

# Tour report

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**14 November – 3 December 2023**

**20-day tour with Birdquest and Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**



**Led by Dave Howes, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**

## **Participants**

Marie Benn, Marshall Dahl, John Dawson, Virginia Fairchild, Mike Goddard, Max & Tessa Harrison and

Rob Rackliffe

## **Images**

Dave Howes

This 20-day tour was arranged by Birdquest and organised and led by Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ. We were lucky with the weather on our tour with three of the four scheduled pelagics going ahead and no real time lost to rain. The birds played their part too, with us seeing 150 species and hearing another 3, with 66 of those being endemic species during the course of the tour. We were a bit light in the seabird department and dipped on a few we expected to get, but you can't win 'em all!

All in all, a great trip with a great group of birders.

**Dave Howes** (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)



Blue Duck

## 14 November 2023 – Day One

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A partly cloudy morning with a gentle breeze had us leaving Auckland at around 8:00am after introductions and a short briefing on health and safety and a broad outline of our plans for the coming days.



A New Zealand Dotterel on the nest.

We headed north to an estuary where we started to meet some of the locals, the feathered variety that is. We had good views of several endemics, including 2 pairs of nesting New Zealand Dotterels. Our next stop was at a nearby wetland where we got looks at most of the more common waterfowl like Black Swan, Paradise Shelduck, Mallards, NZ Scaup, Australasian Shelduck and Canada Geese as well NZ Dabchick, Grey Warbler, Royal Spoonbill and Brown Teal. The nearby water treatment plant produced more of the same, so we headed further up the coast, stopping at a bakery to collect lunch before another stop at a local estuary. We were treated to great views of 4 NZ Fairy Terns, both South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers, a Banded Dotterel and a Ruddy Turnstone. Another estuary a bit further north produced another Fairy Tern and a flock of Bar-tailed Godwit and about 100 Variable Oystercatchers.

Then it was time to head to our accommodation at the northernmost part of our tour, unload our bags, freshen up and head out for a great dinner. After dinner, with rain threatening and the wind picking up, we headed out to look for NI Brown Kiwi. We arrived just after dark and the walk in was surprisingly quiet with no Moreporks or Kiwi calling. After an hour without seeing a bird and

only hearing a couple calling a way away, I was starting to get a bit worried! We walked our circuit for a second time and before long had a female NI Brown Kiwi feeding very close to the track. She was very relaxed, and we watched her for several minutes in the red torch light with everyone getting great views. On the walk out we had brief views of another bird and then 2 more from the van on the way home. It had been a big first day and with jetlag kicking in, I think the whole group was happy to head off to bed to dream about kiwis and the pelagic trip the following day.

## 15 November 2023 – Day Two

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After picking up our lunch from a local bakery, we were on our way to Marsden Cove for our first pelagic trip of the tour. We stopped at a small island on the way out and had good views of a Reef Heron and some White-fronted Terns before heading into deeper water. On the trip out, we were accompanied by Little, Fluttering and Flesh-footed Shearwaters with the odd Australasian Gannet flying about.

Once the chum got going, it didn't take long before we had a Cook's Petrel flying by as well as a good number of Flesh-footed Shearwaters and a few White-faced Storm Petrels and Fairy Prions feeding in the slick. A lone Black (Parkinsons) Petrel came into the chum as did a White-capped Albatross. A Wilson's Storm Petrel had us thinking it may be a NZ Storm Petrel at first glance. At least one Pycroft's Petrel came in, making it two out of three of our main target birds for the day.



Pycroft's Petrel.

A short move a bit further out and we soon had our Flesh-footed Shearwaters back at the boat, this time accompanied by more White-faced Storm Petrels and eventually a New Zealand Storm Petrel that then showed off mere metres away and stayed with us for over half an hour. Another Pycroft's Petrel or two turned up as did a Buller's Shearwater and another White-capped Albatross.

The trip home was fairly smooth with good numbers of waders like South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knots visible, albeit at quite a distance on the mud flats on the way into port.

