

Tour report

5 – 25 November 2022

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Salvin's, NZ White-capped, and Southern Royal Albatross. AstaTobiassen.

Led by Phil Hammond and Fraser Gurney, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Clarice Clark, Jerry Broadus, Cara Borre, Asta Tobiassen, Nancy Houlihan, Jim Danzenbaker, and Shep Thorp

Images

Asta Tobiassen, Jerry Broadus, Nancy Houlihan, Jim Danzenbaker and Phil Hammond

This was a great group of 7 keen American birders and 2 Kiwi guides and the group got along together really well. There was plenty of laughter in our 12 seater Mercedes van, good company at dinner, and plenty of willingness by those that had already seen a bird well to help get the rest of the team on to it.

Our job as guides of course is to know when and where to go, and to find and identify target birds when we get there, but we love it if we get to a chosen site and a client spots the target first, and that happened several times.

On this tour we saw 153 species of bird, 4 cetacean species and great daylight views of a Tuatara. More importantly we had targeted NZ endemic breeding birds and saw a great total of 66 of those, even more importantly just about every one of those endemics was seen well by everyone in the group.

At our last dinner together, each of us ranked our individual top 10 birds of the tour-- not easy with so many rare and endangered birds seen really well. With 10 points for number one, 9 for number two etc the "league table" looked like this;

1--Kea

2--Mottled Petrel

3--Black Stilt

4--Wrybill

5--Morepork

6--Southern Brown Kiwi

7 [equal]-Buller's Albatross

-Yellowhead

-Kokako

10—Kaka

Others that made it on to people's individual top ten lists were, Fiordland Crested Penguin, Yellow-eyed Penguin, Stitchbird, Little Penguin, NZ Storm Petrel, NZ Fairy Tern, White-winged Tern, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Weka, South Island Saddleback, South Island Robin, North Island Robin, Nankeen Night Heron, Little Spotted Kiwi, Long-tailed Cuckoo, Marsh Crake, Blue Duck, North Island Brown Kiwi, NZ Rock Wren, Black-fronted Tern, NZ Tomtit, NZ Wandering Albatross, Brown Skua, Australasian Shoveler, Tui, and NZ Fantail.

In this trip report our FIRST sighting of a New Zealand endemic bird is shown in CAPITAL letters.

Phil Hammond (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

5 November 2022 – Day One

With everyone having tested negative for covid, we held a short briefing, introductions, and welcome, and headed off to a wetland where we saw our first NZ DABCHICK [Grebe].

From there we went to a very scenic Gannet colony where we were within a meter or so of some of the Australasian Gannets that choose to nest right beside one of the viewing platforms. There were about 2000 of them, but White-fronted terns also breed here and they and the gannets were giving us wonderful flying displays very close to us.



Australasian gannet up close. Jerry Broadus.

An unusual sighting was a VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER sitting on a nest on a narrow ledge, on an almost vertical rock spike, about 10m above the sea. Also, there were our first RED BILLED GULLS

Then on to a small town to visit a bakery [something we would do most days] to buy freshly made sandwiches, cakes, and drinks to take away for lunch. On this day we ate them at picnic tables beside a river, where we saw some introduced species but also our first GREY WARBLER [Grey Gerygone], a species we would see on several subsequent days.

Pushing on north we passed our first PARADISE SHELDUCKS. That was another species we would see often, in fact most days on tour, but I don't think the team ever got bored with these spectacular ducks.

The next stop was at a lovely estuary where we saw Bar-tailed Godwits, Ruddy Turnstones, Royal Spoonbills, Pied Stilts, More Variable Oystercatchers, and our first NZ DOTTERELS. We also had a distant view of the NZ sub-species of Fairy Tern. There are only about 40 of those in the world and they are NZ's rarest bird taxon and are critically endangered. We wanted a better view of them, and got that a couple of days later.



New Zealand dotterel pauses on the mudflats. Asta Tobiassen.

Travelling further north we saw the first of a couple of fairly common endemics, TUI and NZ PIGEON, these also were species we would see on a lot of the days of the tour.

We checked into our motel in a garden setting, and after a short rest went to dinner at a boutique restaurant and did our checklist for the day [hoping for a retrospective tick from what was to come that night!]. Then as dusk approached, we drove to look for our first Kiwi species.

Conditions were challenging because in bright moonlight our targets are more shy than normal and reluctant to show themselves out in the open. The moonlight on this night was very bright, but by the time we left before midnight, all of the team had seen at least one of the three NORTHERN BROWN KIWI that we had encountered. We had heard both male and female calls as well from at least ten individuals. We had also heard plenty of calls from our native owl, Morepork [we were to get absolute stonking views of one of those in daylight a few days later].

Each evening [or next morning if we are out late] we voted for our individual bird of the day. It was no surprise that the kiwi got most votes for this day, but Fairy Tern and White-fronted Tern each got a vote too.

