we heard, and then saw our first Stitchbirds and North island Kokako.



A North Island Kokako peers from the bushes. Martin Schofield.

Tiri certainly didn't disappoint. We found, and had really good views of all the usual endemics, including Stitchbird, Kokako, Red-crowned Parakeets, Whitehead, Saddleback and Robin. Takahe with young gave lengthy views and some of the more skulking birds, such as Brown Quail and Spotless Crakes were all seen well. A night-time walk produced a variety of nocturnal creatures, including Brown Teal and Tuatara. Our main target, Little Spotted Kiwi, however was more elusive. Despite hearing at least four or five individuals it was just before midnight when we returned to our accommodation that we finally managed to see a large female feeding out in the open close to the lighthouse.



A Whitehead shows really well, posing for the camera. Martin Schofield.

15 February 2020 – Day Five

After a comfortable night in the Tiri bunkhouse some of us enjoyed early morning birding at the nearby dam where we had great views of Brown Teal and a family of adult and juvenile Spotless Crakes, followed by breakfast and a productive walk along the forest trails to the jetty to meet our water taxi. The short water taxi ride back to the mainland was uneventful. We picked up some supplies for lunch before heading south through the fairly light Auckland traffic to our next destination, the Miranda Shorebird Centre. Our timing was pretty good as we arrived just on high tide, the perfect time to study the huge numbers of shorebirds from the various hides.

Fortunately, there were still a small number of non-breeding Wrybill present and we managed to get reasonably close views. All the usual shorebirds were present, with large numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot, Pied Stilts and Variable Oystercatchers. Also, in the mix were Banded and New Zealand Dotterel, Pacific Golden Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, and three of the recent rarities were also found, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Lesser Sand Plover and a Hudsonian Godwit. We rounded off the day with a visit to the Shorebird Centre followed by fish and chips before retiring to our comfortable accommodation at the Miranda Holiday Park.

16 February 2020 – Day Six

Deteriorating weather conditions initially put our next pelagic trip in doubt, however we headed towards Whitianga hoping the conditions would ease. We eventually headed out on a slightly amended route to give us shelter from the worst of the conditions.



Pycroft's Petrel showing diagnostic hood pattern, bill, and 'jizz'. Niall Perrins joined us on this pelagic.

Despite the fairly heavy swell we managed to find some excellent seabirds, including numerous close views of our main target, Pycroft's Petrel. We were joined on the trip by guide and seabird enthusiast, Niall Perrins, and one of the world's leading seabird photographers, Hadoram Shirihai, who managed to obtain some great shots of the species for his current project.

In the evening we enjoyed an excellent curry in a very busy Indian restaurant; well worth the long wait.

17 February 2020 – Day Seven

We spent the morning travelling south towards the central plateau to our next destination; a complete change of habitat, as we visited one of the largest remaining tracts of native Podocarp forest in the North Island. Stopping briefly to pick up lunch we arrived in the forest early in the afternoon and visited a number of sites. Our searching was quickly rewarded with good views of North Island Kaka, Yellow-

crowned Parakeets and we all obtained good views of a New Zealand Falcon flying over a clearing in the forest.

Whiteheads and Robins were numerous along many of the forest trails, where we also heard Long-tailed Cuckoos calling. After a good deal of searching for this very elusive bird we eventually spotted one, fairly close, perched in the open high up in a tree alongside the track and everyone was able to get excellent views through the scope.



Digiscoped image of a Long-tailed Cuckoo. Neil Robertson.

On the journey to Turangi we picked up a good variety of water birds on a small lake, allowing people to get to grips with Australasian Shoveler, Grey Teal, New Zealand Scaup and our first Coot of the tour.

Before dinner we had time to visit a number of sites along the river close to Turangi, but unfortunately didn't manage to catch up with our next target, Blue Duck. We did however obtain some excellent close views of a very confiding New Zealand Pipit.



Yellow-crowned parakeet in the understorey of the forest. Martin Schofield.



New Zealand Pipit giving great views. Martin Schofield.

18 February 2020 – Day Eight

Early morning birding, before breakfast, found us driving along a gravel track through a large reed bed and wetland area at the southern end of Lake Taupo. It wasn't long before we heard and then saw a small family group of one of our target species, the Fernbird. We had surprisingly prolonged close views of these sometimes elusive birds. Before breakfast we had time to check out a couple more sites along the river and were rewarded with close views of a pair of Blue Ducks, a great start to the day.



