

Tour report

29 October -18 November 2022

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



King Shag in the Marlborough Sounds.

Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Marion & Cheming Chan, Dave & Joy Peters, John Scannell, Kathy Brown, and Ross Brown

Images

All images by Matt Jones

We had an awesome 21-day birding tour of New Zealand. For me it was my first Wrybill tour since the global pandemic, thankfully countries are now reopening for business.

It was great to show folks from overseas New Zealand's special birds, all the while showing off the country. There were definitely a few highlights amongst the 151 species. Our first kiwi, a male North Island bird on our first night. Seeing the thought to be once extinct NZ Storm-Petrel. Finding a Shore Plover in amongst a flock of Wrybill. Close looks at Blue Ducks. A small flock of Bitterns flying over us. Great to witness a pair of New Zealand Falcons. The Okarito Kiwi trip. Stewart Island, in particular the pelagic. And then the pair of Black Stilts just in front of us, while we ate lunch.

Some of the group had waited two years to take this trip - I hope it was worth the wait!

Matt Jones(Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

29 October 2022 – Day One

The tour started in the Auckland hotel car park, seeing Spotted Dove and Silvereye. Our first port of call was a country park just north of the city for our first Pukeko, Eastern Rosellas and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos. Ross must have wondered if he had actually left Australia!

We drove north to enjoy an Australasian Gannet colony, along with Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted terns. At a small water works we got NZ Scaup, Aussie Shoveler, Grey Duck and NZ Dabchick on the list and lunched at a nearby beach for our first looks at the stunning NZ Dotterel. Further north we had our first Bar-tailed Godwits and Turnstones - more importantly the rare Fairy Tern hawking above the rising tide. Next stop we got Aussie Little Grebe onto the first day's list along with more NZ Dabchicks. Pied Stilts and Black Swans were also seen on a small suburban pond.

After our evening meal we headed out to search for our first kiwi species - thankfully the earlier heavy rain had eased as we walked slowly down the grassy path listening for the slightest sound. A male North Island Brown Kiwi stuck his head up out of the long grass just a few metres from us, walking up a nearby bank to give us a clearer view. Further down the track we heard a few birds calling but the weather gods unleashed a huge downpour, and we trudged back to the van, all completely soaked! A damp end to our first day.



Australasian gannet colony.



30 October 2022 – Day Two

As we headed south past flooded paddocks the huge volume of rain that had fallen through the night was evident. It was still very wet and windy as we headed out of the calm of the harbour for our first pelagic of the tour; target birds were NZ Storm Petrel and Pycroft's Petrel.

The birds came thick and fast - Fluttering Shearwaters arrived first with Flesh-footed Shearwaters and Buller's Shearwaters not too far behind. The gorgeous Black Petrel was soon added along with White-faced Storm petrels skipping across the water and a NZ storm petrel put in an appearance.

The weather was challenging but it did bring in some unexpected birds; a couple of fly-bys from Black-winged Petrels from the north and a bulky Mottled Petrel skimmed through. A brief look at couple of Pycroft's Petrels picked out of the more common Cook's Petrels, as well as a brief appearances from a Wilson's Storm Petrel, Common Diving Petrels and Little Shearwaters.

Not to be expected at this stage of the tour, but a White-capped Albatross was a welcome bonus!

Lunch in the shelter of some islands provided a welcome break from the weather and while enjoying a cup of tea we saw our first Kaka and Reef Heron. The wind and rain had stopped when we returned to open water. At our next chum location we got two more visitors from the south - a juvenile Northern Giant Petrel and a smart looking Cape Petrel, plus a partial leucistic Flesh-footed Shearwater. Tired but happy we headed from the wharf with a bag full of ticks and lifers, not forgetting the Short-beaked and Bottlenose Dolphins.



Leucistic Flesh-footed shearwater

31 October 2022 – Day Three

After leaving Whangarei we headed south for another look at some waders: Bar-tailed Godwits, Ruddy Turnstones, Variable Oystercatchers, and very obliging NZ Dotterel. Further south on the coast we went to a predator free fenced area for our first bit of forest birding. The weather was calm and sunny as we walked through the sand dunes to the forest, getting good looks at Tui, Silvereye, Eastern Rosellas and Fantails. Down the path California & Brown Quails joined the list and we got our first Bellbirds and Whiteheads. Ross spotted a shy Buff-banded Rail. We had trouble re-locating the bird but did find some very showy Brown Teal hiding along the stream bank. More flying Kaka, plus two sought after birds joined the list - our first North Island Robin happily posed for a photo - and North Island Saddleback. A great bird and lifer and one of the main targets for the day in the bag.