## 16 November 2023 – Day Three

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We headed a little bit further north in the morning to a manmade pond where we had several species of waterfowl including Australasian Grebe, NZ Scaup and Paradise Shelduck. A brief stop on our way southwards netted us both Brown and California Quails, but none of the NZ Pipits we'd hoped for.

We continued to one of Auckland's predator free sanctuaries and at a small creek the group had great views of Brown Teal and Buff-banded Rail with Tui, Bellbirds and Grey Warbler all showing well. A short bush walk saw us add some endemics like Whitehead, North Island Saddleback, NZ Pigeon, NZ Fantail and Kaka, as well as great views of a Morepork – always a treat during the daytime. Along the road and in the surrounding paddocks we also saw Swamp Harrier, White-faced Heron, Pukeko and a host of introduced passerines, but couldn't find a Spotless Crake, despite a good look.

We headed to our motel, checked in and headed out to dinner a bit earlier than planned. After dinner, it was back in the van and a trip to another of Auckland's predator-free sanctuaries. Our target here was the Little Spotted Kiwi and as we weren't going to be spending the night on Tiritiri Matangi, this was our only chance. After about an hour, we heard a male calling frustratingly close, but despite looking everywhere we could on the paths, he never showed himself. We did have a pair of Brown Teal pop out of the bush in front of us and waddle down to the creek where they carried on feeding quite unperturbed by the red torchlight. There was also a large Short-finned Eel in the creek and some glow worms on a nearby overhang to keep us interested.

## 17 November 2023 – Day Four

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After picking up lunch at a nearby café, we headed down to Sandspit for our Hauraki Gulf pelagic. We were joined on the boat by 3 day-trippers, 2 of whom we'd met the day before while looking for Fairy Terns. We headed out towards Kawau Island in near windless conditions which were

great for boating but less than ideal for seabirds! As we headed out, we started to pick up Buller's, Flesh-footed and Fluttering Shearwater, White-faced Storm Petrels and Common Diving Petrels, sometimes in quite large groups.



White-faced Storm Petrel dancing in the slick.

We started chumming near a reef system and could see birds working all around us, so hopes were high. We ended up with good numbers of Fairy Prion, Cook's Petrel, Fluttering and Flesh-footed Shearwaters and White-faced Storm Petrels. We also had two NZ Storm Petrels around the boat and a brief visit from a Northern Giant Petrel, which didn't stick around. There were still large flocks of Fairy Prion and Fluttering Shearwaters around and we made a couple of moves to try and attract different birds into the chum, but after a few hours and with no "new" birds, the call was made to head inshore where there had been large flocks of terns working the day before.

We headed in the direction of Moturekareka Island but the large feeding flocks from the day before had moved on. A circumnavigation of the island produced a large roost of Silver (Red-billed) Gulls, some Kelp Gulls and a handful of Variable Oystercatchers, Welcome Swallows and Pied Shags.

The boat and skipper had to be back at the wharf at 4:30pm, so we called it a day and headed in and on to our accommodation for the night.

## 18 November 2023 – Day Five

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After breakfast we headed down to Gulf Harbour for the short ferry trip across to Tiritiri Matangi. The ferry trip was fairly quiet from a birding perspective with a few gannets and the odd Fluttering Shearwater. Once on the island we had the biosecurity briefing, during which we had NI Saddleback calling and performing in the Flax behind us, which was a bit of a distraction. We then started heading up the track when we heard Kokako calling very close to us. Despite spending about 10 minutes looking, we couldn't locate them so carried on via the first feeder. We were soon enthralled by the Stitchbird and Bellbird coming to feed. The rest of the walk to the top yielded a pair of Rifleman, which some managed to get onto as they don't sit still for very long or at all really, Red-crowned Parakeets, Brown Quail, Whitehead, Tui, Grey Warbler and loads of NZ Pigeon and another roosting Morepork. At the top of the hill, we were lucky enough to find the Takahe family out and about with their new-ish chick.

