

Tour report

19 November – 9 December 2022

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



A white morph Southern giant petrel. Jane Stavert.

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Steve & Becky Turley, Jane Stavert, Chris Sansone, Steve Tabor & Merryl Edelstein

Images

Merryl Edelstein, Jane Stavert, Steve Turley, Sav Saville

19 November 2022 – Day One

We met in the Rose Park Motel at 8 am for a briefing, introductions and to hear the good news that everyone had tested negative for Covid-19!

Into the van and off to an **Australasian Gannet** colony which provided many great photographic opportunities. Cloudy skies, but no rain and magnificent West Coast scenery.

It was about lunchtime by the time we made it across to an estuary, on the Eastern side of the peninsular. This is one of a handful of breeding spots for the extremely rare NZ race of **Fairy Tern** (c 40 individuals), and we were lucky enough to find 2 adults, as well as a **Little Tern** – an uncommon migrant. Plenty of **NZ Dotterels** were about on the estuary.

Next stop was a small lake – where both **NZ and Australian Little Grebes** breed side by side. Around 10 Aussies and a single NZ Grebe were present.

Then to Kerikeri, relatively early to conserve some energy for the night-time kiwi excursion.

The kiwi walk worked very well, with a confiding female **North Island Brown Kiwi** feeding, unconcerned by our presence at about 20' for a15 mins. A bonus male kiwi in the roadside gutter as we drove home also gave cool views in the van headlights.

A **Morepork** was calling tantalisingly close but remained unseen.

20 November 2022 – Day Two

Straight down to Marsden Cove, near Whangarei, for our first pelagic outing on “Sumo” with skipper Steve Martinovich. Chris and Steve stayed ashore, and we picked up 4 independent travellers for the day. For Marsden this was a relatively quiet day on the water, in good conditions, with a stiff Northerly breeze.

The majority of expected birds were present, but mostly in rather lower numbers than hoped for. *Pterodroma* petrels were few and far between, but at least 3 **Pycroft's Petrels** and 30+ **Cook's** were seen as well as a couple of **Grey-faced Petrels**. **Short-tailed** outnumbered **Sooty Shearwater** by almost 2:1 and we only had about 20 **White-faced Storm-petrels**. A **Wilson's** was the only “black-and-white” stormy so one of the major targets eluded us.....for now.....

Flesh-footed Shearwater was the most numerous species with about 200 birds, followed by **Fairy Prion** at around 50. Very few **Black Petrels** showed up and only brief views of a couple of **Buller's Shearwater** – where were they all hiding? About 10 **Little Shearwater** gave typically fleeting views. Short-beaked Common Dolphins were the only marine mammals.

21 November 2022 – Day Three

The early part of the day was spent with yet more **Fairy Terns** – one at the same estuary as before, and the **Little Tern** was also present again. **Banded Dotterel** was new for us there. Then 2 more Fairy Terns : at another location, along with about 100 **Red Knot**, and at a nearby spot. So that meant 4 different Fairies in 2 days – approx. 10% of the entire population!

Then we spent the rest of the day at a Regional Park, the reserve behind a predator-proof fence where many rare creatures thrive. We had great looks at several endemics – **Whitehead, Kaka, North Is Saddleback, Bellbird and Tui** were all showing well. A couple of **Brown Quail** were nice, as were **Banded Rails** and a **Reef Heron**. A very high count of 55 **Brown Teal** was a surprise and testament to the benefits of predator control – this rare endemic duck is not doing well in the truly “wild” predator-infested regions of the country.

We continued on to Warkworth where we were to spend the next 2 nights – cue laundry!!

22 November 2022 – Day Four

The second pelagic of the trip and the forecast was a bit grim! Although the wind was light enough at the start of the day it was expected to rise to 50+kts by midday.....best we get out there and get going.

Since the wind was from the North it was going to be an easy enough ride back, so we were able to stay in place at NW Reef for a reasonable amount of time.

Birds started to arrive as soon as we started to put bait in the water – well over 100 **Cook’s Petrels** wheeled about and the number of **White-faced Storm-petrels** steadily increased, also ending up with more than 100 individuals. A **Wilson’s Storm-petrel** arrived, and then another, and another...until we had an unprecedented 5 Willies in the slick – but no NZ Stormy! The wind continued to rise and the sea state went from calm to rough.....and then, just as it was becoming apparent that we really ought to be “running away bravely” in came a little stripey Storm-petrel to save the day!! Relief from me, and joy for everyone else. **New Zealand Storm-petrel** – the Wrybill Birding Tours logo came to life!

Our skipper did a brilliant job of getting us home in one piece via Kawau Island to look (unsuccessfully) for Weka.