Fernbird showing really well for the skulky species it often is. Martin Schofield.

The rest of the morning we spent travelling across the dramatic volcanic landscape towards Napier and the east coast. On the way we had time to explore another area of old growth podocarp forest, which was unusually quiet, but did allow us brief views of New Zealand Falcon.

On arrival in Napier we checked out a large estuary where we were able to find a good variety of waders, including Banded Dotterel, New Zealand Dotterel and a juvenile Black-fronted Dotterel, which unfortunately didn't hang around long enough to allow closer views.

Before retiring for the day we had time to check out an area of parkland and were rewarded with another vagrant, Plumed Whistling Duck, and a range of other water birds.

19 February 2020 – Day Nine

First stop this morning was to check out another wetland site and to our delight we spotted no fewer than three Australasian Bittern foraging along the edge of the reed-bed. We also managed to obtain much more satisfactory views of an adult Black-fronted Dotterel.



Digiscoped image of an Australasian Bittern. Neil Robertson.

One further brief stop south of Napier produced Mute Swan, before we started our journey west once again; next stop Foxton Beach. We arrived just in time to watch the shore birds and terns being pushed in very close by the incoming tide. This was a good chance to see both Oystercatcher species up close, along with good numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit, Wrybill and Pacific Golden Plover.



Pied Stilt and reflection. Martin Schofield.



Royal Spoonbill looking regal. Martin Schofield.

20 February 2020 – Day Ten

Continuing our journey south we headed towards Wellington and the Cook Strait Ferry crossing, finding time to bird some interesting wetland and coastal sites. The sea conditions were relatively calm and, once we left Wellington Harbour we all assembled on the outer deck to search for seabirds. Most of the views were quite distant but we consoled ourselves in the knowledge that we would have another opportunity in a couple of day's time when we reached Kaikoura. We did manage to spot Arctic Skuas, White-capped Albatross and Northern Giant Petrel, and small numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and Fairy Prions. Once we reached the shelter of the Marlborough Sounds, we witnessed many Fluttering Shearwaters, Gannets and Spotted Shags. We had a pleasant evening in Picton, where we spent the night.



A white-fronted tern comes in to land. Martin Schofield.

21 February 2020 – Day Eleven

An early start this morning saw us sailing once again, this time in a much smaller boat. Our destination was another predator free sanctuary. But on the way we caught up with a very rare seabird, the New Zealand King Shag. Indeed, on one rocky outcrop we had over fifty King Shags, certainly the largest number I have ever seen at a single location. The entire world population of King Shags is restricted to the Marlborough Sounds.



New Zealand King Shag roosting. Martin Schofield.

Heading out towards a small island, we were accompanied by small flocks of Fluttering Shearwaters, NZ Fur Seals and we also had brief views of a Hector's Dolphin.

A short walk on the island produced excellent close views of South Island Saddleback, Weka, South Island Tomtits and Robins and all the usual forest birds. The search for our target, possibly New Zealand's rarest parakeet took a little longer. We could hear the birds quite clearly but they seemed unusually shy. Perseverance paid off though as eventually we managed to track down a single Orange-fronted Parakeet, in heavy moult, and everyone had good views.

Back to Picton for lunch followed by a short stop at a Spoonbill colony east of Blenheim allowed us to add Great Egret and a very recent colonizer, Glossy Ibis, to the list, before we continued our journey south towards Kaikoura.

Another scheduled stop at a small lake and we soon had cracking views of another establishing species, Hoary-headed Grebe, along with a number of Australasian Crested Grebe.

We soon arrived in Kaikoura, our base for the next two nights. After an early dinner we headed out to explore some of the paddocks inland from the township and were rewarded with good views of at least three Little Owls, a pleasing end to another successful day's birding.



Grey Teal paddling about. Martin Schofield.



Hoary-headed Grebe swimming past. Martin Schofield.

22 February 2020 – Day Twelve

An early breakfast allowed us to explore some of the Kaikoura Peninsula before our pelagic trip and we were able to find a couple of Cirl Buntings along with the usual Yellowhammers and finches. Although introduced to New Zealand, it is always pleasing to catch up with these special little farmland birds.