Variable oystercatcher.



New Zealand dotterel.



1 November 2022 – Day Four

Before boarding our next pelagic we first got better looks at Buff-banded Rails then it was on to the Norma Jean for a sunny calm day on the water. Very different weather wise to our previous pelagic which photographers Joy, Kathy & Ross appreciated.

Fluttering Shearwaters were the first to arrive and then our first Little Blue Penguins were seen and photographed. Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters soon put in an appearance along with Black Petrel. A bit further out we had a good number of Fairy Prion and Cook's Petrel and the bonus arrival of a stunning Salvin's Albatross that sat behind the boat and was joined by an Australasian Gannet - the first time I had seen these two species side by side. Unfortunately, we didn't see any NZ Storm Petrels on this trip but had plenty of White-faced Storm Petrels.

Once ashore, we briefed John on the awesome day out on the water, as he'd skipped this pelagic.



White-faced Storm-petrel

2 November 2022 – Day Five

One of the highlights of this 21-day Wrybill Birding Tour is the 24 hours on Tiritiri Matangi, a small predator free island within view of Auckland. Matt was at the supermarket pre breakfast buying supplies for the island. After breakfast we hit the road south trying to avoid the commuting traffic and arrived at Gulf Harbour for the ferry. The crossing was pretty uneventful, with a few Aussie Gannets and Fluttering Shearwaters seen.

Once on the island we listened to the debrief from the rangers and started birding. Plenty of our target birds are on this small island. Red-crowned Parakeets were first heard then seen feeding on the flowering flax bushes. More views of North Island Saddlebacks, then once on the forest trail we could hear Whiteheads. Stitchbird (or hihi) is one of the big target birds - we heard the sharp zip like call and made our way to feeding station. Boom! There was our bird. A splendid male Stitchbird with his white wing bars, golden shoulders, and white ear tufts. Wow what a bird. We watched as males and females came to the feeding station along with plenty of noisy boisterous Bellbirds and walking through the bush we got better looks at North Island Robin.

We made it to the Bunkhouse, our accommodation for the night, and unpacked food and gear. After lunch and a bit of retail therapy we headed out for the afternoon with two major targets in mind. The first to be seen on the trails was Takahe. This prehistoric looking bird is like a giant Pukeko with large powerful red legs and bill and shaggy purple/ blue plumage. The second on our wish list was found at the far end of the island - North Island Kokako - which jumped in front of us from the side of the path! There was a moment of panic to make sure that everyone got onto it before it hopped through the canopy and then a sense a of relief. One of our main targets was added to our NZ list! Also, at the far end of the island we gained better views of Saddlebacks, Parakeets, Stitchbird, Bellbirds, NZ Pigeons and Tui. Brief and unsatisfactory views of the elusive Fernbird but had better views of Takahe.

Back at the Bunkhouse everyone chipped in to help with dinner - Matt rustling up lamb and gurnard on the BBQ. Ross and Kathy on salads and potatoes and Joy and Dave doing the dishes. It was a great day but we hadn't finished yet. After tidying up we headed out into the darkness with hope of finding Little Spotted Kiwi. After an hour of searching we saw Morepork, Tuatara and Little Blue Penguin. Kiwi calls aplenty but no sightings. Some of the group were getting tired and headed back to the Bunkhouse. Murphy's Law showed its hand and ten minutes after the others had left Matt, Kathy & Ross encountered a male Little Spotted Kiwi shuffling off the path into the bush and melting into the darkness of the forest.





3 November 2022 – Day Six

An early pre breakfast walk rewarded us with views of Kokako, Saddlebacks, Whiteheads, Parakeets, Robins and Pigeons. By the time we got back to the bunkhouse the wind had picked up and Matt received a call from the water taxi company saying they might be late ... very late! A few hurried calls and texts made and a larger boat would collect us a bit later. With the extra bit of time we had on our hands, Ross had gone exploring and found a family a Rifleman. New Zealand's smallest bird can be a challenge to find especially on Tiri but we all had good looks at this diminutive New Zealand wren. A bouncy crossing back to Gulf Harbour picking up views of Arctic Skua, Fluttering and Flesh-footed Shearwaters. Almost back on schedule by the time we got to the van, we headed south – passing through Auckland's city traffic towards our next destination.