We had lunch at the tearoom and halfway through, one of the rangers appeared and asked if we'd like to see a *wetapunga* or Giant Weta. Of course, we were and managed to get amazing close up views of one of the world's heaviest insects.



Giant Weta.

After lunch we started our slow meander towards the ferry dock and were lucky enough to find a large Tuatara basking in the little bit of sun that had poked through the clouds. Shortly after, we saw our first pair of Kokako and just before the wharf, we had a Little Blue Penguin in a nesting box.

The ferry crossing was again quiet, and we drove south and straight to dinner after which we checked into our accommodation in Miranda.

## 19 November 2023 – Day Six

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We left the accommodation at a leisurely 8:00am and headed a little way along the coast where the tide was still a bit too far out to really get good views of the waders, but we managed to see some Bar-tailed Godwit, South Island Pied Oystercatcher, including a leucistic bird, Red Knots and a couple of Ruddy Turnstone.

No visit to Miranda would be complete without a visit to the world famous (in New Zealand) Shorebird Centre where the team were soon trying on T-shirts, sweatshirts and the like – I'm sure the van felt heavier as we pulled out of the carpark!



Godwit flock, Miranda



Anyway, it was back to the serious business of birding and the tide was starting to push up as we arrived. We had thousands of Godwits and Knots at the main hide and our first, rather distant views of Black-billed Gulls. A quick move to the Stilt Ponds and we were soon looking at about 90 Wrybill, Pied Stilts, Grey Teal and a lone, Red-necked Stint. On the way back to the van, we had a small flock of Pacific Golden Plovers, which are just stunning birds.

We headed around the coast towards Thames, with a quick stop for lunch enroute. At the wader roost, we again had several hundred Godwit and two Australian and one Whiskered Tern, both rare visitors to New Zealand.

As we still had plenty of daylight left and the tides were in our favour, we headed back up to Auckland to visit Mangere. On the storage pond, we had numerous waterfowl and Pied, Little Pied and Little Black Shags and a Shining Cuckoo that came in for a look.

On the shell banks, there were more Godwits, Knots, SIPO, NZ Dotterels, Wrybill, two Red-necked Stint and one Whimbrel. As we were leaving, a Reef Heron flew in and started fishing which was interesting to watch but we had to press on to make our dinner booking.

Along the road back to Miranda, we had a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo fly over the road and when we stopped it flew out of its tree and screamed at us as only cockatoos can!

## 20 November 2023 – Day Seven

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We left Miranda about 7:30 to continue our journey south, stopping briefly at a dam to look for waterfowl before heading to an area of native forest for lunch. While having lunch we had Kaka flying overhead making their characteristic screech as well as a brief view of a pair of Yellow-crowned Parakeets flying over. The Parakeets then settled in some heather to feed and were very obliging when it came to photographing them.

A bit of a walk after lunch produced great views of Yellow-crowned Parakeets, Tui, NI Robin, Grey Warbler and more Kaka and a distant calling Long-tailed Cuckoo that didn't show itself.

Between walks, we got a glimpse of a New Zealand Falcon from the van, so we stopped jumped out and were able to see it again being harassed by an Australian Magpie. Not a great view, but our first for the trip and then a Long-tailed Cuckoo called and shortly afterwards flew between trees giving us, by Long-tailed Cuckoo standards, a good flight view.

We left Pureora behind us and started our journey to Turangi, stopping along the way to find New Zealand Pipits, which we did with two birds giving us all good views. We also had good views of various introduced passerines like Lesser Redpoll, Chaffinch and Goldfinch, before continuing on our way.



Yellow-crowned Parakeet.

On our way in to Turangi we tried for Blue Duck without any luck and were rewarded with distant views of a pair of ducks from one of the bridges over the river. They were hunkered up on the riverbank quite a way downstream, so not the best views, but we had them in the bag. Dinner called, so we headed to our accommodation.