The Albatross Encounter pelagic is so productive because of the deep canyon very close to the coast, allowing many deep-sea tubenoses to be reached without a long boat trip. After checking in we drove around to South Bay, where the albatross and whale-watch boats depart. Our boat was on a trailer hooked to a farm tractor and we climbed aboard before it was backed into the water for the start of our trip. The harbour here was greatly modified by the earthquake uplift, with many new rocks to navigate.

We headed out into a fairly rough sea towards the open ocean. After a very bouncy twenty minute ride we started to encounter our first seabirds. A couple of Hutton's Shearwaters were spotted always keeping a little distance from the boat. We were only two miles or so offshore when the first large sea birds started to track the boat, Northern Giant Petrels, White-capped and Salvin's Albatross and Cape Petrels. Very soon we had our first large albatrosses, with Northern Royal and New Zealand (Gibson's) Albatrosses.

A bit further out we began chumming and very soon we were surrounded by more albatross and other tubenoses. Everyone was amazed with how close we were able to get to the birds, and despite the very rough conditions amazing good views were had by all.

Conditions were starting to take their toll so after another short chumming session, we headed towards shore, checking out some rock stacks for shags and fur seals along the way, and followed a route along the coast back to South Bay. Despite being shorter than usual due to the sea conditions the pelagic was still productive allowing great views of most of the targets, including Cape Petrel, Hutton's, Fluttering, and Sooty Shearwaters, Giant and White-chinned Petrels.

23 February 2020 – Day Thirteen

Our journey continued south towards Christchurch and then west towards the Southern Alps, a huge mountain range forming the spine of the South Island.

On the way we spent some time at a coastal estuary where we were able to view Black-fronted, White-fronted and Caspian Terns and a variety of shorebirds, including a Sanderling, a species which occurs only in very small numbers in New Zealand.

Heading west towards the Southern Alps we stopped for lunch at the famous Sheffield Pie Shop before continuing into some of the finest scenery of the tour. Stopping at one point on a remote mountainside we enjoyed excellent prolonged views of a New Zealand Falcon circling high overhead.

We arrived at our destination, Arthur's Pass, by mid-afternoon which gave us time to take in the fantastic mountain scenery. After trying a couple of sites for Kea, without success, we explored some of the tracks in the beech forest to look for South Island forest birds, managing some excellent views of South Island Rifleman, South Island Tomtit and Brown Creeper, as well as the usual Grey Warblers and Fantails.



New Zealand fantail with tail spread. Martin Schofield.

After dinner we headed back to the forest and were rewarded with the distant calls of a female Great Spotted Kiwi, presumably just leaving her burrow.

24 February 2020 – Day Fourteen

An early morning search, before the tourists were up and about paid dividends and we were privileged to have a close encounter with a small group of Kea. After another beech forest walk we drove down the steep descent towards the West Coast, spotting numerous Weka along the way. We took time to check some coastal ponds near Hokitika for water fowl and then continued on to Okarito, an area of wet coastal forest and home to our target bird for the day (or should I say, night), the Okarito Rowi, rarest of all the Kiwi species.

We spent some time at Okarito village where we met our kiwi guide, who briefed us on what to expect for the evening tour. On the way out of Okarito we spotted a Great Egret feeding on the edge of the lagoon.

We then spent some time exploring some of the Okarito forest, for more tomtits and robins, before heading to our accommodation. We had time to walk the trail up to the Franz Josef Glacier viewpoint before dinner, after which we headed back to Okarito for the evening tour. After parking up along a forest trail in the fading light we took a short walk to our chosen location. Our guide positioned us on the side of the track; the silence was deafening as we waited expectantly. We didn't have to wait too long though as fairly soon we heard the tell-tale scuffling of a kiwi, sniffing its way around the forest floor on the opposite

side of the track. After teasing us for an agonizing 20 minutes or so, it eventually reached the edge of the vegetation. The bill came into view first sniffing the night air, and then the bird appeared, less than five metres from the group. We all had great views for at least ten minutes before the bird crossed right next to us and headed off into the undergrowth on the other side of the track.

Back where we had parked our vehicle we were fortunate to catch up with another nocturnal bird; a Morepork, which flew in and perched very close to where we were parked.



The curious Kea. Martin Schofield.

25 February 2020 – Day Fifteen

We spent the first part of the morning heading south along the West Coast road, stopping briefly to check out the view up to Mount Cook and Mount Tasman, both of which were obscured by low clouds.

