

Tour report

26 November – 16 December 2022

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Surely one of the most beautiful terns in the World, the Black-fronted tern

Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Barry Edmonston & Sharon Lee, John Couchman & Hinke Mulhaupt, Pierre Poulin & Ginette Roy, Philippe Blain, and Raymond Garrett

Images

All images by Matt Jones

We had an incredible 21-day birding tour of New Zealand and finished with a very respectable 154 species seen.

Lots of lifers were seen. The highlights - seeing multiple North Island Brown Kiwis, the 24 hours birding on Tiritiri Matangi with great looks at Takahē with chick, Stitchbirds feeding and calling all around us, and of course the unfazed Little Spotted Kiwi. Great looks at New Zealand Falcon, King Shags and Orange-fronted Parakeet, not forgetting the amazing sight of a huge pod of Dusky Dolphins while on the boat at Kaikoura.

Sometimes the weather gods were against us, especially on the West Coast. We missed Okarito Kiwi and Fiordland Crested Penguin but even when the weather was against us, we found the illusive Rock Wren.

Good ole Stewart Island came to the party, with Ulva Island and the Pelagic delivering the birds.

Just seeing birds like Yellow-eyed Penguin, Black Stilt, and South Island Saddleback, which are such rare birds. And dare I mention finding Australasian Bittern at the eleventh hour!

As a guide it was such a pleasure to share these very special birds with a fun bunch of birders.

Matt Jones(Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

26 November 2022 – Day One

After a slightly COVID complicated start, the wheels on the van rolled out of our Auckland hotel towards our first port of call which was an Australian Gannet colony. Next stop was very important, the first bakery off the tour as we grabbed some lunch! Then to sewage ponds for our first looks at some of the more common wildfowl - Black Swans, NZ Scaup, Aussie Shovelers - plus our first Shining Cuckoo and Grey Warbler. A small beach for lunch was where we got looks at our first NZ Dotterels along with a few Variable Oystercatchers.

Further north we stopped at a tidal estuary for one of the major target birds. It didn't take long to find the tiny Fairy Tern hawking up and down the dropping tide. Amazingly we found a Little Tern at the same location. This vagrant is really the only species that can be confused with the resident Fairy Tern. At the estuary we also found more NZ Dotterels, Bar-tailed Godwits and Ruddy Turnstones. At a man-made lake sitting in amongst a new housing estate, our two main targets were quickly in the bag or on the list - New Zealand Dabchick and Australian Little Grebe - sharing this lake with Pied Stilts, Paradise Shelducks and Masked Lapwings.

Later we checked into our motel and enjoyed a very nice meal before the search for our first Kiwi of the tour. There are five kiwi species endemic to NZ, and as a whole they are shy nocturnal birds. So, after an hour and half when we returned to the van, we had seen at least six North Island Brown Kiwi, and heard quite a few others. Wow what a start to a tour. It's safe to say all slept well that night, dreaming of Kiwi.

27 November 2022 – Day Two

Out early this morning and on the road south to Marsden Cove for our first pelagic of the tour. The sea was a bit sloppy as we headed away from shelter of land, but we added a few good birds to our list. First to arrive were the fairly common Fluttering Shearwaters and as we got into deeper water, Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters showed up. Checking through the Cook's Petrels we grabbed a couple of sought after Pycroft's Petrel, which can be a challenge to pick out quickly. A couple of Black-winged Petrels were a bit easier to get onto with their noticeably thicker black broader underwing pattern. It's a bit of a bonus to find these northern breeders this far south. We got our first looks at the very smart Black (Parkinson's) Petrel. Another big target for the day was the New Zealand Storm-Petrel. We saw a few of these small seabirds but they were out-numbered by the more abundant White-faced Storm Petrel along with plenty of Fairy Prions. A bonus was seeing a couple of Short-tailed Shearwaters.