6 November 2022 – Day Two

Today was to be our first pelagic, and our day started well, before we even left our motel. While we were loading the van in the motel garden we got good views of Shining Bronze-cuckoo and our first NZ FANTAIL.

We drove south to Marsden Cove to board our very comfortable boat, the Sumo, with captain Steve knowing where we wanted to go. Leaving port, we passed a sand bank with White-faced Herons and some shorebirds including species we had already seen, but also Red Knots and our first SOUTH ISLAND OYSTERCATCHERS.

In shallower water on the way out we saw BULLER'S, Flesh-footed, and FLUTTERING SHEARWATERS. Once out in deep blue water, a prime target for this pelagic was PYCROFT'S PETREL and although some could only be called probables we got some that were definite Pycroft's as well as the often similar COOK'S PETREL. A nice surprise this far north was a MOTTLED PETREL which treated us to some wonderful close fly-bys.

In all we saw 15 pelagic species including 2 different storm-petrels— White-faced, and another prime target NZ STORM-PETREL several of which gave us numerous great close views. Another prime target was BLACK PETREL and we had some of those a meter or two away at the back of the boat. Fairy Prions were giving good close views, a Sooty Shearwater flew past and so did a GREY-FACED PETREL which also gave us good views, and our first Albatross of the tour flew in, a NZ WHITE-CAPPED ALBATROSS.



New Zealand storm-petrel flies over a wave. Asta Tobiassen.



A white-faced storm-petrel swings in towards the boat. Asta Tobiassen.

Little Shearwater, and Common Diving Petrel are never attracted to the chum and as usual the only views we had of those were fly-pasts. We also had good views of Little Penguin.

On the way back in to port we spotted a Pacific Reef Egret on a rock wall, and after we had said goodbye to Steve and “Sumo” and were back in the Mercedes, we drove around to the foreshore to get good views of it in our scopes.

Over dinner it was really hard to pick just one bird for bird of the day after such a great day, but Mottled Petrel, NZ Storm-petrel, NZ White-capped Albatross, and Shining Bronze-cuckoo all got votes.

7 November 2022 – Day Three

Our first stop was at a wetland where we saw Pacific Black Ducks [as well as the common Mallard x Pacific Black Duck hybrids], Australasian Shovelers, our first NZ SCAUP, Black swans, more Paradise Shelducks, and an uncommon species in NZ that we knew we would not see anywhere else, Australasian Little Grebe.

We really wanted a better view of the rare and critically endangered NZ sub-species of Fairy Tern, and knew we would not see any once we left Northland. By midday we had seen them in 4 different locations and had seen about 20% of the World’s population including good views of some that worked their way towards us whilst foraging. All views had been gained without approaching or disturbing them.

Then we drove a bit further south and headed for a peninsular that has a predator proof fence across it from coast to coast. Once that fence had been built some years ago, all alien predators had been removed from the fenced-off part of the peninsular, and a natural environment had been restored where vulnerable endemic species could thrive.

On the way to that reserve we stopped the van for great views of our first NZ KAKA, and then stopped again when we spotted a roadside NZ PIPIT which hung around long enough for great photos and video.

Once inside the reserve we had great views of NZ BELLBIRD, NORTH ISLAND ROBIN, NORTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK, WHITEHEAD, and lots more views of Tui, NZ Pigeon, NZ Fantail, an encounter with a Kaka that held our attention, and our first Buff-banded Rail. Another rare and endangered bird seen in several places there was BROWN TEAL.

Dinner was at a riverside restaurant, and as usual we did our checklists and each of us voted for our bird of the day. The rare and endangered North Island Saddleback didn't manage a single vote! But again, there were a lot of great birds in one day. NZ Fairy Tern, North Island Robin, and Brown Teal all got votes, but the winner was a Kaka that had captivated us, ignoring the fact that we were standing just about 3 meters away for several minutes, while it ripped bark off the branch of a tree at eye-level.



New Zealand kaka tearing a branch apart. Asta Tobiassen.



A gaggle of brown teal. Nancy Houlihan

8 November 2022 – Day Four

The weather this November was some of the wettest and wildest of any NZ November in memory, but we were pretty lucky on this tour, often the rain fell while we were driving and then stopped when it was time to get out and walk.

Today our luck ran out. We were booked on an all-day pelagic but the wind out in the outer Hauraki Gulf, where we wanted to go, was howling and we couldn't go there. Luckily the main targets that we would have been chasing had already been seen two days earlier. We boarded the boat anyway and settled for 3 hours in the inner gulf.

After backing the boat in for views of a breeding colony of Pied and Little Cormorants in trees hanging over the water, we stopped for great views of a Little Penguin on the water.

Then we went ashore for a while on an Island. A family of Paradise Shelducks with their stripey chicks got some attention and we saw more of the common endemics, but we also added a new endemic, getting great views of the big flightless rail WEKA, and this was the rarest of the sub-species, North Island Weka.