With the pelagic day cut short we returned to the same reserve as yesterday for the afternoon, seeing most of what we had seen yesterday, but adding **North Is Robin** to our list.



A Wilson's storm-petrel skips over the water. Meryll Edlestein.

23 November 2022 – Day Five

The storm of Day 4 had barely abated and our ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island was cancelled. Plan B saw us down near Auckland Airport checking our estuaries trying to salvage something from the disaster – finding **Wrybill** was the main aim, and that was duly accomplished with about 6 birds at one location and 12 at another. A bonus **Whimbrel** and a **Curlew Sandpiper** added to our trip list and the first **Black-billed Gulls** of the tour were enjoyed.

On our way back to Warkworth a beach produced much closer views of **NZ Dotterel**, and a sewage treatment ponds produced **NZ Scaup**, **NZ Grebe** and at least 3 very showy **Shining Cuckoos**. At least the day wasn't a total washout.

24 November 2022 – Day Six

Oh, good grief! The ferry has been cancelled again so we don't even get a day-trip to Tiri. That's a bit of a disaster since we already have "missed" Little Spotted Kiwi, now we will also struggle for Takahe, Kokako and Stitchbird. There are chances for all three species at other locations but not going to Tiri at all is (another!!) unprecedented occurrence for this tour.

It is another windy, showery day. A visit to another Regional Park produced nothing much bar a heard **Spotless Crake**, and attempts to find Bittern at a wetland area were thwarted by ridiculously high water levels, so we headed to Miranda much earlier than anticipated.

The afternoon high tide brought masses of shorebirds into the limeworks area – maybe 5000 **Bar-tailed Godwit** and 1000 **Red Knot** made quite a spectacle as they whirled about. Rather surprisingly there were few additional species in the mix – a few **Ruddy Turnstone**, a single **Whimbrel** and a few **Pacific Golden Plover**.

We eventually found a flock of 45 **PG Plover**, but the main prize was the point-blank views of 56 **Wrybill** roosting by a track. Terrific little birds, doing their best to look cute for the photos.

25 November 2022 – Day Seven

Another day of trying to dodge showers. It was decided that our views of Wrybill last night were not going to be bettered so we set off direct for a large forested area. The logic was that more time spent there would give us the best chance of some dry weather – even though it was rather cold.

A brief stop for **Eurasian Coot** and **NZ Scaup** at a hydro-electric dam and picking up lunch didn't delay our progress by much and we were rewarded with a male **NZ Falcon** overhead almost straight away after our arrival. What was presumably the same bird flew past again a few minutes later with some prey in its talons.

Yellow-crowned Parakeet was picked up at a picnic spot, and there were plenty of **Kaka** about. **North Is Robins** performed in the forest, and the common bush birds all showed, including our first **Tomtit**.

One target bird was conspicuous by its absence – **Long-tailed Cuckoo**. Not even a single call was heard in the "usual" areas, so we tried another location and Bingo! In came a LTC to perch ahead of us and give good, but slightly long-range views.

Still thinking about missing Kokako on Tiri, we decided to press on towards Turangi in the hope of scoring **Blue Duck** today and not needing to spend time looking tomorrow.

This plan worked well – with a pair and 5 ducklings found almost immediately, then 2 more singletons at 2 more locations. We even had time to go for **Fernbird** that evening and at least one bird showed well enough. So, starting to get back on track after the Tiri failure.

26 November 2022 – Day Eight

With no Blue Duck pressure, we turned our attention to **Australasian Bittern**. Birds have been very active at a local spot in the past couple of weeks, but in a pre-breakfast jaunt this morning we saw none – though several booms were heard from at least 2 different locations.

After packing up the van once more we set off across country towards Napier and the Hawkes Bay.

Our first stop was at a seemingly random bit of forest on the main Napier-Taupo highway, where a **Long-tailed Cuckoo** was calling as we left the van. The bird flew and perched in plain view for several minutes. Two perched LTCs in 2 days. The tour running a week behind us saw none....

The long and windy road to another reserve produced good views of 3 **NZ Pipits**, but the forest reserve itself was rather disappointing and singularly failed to provide us with a Kokako (our last chance). And there was no sign of the normally abundant Rifleman here either.

You win some and you lose some I guess – so next it was down to the coast near Napier for good looks at both **Banded** and **Black-fronted Dotterel**.

Final stop for the day was at a friend's place where **NZ Falcon** have been nesting – strangely quiet and no birds seen.....?

Pizza at Sav's place.

27 November 2022 – Day Nine

Back to the **NZ Falcon** site first thing this morning, and as we arrived the male flew past with prey in its talons – a good start!