Miranda is arguably NZ's wader hotspot. We checked into our accommodation and headed to the shorebird centre for a bit more retail therapy and onto the reserve. Once at the hide it became obvious the tide wasn't the best but it didn't stop new species and lifers being added to our growing list. Wrybill, South Island Oystercatcher, Pacific Golden Plover, Black-billed Gulls, Royal Spoonbills, plenty of Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot and Pied Stilts.

We ate at the local pub that night and all agreed it was great food, particularly the Fish & Chips!

4 November 2022 – Day Seven

This morning we headed to a location just a bit further north from Miranda visitor centre in the hope of getting better views and photographs of Wrybill in particular. The tide was dropping nicely, and we found flocks of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knots along with Variable and South Island Oystercatchers.

While the group watched and photographed an approachable flock of Wrybill, Matt was scanning with his scope for Red-necked Stints that could be hiding amongst them. Wait. What. Boom! Matt had indeed found a new bird in amongst the flock - not a Stint but a Shore Plover! This sought-after rare endemic is rarely seen on Wrybill tours and everyone saw the bird through the scope, some even got distant images. We noted the colour leg bands and Matt reported the sighting on the NZ Bird forum. It turned out that providing the leg bands as ID, the Shore Plover was identified as a female and was translocated to Motutapu in August as part of a release program.





Shore plover.



Happy with our early morning birding we headed back to the motel for breakfast and then hit the road further south to the centre of the North Island. Our lunch spot provided a chance of some forest birding, and we caught sight of our first Yellow-crowned Parakeets, along with Kaka. We had brief but satisfactory views of our first NZ Falcon picked up quickly by Joy. We listened for Long-tailed and Shining Cuckoos without any luck, and more looks at Whitehead, North Island Robin, Bellbird and Tui.

After a bit of a drive we checked into the motel and thought we'd try our luck at finding another major target bird. A stroll from the car park out to a bridge with fast flowing river beneath - to see not one but a pair of Blue Duck. They were super relaxed sitting on a fallen log only a few meters from a fly fisherman. We crossed the bridge and the fisherman very kindly stopped casting to let us get closer for amazing views of these fantastic rare ducks.

We celebrated an incredible days birding at the motel restaurant that night, recalling Shore Plover, Wrybill, Yellow-crowned Parakeets, NZ Falcon and Blue Ducks... what a day!



Blue duck.

5 November 2022 – Day Eight

This morning we were up before sunrise to scan the river behind the motel - and spotted an adult Blue Duck sitting on rock in the middle of the river! We had frustrating brief views of a Shining Cuckoo that was calling all the time but didn't want to show much of itself.

The reed bed in a swampy area provided a good place to add new birds to our list: Eurasian Coot and Little Black Shag, plus good looks at New Zealand Dabchick, Black-billed Gulls and New Zealand Scaup. We heard the booming of Australasian Bittern coming from the reed bed. More often they are heard than seen. The booming call started again as we walked along the road to see the head of a Bittern sky-pointing in amongst the reeds. A slight change of location provided better and higher views of the reed bed and we counted another couple of Bitterns. Then it went a bit crazy as five Bitterns blasted out of the reeds and flew around above us in formation. Quite incredible!

Grabbing our attention next was the plaintive call of a Fernbird close by. We played hide and seek with this expert skulker but soon enough we had all glimpsed this cryptic little grass bird. All of this was before breakfast! As we were going to be on the road for the next couple of hours we stopped at a local bakery to stock up for lunch and headed towards the east coast.

First stop was a forested area. Enroute, we encountered our first NZ Pipit sitting in the middle of the road. Once at the site we ate lunch and enjoyed a walk around our last bit of lovely North Island native forest to see Rifleman, Kaka, North Island Robin - eventually our first Tomtit - and our last looks at Whiteheads. On the road to the coast and the smart town of Napier. A local park provided good photo opportunities for some of the more common species such as Pukeko, Aussie Shoveler, Grey Teal, Little Pied Shags in amongst some strange looking wildfowl.

We struggled to get close to a known wader spot due to some weird town planning and high tides, so we called it a day and checked into our motel, later enjoying a fantastic Indian meal.





Grey Teal and ducklings

6 November 2022 – Day Nine

Today was a bit of a drive and relocation day. Just over a week into the tour and we hadn't missed many birds.