Back ashore on the mainland we had more good views of Buff-banded Rail and NZ Kingfisher [the NZ sub-species of Sacred Kingfisher] which we saw most days on the tour, some other native and introduced repeats, and added Kookaburra to our list [uncommon in NZ] with good views of a pair.

Over dinner, Weka and Kookaburra got votes for bird of the day, but most votes were for Little Penguin

9 November 2022 – Day Five

We went to the fabulous Tiritiri Matangi Island today. It's another place where introduced predators have been removed and endangered endemic birds can thrive in endemic trees. Introduced birds, so common elsewhere in NZ, are uncommon here because in this environment they can't compete with the natives for food in native trees. The bird song is spectacular.

We were seeing some of the rare endemics we had already seen 2 days earlier, but added RED-CROWNED PARAKEET, STITCHBIRD, KOKAKO, and RIFLEMAN. Some of the group didn't see the Rifleman but by the end of the tour everyone had a great view of at least one of those somewhere else.

We also got a stonking daylight view of the native owl, Morepork. It was first seen close and in the open, then a few minutes later we found it again, this time on the forest floor just a meter or two from the boardwalk that we were on, with prey in its talons [a Stitchbird]!



An incredibly rare interaction with a morepork feeding during the day. Jerry Broadus.

This is of course a birding tour, but there are one or two other endemic animals that we hope to see, one of them an ancient species that pre-dates dinosaurs-- the Tuatara. Normally we hope to see one at night when we are out looking for Kiwi, but today we got rare views of a big one in daylight.



A tuatara spotted during the day. Jerry Broadus.

After a dinner in the bunkhouse which was cooked by the guides, with help from some of the team, we waited until dusk and then set off with the red-filtered torches that we use for all Kiwi spotting, to look for another species of Kiwi.

We found one that not everyone saw, but on these tours we want everyone to get a view of each of the endemics, and we found another one, and this time everyone got good views of it, LITTLE SPOTTED KIWI.

The brilliant daylight encounter that we'd had with a Morepork won 3 votes for bird of the day. But Little Spotted kiwi got 5.

10 November 2022 – Day Six

The dawn chorus on “Tiri” is unforgettable and most of the group got up for an early walk and were rewarded with great views of a Kokako, much better than the flying one that we saw the day before.

Once we had cleaned up the bunkhouse and loaded our bags into a vehicle that would take them to the wharf, we had a leisurely walk through a lovely track down to the wharf, seeing again most of the rare and endangered species on the Island.



A stunning North Island kokako. Asta Tobiassen.



Grey warbler (grey gerygone). Asta Tobiassen

A water taxi that we had booked to take us to the mainland couldn't come because the sea was too rough for a smaller boat, and the public ferry was also cancelled. We had a contingency plan. A large launch came for us and we were back on the mainland by late morning. We made a slight detour for one of the group to buy a pair of binoculars after his fogged up, and drove south across Auckland.

Normally we would have headed straight down to the famous Pukorokoro Miranda Shorebird centre but tides on the east coast were not good for that plan, so instead we went to a different harbour on the west coast where tides are 3 hours later than at Miranda.

Our prime target was the iconic WRYBILL and we found a small flock of them. There were also Caspian and White-fronted Terns, both Oystercatcher species, more Ruddy Turnstones, and thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red knots. When on several occasions a Swamp Harrier or something else spooked them, the whole flock of about 6000 shorebirds would go up for an impressive sight. There was also a flock of Royal Spoonbills and a flock of the elegant BLACK-BILLED GULLS [another endangered species].

In amongst all the Godwits and knots we managed to pick out a Whimbrel [the asiatic subsp] and we also spotted two vagrant Grey-tailed Tattlers, which may well have been the only two in NZ at the time.

From there we headed south-east to the Firth of Thames and at a river mouth got closer views and photos of Wrybill and a good selection of shorebirds but nothing new.

Over dinner the great views of Kokako on the island early in the morning won bird of the day with 5 votes, but there were 3 for Wrybill and 1 for Red Crowned Parakeet [also seen this morning on the island].



A wrybill showing clearly the bent bill. Asta Tobiassen

11 November 2022 – Day Seven

The tides were good for a visit to the hides at Pukorokoro Miranda this morning so that was our first stop. We were able to stay dry in the main hide but persistent rain spoilt viewing a bit. We added Pacific Golden Plover to our list [some didn't see these ones but got good views of them later in the tour] but we didn't see anything else new among the thousands of shorebirds.

From there we drove further south to an ancient podocarp forest in the central North Island. Shortly after arrival we saw our first YELLOW-CROWNED PARAKEETS, not close views, but we were to get those 1000km further south a few days later. We searched from tracks and from a five-story tower looking over the splendid forest and saw more great birds but no new endemics or other natives.

We headed further south to the Turangi area at the bottom of Lake Taupo. A prime target here was another iconic NZ endemic, a duck that usually only feeds and lives in clean torrent rivers through native forest. We checked several sites that we knew and at one of them found two adult BLUE DUCKS and five newly hatched ducklings.



