

Tour report

19 February – 9 March 2024

20-day tour with Limosa & Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Wrybill. Nigel Jones.

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Brian & Jo Crowley, Nigel & Sandra Jones, Michael Potts & Judith Smith, and Richard & Jackie Whiteley

Images

Nigel Jones and Jackie Whitley

19 February 2024 – Day One

Pick-up in central Auckland and away to the North in sunshine. With the (originally) planned stop stymied by closure after last year's cyclone, we aimed for the eastern side of the Auckland peninsula.

Several ponds and beaches provided a gentle introduction to a variety of NZ endemics and these included Variable Oystercatcher, New Zealand Scaup, NZ Grebe and NZ Dotterel along with Grey Warbler (*Gerygone*) and Tui. Other nice birds today were Royal Spoonbill, Banded Dotterel and Australian Little Grebe – but the stars of the show (at least during day-light hours!) were two Fairy Terns. Fairy Terns are the rarest taxon in NZ; a subspecies (though maybe a full species soon?) with a total population of less than 40 individuals.

After dinner we set off with high hopes in good weather to look for Northern Brown Kiwi. As we set off along the trail Moreporks were calling, and one showed extremely well on top of a bare tree allowing unusually long and close looks. This was followed almost immediately by a brief sighting of a male kiwi which scuttled off into dense grasses. For the next hour or so we were treated to several kiwi calls before one finally gave itself up to view – and what a view! A large female Northern Brown Kiwi just froze on the trail ahead of us and waited while we watched, edged closer, watched some more...Eventually she decided it was time to go and simply ambled across the trail and disappeared into the long grass. Happy birders!!

20 February 2024 – Day Two

Still elated after last night's kiwi we were off out to sea for the day. The weather was really too nice – almost no wind, and fairly calm seas leading to an “unusual” day on the water. We quickly collected Eastern Reef Heron for the trip list on a tiny island outside the harbour, and then to open water. There were rather few birds to be found, with low numbers of every species except Flesh-footed Shearwater. Luckily the diversity was good and we didn't miss any of the target birds – so New Zealand Storm-petrel, White-faced Storm-petrel, Pycroft's Petrel and Black Petrel were all duly tallied. The biggest surprise was the dearth of “cookilaria” petrels with only one identified Cook's, two Pycroft's and a further six unidentified. A nice group of Grey Ternlets helped the general feeling on board as did a series of very good sightings of a Bryde's Whale.

21 February 2024 – Day Three

Mostly spent at a forested location where many endemic species are doing really well. We got great looks at multiple Tui, Bellbirds, huge NZ Pigeons and Whiteheads. Also North Is Saddleback, North Is Robin and Kaka to give us 4 of the 6 endemic bird families of NZ already. Perhaps the star billing for today though was the pair of prehistoric-looking Takahe which strolled down the path – not a species often encountered here and another really rare bird (250 individuals?). Banded Rail and Brown Teal rounded off the day.

22 February 2024 – Day Four

Tiritiri Matangi Island. A 20 minute ferry ride to what NZ used to be like. A predator-free island, now more or less covered in native vegetation and swarming with birds. Our success yesterday made the day relatively stress-free with only 3 important targets, Stitchbird (5th endemic family) and Red-crowned Parakeet were easy enough, and nice views of Kokako were eventually had – having seen two already it was no great surprise that we saw another four Takahe through the day.

Leaving the island behind we then made our way South through Auckland to Miranda to be in time for the evening high tide. I thought that I had a sure-fire spot for Wrybill at close range, so after a brief stop to look at some 20 Wrybill at a longer distance, that's where we headed – to find no Wrybill present at all. Ouch! A few Black-billed Gulls didn't seem to be appropriate compensation!

23 February 2024 – Day Five

A second bite at the cherry for “proper looks” at Wrybill. We parked in the pre-dawn gloom, but could see Wrybill in the headlights already.....eventually we had about 500 individuals, with many less than 10m away. Brilliant! Later, another huge flock of maybe 1500 Wrybill delighted us, alongside many thousands of Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot and South Is Pied Oystercatcher, before we set off from Miranda to forests in the central North Island.