This morning we had brief looks at a NZ Pipit before taking our search down to sea level for waders. A nice muddy bank next to the state highway revealed Double-banded Dotterels and smaller Black-fronted Dotterels happily feeding, in amongst some Pied Stilts. Our next new bird for the list was a bit more showy and gaudy- an Indian Peafowl. In the hope of finding an endemic we spent an hour at an area of private land that we have permission to visit. Sadly, no luck. With just a few Yellowhammers for company, we were folding the legs away on the tripods, when a stunning male NZ Falcon flew in and landed in front of us. It didn't stay around too long and moved around the corner. We followed and were treated to a pair of these mighty birds putting on a show. These NZ endemic raptors can be a challenge to find, but we watched this pair calling, and chasing a passing Australasian Swamp Harrier and Kelp Gull. We left the falcons and drove cross country to Foxton on the west coast, stopping in the small village of Norsewood for a cafe lunch.

Once in Foxton we checked into our comfortable motel and dinner was another of Matt's BBQs.



7 November 2022 – Day Ten

This morning we headed out to the Manawatu Estuary and found a few good waders. Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Pied Stilts, Masked Lapwings and a lone Wrybill. A brief stop to buy some lunch, and then we found pair a Black-fronted Dotterels, along with plenty of wildfowl at a local sewage ponds.

Onwards to New Zealand's capital, Wellington, where we boarded the ferry to Picton, gateway to the South Island. On the crossing we saw a few seabirds including White-capped and Salvin's Albatross, White-chinned and Westland Petrel Fluttering Shearwater, Arctic Skua, Spotted Shags - and plenty of Australasian Gannets in the Sounds.



The ferry was full, narrow passages on the vehicle decks between the trucks!

Once into Picton we headed out for a dinner but the restaurant that Matt had booked was closed. Eventually we found a nice friendly place which, to Cheming's delight served mussels by the bucketload!!



8 November 2022 – Day Eleven

Our first full day on the South Island and new target birds to gather. After breakfast we headed out to Queen Charlotte Sound. It was a nice sunny day to be out on the water and we soon found King Shag. This bulky heavy-set bird is restricted to the Marlborough Sounds at the top of the South Island. We found a few birds sitting on some rocks with a couple of NZ Fur Seals which kept the photographers happy. The next encounter was with a pod of Dusky Dolphins which kept us amused. A couple of Little Blue Penguins were spotted as we made our way further out to an island. Once on the island we were met by the local Wekas, another new bird for the tour. Our main target here was the super rare Orange-fronted Parakeet. We found up to three individuals (that seemed to be in an argument about territory!). Also seen on the island was NZ Pigeon and a smart looking Tomtit.



King Shag (above), Spotted Shag (below).





Orange-fronted Parakeet

Back to Picton for lunch we hit the road south, stopping to look for Cirl Bunting and Glossy Ibis enroute but coming up empty handed with both. Our next stop was a bit more fruitful, finding Australasian Great Crested Grebes, a lone NZ Dabchick and at least three vagrant Hoary-headed Grebes. Probably the only lake in NZ with three Grebe species on it. Also on the lake were NZ scaup, Aussie Shovelers, Grey Teal and Black Swans.

Next stop was just north of Kaikoura overlooking a large NZ Fur Seal colony. Matt played a bit of a gamble before entering Kaikoura itself, which fortunately paid off - and found a lone Little Owl sitting out in the open. Bonus!

With Kaikoura as our base for two nights, we headed out for a well earned meal.



New Zealand fur seal

9 November 2022 – Day Twelve

Kaikoura on the South Island's east coast is a very pleasant little tourist town that is getting back on its feet after earthquakes and Covid 19.

We were in town for the pelagics with Albatross Encounter and were on the water by 6am watching the sunrise. It wasn't long before we had a couple of Northern Giant Petrels tracking the vessel. Birds quickly showed up at our first stop - Wandering Albatross, White-capped Albatross, Salvin's Albatross, lots of squabbling Northern Giant Petrels at the back of the boat arguing over the chum, being helped out by the checkerboard-coloured Cape Petrels. Also, Westland petrels and a few White-chinned Petrels. The next stop we found a couple of large Southern Royal Albatross, and a lone stand offish Northern Royal Albatross. A brief fly-by of a juvenile Black-browed Albatross, our sixth Albatross species of the morning. We also had brief looks at Hutton's Shearwater. This endemic Shearwater only breeds in the mountains that rise behind the town.