Adult blue duck swims in the rapids. Asta Tobiassen.

Then at another location we found another adult. This one was on its own and was feeding, partially submerged, in fast flowing water tumbling over boulders in the river. We stood and watched it for about half an hour, sometimes in light rain. Some great videos were recorded.

Next, we went to the southern tip of Lake Taupo. There were hundreds of waterfowl, mostly species we had seen elsewhere, but we added Little Black Cormorant, and Eurasian Coot to our list.

Another nice restaurant and tonight for first time all nine of us were unanimous, we had seen some great birds again, but Blue Duck got all votes for bird of the day.

12 November 2022 – Day Eight

We headed out a bit earlier this morning at 6.45am, because we were looking for a Bittern and other swamp dwellers, and our best chance was early. We tried scanning from a high point without success, but walking down an unsealed road through an area of swamp and reeds we picked out a head poking up, and then 2 Australasian Bitterns flew giving good views for all of us. Another rare and critically endangered bird in the bag! This one is always a challenge to spot. We saw another one flying, and in other nearby places we heard booming. Before we left the Turangi area we reckoned we had either seen or heard 7 different Australasian Bitterns.

Still in the Turangi area we went to another swampy area to look for a different, but still skulking and challenging swamp bird, and managed great views of NZ FERNBIRD.



A fernbird shows really well. Asta Tobiassen.

After loading up with diesel for the Mercedes, and lunches for us [we wouldn't be seeing any more shops for a while] we left the central North Island and headed east towards Hawkes Bay. Even the main road is a bit remote and lonely, but we made a detour through an even more remote route. The detour was to visit a lovely forest with very old and big beech trees and some endemic forest birds. We set off on a walk of an hour and a bit through the forest and got much better views of Rifleman than we'd had on "Tiri" and this

time everyone saw them well, male and female. We found a NZ Fantail on a nest, more North Island Robins and Whiteheads and our first good views of NZ TOMTIT.

Some of us had seen a flying NZ FALCON when we first arrived, we got more views later on when we were high in the forest, and by the end of the tour the whole team had seen at least one.

Back in the van, it was time to wind our way down from the hills and head for the east coast. At a beach near Napier we got great views of male and female BANDED DOTTEREL [Double Banded Plover], more Black-billed Gulls, and coastal birds.



A male double banded plover walking. Asta Tobiassen.

In another good restaurant, this time in Havelock North, the votes for bird of the day were well spread, NZ Fantail, Australasian Bittern, NZ Tomtit, and Banded Dotterel each got 2 votes and NZ Fernbird got 1.

13 November 2022 – Day Nine

The plan today was to drive from the east coast across a wide part of the North Island to the Manawatu Estuary in the west, and we wanted to be there for the high tide which was a bit after midday. We had time though before leaving the east to look for a Black-fronted Dotterel. We checked several known sites without success but then found a couple in an unexpected spot beside the road, and everyone got great views of at least one.

Then we set off to the west, as usual collecting lunches along the way, and got to the Manawatu Estuary in good time. There was a good selection of shorebirds and some more Royal Spoonbills but no new endemics. There was however one addition to our list. Out on a log in the river was a rarity [rare in NZ that is] a Common Tern. This eastern sub-species is quite distinct and has an entirely black bill all year round.

We had some time to spare and knew of a site where a rare [in NZ] species had been roosting so we headed off for that.

A cafe near Whanganui has had Nankeen Night Herons roosting [and hiding during daylight hours] behind it [and makes great coffee and food] . When we got there the cafe was closing for the day, but the friendly staff let us into the garden and we got great views and videos.



A nankeen night-heron peers down. Asta Tobiassen.

Before leaving the area we went to a lake and saw a good array of waterfowl but nothing new. A very obliging NZ Scaup came out of the water and up on to a bank very close to us for our best views of the tour of that endemic.

The fairly spectacular little Black-fronted Dotterel got the most votes for bird of the day with 3. Nankeen Night Heron, Common Tern, NZ Scaup, and Bar-tailed Godwit were other people's favourite for the day.

14 November 2022 – Day Ten

It was time to leave the North Island and drive down to the ferry to cross to the South Island, but that wasn't until the middle of the day so we had time to check some sites along the way from Foxton to Wellington.

We checked out some ponds around Foxton as well as the Manawatu Estuary which was now at low tide. Most of the group had not seen the Pacific Golden Plovers at Pukorokoro Miranda but all saw them here. We weren't able to add any new bird species, but a NZ Fur seal that lumbered down a bank and swam closely past us was interesting, and we got good views of NZ Grebe in one of the ponds.

At a lake a bit further south we got even better views of Black-fronted Dotterel, there was another good array of waterfowl and a tightly packed flock of 71 Little Black Cormorants was impressive. We went from there to two other ponds but didn't add anything to our list.



A great little black-fronted dotterel. Jerry Broadus.