When we walked up to near the presumed nest site the male flew straight past my head and landed in a tree 20 yards away. Over the next 15 minutes or so he was pretty much in view the whole time allowing cool scope views.

Buoyed by this success we set off again, back across to the West Coast, at Foxton Beach.

A single **Wrybill** was near the other (few) shorebirds – **Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Red Knot**.

Nothing much else to report for the afternoon until our return visit to Foxton brought a distant **Little Egret** feeding in distinctive fashion. This vagrant bird had been present off-and-on for several months.

28 November 2022 – Day Ten

This morning was our final chance to claw back a couple of species missed on Tiri. So, we made our way down to another predator-fenced reserve in the heart of Wellington.

There are some quite steep trails here, and we seemed to take all of them! But the rewards were great with a couple of superb male **Stitchbirds** seen, as well as a male **Takahe**, which seemed to have become quite habituated to humans. Phew!

We also had our only North Is **Rifleman** here – only a sub-species, but maybe still worth banking?

After lunch it was onto the Cook Strait ferry. A fairly standard ferry crossing with the outstanding thing being a couple of thousand **Fairy Prions** (Ferry Prions??). A single **NZ Wandering Albatross** and several **White-capped** and **Salvin's Albatross** were our first albatrosses of the tour. About 8 **Westland Petrels** flew past but none were particularly close, and once in the Marlborough Sounds we also had a **King Shag**, a few **Spotted Shags** and a handful of **Parasitic Jaegers** – all expected species for here.

A breakdown at the head of the queue to leave the ferry was frustrating for about 40 mins but we eventually got in and all was well.

29 November 2022 – Day Eleven

The morning was bright and cool, with no wind – so perfect for a boat trip on Queen Charlotte Sound. The main targets of this trip are Orange-fronted Parakeet, King Shag and the diminutive Hector's Dolphin. All really rare creatures in real terms.

None disappointed! The **King Shags** were very cooperative (36 in total), and the **Hector's** put on a great display. We made a slightly feet-wet landing on an Island and after a short walk arrived at the spot for **Orange-fronted Parakeet** and they performed well, alongside a **South Island Saddleback** and a bunch of super-inquisitive **Weka** – the large flightless (and fearless) Rail.

We had a few **Dusky Dolphins** too.

Back to Picton and off Southwards. First stop for a brief view of **Black-fronted Tern** (but plenty more to come later), then scope views of **Glossy Ibis** at their only NZ breeding site with **Royal Spoonbills**.

A lake stop gave us 3 species of Grebe – another one-off breeding site this time for **Hoary-headed Grebe**, but also **NZ Grebe** (very scarce on South Island) and **Great Crested Grebe**.

Driving on down to Kaikoura, we stopped at Ohau Point to view the large numbers of **NZ Fur Seals** including some new-born pups.

Our final act, after dinner, was to find 2 **Little Owls** in the near dark.



A great view of a spotted shag. Sav Saville.

30 November 2022 – Day Twelve

One of my favourite days of the tour – no driving and a chance for 2 great pelagic trips with my old mate Gazza Melville – plus lunch at the famous seaside BBQ!

The first of our two pelagics was cut short after another passenger fell and broke her wrist – but the list of birds seen in such a short time is quite impressive.

Only one **NZ Wandering Albatross**, but both **Northern and Southern Royal Albatross**, along with several smaller **Salvin's and White-capped Albatross**, lots of **Westland Petrels**, a single **White-chinned Petrel**, lots of **Northern Giant Petrel** and a stunning white morph, Dalmatian-spotted **Southern Giant Petrel**, a **Grey-faced Petrel** and lots of **Hutton's Shearwater**, **Sooty Shear**, **Buller's Shear** and a couple of **Flesh-footed Shearwater**. In yet another first for a Wrybill Tour – no Cape Petrel??

Both **Hector's** and **Dusky Dolphins** performed for us and a distant **Sperm Whale** was seen.

Much better, closer, views of **Little Owl** were had in the daylight at about 4.30pm.



A white morph Southern giant petrel at the back of the boat. Jane Stavert.

1 December 2022 – Day Thirteen

Leaving Kaikoura and heading South towards Christchurch our first birding attempt was at an estuary, where a ridiculously high tide meant the hoped for shorebirding was not possible.

A **Mute Swan** and a small photogenic colony of **Pied** and **Little Pied Shags** was hardly a compensation.

However, better things were to come – mostly in the shape of the Famous Sheffield Pie Shop!! Best pies in New Zealand.