## 21 November 2023 – Day Eight

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An early, pre-breakfast start had us at a spot on the lake, looking for Australasian Bittern. Not long after arriving, we had at least two birds booming around us, but couldn't locate them in the dense *raupo*. We did have 3 NZ Fernbirds that put on a very showy display for us, which is not that common for these skulky birds. We made a short move to another spot on the lake and almost immediately heard another bittern booming and shortly afterwards, had one fly along the lake edge giving everyone a good view. We spent a bit of time looking at the waterfowl and got much better views of Black-billed Gulls and Little Black Shags, both of which we'd seen before but at some distance.

On our way back for breakfast, we made a stop at the spot we'd had the Blue Duck the day before and were rewarded with a pair a little way upstream but much closer than before. We then witnessed what could only have been a territorial dispute, with another pair flying in and then a fight breaking out between the two pairs, with the intruders eventually being seen off by the original pair – quite a spectacle to behold.



Looking for Blue Duck.

After breakfast we continued south, stopping at some native forest and adding a very obliging male Tomtit to our list.

Today was really a driving day, but we stopped at a picturesque reserve for lunch and had a lone Blue Duck on the river not too far from us as well as NZ Pigeons, Silvereyes, Tui and a few introduced species such as Song thrush, Blackbird, Goldfinch and Chaffinch. As we continued our drive south, we added Indian Peafowl to the list from the van later in the afternoon made a coffee stop just north of Wanganui where we got rather obscured views of Nankeen Night Heron.

We'd run out of time for any more birding, so checked in to our accommodation in Foxton and headed out for a great Indian meal.

## 22 November 2023 – Day Nine

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The tides first thing in the morning were not ideal at the estuary, but we had reasonable views of Bar-tailed Godwit, Banded Dotterel, Wrybill, a Red-Necked Stint and a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, our first for the trip. After an hour or so of wader watching, we continued south towards Wellington. We were in no rush as our ferry had been delayed from lunchtime to 8:30pm, which meant we

had plenty of time for birding enroute but wouldn't get to do any birding from the ferry as we'd be crossing Cook Strait in the dark.

We made a brief stop at Lake Horowhenua, but the grass had got very long, and it looked as though no maintenance has been done for a while. There was a large flock of domestic-type Greylag Geese wandering around along with a host of other waterfowl, but all in all, a bit disappointing.



Team building!

Further down the coast, we called in to a water treatment plant, because that's what you do on birding trips! For putting up with the smell, we were rewarded with our first Black-Fronted Dotterel and good views of several species of waterfowl.

Lunch and a walk at Waikanae Spit produced several hundred White-fronted Terns, which were nesting on the spit, and we spent a bit of time watching their fascinating courtship displays with the males coming in from fishing and presenting the female with a fish. Because we had time up our sleeves, we stopped at a wetland and after receiving a bit of local intel (even if it was 2 or 3 years old!) we had a Spotless Crake walking around in the open for several minutes, which was great as this is another skulker which is quite easy to miss.

We headed for an early dinner before heading to the ferry terminal. The crossing in the dark was thankfully very smooth and we finally checked into our motel in Picton around midnight.

## 23 November 2023 – Day Ten

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After breakfast it was down to the wharf for a safety briefing before departing for Blumine Island. The cruise up through the sound got us our first, if brief, views of a King Shag flying past. Shortly after this we pulled into a cove where we had close views of both Spotted Shags and a single King Shag. In a cove a bit further along, we had three Hector's Dolphins, one of the rarest dolphins in the world, right at the boat giving superb views to all.

A brief stop at the end of Blumine Island gave better views of King Shags at their roost and then it was off for our landing on the island. A Weka and a couple of Variable Oystercatchers were waiting for us on the beach and was soon joined by another two as they made their way around the group looking for food. There was a tent in the middle of the campsite and it seemed a bit quieter than usual, maybe because of the camper, but maybe not. We soon heard Orange-fronted or Malherbe's Parakeet chattering away but they didn't show. After standing still and quietly waiting, a pair turned up to what may have been their nest site and gave us stunning views.