We headed for a bit of shelter around some nearby islands and added NZ Pipit to the list and got distant looks at Kaka. Chummed at another location got Common Diving Petrel on the list plus plenty of Australasian Gannets.

All too quickly it was time to head back to land. I think some folks were glad to get off the water and into our Whangarei motel for the night.

28 November 2022 – Day Three

After breakfast we headed to an estuary we'd visited a couple days ago, and reconnected with the Fairy and Little Terns, and their bigger cousin the Caspian Tern. Bar-tailed godwits, Variable Oystercatchers, Ruddy Turnstones and NZ Dotterels also present. A predator free reserve provided our first chance of forest birding and we found our first Whiteheads. Better looks at Bellbird and Tui. Other new birds seen: North Island Robin, and North Island Saddleback which gave us a bit of a run around before showing well.



Beside a forest stream we had great looks at more than thirty Brown Teal. Matt found a pair of Takahe - always great to see these somewhat shy birds. We happily showed our find to a passing family.

One of the other highlights was a very approachable Kaka that sat in a tree just above heads and kept the photographers happy. On the way to our motel we had the briefest of looks at a Laughing Kookaburra that flew over the road!



29 November 2022 – Day Four

We grabbed coffee and lunch in preparation for our second pelagic, but prior to boarding walked around a small park adjacent to the wharf, getting much better views of Buff-banded rail than the brief glimpse yesterday. We also saw NZ Pigeon and Sacred Kingfisher. Once on the vessel we headed out to open water, passing Pied Shags on the coastal rocks and stopping for looks at a couple of Little Blue Penguins.

First seabirds to arrive were numerous Fluttering Shearwaters, quickly followed by Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters. We saw more attractive Black Petrels and Cook's Petrels, and some Short-tailed Shearwaters. Fairy prions and White-faced Storm Petrels seemed plentiful, but we struggled to get great looks at New Zealand Storm-petrel. Thank goodness we had better views a couple of days earlier.

The one species that we did add to the list was Little Shearwater, which can be rather aloof and hard to pick out, and we had a few. More Common Diving Petrels and Australasian Gannets bulked out the list.



30 November 2022 – Day Five

Everyone was up early this morning, Matt even earlier and to the local supermarket because today was a big day in the tour schedule. We were heading over to Tiritiri Matangi, a predator free island. First, there was time for a walk around an area near the harbour, and we saw Buff-banded Rail and few of the more common forest birds. Once at the wharf, we met the water taxi and took aboard all our gear for the next 24 hours. On the crossing we saw our first Arctic Skua and a few Fluttering Shearwaters and Gannets.

Once at Tiritiri Matangi Island we had a debrief from the Warden/Ranger about the do's and don'ts and were then free to go birding. We had a shopping list - Tiri holds a few species that we need and that we can't find easily elsewhere so we reconnected with North Island Saddlebacks, found our first Red-crowned Parakeets. North Island Robins and Whiteheads also re-found. A sharp zapping sound was heard. We found a sugar water feeder and there was the culprit, the stunning Stitchbird, or Maori name Hihi. The early European settlers called the bird the Stitchbird because they thought the contact call resembles the word

stich. To me it sounds like an electric bug zapper. An important bird to get on our list. Plenty of Tui, Bellbird and NZ Pigeon were also seen.

Our accommodation for the night was the bunkhouse so we dropped our gear off and ate lunch. A quick search before heading out for the afternoon's birding, we added Rifleman, New Zealand's smallest bird to our list. Walking the length of the island we found a family of Takahe with a fluffy black chick. Very special. During our walk we found lots of NI Saddlebacks and Whiteheads, Robins and Stitchbird - and even a daytime Tuatara.

One prize was missing. Walking slowly back to the bunkhouse on the side of trail ahead of us was a North Island Kokako. This incredibly rare endemic wattle bird was just in front of us, and everyone got onto it.