Wrybill. Nigel Jones.

A pleasant afternoon in wonderful primeval forest was punctuated by a perched Long-tailed Cuckoo, a bonus Shining Cuckoo (hard to find after they stop calling) and nice male Tomtit. Also our first Yellow-crowned Parakeet.

24 February 2024 – Day Six

Mostly spent in the vicinity of Turangi, with Blue Duck and Fernbird as the two main targets. Two separate sites each held single Blue Duck and the best-known Fernbird site didn't disappoint. A visit to some prime forest habitat was less rewarding with the whole place eerily quiet.

25 February 2024 – Day Seven

A fly-over NZ Falcon caused a screeching halt on the main road just outside Turangi, before we went across to the East coast of the North Island via another forest reserve. Common bush birds were in evidence, along with heard only Kokako and a juvenile NZ Falcon, but the hoped-for Rifleman was not found. Near the coast a wetland site brought Banded and Black-fronted Dotterel, seven Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and three Marsh Sandpipers (a rarity in NZ). Then a visit to a breeding colony of Royal Spoonbill and close encounters with NZ Pipit - literally running about a car-park.

26 February 2024 – Day Eight

More very close Wrybill (only 16 this time though!) and some Pacific Golden Plover, more Banded Dotterel and a juvenile Black-fronted Tern were the main events of this day after traversing the island again back to the west coast of the North Island. Late afternoon saw us watching a couple of smart Pectoral Sandpipers and a couple of particularly dapper Black-fronted Dotterel.

27 February 2024 – Day Nine

A stop at an estuary mid-morning where many hundred pairs of White-fronted Terns breed, and a bonus (vagrant) Eastern Common Tern was found. Then it was down to Wellington and the ferry to the South Island.

The ferry crossing was a little quiet for birds, though eight species of tubenoses were seen and they included our first albatrosses – about 10 White-capped (Shy) Albatross were present, with some giving good, close views. A single Grey-faced Petrel was the best bird and we also had our first Northern Giant Petrel.

28 February 2024 – Day Ten

Today's major event was a boat ride on the Queen Charlotte Sound, home to the range-restricted King Shag, and including a visit to an Island where we were able to find the rarest NZ endemic land-bird – Malherbe's Parakeet. The King Shags (19 birds) and Spotted Shag (20+) gave splendid views, and the island produced a brilliant juvenile (way too close to photograph!) South Island Saddleback, along with the parakeet, a couple of super-confident Weka and a charming male Tomtit.

We were also treated to a stunning performance from at least six endemic Hector's Dolphins which included them jumping clear of the water which is seldom seen.

Swimming Little Penguin was another highlight before we set off towards Kaikoura, stopping to view a large NZ Fur Seal colony enroute.

29 February 2024 – Day Eleven

The short boat trip at Kaikoura is always a great time, and ours did not disappoint with seven albatross taxa (including several Southern Royals) present among a total of 16 tubenose species. The opportunity to compare albatross species with each other, both in flight and sitting on the sea, is a huge highlight of the whole tour and today was no different to most. When 100+ Cape Petrels and 300+ Buller's Shearwater are added to the mix it starts to become a great day! We also had the chance to sort Sooty from Short-tailed Shearwater, and White-chinned from Westland Petrel (and from Flesh-footed Shearwater) which all just added to the fun.

1 March 2024 – Day Twelve

An early start from Kaikoura had us watching a big pod of 300+ Dusky Dolphins from the main road South before we pulled up at an estuary to look for more Black-fronted Terns (about 20 present) and found a very dark hybrid Black x Pied Stilt. Pressing on eastwards, up into the Southern Alps we quickly got onto the endemic Brown Creeper (Pipipi) and our first Riflemen which gave good looks – our sixth and final endemic family. Star bird up here though is Kea – an Alpine, carnivorous parrot with attitude to burn. We found three individuals hanging about the local café!



Kea. Nigel Jones.

2 March 2024 – Day Thirteen

Rain in the mountains this morning, so we set off downhill to the West Coast. This was planned to be a quiet day, with all the action scheduled for after dark – but we did find a couple of cooperative Fernbird and a lovely South Island Robin, plus Tomtit and Yellow-crowned Parakeet.