Further south we took a short walk through the coastal podocarp forest to a secluded beach where we were delighted to hear such a cacophony of native bird song.

After a brief lunch stop at Haast Village we started our ascent of the Sothern Alps once again, making a couple of stops to explore the forest trails along the way. At the top, we had a longer walk and very quickly found a variety of forest birds.

We were unable to pin down any Yellowheads, despite hearing the occasional distant call, but managed good views of other forest species like Rifleman, Brown Creeper, Tomtits, Fantails and Grey Warblers.



Posing male South Island Tomtit. Martin Schofield.

Our journey continued back down the eastern side of the mountains to Wanaka, our overnight stop, where we made a couple of photo stops to admire the amazing lake views.

26 February 2020 – Day Sixteen

The morning journey south from Wanaka followed a route along the highest 'sealed' road in New Zealand reaching an altitude of just over 1000 metres.

We had a short lunch stop in Te Anau, where we sampled some of Miles' Better Pies, before starting our journey along the famous Milford Road. Due to recent very severe weather conditions the northern section of the Milford Road had been closed to vehicles while major repairs were being undertaken. However not to be discouraged we spent a few hours exploring some of the wonderful scenery and visiting a number of great birding spots and walking the forest trails. Here we found good numbers of the usual forest birds, including Yellow-crowned Parakeets, South Island Robins, Rifleman, Fantails, Tomtits and Grey Warblers, before returning to Te Anau and an evening meal before retiring for the night.



A juvenile Rifleman clings to a beech tree trunk. Martin Schofield.

27 February 2020 – Day Seventeen

Our ferry crossing to Stewart Island left at 11.00am so we had an early start from Te Anau in order to allow time to have a birding stop on the way. We opted to check a large lagoon near Invercargill on the way. Here we spotted a good selection of water and shore birds, including large numbers of Grey Teal,

Australasian Shoveler and Paradise Shelduck. We were also pleased to catch up with a Chestnut-breasted Shelduck, a recent arrival from across the Tasman.

The ferry crossing was into a heavy swell that produced a lot of spray, which made seabird watching a bit of a challenge. However, the early part of the journey produced a good selection of seabirds, including high numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and White-capped Albatross. We dropped our bags at the hotel, picked up our packed lunches and headed for the water taxi which took us on a very bumpy ride across to Ulva Island, another wonderful predator-free sanctuary.

Our visit to Ulva took us along all of the forest trails and it quickly became clear what a special place this is, with healthy populations of many endemic birds which either don't occur or are very rare on the mainland. All of the target birds were seen really well with good numbers of South Island Kaka, Yellow and Red-crowned Parakeets, South Island Saddleback, Stewart Island subspecies of Robin, NZ Pigeon, Rifleman, Tomtit, Yellowheads, Brown Creeper and Weka.



Closeup of a Yellow-crowned Parakeet. Martin Schofield.

After our evening meal we headed out to look for Southern Brown Kiwi, where we met up with Matt Jones, our guide for the evening. Matt is another Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ Guide, and was great company and, with his help, we were able to find at least seven or eight kiwi, of varying ages and sizes, some being approachable to just a few metres.

28 February 2020 – Day Eighteen

The day dawned with a light breeze and just a slight sea swell, much to the relief of those members of the group prone to motion sickness. After an early breakfast we set sail from the harbour on our final pelagic of the trip. For this trip we were again joined by Matt Jones, who acted as crew and chum master for the day.



The benefit of having an expert 'Chum Master'. Martin Schofield.

After leaving the wharf we stopped for a while to view Fiordland Crested Penguins on the rocks. Always potentially difficult at this time of year we were fortunate that a small number of Fiordland Crested Penguins were still present, right at the end of their moulting period. Heading back out into the bay we also had great views of two more penguin species, Yellow-eyed and Little Penguins, before continuing our cruise out towards the smaller islands to the east of the harbour.

On leaving the harbour we started to pick up good numbers of White-capped Albatross, with a few Salvin's and our first Sooty Shearwaters of the day.



Yellow-eyed Penguin preening and splashing about beside the boat. Martin Schofield.



White-capped Albatross floating past the boat. Martin Schofield.