From the decks of the ferry out of Wellington Harbour we saw our first SPOTTED SHAGS and lots of Fluttering Shearwaters. Once we were in the deeper waters of Cook Strait we saw our first WESTLAND PETRELS as well as lots of Fairy Prions, a couple of Sooty Shearwaters, and NZ White-capped Albatross.

In the more sheltered water of the Marlborough Sounds at the top of the South Island there were lots more Fluttering Shearwaters, Red-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns, a Parasitic Jaeger, and our first NZ KING SHAG, a range restricted species that lives only in the Marlborough Sounds.

Apart from birds, we had also seen a pod of Short-beaked Common Dolphins and a Bryde's Whale whilst crossing Cook Strait, and we'd seen Dusky Dolphins in the Sounds.

There was no clear winner of bird of the day today. Black-fronted Dotterel, NZ King Shag, and Little Black Cormorant each got 2 votes and there was 1 each for NZ Grebe, Fluttering Shearwater, and Westland Petrel.

15 November 2022 – Day Eleven

We packed our bags into the van first thing in the morning, and left it locked in the motel secure area. Then we walked a short distance through the small town of Picton to the waterfront, where we boarded a boat with a comfortable seat for each of us, which we had chartered exclusively for ourselves, and our skipper took us out into the spectacular Marlborough Sounds for the morning.

From this smaller boat we gained the best views yet of Fluttering Shearwaters, Little Penguins and Dusky Dolphins which were almost within touching distance. There was also a surprising number of Parasitic Jaegers, not a flock, but we countered 12 individuals.

Our skipper knew exactly how to back our boat quietly in, for great views and photo opportunities of a group of roosting Spotted Shags on a cliff face.

Then a bit further on he did the same, but this time for the much rarer NZ King Shags, another rare NZ endemic. These are restricted to the Marlborough Sounds and there are only about 600 of them. Not everyone had seen the single one from the ferry yesterday but these ones were right in front of us.



A King shag strains its neck. Nancy Houlihan.

After that we headed for an island, lowered a ladder down from the bow on to a remote beach to go ashore, and for a couple of hours had the island to ourselves. As soon as we stepped ashore the local Weka greeted us scurrying around not far from our feet. We had come here for the only chance we would have on the tour for another rare and critically endangered endemic ORANGE-FRONTED PARAKEET [Malherbe's Parakeet] and, after some searching and patience, everyone managed to see at least one, as well as the South Island sub-species of NZ Tomtit, more Bellbirds, and other bush birds, and on the beach a pair of Variable Oystercatchers. We also had a fly-over by a NZ Falcon.

On the way back to Picton we were treated to close views of Dusky Dolphins in the bow-wave of the boat, and at times almost within touching distance.



Dusky dolphins beside the boat. Nancy Houlihan.

We were back ashore in Picton by midday and after walking back to the van we drove off on the South Island leg of the tour. As usual we had bought lunches to take away from a bakery which we ate in a roadside park. Our next stop was a water treatment plant where Royal Spoonbills were breeding and we saw another good array of waterfowl but nothing new for the list.

After that we checked out an area of salt flats and wetlands. More good views of Banded Dotterels, and various introduced finches, Yellowhammers etc but again nothing new.

At the next stop however we did add to our list. There is only one place in NZ where Hoary-headed Grebes breed and that was at a lake that we had pulled in to. There are probably only two breeding pairs here [and therefore only two pairs in NZ] and we had stonking views of a pair of adults feeding a very young greeblet. We also saw a Great Crested Grebe here [the Australasian sub-species that keeps its crest year-round] and a third Grebe species on that lake, NZ Grebe.

In addition, we were getting great views of NZ Scaup, Grey Teal, Australasian Shoveler and other waterfowl and Silvereyes etc in the trees.

The drive down to Kaikoura was through more great scenery, with rolling hills and then spectacular coastal vistas.

Although we don't spend much time looking for introduced species on these tours, Little Owl which had been brought to NZ and released in the 19th century, is an exception that clients who are not British or European, often want us to make. We found one sunning itself on the leaning trunk of a tree.

Later over dinner in a restaurant that we think is Kaikoura's best, Spotted Shag got 4 votes, Orange-fronted Parakeet 3, and there was one vote each for NZ King Shag and Weka.

16 November 2022 – Day Twelve

We were booked today to go out on a pelagic for the morning, but the sea was covered in thick fog.

Our famous skipper, Gary, and other management at "Oceanwings" [AKA Albatross Encounter] were concerned that we wouldn't get our money's worth and seriously questioned whether we wanted to go, but we decided we would. It turned out to be the right decision, and the fog lifted enough for us to have a fantastic morning. The best for months Gary said!