Spotted shags, Queen Charlotte Sound.

Back on the boat heading to Picton, we had great views of a couple Arctic Skuas harassing terns.

After picking up some lunch and started our trip south to Kaikoura, stopping briefly at a water treatment plant where Glossy Ibis have been known to breed. Either we were too early or they were out feeding elsewhere but we couldn't find one amongst the 80-odd Royal Spoonbills roosting in the *Ngaio*. There were however good numbers of Grey Teal, Australian Shoveler, Paradise Shelduck, Black Swan, Canada Geese and Mallard. We carried on our journey stopping at a lake a bit further south where we found our first Great Crested Grebe (voted New Zealand's Bird of the Century this year), which are interesting as they don't moult into basic plumage but remain in breeding plumage the whole year. The Hoary-headed Grebe played ball and showed well right in front of the viewing platform.

After checking into our motel, we headed out to a great dinner at the Pier Hotel with its stunning view over the bay on to the mountains behind. After dinner we went in search of Little Owl, but the wind had really picked up and I think any self-respecting owl was tucked up in its hole out of the weather and we failed to find any.

## 24 November 2023 – Day Eleven

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The wind had continued to build overnight with lots of rain, but a quick call to the skipper confirmed that our pelagic trip was still on but that we should expect rough conditions. We boarded the boat at South Bay and after a quick safety briefing from our trusty skipper, Gary, we were off. Conditions were not great, and we had only just reached the first of our chum spots when Gary got a call from the office to say that wind was due to increase and that we were to curtail our trip and head back.

The world's shortest pelagic trip was not completely in vain, and we still managed to get reasonable views of Salvin's, Black-browed and New Zealand (Antipodean and Gibson's) Albatross as well as Westland and Northern Giant Petrel.

The afternoon was spent at leisure, shopping and catching up on laundry or just relaxing. We had more luck with Little Owl before dinner this time and managed to find one rather grumpy looking individual before going to eat once more.

## 25 November 2023 – Day Twelve

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An early start saw the team, sans guide, boarding the boat at South Bay for the 6:00am pelagic trip. Conditions had improved somewhat, and everyone was able to get good views of Hutton's Shearwaters, Northern and Southern Royal Albatross, Salvin's Mollymawk and Westland, Cape and White-chinned Petrels.

After breakfast we departed for the West Coast via an estuary where we saw our first Black-fronted Tern, with one bird putting on a spectacular feeding display at very close range. Other interesting birds were Wrybill, Banded Dotterel and a Little Egret as well as Black-billed Gulls, Royal Spoonbills and some of the more common waterfowl. Nearby we stopped for great views of a Pied and Little Pied Shag breeding colony and had our first Great Egret / White Heron feeding in the stream.



Black-fronted Tern

Apart from the odd comfort stop, we headed straight to Arthurs Pass and straight into the village to look for our target species, the Kea. Just short of the village a fairly large bird flew off the road – Kea! We stopped at a handy spot and soon had three of these inquisitive birds come in to do a bit of people-watching and probably to see if they could scavenge anything!

After what had been a successful day, we headed for the Bealey Hotel and dinner, after which we headed out to find what is probably New Zealand's most elusive kiwi – the Great Spotted Kiwi. We walked a trail that was particularly quiet, although some rustling low down did get the heart racing briefly until a female Brush-tailed Possum with a baby on her back came into view. Eventually, on our way back to the van, we heard a male kiwi calling quite some distance away and decided to call it a night.

## 26 November 2023 – Day Thirteen

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Our first stop after breakfast was the look out point just past Arthur's Pass. The temperature was in low single figures so we wrapped up warm, armed ourselves with scopes and walked a little way to see if we could find a Rock Wren on the scree slopes above us. It wasn't long before we were joined by 3 Kea, who showed lots of interest in our scopes! We heard a falcon calling and managed to get good scope views of one the birds perched and also had a Chamois on the slope above us, but alas, no Rock Wren.