After the pelagic we headed back into town to the 'Encounter' office, shop and restaurant for some retail therapy and a sit down brunch.

At 1pm we were back out on the water for pelagic number two. The wind had dropped quite a bit so we headed out to deeper water. It took a bit of time but slowly the birds found us - a lone Antipodean (Gibson's) Wandering Albatross was joined by smaller White-capped and Salvin's Albatross, a handful of Westland Petrels plus the usual Northern Giant and Cape Petrels. Two Grey-faced Petrels spent some time circling the boat allowing the photographers to grab a few shots. Heading back towards the shore we were joined by a small pod of Dusky Dolphins, and we found a large raft of Hutton's Shearwaters that allowed us to get a better look. Both our Pelagic's were skippered by the legend that is Gary Melville AKA Gazza. Always great to be out on the water with Gary in Kaikoura.



Once ashore we had another look for Gull Buntings, but yet again, came up short. Then back around to reconnect with the Little Owl.

Tonight's dinner was fish and chips which we ate in the motel garden - much to the pleasure of the local Red-billed Gulls who joined us!

10 November 2022 – Day Thirteen

This morning we drove the coast road south out of Kaikoura, witnessing the incredible repairs to the roads and bridges in the wake of the 2016 earthquake. Our first stop was a small park with a large lake, in the vain hope of finding some Cape Barren geese. This introduced species seems to be becoming rarer and harder to find, so not a complete surprise that we didn't find any. We did find plenty of Black Swans, Aussie Shovelers, NZ Scaup and Coots.

On the Northern outskirts of Christchurch we stopped again at a large Estuary. Matt set up the scope and within seconds we were all looking at an endemic mega!! A single Black Stilt was showing well. The bird had been reported on and off for the previous few days but could very easily disappear in this very large area. We had pretty good views of the bird that seemed to be in a pair with a Pied Stilt. We also added Royal Spoonbills, Black-billed gulls, Wrybill, Banded Dotterels and Bar-tailed Godwits (and Mute swan enroute) to the days list.

We grabbed lunch before turning inland towards the spine of the South Island, the Southern Alps. If you are going to climb a mountain, you need fuel so we stopped at the small village of Sheffield and its world famous pie shop!



With full tummies we climbed higher into the mountains for our next port of call - the magical Hawdon Valley. We quickly found a couple of lifers - a curious South Island Robin and a small flock of Brown Creepers/ Pipipi - plus better looks at Redpolls. Fantastic views of a couple of stunning Black-fronted Terns hawking up and down the mountain river and once into the village of Arthurs Pass we found a small flock of Kea. These incredibly rare Alpine parrots are always a pleasure to witness.

We checked into our lovely mountain motel for the night and ate at their very nice restaurant. After dinner Kathy, Ross and Matt went to look for Great Spotted Kiwi, which is probably the most challenging of the five Kiwi species to find. We walked a well maintained path close to a stream, but after an hour or so we returned to the motel without any luck. You win some you lose some.

11 November 2022 – Day Fourteen



A fantastic view to wake up too.



After breakfast we headed into Arthurs Pass itself for a small but great forest walk, finding Tomtit, South Island Robin, Rifleman and Kea. After picking up a bit of lunch we drove south on the West Coast road. At our Ross Beach lunch stop we saw two or three Hector's Dolphins playing in the surf.

We found a Great Egret / White Heron on the lagoon just outside Franz Josef village, another bird for the growing list.

We ate at Alice May Restaurant that evening and then the group split - John and Cheming deciding to have an early night and head back to the motel - and the rest of the group heading to Okarito. After a debrief with Ian Cooper (Coops) about the rarest of the kiwis, the Okarito Kiwi/Rowi we walked into the thick wet bush. Once at the right spot Ian gave us all different but close locations to stand at. Kathy, Joy and Matt hadn't waited too long before "white-eyes", the local male, called loudly and not far away. Ian rounded us all up and got us standing military style in complete darkness in front of a clearing. We could hear "white-eyes" getting closer by the sound of the crunching leaf litter. And then there was light! Ian flicked on his torch and there in the beam was "white-eyes", a male Okarito Kiwi was just a few metres in front of us. He sniffed the air and then the ground before turning and melting back into the forest. It's amazing how the walk back out of the forest never seems so far once you have seen a wild kiwi! This was our third kiwi species of the tour and it's fair to say we all slept soundly that night.