After a BBQ meal cooked by Matt with all the troops helping out, you guessed it, it was time to go night birding! We set off down the road, listening carefully for any sound. Not much joy but we arrived at the wharf where we had arrived earlier in the day and BOOM! Right in front of us walking around in the open was an adult male Little Spotted Kiwi. The bird sniffed around the wharf shed and disappeared into the bush. Very happy with our sighting of our second kiwi species of the trip we decided to head back to the bunkhouse by another route. We didn't see any more kiwi but did find a couple of Morepork flitting around beside the track. These endemic owls are always a bit hit and miss on tour. We'd seen everything on our wish list so a good day's birding.

1 December 2022 – Day Six

No time for a lie-in! We were out listening to the dawn chorus and birding pre breakfast. With the pressure off, having got all our target birds yesterday, it was just nice to bird for the enjoyment of it. We re-found and saw Saddlebacks, Robins, Whiteheads, Red-crowned Parakeets, Brown Quail, Stitchbird - and even a couple more North Island Kokako that fed above us as we sat on a bench in the bush. Back to the bunkhouse for breakfast and a repack before going back down to the wharf to meet our water taxi to take us back to the mainland. We met Brent and his group who were arriving on the island and said our hellos and goodbyes.

Once on the mainland it was back to the van and onto the highway south, watching the Auckland skyline in front and then disappear behind us. We checked at the Miranda Shorebird Centre to see what was around (and some retail therapy) then headed out to the reserve. We found our first Wrybill with some Ruddy Turnstones on the rising tide and our second Little Tern of the tour. Around to the hides we saw plenty of Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot, new sightings were South Island Pied Oystercatchers and their bigger cousin the Variable Oystercatcher. Black-billed and Red-billed Gulls together for an ID challenge. The two new bonus birds of the day were Far-eastern Curlew and the Eurasian Whimbrel which are not very common these days in New Zealand. Other new birds seen were Royal Spoonbills and the smart looking Grey Teal.

2 December 2022 – Day Seven

This morning we birded Miranda pre breakfast finding Pacific Golden Plover, which was new for the trip. Unfortunately, the tide was very low so we headed back for breakfast before heading south for a bit of a drive to our next stop - lunch in a clearing surrounded by native forest - and chances for a few new birds to add to our first week birding in New Zealand.

We found and heard Kaka flying above us and added Yellow-crowned Parakeet to the list. These small endemic parrots were whizzing around us calling and landing in the trees, giving good but brief views. Whiteheads, Bellbirds, Tui and South Island Robins were all see again. We saw our first New Zealand Falcon of the trip but didn't hear or find Long-tailed or Shining Cuckoo. After a few hours birding around the forest we headed east towards our motel for the night. We stopped enroute and found a pair of Blue Duck. It was great to see this pair with four very cute humbug coloured ducklings swimming with parents on the fast flowing river. Just awesome to witness.





3 December 2022 – Day Eight

Up before the birds and back to the river where we found another lone Blue Duck, then out to a large swampy area. Plenty of New Zealand Scaup and Black Swans. A few NZ Dabchicks with stripy chicks. Our first Eurasian Coot and Little Black cormorants, seen in between Little Pied and Great cormorants and plenty of Black-billed Gulls flying around. We looked and failed to find Fernbird. We did hear a very distant Australasian Bittern but could not find one. A change of location had a few Swamp Harriers flying over the reed beds, a faint hope that they were Bitterns but - no.

Back to the motel for breakfast before hitting the road. We failed to find any Long-tailed cuckoo at our next stop. Lunch was enjoyed at the last bit of native northern forest of the tour and we saw our last North Island Robins playing hide and seek with a pair of North Island Kokako. Eventually we all got to see them hiding high in the canopy. We also found Rifleman, Whiteheads, Tui, Bellbirds and Kaka. Down into Napier and a bit of urban birding around a city park - great views of the more common species - Pukeko, Black-billed Gull, Coot, Royal Spoonbill, and Little Pied cormorant.

A very nice Indian meal this evening to celebrate Matt's birthday - and a slice of chocolate cake for dessert, thanks guys!