Kea.

We continued on down to the West Coast, stopping in Hokitika to pick up lunch and then after a quick stop at the Hokitika Water Treatment Plant, ended up at a lakeside picnic spot for lunch where we were joined by the resident Wekas looking for a handout. There were two White Herons feeding along the shoreline, but the bush around the picnic area was surprisingly quiet and a short walk in the bush only produced Bellbird, Tui and Silvereye and not the Brown Creeper we'd hoped for.

Not too much later, we were in Okarito and headed to the wetland for a bit of a walk. A couple fernbirds showed well for us and there was another White Heron feeding in the shallows. A short walk up the track got us good views of Brown Creeper, Tomtit and South Island Robin.



We then walked along the beach a little way as there had been confirmed reports of a pair of Rock Wren at a large pile of boulders along the beach – a strange place for Rock Wren, but perhaps somewhere they go at certain times of the year. They didn't show for us, so we made a brief stop at the wharf on our way to Frans Josef.

After checking into our motel and having an early dinner, we headed out to look for our main target in the area, the Okarito Kiwi or Rowi and meet up with Ian, our kiwi guide. It was still quite light when we entered the forest and we had Kea flying overhead and good views of NZ Fantail, Tui and Grey Warbler. We walked down one of the forestry roads a little way and just before darkness fell, Ian gave us our final briefing on the dos and don'ts of kiwi spotting. Some of the male kiwi in the area have trackers on their legs and Ian soon picked up one with his telemetry gear not too far from us. We moved up and down the path with military precision, often standing still for what seemed like ages as the bird moved through the bush parallel to the path, at times close enough for us to hear it, but never showed. We moved back to the road to wait as Ian thought it may be heading to cross the track, but it changed its mind and headed deeper into the bush, so after an hour and half, we got in our vehicles and moved to another spot.

As soon as arrived, Ian picked up another bird moving in the bush close to the track. We listened and waited and waited and listened as we slowly moved up and down the track as the bird calmly but quite noisily went about its business frustratingly close to us but all the time out of sight. By now, we had heard several kiwi calling but none of them wanted to show themselves.

Our third spot probably had us the closest to a kiwi we'd been all evening, but just as we were certain it was going to show itself, a crunch of gravel or some other small noise spooked it and it was off! We called time on what had been an exciting, if frustrating night and headed back to the motel for a well-deserved sleep, finally crawling into bed just before 1:00am.

## 27 November 2023 – Day Fourteen

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A late start after a late night (or rather, early morning) had us stopping to look at Frans Josef Glacier on our journey south. The cloud hadn't really lifted, but we still had reasonable views of the glacier.

Our southward journey had us stopping at a beach a bit further south to look for Fiordland Crested Penguins. While we were applying bug spray and sunblock in the carpark, we had a pair of NZ Flacon flying around above us calling. The walk down to the beach yielded some typical and now familiar bush birds like Tomtit, Grey Warbler, Tui and Fantail. Two Spanish girls heading back to the carpark very excitedly showed us their photos of a couple penguins walking up the beach, so we quickened our pace, our hopes high.

The tide was quite high, but we sat quietly among the rocks on the beach and munched on our lunch at the same time scanning the ocean. The call of "penguin!" was made and in the far corner

of the beach, a Fiordland Crested Penguin, that had come in under the radar and eluded all our scopes, made its way quickly between the rocks at the far end of the beach before disappearing out of sight. It was followed a bit later by a second bird and everyone had good, if quite distant views of at least one of them.

Along the way to Wanaka, we made a stop in some mature Beech forest and were rewarded with at least 4 Rifleman showing off for us as well as an adult Tomtit feeding three youngsters, a single Brown Creeper and a couple other bush and just as we were getting back into the van we heard, but never saw some Yellow-crowned Parakeets chattering overhead.

In Wanaka, we checked into our motel before heading out for another great meal.



Frans Josef Glacier peeping around the corner.