12 November 2022 – Day Fifteen

Still fizzing from the Kiwi the previous night, we had a leisurely start to the day. We headed south down the West Coast for a caffeine fix at the small town of Fox Glacier. The van needed a drink as well, and there are not many gas stations on this road! Our next birding stop was a bit down the coast. We walked a pleasant forest trail to a quiet beach and set up the scopes. We waited. Out of the sea came our next new bird, a lifer for all. A tubby Fiordland-crested Penguin made its way out of the surf up the beach to the rocks. We watched another penguin coming and going, before heading back into the forest, where we saw Tomtits, Silvereyes, and Grey Warblers on way back to the van. Back in to Haast for a bite to eat before stopping at another forest site. We were hoping to find some Yellowhead but the forest was very quiet although we did see some Rifleman.

We had a smart motel for the night in the lake town of Wanaka. Time for a quick shower before heading out for a fantastic Indian curry. An early night was had by most of the group, except John and Matt who stayed up to watch the Women's Rugby World Cup final between New Zealand and England on TV. What a great match!

13 November 2022 – Day Sixteen

Up early and on the road this morning leaving Wanaka behind us we climbed the Cardrona Range to look down over Queenstown. Driving through the Southland farming countryside we arrived at Te Anau, the gateway town to Fiordland. Ross was able to have a quick catch up with his lovely wife who had just spent the night in Te Anau while doing her own tour of New Zealand. With everyone fed and watered we headed to the mountains. From a small carpark we walked up to a clearing at the base of some rock faces. The rain got heavier but it wasn't too long before we saw our target bird, a cracking male Rock Wren hopping up into view. It disappeared before John had got onto it, but a few minutes later the bird reappeared and now we all had Rock Wren on our list!

All pretty wet we headed down to Milford Sound itself, but it wasn't the best day for views.

Retracing our steps, we saw plenty of Kea beside the road as we headed out of the mountains. At the appropriately named Kaka Creek we found at least ten Kaka. Next stop was into the forest where we encountered South Island Robins, Rifleman, at least two Shining Cuckoos calling and showing well in the canopy above us. Walking back to the van Matt heard a familiar call - everyone got onto the stunning male Yellowhead, with its bright yellow head he was the brightest thing we had seen all of this rather grey damp day! A stop beside a river provided great views of Black-fronted Terns, South Island Pied Oystercatchers and at least two NZ Pipits.

Back into Te Anau and our smart motel, it was warm showers for all and time to dry out some clothes, optics and boots before heading out for another great meal, toasting the Wren that rocks!!



A curious Kea.

14 November 2022 – Day Seventeen

Back on the road early again we had a ferry to catch. Stewart Island, our third island of the trip and home to Matt.

We drove through the flat Southland farming belt to Invercargill, Southland's biggest town before arriving at Bluff. The ferry across Foveaux Strait only takes an hour and we arrived at Oban, checked into our hotel and had time for a quick brunch before catching a water taxi to Ulva Island. On the way to Ulva Island we were able to grab a sighting of a couple of Fiordland Crested Penguins. Once at Ulva Island we soon encountered Stewart Island Robins (a Sub-species of the South Island Robin), Stewart Island Weka, Rifleman, Red-crowned Parakeet, Brown Creepers, Kaka, and a new bird for the tour in the shape of the very rare South Island Saddleback. And much to the relief of John we got more Yellowhead, as he had missed the bird a few days ago in Fiordland.

After our evening meal at Stewart Island's only pub, we went kiwi spotting to search for our fourth kiwi species of the tour. We successfully found three birds and Stewart Island had delivered everything needed on our first day.



15 November 2022 – Day Eighteen

On Wrybill tours the Stewart Island pelagic can make or break a tour with regards to seabirds. As we left the main wharf at Oban expectations were high. We had another look at the Fiordland-crested Penguins - seven in total - then out to some islands. No sign of any Yellow-eyed penguins but we saw three southern Brown Skuas. These bulky looking birds were new for our tour list.