4 December 2022 – Day Nine

A pedestrian bridge next to the state highway provided the spot for two new species to join our trip list. Feeding on the muddy riverbank among a small flock of waders was a handful of very smart Banded Dotterels joined by the much smaller Black-fronted Dotterels. Noisy Pied Stilts were also present being their usual aggressive selves, with their constant yapping call. Moving on to a nearby estuary where White-winged Tern had been reported, we scanned the estuary and islands without any luck. Incredibly we found a Little Tern hawking over the far bank of the estuary, our third of the tour. The very exotic (introduced) Indian Peafowl was next to join the list - plenty of males and females were seen. Keeping it real, next up were great views of a stunning male New Zealand Falcon.

Spanning from the East Coast to the west after a few hours of driving we pulled into a cafe car park for a cuppa. The best thing about this little cafe is that it's probably the best and only place in New Zealand to see Nankeen Night Heron, which we saw in a tree in the cafe grounds. This species is a very recent coloniser to New Zealand and only number into a few hundred individuals.

Southwards into the small town of Foxton for the night and Matt was back on BBQ duties.

5 December 2022 – Day Ten

Heading towards the Manawatu Estuary, we stopped at a small pond enroute to see NZ Scaup, NZ Dabchicks and Grey Teal. Once at the Estuary the tide was just coming in, so we had good views of flocks of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knot flying onto the sand bar in front of us, along with a few Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers. Luck was on our side this morning, because sitting on the mud flats in amongst the gulls was a lone tern - a Common Tern - ironically not very common in New Zealand. And bonus bird was a very active Little Egret, yet again surprisingly an unusual vagrant. On our way to New Zealand's capital, Wellington, we stopped for lunch and checked out a few ducks on a sewage pond - well, it is a birding tour!

Leaving the North Island behind us we headed south on the ferry to Picton. On the crossing we saw our first albatross, a White-capped Albatross, plus Fluttering and Sooty Shearwaters and a few Fairy Prions. Once into the Sounds we saw Australasian Gannets, White-fronted Terns, a couple of Little Blue Penguins and a distant look at single King Shag.

We were in Picton overnight and after a big driving day we were all glad to stretch our legs and be able to walk to the nearby restaurant for dinner.



Arriving to the South Island

6 December 2022 – Day Eleven

After an early breakfast we assembled at the wharf for a debrief before heading out into Queen Charlotte Sound. A new day, a new island, and the promise of new birds. This morning we had two target birds - King Shag and Orange-fronted Parakeet. First to be seen was the very rare and shy New Zealand King Shag AKA Rough Faced Shag. This bird is a very localised endemic so it was great to get really good looks at a few birds on the rocks as well as some Spotted Shags, New Zealand Fur Seals and even brief views of Hector's and Dusky Dolphins.

The vessel dropped us off at a small island and we were greeted by our first Weka of the trip. Rails are typically shy secretive species, but not Weka, they happily checked us out. Fortunately, it didn't take us too long to find our second target bird - we watched two very relaxed Orange-fronted Parakeet (sometimes known as Malherbe's Parakeet) through a small gap in the tree line. This was really our only chance of seeing this rare endemic so views and photos were grabbed. We also saw a very showy South Island Tomtit, NZ Pigeon and Bellbirds before getting back on the vessel to Picton.



A Spotted Shag (above) and the much sought after Orange-fronted parakeet.

South of Picton we tried to find Cirl Bunting. This introduced European bird is always a bit hit and miss, and this time we missed! We also failed to see any Glossy Ibis. This self-introduced bird is not particularly common. Our luck changed a bit further down the road at a small roadside lake. Not one, but three Grebe species, a single NZ Dabchick, and at least three Hoary-headed Grebes. These self-introduced grebes are incredibly rare in New Zealand, but this lake seems to be their stronghold. The third Grebe species was the Australasian Great Crested Grebe and we saw at least two or three of these birds. For all intents and purposes they look very similar to the Great Crested Grebes found in Europe, but they never go into winter plumage. Also on the lake were White-faced Herons, Aussie Shovelers, Grey Teal and NZ Scaup.