## 28 November 2023 – Day Fifteen

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Our drive south took us over the Crown Ranges where we made a brief (pun intended) stop at the “bra fence” and another at the lookout on the Queenstown side in what felt like sub-zero temperatures. After a couple quick photos, we continued along Lake Wakatipu towards Te Anau.

A visit to Miles Better Pies in Te Anau had us stocking up for lunch before heading out towards Milford. The scenery along the way is spectacular and there is quite a lot to see along this road, but we didn’t have too much time, as we were hoping to find a Rock Wren near Homer Tunnel, so we pressed on to our first stop at Mirror Lakes. The water level was higher than usual and the birds a bit scarce, so we moved on. As we headed further up towards the summit, the clouds seemed to get lower, and it wasn’t long before we were driving through a fine drizzle.



The fence!

We stopped before the summit to look for bush birds, in particular, the Yellowhead or *Mohua*, but perhaps because of the weather, the bush was quiet with very few birds calling, but we still managed good views of Rifleman, Tomtit and South Island Robin. Over the summit, we stopped alongside one of the many creeks to look for Blue Duck which weren’t around, but we very soon had a Kea showing a keen interest in our van!

By the time we got to Homer Tunnel, the drizzle had turned to rain. We made the call not to go all the way to Milford and keenly scanned the hillside for Rock Wren from the van while waiting for the lights to change. Construction of a new rock shelter in the carpark has made it impossible to park and walk up the valley for these birds so we turned around on the west side of the tunnel and parked just east of the tunnel entrance and scanned with our scopes until we were wet, but no sign of our targets – probably a combination of the weather and the fact that we were trying to find one of New Zealand’s smallest birds at long range through spotting scopes.

Disappointed, we headed back down towards Te Anau and made a slight detour to a small, private wetland, where in near gale force winds, we got good views of two Baillon’s or Marsh Crakes.

## 29 November 2023 – Day Sixteen

Another early start as we headed to Bluff to get the ferry across to Foveaux Strait to Stewart Island. The crossing was quiet with very little wind and accordingly, the birds were few and far between, although we did have brief views of a couple Foveaux Shags flying past as we entered Half Moon Bay and a single Fiordland Crested Penguin sunning itself on the rocks.



A long way from home!

We dropped our bags at the hotel and boarded the water taxi to Ulva Island, which is another of New Zealand's predator-free sanctuaries. We hadn't been on the island long when we heard a flock of Yellowhead, one of two main targets for the day, but frustratingly, as is often the way with these birds they were feeding high up in the canopy and only a couple of the group managed to get onto one of them. We later had a flock moving backwards and forwards along the trail affording everyone great views of these stunning birds. We had only heard one call from a South Island Saddleback and were really struggling to find one, a recent rat incursion on the island having wreaked havoc with the population. We also had great views of Kaka, Red & Yellow-crowned Parakeets, South Island Robin, Brown Creeper, Grey Warbler, NZ Pigeon and Rifleman, but by the time we left, we'd failed to see a Weka or a Saddleback.

## 30 November 2023 – Day Seventeen

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After collecting lunch from the local store, we boarded the boat for our final pelagic trip of the tour. We were joined by Matt Jones, another of Wrybill's guides and Stewart Island resident who was on chumming duty for the day and 6 day trippers. The wind had picked up a bit overnight and we were hopeful it was enough to get the birds flying around without getting too uncomfortable. A cruise of the inner bay got us views of 7 or 8 Fiordland Crested Penguin, and both Spotted and Foveaux Shags. A bit further out and we had some Little Penguins in the water and already an attendant flock of White-capped Albatross.



Salvin's Albatross.

Our first stop was to look for the semi-resident Brown Skua, which didn't disappoint, flying around the boat at close range. A bit further on, we scanned the shores of an Island, hopeful of a Yellow-eyed Penguin, sadly this species is in a world of trouble and their numbers are in steep decline and we didn't find one. The Foveaux Shag colony a bit further out however, was in full swing with several hundred birds on the rock giving good views of both colour morphs.