We had close views beside the boat of BULLER'S, NZ WANDERING, NORTHERN ROYAL, and SALVIN'S ALBATROSS, as well as a fifth endemic albatross, White-capped, which we had seen earlier in the tour. The Buller's was the first that Gary had seen since last Autumn. There were Cape, White-chinned, Cook's, Grey-faced and Westland Petrels, Sooty and HUTTON'S SHEARWATER, Fairy Prions, and Northern Giant Petrels. A fly-past by a Wilson's Storm-petrel wasn't seen well by everyone, but all of the Albatrosses and most of the Petrels including Westland, were sitting on the water beside the boat.

There were also NZ Fur seals, and more Dusky Dolphins. Hector's Dolphins are rare, endemic and endangered. They are also small and pretty cute, so it was a real privilege that they chose to come in and investigate our boat and put on a fantastic display, including jumping out of the water very close to us.

After a sit-down lunch in a cafe, some of the group decided to go back out on the water again at their own expense while others had a break in the afternoon. The three that went back out on the water added SOUTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS. Those that didn't got super views of that species later in the tour.

Wilson's Storm-petrel got one vote, so did Cape Petrel, but Buller's Albatross won the day for bird of the day.



Westland petrel feeds beside the boat. Nancy Houlihan.



Stunning capture of a leaping Hector's dolphin. Asta Tobiassen.



A beautiful Buller's Albatross. Nancy Houlihan.

17 November 2022 – Day Thirteen

We drove further south down the east coast of the South Island, stopping for a break at a lake with a wide array of birds but no additions to the list, and then further south ate our lunches beside a river mouth. Exploring that river mouth from both sides gave us another wide array of birds including shorebirds, waterfowl, and our first BLACK-FRONTED TERNS, beautiful endemic terns hawking up and down the river in breeding plumage.

Then it was time to turn inland and head for the mountains. We wound up into the Southern Alps through more beautiful scenery and when we reached Arthurs Pass began searching for an endemic alpine parrot. At the third place that we explored we found what we were looking for, a group of 14 KEA, some adults, some juveniles, that delighted us for over an hour with their antics. Lots and lots of photos were taken!

The team loved walking through moss-covered Mountain Beech forests that are up here, and we had more great views of Rifleman, Tomtit, Bellbird etc and also our first NZ BROWN CREEPERS and a SOUTH ISLAND ROBIN that we could hardly miss because it was hopping around our feet and pecking at shoes and walking sticks while we stood still and quiet.

After dinner the plan was to go out and see if we could at least hear another species of Kiwi [Great Spotted] but the very slim likelihood was made hopeless by the conditions, it rained the whole time we were out, and I think we were all glad to get back to our hotel and get warm and dry.



Kea bounce and play. Asta Tobiassen.



Male South Island tomtit perches on moss. Asta Tobiassen.



A female rifleman amongst the moss. Nancy Houlihan.



The Team! Phil Hammond.

South Island Robin and Black-fronted Tern each got a couple of votes for bird of the day but Kea got 5.

18 November 2022 – Day Fourteen

Before leaving the Mountain Beech forests we walked again and got better views of Brown Creeper and other forest birds and then began winding our way back down to the West Coast, seeing several Weka on the way.

We stopped at a river estuary and some water treatment ponds, lots of birds but no additions. Then we drove through a forest glade to eat our lunches beside a lake. A New Zealand Falcon gave us great views flying past us along the lake edge and then it, or probably another, was soaring above the forest.

The other raptor seen on these tours, is the Swamp Harrier and we saw those on most days of the tour when in open country.

At another lake we had seen more Great Crest Grebes and added Great Egret to the trip list.

There is a species of Koel that breeds only in NZ that we had missed in the North Island but had hopes of still seeing. We searched for it in forests a bit further down on the West Coast near Okarito, and after some frustrations with one calling near us but only giving brief flight views, we finally found a perched one, a LONG-TAILED CUCKOO [KOEL] for everyone to get good views.

After dinner we went out again for another species of Kiwi [Okarito Brown]. Some calls were heard but conditions on this night were just too difficult and there was no sighting.

NZ Falcon got a couple of votes for bird of the day, but all the rest were for Long-tailed Cuckoo.



A road through dense West Coast forest. Nancy Houlihan.



A New Zealand falcon zips past. Jerry Broadus.

19 November 2022 – Day Fifteen

The journey today was from Franz Josef to Wanaka and a lot of the journey was through magnificent ancient forest. We stopped for bathroom breaks, lunch, and forest walks.

At the first stop we saw the South Island sub-species of Kaka for the first time as well as other forest birds. At the next stop we walked for about 45 minutes through lovely coastal rainforest and came out on a remote beach with no road access and settled down to wait for what we hoped would happen, and it did. Everyone got good clear views of one of the world's rarest penguins FIORDLAND CRESTED PENGUIN.

At the right time of year they swim ashore waddle up the narrow, stoney, beach and disappear into the forest and visa versa. We were keeping a good distance to avoid disturbance but through scopes and bins had good views of them on the beach, and bobbing in the surf.

Then we headed back inland still through forest, and high up in Haast Pass we stopped again, this time to walk in high forest where we had great views of more endemic forest birds including probably our best of Rifleman.