And so on to Arthur's Pass, and the Kea – the World's only carnivorous, Alpine Parrot – and what a character! 7 **Keas** were found around the Café in the centre of town – as if they owned it.

The nature walk nearby produced some good birds as well – with epic views of a male **Rifleman**, as well as lovely (South Island) **Tomtits**, and **Brown Creeper**.

A few **Black-fronted Terns** showed on a river later.

After dark, we made an attempt to at least hear a Great Spotted Kiwi – but nothing doing, except for a **Morepork** or two calling.



The Wold famous Sheffield Pie Shop. Jane Stavert.

2 December 2022 – Day Fourteen

Three more **Kea** were seen as we left Arthurs Pass village to descend back to the coast. It was a nice sunny, relatively warm day, but a couple of forested spots on the way South produced nothing noteworthy – so we proceeded to Okarito to meet up with Ian Cooper, tonight's kiwi guide.

Just prior to meeting Ian we looked for **Fernbird** and were rewarded with awesome close views. After our briefing, we looked at a forested area and had a few **South Island Robins**, **Brown Creeper** and a lovely **black morph NZ Fantail**.

The evening Okarito Kiwi expedition was frustrating to say the least. No calls heard, and no bird seen – but we did hear one moving in the bush at about 5 feet range. Many **Morepork** were heard along with **Kea**, but the nearest bird just refused to show – and we were moving too quickly (under Ian's direction) to really stop and look.

3 December 2022 – Day Fifteen

Kea were calling around Franz Josef township as we woke up after a bit of a lie-in due to the late night before. First up was a relatively quick drive down to a scenic lake to look for NZ Falcon while having a decent coffee. No Falcons were seen but **NZ Pigeons** feeding on the ground was an unusual sight, and we had great views of **Bellbirds** feeding in the flax bushes.

Next, we stopped at a forest trail. Deciding that a walk down to the beach would likely not produce Fiordland Crested Penguin at this date, spent time investigating the area and a pair of **NZ Falcons** flew overhead.

The beech forest was fairly quiet, but did produce excellent views of 5 or more **Riflemen**, a couple of **Yellow-crowned Parakeets** and **Tomtits**. A **Shining Cuckoo** was calling but not seen.

Our final stop of the day was at a lake, where **NZ Scaup** and particularly **Great Crested Grebes** put on a brilliant show.

4 December 2022 – Day Sixteen

A cool and windy day with spitting rain did not bode well for our attempt at Rock Wren – but undeterred we set off anyway. The Rock Wren site has incredibly beautiful scenery, and when Jane spotted a bit of movement that turned into a male **Rock Wren** it was a magical moment (for me at least!!). The pair of wrens eventually came and displayed right in front of us, giving fantastic looks.

Sharp eyes from the van spotted a “duck on a rock” – which could really only be a Blue Duck in this area, so a quick u-turn was made and sure enough a pair of **Blue Ducks** were right there by the roadside.

A forest walk was next with a fleeting **NZ Falcon** smashing across the road ahead of us, and the usual suspects present in the delightful “Fairy Forest” – **SI Robin, Rifleman, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Kaka** heard overhead.

Plenty of **Black-fronted Terns** and a **NZ Pipit** were showy at another stop.

Final act of the day was a visit to a remarkable wetland area which had been made by an old friend of Wrybill, Ian Clow who used to skipper a boat that we used from Whitianga. He thinks there are both sorts of crakes there and it took only seconds to see a **Baillon’s Crake** run between reed clumps. Another bird, seen a few minutes later, lingered longer and was accompanied by a tiny black fluffy chick.

That turned out to be a pretty good day by any standards.....

5 December 2022 – Day Seventeen

Direct to the ferry at Bluff, and soon onto our first new bird of the day the recently split **Foveaux Shag**. An overcast day, with drizzle turning to rain – and a less than productive ferry crossing : one **Southern Royal Albatross**, a couple of **White-capped Alb**, very few **Sooty Shearwaters, Fairy Prions** and about 30 **Common Diving Petrel** was the tally.

An afternoon on Ulva Island followed – no Fiordland Crested Penguin on the way there, but nice birds showing really well at times on the island. At least 3 different groups of mixed species included **Yellowhead, Brown Creeper**, both **Red-crowned** and **Yellow-crowned Parakeet** and **South Island Saddlebacks**. Yellowhead in particular gave splendid close views.

Plenty of **SI Robins**, a few **Kaka** and a handful of **Weka** completed the bird list, and a female **NZ Sealion** was partly blocking the path off Sydney Cove.

Our water taxi ride home started with a group of 4 **Little Blue Penguins** ahead of the boat, and then the skipper and I both spotted a welcome sight on some rocks – a handsome **Fiordland Crested Penguin**.