We travelled for about an hour out to sea for our first chumming session and before we'd even started chumming, we had White-capped Albatross at the boat. They were soon joined by Salvin's and Southern Royal Albatross and our first Campbell Albatross for the trip and good numbers of Fairy Prion and Cape Petrel. There was a constant stream of Sooty Shearwaters and Common Diving Petrels flying past. A single Cook's Petrel and Northern Giant Petrel visited briefly, but after about an hour, we moved to a position a bit further out, hoping for some storm petrels.

Chumming resumed at the next stop and the number of White-capped Albatross increased, but apart from increased numbers of Cook's Petrel and a couple White-chinned Petrel nothing new came in so we headed back to Golden Bay. On the way past the islands, we picked up a Yellow-eyed Penguin in the bushes – not the greatest views but a great bird to see.

We'd opted to go to Golden Bay as we'd arranged a water taxi back to Ulva Island for a last-ditch attempt at the SI Saddleback. We had Yellowhead seemingly everywhere and after about half an hour, heard saddleback calling close by and located a pair feeding, giving everyone fantastic views – phew! A walk along the beach gave us views of a Hooker's or New Zealand Sealion fast asleep – I don't even think he knew we were there, although we did stay a respectable distance from him.

After dinner we assembled to go out looking for Southern Brown Kiwi or *Tokoeka*. Our trip was organised through a local guide to an area with restricted access. It didn't take too long to find an adult male which calmly carried on its business, totally unfazed by our red light. After a short while it was joined by another male and they proceeded to chase each other around for a couple of minutes before heading back to the bush. It had been a long day, so we gladly headed back to the hotel for some sleep.

## 1 December 2023 – Day Eighteen

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There was even less wind our return ferry crossing which made birding very slow but made for a comfortable trip back.

Today was basically a travelling day with a bit of birding along the way. A brief stop at a lagoon in Invercargill, got us a bunch of waterfowl and a few waders and then it was time to pick up some lunch and start our northward journey. A stop on the coast got us a view of a Yellow-eyed Penguin in the bush as well as our first, rather distant views of Otago Shag.

From here we headed on to Oamaru, where we were to spend the night but not before heading down to the harbour to view the massive breeding colony of Otago Shags there. The Otago Shag

was recently split from the Stewart Island Shag (now Foveaux Shag), although not all taxonomists have accepted the split.



Otago Shag.

## 2 December 2023 – Day Nineteen

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We left Oamaru around 7:30am and headed for Twizel and our last endemic target of the trip, the Black Stilt or *kaki*. With a population of less than 200 birds, considered to be one of the rarest waders in the world.

Water levels were quite low, and our first stop had us walking around on dry mud that is usually submerged. We found good numbers of Banded Dotterel and Pied Stilts as well as numerous other birds but no Black Stilts, so after about an hour, moved on to another spot and then Boom! A pair of adult Black Stilts standing where we could get great scope views of them. The weather was great, the location idyllic and it was lunch time, so it seemed appropriate to have our lunch while we watched the Black Stilts and their Pied cousins doing what stilts do.

After lunch we explored a bit more finding another three Black Stilts, a pair and a single bird, all adults. A quick trip up a rather busy Mt John got us a glimpse of a Pipit and close views of five brand new Ferrari SUV's which sparked quite a bit of interest in the group!



It must be lunchtime!

Before dinner, we got together in one of the motel rooms for drinks and snacks and an informal debrief on the trip before heading out to our final dinner as a group.

## 3 December 2023 – Day Twenty

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We packed the van for the last time and headed to a local wetland area in the hope of finding Marsh Crake. We had a good walk with some good birds including Black-fronted Tern and a surprisingly large number of Grey Warbler.

A quick stop in Tekapo to pick up lunch and we headed for Christchurch airport and a couple of motels to farewell new friends.

We finished the trip on 150 species, 66 of which were endemics, plus 3 heard only.

**Dave Howes**, Wrybill Birding Tours Leader