Over dinner in Wanaka the bird of the day vote was for the first time unanimous, Fiordland Crested Penguin.

20 November 2022 – Day Sixteen

We had a lot of ground to cover today and a couple of mountain ranges to climb in the trusty Mercedes, so we were loaded up and away by 6.15am. At the top of the Crown Range we stopped briefly for photo ops and a NZ Pipit serenaded us from the top of a monument. We carried on with a few brief stops until we got to Te Anau where we bought lunches for later.

We travelled through alpine rocky plains, tussockland, remote farmland, and a lot more ancient forest until we were back in the Southern Alps to look for a very special bird that has been hard to find, and sometimes missed on tours in recent years. Today we were lucky, and it wasn't long before we all got great views of it, NZ ROCK WREN.

We were also lucky that the Kea that flew in and began looking for mischief as soon as we parked, hooking it's bill into our windscreen wipers etc, didn't do any permanent damage to the Mercedes!

Lower down we had time for another couple of walks in ancient forests and in the first, as well as more endemics that we had already seen, we added another pretty special bird. A male YELLOWHEAD came in and gave us great song and great views for everyone.

At another stop we walked a short distance to beautiful lakes surrounded by forest. As well as another good selection of forest birds, we had good views of the South Island sub-species of NZ Fernbird, and on the very still water there were NZ Scaup, Pacific Black Ducks, and a real surprise a Brown Teal. They are very close to extinct in the South Island!

Dinner was at another really nice restaurant, this time in Te Anau. Yellowhead got 4 votes and Rock Wren 3, but the cheeky Kea got a vote too, as did a NZ Fantail that we had seen on its nest.



A rock wren sits on a rock. Jerry Broadus.



A yellowhead feeds on a mossy trunk. Jerry Broadus.

21 November 2022 – Day Seventeen

Another great effort from the team to all be at the van on time, and we were away at 6.15am again. This time the slightly earlier than usual start was because we had a ferry to catch to the fabulous Stewart Island. There was, as usual time for a bathroom stop along the way and we got to the wharf at Bluff in plenty of time.

We left the van in secure parking and just loaded overnight bags [as well as cameras, bins and other essentials of course] onto the ferry and were off. Crossing Foveaux Strait on the ferry there were Common Diving Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters, Westland and White-chinned Petrels and a new endemic-- FOVEAUX SHAG.

Once on Stewart Island we left our bags at our hotel, ate the pre-packed lunches that were waiting for us at the waterfront, and walked a short distance back to the Oban wharf to board a water taxi. We were going for an afternoon on Ulva, another island from which introduced predators had been removed, and where rare and endangered endemics can thrive.

Before getting to the island there was another great birding experience for us. Our water taxi skipper backed into rocks where, without disturbing them, we got great views from the boat of Fiordland Crested Penguins standing on rocks outside their caves and we were able to get better views than we had a couple of days before.

Once on the island there was another rare and endangered endemic that we needed to see and before we left everyone had an absolutely stonking view of a SOUTH ISLAND SADDLEBACK that came in and foraged right under our noses. The rest of the birding was pretty special too. There is a Stewart Island sub-species of



South Island saddleback. Jerry Broadus.

South Island Robin and we had them around our feet, and we were getting super views of Brown Creeper, Yellowhead, Kaka, and both Yellow-crowned and Red-crowned Parakeet as well as the more common endemics. After we had been walking lovely forest tracks on the island for a couple of hours we came out on a remote beach that we had to ourselves and sat down for a while to rest, listen to the bird song and be entertained by the local Weka. There were Foveaux and Little Pied shags out on the water as well as White-fronted Terns, Variable Oystercatchers and Weka on the beach, and endemic forest birds calling from the bush behind us and occasionally showing themselves.



A red-crowned parakeet poses. Asta Tobiassen.

It had been a super afternoon and we took the water taxi back to our hotel for dinner and a rest.

Once darkness fell we were away for another adventure. We were hoping for another species of Kiwi, but unfortunately it had begun raining and wind was building up too, nevertheless we all piled into a local van and headed off to try. By the time we got to the spot to look, the wind was howling and rain driving. Our attempt lasted only a few minutes, we knew we would still be on the island the next night, and we crossed our fingers for better conditions then.

South Island Saddleback got 7 votes for bird of the day but Weka got a couple too.



A weka explores the beach. Asta Tobiassen.

22 November 2022 – Day Eighteen

It was another day for an all-day pelagic, and what a great day it was. Our large comfortable boat pulled out from the wharf at 8am and we went again past rocks where Fiordland Crested Penguins were standing for more photos and even better views.

From there to an island where we cruised slowly past and picked out a YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN that emerged from vegetation and hopped down rocks to make its way to the sea. It was a three penguin day because Little Penguins were also in the water close to the boat.

We motored out into deeper water to smaller islands where Sub-antarctic Skuas [Brown Skuas] had bred and a couple of them treated us to several very close fly-overs.