That turned out to be the last noteworthy bird of the day since it just poured with rain that night and our kiwi spotting excursion was cancelled.



A South Island saddleback foraging on the ground. Steve Turley.

6 December 2022 – Day Eighteen

The Stewart pelagic can be the make-or-break day of these tours – particularly in terms of the number of species, but also the spectacle of huge numbers of birds when it all works out. It all worked out today!!

We had 4 **Little Blue Penguins**, 3 plus 1 **Fiordland Penguins** and 2 **Yellow-eyed Penguins** before 10am so that's a pretty good start! Our first **Cape Petrel** of the tour was welcome (as were the other 20 or so later), and **Brown Skuas** did their normal thing catching bits of fish thrown up for them.

We passed huge flocks of **Sooty Shearwaters** (3000?), and a constant stream of **Common Diving Petrels** (500?) on our way out to Wreck Reef and we were followed by about 20 **White-capped** and **Salvin's Albatross**. The reef itself was all go, right from the start – a **Northern Royal Albatross** flew past, then the first of about 25 **Southern Royal Albatross** came in to join the growing numbers of **White-capped Albies**. Soon an adult **Campbell Albatross** arrived, and then another, and finally an immature Campbell was also present. A **White-chinned Petrel** stooged about and then in came an almost pure white morph **Southern Giant Petrel** (our second of the tour – yawn.....).



Campbell albatross swimming past. Merryl Edelstein.

With albatross numbers hitting three figures, a few **Cook's Petrels** flashing by, plenty of **Fairy Prions** about, we were only really missing a storm-petrel or two – until first one then two and then three **Grey-backed Storm-petrels** showed up and performed in our slick for ages.

This was all about to pale into insignificance. As I was making a cup of tea in the galley, I looked out of the window to see an unmistakable shape fly past – panic set in hoping that those outside would also be able to see it. It wasn't as problem because the **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross** stayed with us for a few minutes. An exquisite bird, graceful and huge, and a real rarity off the main 3 islands of NZ – a new bird for Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ as well.

As we were leaving an adult **Black-browed Albatross** slotted into the wake and followed us for a while (7 albatross species for the day). On the way home we stopped for looks at one of the larger **Foveaux Shag** colonies, holding over a 100 birds.

Unfinished business with the kiwis though – so at about 10 pm we set off up to a private area to look for **Southern Brown Kiwi**. We were not disappointed as a female kiwi fed in the open for about 15 minutes just in front of us. A few of the group also saw a second bird run past.

What a great day!!



A light-mantled sooty albatross, a real star of the show. Steve Turley.

7 December 2022 – Day Nineteen

A gusty wind across the Foveaux Strait made birding quite tricky, but our efforts outside were rewarded by a brief **Mottled Petrel**.

A **Brown Skua** followed the ferry for a while, and there were quite a few **Fairy Prions** about and what were almost certainly a couple of **Broad-billed Prions** which we just couldn't nail in the conditions.

A visit to a nice wetland gave us a couple of trip ticks in the form of 2 **Pectoral** and 2 **Sharp-tailed Sandpipers**, before the long drive up to the Oamaru area.

Katiki Point lighthouse allowed us scope views of one **Yellow-eyed Penguin**, and we noted none at another beach site for the species which is in steep decline.

Finally, about 500 **Otago Shags** along with 150+ **Spotted Shags** were seen before reaching our accommodation.



A yellow-eyed penguin stands guard. Steve Turley.

8 December 2022 – Day Twenty

Only one bird to go.....Black Stilt. I had been in the area just a month before and had struggled badly to find them at any of their usual haunts, so I was anxious and hoping that intelligence from our other guides in the meanwhile would hold good.

I shouldn't have worried. A pair of **Black Stilts** were present on a lake that they have used for ages. They even came and did a flypast for us before disappearing! Cheered up by this we got permission from a farmer to go onto his land and found another 3 pure **Black Stilts** and one very high grade hybrid.

We spent some time at a **Black-fronted Tern** colony on a local river, mostly to look (unsuccessfully) for a breeding plumage White-winged Tern which had been recently reported. A few **Wrybill** and lots of **Banded Dotterels** were on the river.

Towards the end of the day we found another pair of **Black Stilt**, plus more **Black-fronted Terns** at another location.



The black stilt hunters are happy. Sav Saville.

9 December 2022 – Day Twenty-One

A non-birding transit up to the airport at Christchurch to say farewell to the group. Good times and a total trip list of 156.

Thanks to all for the excellent eyes, helping me out by finding heaps of the birds yourselves.