After dinner we went out to look for the rarest of the 5 kiwi species – Okarito Kiwi (aka Rowi). Any views of any kiwi species are good views, and the bird we were looking for tonight really showed well for the whole group at close range. Whew!

3 March 2024 – Day Fourteen

A calm, warmish day with more forest to investigate and without any real pressure for new species. The only potential new endemic for us (Yellowhead) did not materialise, but never mind – this was not the only chance!

Plenty of Bellbirds, Tomtits, more Brown Creepers and Riflemen were seen but all in all the forests were fairly quiet throughout.

Some Great Crested Grebes with tiny chicks at the end of the day's journey were nice to see – the grebes here being significantly different to those in Europe.



Entoloma hochstetteri or Werewere-kokako. Nigel Jones.

4 March 2024 – Day Fifteen

The weather changed from warm to freezing cold – and on a day where we were off into some proper Alpine territory, Eek!

Sleet and hail greeted us at the known site for Rock Wren. There surely wasn't much chance but we had to give it a go, and it nearly worked. Another birder pressed on past our stakeout and saw Rock Wren, but we did not and the terrain meant that we were unable to safely carry on to the same place. To make the chances of a Rock Wren showing even worse we were treated to a visit by a juvenile female New Zealand Falcon (which was some compensation for no wren). The falcon perched on rocks not 20m from our position giving great views to all. Several Kea were also around and the interaction between Kea and Falcon was very cool to see.



New Zealand falcon. Nigel Jones.

5 March 2024 – Day Sixteen

An earlyish start and down to Bluff for the Stewart Island ferry. The ferry crossing was unremarkable with about 100 Sooty Shearwater, 10+ White-capped Albatross and a single Fairy Prion being the only seabirds noted. A couple of Foveaux Shag were new for the trip.

An afternoon walk near Oban produced stunning close views of Kaka and all the commoner bush bird species.

After dinner a quick ride to a great spot for Southern Brown Kiwi, where we watched both a male and a mature female for several minutes feeding in the open, before seeing a male very close to the road on our way home.

6 March 2024 – Day Seventeen

Back on a boat again this morning and almost immediately found one of the big targets – 2 freshly moulted, dapper Fiordland Penguins. Then out to sea for some chumming. Sometimes these trips out of Stewart are quite extraordinary for numbers and diversity – today was only “average” but we still had over 150 albatrosses at one point! Five species including everyone’s favourite: Buller’s Albatross. The supporting cast of 500+ Sooty Shearwater, Cook’s and Cape Petrel, Common Diving Petrel and a Wilson’s Storm-petrel made for a great short-pelagic.



Southern Royal albatross with White-capped albatross in the foreground. Jackie Whitely.

We returned to land at Ulva Island to look for our last remaining forest endemic – Yellowhead. The Yellowheads were on great form with at least 20 seen in noisy, mobile groups, alongside Brown Creepers.



Yellowhead. Nigel Jones.

7 March 2024 – Day Eighteen

New birds are getting hard to come by at this stage of a NZ tour, but today we managed another couple of goodies. Leaving Stewart by ferry again produced lots of Sooty Shearwaters and White-capped Albatrosses, as well as about 15 Black-fronted Terns. Then a long drive North for Yellow-eyed Penguin – a species in rapid decline on mainland NZ (and Stewart Is). We were lucky to find two individuals including one which was only a few metres from the path.

Finally on to Oamaru where the masses of Otago Shag were viewed – our 8th shag species.



Yellow-eyed penguin. Nigel Jones.

8 March 2024 – Day Nineteen

With one full day to go, and one “big” species to see we headed into the MacKenzie Basin and were rewarded with extraordinary looks at a pair of Black Stilt, feeding unconcerned by our presence in bright, warm sunshine. We spent over an hour with them – the rarest shorebird in the world. What a fitting end to a tremendously successful tour.

9 March 2024 – Day Twenty

More or less a straight transfer up to Christchurch Airport and away home. Since we had a bit of spare time up our sleeves we did stop off at another Black Stilt location and found a further four birds before heading North.



The group! Jackie Whitely.