Approaching the rocky islets to the north of Bench Island we spotted one of the family of Brown Skuas, which Matt had been training over the previous season. Very soon he had the Skua swooping in to take cod frames out of his hand. Once the skua had finished his breakfast we sailed out into the open sea and headed south towards a large reef and we soon started to add more species to the list. Two more Albatross species, Southern Royal and Buller's were spotted on the journey to the reef as well as good numbers of Cape and Northern Giant Petrels. Good numbers of Cook's petrels were present along with White-faced Storm Petrels.

Continuing our search out to the east of the reef failed to produce any Prions (unusual), but we did eventually obtain good views of Grey-backed Storm Petrel which circled the boat for a few minutes. There were also small numbers of New Zealand (Gibson's) Albatross, Buller's Shearwaters, Common Diving Petrels and White-chinned Petrels, and good numbers of Cook's Petrels and Sooty Shearwaters. Additionally, Northern Royal Albatross and a single Short-tailed Shearwater were also seen.

All too soon we were heading back towards Oban, making time for a couple of brief stops to look at some Hooker's Sealions on a secluded sandy beach and a large colony of Foveaux Shags on some remote rock stacks.



Southern Royal Albatross up close! Martin Schofield.



Short-tailed Shearwater paddling beside the boat. Martin Schofield.



Pied morph Foveaux Shags. Martin Schofield.

29 February 2020 – Day Nineteen

We set sail on the 8.00 am ferry and waved goodbye to Stewart Island to start the final phase of the tour. Once again, we were accompanied by a variety of seabirds on the crossing, notably White-capped and Buller's Albatross and Sooty Shearwaters.

After a brief stop at a lagoon, while Neil picked up some supplies, we headed towards Dunedin. We broke the journey with occasional short stops.

Our afternoon destination was another secluded area of the Otago coastline where we were fortunate to catch up with our target, Yellow-eyed Penguin.



Yellow-eyed Penguin standing ashore. Martin Schofield.

This is a species which is in serious trouble on the New Zealand mainland, where the population is crashing. It is now officially the world's rarest penguin species, and while the numbers on the Sub-Antarctic Islands are fairly stable the mainland population is in rapid decline. We also spent some time watching a single Hutton's Shearwater circling around the small bay to the west of the headland, slowly making its way back out towards the Pacific Ocean.

Our overnight stay was in Oamaru where we enjoyed a great evening meal and very comfortable accommodation.

1 March 2020 – Day Twenty

The next morning we started our journey inland to the Mackenzie Country, towards the wonderful high country scenery around Lake Tekapo and the eastern side of the Southern Alps.

We had time for a brief stop for coffee and to pick up food for our picnic lunch before heading out to our next location, a small secluded lake. A short search was all that was required to find our target for the day, one of the world's rarest waders, the Black Stilt.



A pair of Black Stilts roosting. Martin Schofield.

We spent a little time slowly exploring a few more sites in the area allowing the photographers a chance to approach the birds. We managed to find good numbers of Black-fronted Terns along with Banded Dotterel and a variety of water birds.

We then found a suitable place to stop for a picnic, high up on a small hill giving us great views all around. After we had eaten we took a short walk and were delighted to find a family party of Chukar wandering through the long grass.

Later in the afternoon we headed south to Lake Pukaki for some amazing views of Mount Cook and then on to a couple of sites close to our overnight accommodation in Twizel. Sadly, our search for Baillon's Crake was unsuccessful, however we did manage more good views of terns, ducks and grebes along the way, during a brief visit to another lake area.



An Australasian Crested Grebe swimming. Martin Schofield.

2 March 2020 – Day Twenty-One

The final day of the tour meant a long drive north to Christchurch. We managed a little roadside birding, but as expected we didn't add anything new to the list. We made enough time to spend an hour at Lake Ellesmere near Christchurch and have a final look at the shorebirds. We managed to find a flock of small waders which allowed us to approach, through the sticky mud, and obtain quite close views. The flock included mainly banded dotterel and wrybill, and, pleasingly a small number of red-necked stint, which was new for the trip and brought our final tally to a respectable 154 species.

From my point of view it was a very enjoyable trip due mainly to the great company and good humour shown by all of the guests and the presence of Wrybill's newest guide, David Thomas, who will no doubt be a great asset to the company in the future.

My very special thanks go to Martin Schofield for allowing me to use his great photos in this report.

Neil Robertson (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)