Then we went out into deep blue water and began chumming. We had dozens of Albatross around the boat, Northern and Southern Royals, NZ White-capped, Salvin's and an addition to the list, a young Black-browed. Another very welcome addition to the list was Grey-backed Storm-petrel and we had several close fly-bys from them. There were Sooty, Short-tailed, and Buller's Shearwaters, Cape, Cook's Westland, and Northern Giant Petrels, and Fairy Prions. A highlight was another couple of very close Mottled Petrels

On the way back to port the skipper took us past some remote rocks where could get great views and photos of a large roost of Foveaux Shags with both colour morphs represented.



Two Fiordland crested penguins on the rocks. Jerry Broadus.



A yellow-eyed penguin about to jump. Jerry Broadus.



A mottled petrel swings past the boat. Asta Tobiassen.

After dinner we waited for dusk and tried again for Kiwi and this time had super views including different behaviours of SOUTHERN BROWN KIWI.



A Southern brown kiwi at night. Jerry Broadus.

This had been another day when trying to pick just one bird as bird of the day was pretty hard. Southern Brown Kiwi got 4 votes, Brown Skua 2, and there was one each for Yellow-eyed Penguin, Grey-backed stormy, and Little Penguin.

23 November 2022 – Day Nineteen

After breakfast we made our way down to the wharf to board a ferry and head back north to the bottom of the South Island. Once we arrived at Bluff there was an unplanned hold-up getting our van away and we spent some time exploring the local waterfront and a cafe. Our first stop once we did get away was a large lagoon, a wide array of waterfowl but nothing new.

There was quite a long drive north with a few stops along the way. At a cliff-top stop we spotted another Yellow-eyed Penguin and also added another endemic to our list – OTAGO SHAG.

Yellow-eyed Penguin won the day for bird of the day. Other votes were for Little Penguin and Kaka.



A little penguin swims past. Asta Tobiassen.



A little penguin on the rocks. Jim Danzenbaker.

24 November 2022 – Day Twenty

The guides had shown the group 65 of our endemic breeding birds and we were running out of opportunities for any others, but one more chance remained, it was the world's rarest wader and for that we would have to head inland and up into the central high country.

Before leaving the east coast of the South Island we drove a short distance for a pretty spectacular sight. It was a roost of dozens of cormorants, some of them Otago Shags of both colour morph and the others Spotted Shags.

Then we drove inland and back into high country for our prime target for the day, and at a river delta with snow-capped mountains as a backdrop we got our first sighting of a BLACK STILT. Endemic number 66 for the tour. Everyone saw it, but it was a bit distant and we needed to get a better view. While searching for it we also saw more Banded Dotterels, NZ Pipit, another Wrybill foraging around a remote pond that gave us great views, and other open country and wetland endemics that were repeats.

At a remote river, flowing quickly over stones, we had great views of beautiful Black-fronted Terns, and Black-billed Gulls hawking up and down the river, and a surprise addition to our tour list was a White-winged Black Tern in full breeding plumage.

We also went to a wetland and canal area where we had more good views of NZ Scaup, Great crested Grebe and other waterfowl and some of the group got a glimpse of a Marsh Crake [the NZ sub-species of Baillon's Crake] but better was to come the next morning.



A black-fronted tern whizzes past. Asta Tobiassen.



The group looking for black stilt. Jim Danzenbaker.

Another very nice dinner at a good restaurant and we discussed our best birds of the tour as detailed at the start of this report, but did our usual daily checklist as well, and our individual choices for bird of the day, for which the White-winged Black Tern got 6 votes but the distant view of a Black Stilt got a vote and so did Wrybill and Black-fronted Tern.

25 November 2022 – Day Twenty-One

On this last day of the tour there are usually no more endemics that we can show clients and that was the case on this tour too, but we did want to get a better view of Black Stilt. It is after all one of, if not the world's rarest wader, and an iconic very special NZ endemic.

Overnight the guides had received a tip about where a pair had been seen, and we were away in good time in the morning to get a stonking view of that pair on the edge of a little, un-named, remote pond that was not much more than a rain puddle in the middle of nowhere.



A beautiful black stilt. Asta Tobiassen.

We still had a bit more time and went back to a wetland to try again for Marsh Crake. We had no luck at the first two places we tried, but at the third, just a short walk away, we got on to one, and everyone got a good view of this skulking, very difficult, little bird.



A Baillon's crake skulks in the vegetation. Asta Tobiassen.

Back in the van, some of the group were making changes to their list of top ten birds of the tour!

It was time to head back down to the coast and up to Christchurch airport and hotels to say our goodbyes, but there was time to do one final bird of the day vote. It was no surprise that Black Stilt got 6 votes, and Marsh Crake 3.

We made it to Christchurch in good time and said goodbye to a group that had enjoyed each other's company over the 21 days, had helped each other, and were a great group to lead.