Once down at Wreck Reef on the eastern side of the island it was pretty quickly clear that it was quiet. Very quiet. We were joined by only four White-capped Albatross and for over an hour nothing else, not even a Sooty Shearwater. At a new location one Cape Petrel and a Salvin's Albatross was added to the list so Matt discussed with Nate the skipper and we moved the Aurora thirty minutes sailing time out to the east. The wind picked up and our luck changed. We were joined by four Southern Royal Albatross, thirty White-capped Albatross, twenty Salvin's Albatross with their attractive smokey grey heads, twenty Cape

Petrels, twenty Buller's Shearwater, one Flesh-footed Shearwater (only the second time Matt had seen this species off Stewart Island), one White-chinned Petrel, two Cook's Petrels, one Fairy Prion, and two Short-tailed Shearwaters picked out from the more common Sooty Shearwaters. Probably the two star birds were the tiny Grey-backed Storm-petrel that skipped past the vessel on multiple occasions and the incredibly showy Broad-billed Prion.



Broad-billed prion.



Cape petrels (above), Buller's shearwater (below).



The strangest sighting of the day was a Ruddy Turnstone that came up the chum slick twice! After a fruitful couple of hours we headed back to the islands to look at the Foveaux Shag colony and then we found a lone Yellow-eyed Penguin.

What a day and what a great Stewart Island pelagic! We celebrated with a nice meal and glass of wine at the South Seas Hotel.

16 November 2022 – Day Nineteen

We left Rakiura (the Maori name for Stewart Island) on the 8am ferry for the one hour crossing back to Bluff on the mainland.

We just made out a Fiordland-crested Penguin on the rocks as we left Halfmoon Bay along with a couple of Little Blue Penguins swimming away from the ferry. Other species seen on the ferry crossing included a few Common Diving Petrels, Northern Giant and Cape Petrels.

Once back in Bluff, we reloaded the van and headed north to Invercargill, squeezing in a brief stop at Tip Lagoon just outside town to check out some of the more common wildfowl. With lunch bought we hit the road north and arrived into the Catlins. In the company of NZ Sealions, three males and a lone female, we walked along a quiet beach and enjoyed some lunch. Back on the road the rain started and while waiting in traffic we witnessed a NZ falcon chasing Starlings over some gardens. Near Dunedin Joy and Kathy spotted a Great Egret in a small roadside lake so we stopped for a look on the way to a private reserve, where we saw three Yellow-eyed Penguins. Always a pleasure to see these incredibly rare penguins. Less pleasurable was the smell of NZ Fur Seals but great to see! Then onto our final destination - Oamaru. We added plenty of Otago Shags to our day and trip list before heading out for a great pub meal.



New Zealand (Hooker's) Sealion.

17 November 2022 – Day Twenty

Our final full day, we left Oamaru in the rear view mirror and headed north along State Highway one (SH1), a road that we had been using since our first day. Our next stop was in the village of Fairlie - to be precise the Fairlie Bakehouse - to pick up lunch. This little farming village is the gateway to the Mackenzie country.

We headed down a quiet road, checking every pond, puddle and ditch. And then, there they were - a stonking pair of Black Stilt. We parked up and had lunch in the company of one of the world's rarest waders. There are only around 180 of these birds left in the wild. We had seen a single bird about a week earlier but this was special. The two Stilts were joined on the small roadside pond by Pied Stilts, Banded Dotterels, and a couple South Island Pied Oystercatchers.

We changed location in the hope of finding some more Black Stilt. Distant scope views of a couple more birds and good looks at smart looking Black-fronted Terns. Unfortunately, Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest peak was hiding under some low clouds. At a small campsite, we had the vain hope of finding a Marsh (Baillon's) Crake. No luck! One more stop one more scan... then Matt found a Bittern just walking around in the open. From our elevated position we had great views of this unexpected bird in this location.

Into Twizel for the final motel of the tour and our last evening meal of the tour. As we sat down the heavens opened, and boy did it rain!



Black-fronted tern



Black stilts





18 November 2022 – Day Twenty-One

The last day of the tour, we were all heading to Christchurch but there was still time for a bit more birding. Back to the site where we'd found the pair of Black Stilts yesterday. But, they had moved on and we couldn't relocate them. A slow drive overlooking Lake Tekapo for Chukar, but no luck. A slow drive back down and then boom! There it was. Our final bird species of the tour. A single Chukar. Everyone got onto it, our 151st species for the trip.

As we neared Christchurch, we dropped Ross at his B&B just south of the city; next Kathy, Joy & Dave at Christchurch International Airport as they were all flying directly home to the States; then Marion & Cheming at their motel; and finally John to his motel near the railway station in the centre of the city.