Yellow-spotted dragonfly

Our next stop was a bit pungent - we opened the doors of the van and could smell the New Zealand Fur seal colony below us. We watched the larger bulls sleeping on the rocks along with playful and cute pups. We also found a lone young Southern Elephant Seal - such a bonus to see these creatures from the Subantarctic Islands.

The eastern coastal town of Kaikoura was to be our base for the next couple of nights. We found Little Owl sitting out in the open on the way to the restaurant that evening which was a great end to a very productive days birding. The South Island had started with a bang.



Juvenile Elephant seal, with fur seals.

7 December 2022 – Day Twelve

Kaikoura offers one of the best locations in the world to see seabirds up close and personal. 6am we were leaving the small harbour of South Bay with Gary Gazza Melville at the helm. Heading out to deeper water we soon had a couple of Northern Giant Petrels following the boat. Near a local fishing boat we started to pick out the different species – Antipodean (Gibson's) Albatross, Southern Royal Albatross, Northern Royal

Albatross. These three species of Albatross are the most impressive of birds and with such close looks you can really see the subtle differences. They were joined by the smaller Albatross - White-capped, Salvin's and Black-browed Albatross. It's not all Albatross on these pelagic. It was great to see and hear Northern Giant Petrels squabbling at the rear of the boat who were joined by a single Southern Giant Petrel, picked out by its peppermint green tip to the bill. Smaller but just as aggressive and noisy were the smart looking Cape-petrels. A change of location provided White-chinned Petrels and Westland - always great to challenge yourself with separating these two species.

Back on dry land we had another brief look for Cirl Buntings on the way to grab some brunch at the Encounter Cafe, but once again no joy. Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, even Yellowhammer. After brunch there was a bit of time for retail therapy at the cafe, Ginette was super happy with her purchases and at 1pm we headed back out with Gazza for our second pelagic. You can never have too much of a good thing!

On this second trip we pretty much had the same species of birds including Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwater - just like the White-chinned and Westland Petrels it's great to see these very similar species side by side. Buller's and Flesh-footed Shearwaters from the north, and Fairy Prions skipped through. We also saw the local endemic Hutton's Shearwaters, always a bit shy and stand offish. The top sighting of this trip was the amazing display put on by 100+ Dusky Dolphins that jumped, leapt, and splashed all around us. Truly special.





Hutton's shearwater



Dusky dolphins.



Dusky dolphins cavorting

8 December 2022 – Day Thirteen

We left Kaikoura early heading south to the South Island's biggest city, Christchurch. The journey was broken with a stop at a small park where we found plenty of wildfowl. Black Swans, Grey Teal, Paradise Shelducks to name but a few. At an Estuary we found our first Black-fronted Terns, Bar-tailed Godwits, Ruddy Turnstones, Banded Dotterels, Royal Spoonbills and all three gull species. From the estuary to the northern outskirts of Christchurch, we headed inland towards the spine of the South Island and the Southern Alps. The next very important stop was lunch at the world famous Sheffield Pie Shop. Savoury and sweet were enjoyed.

After a pie it's always good to try and find a lifer! At the Hawdon Valley we walked off our lunch in the beech forest, finding Brown Creeper / Pipipi. For American readers this is not the American Brown Creeper, it's often known in field guides by its Maori name Pipipi. A social little bird, often found in small flocks looks very similar to a Chickadee. We had a good encounter with a couple of birds then found another lifer, a South Island Robin, which showed well. A small group of Kea were hanging around in a garden as we stopped at Arthur's Pass village - even in this semi-urban environment this Alpine parrot is always a great pleasure to witness.

Our very smart hotel was set amongst the mountains. We enjoyed a great meal at their restaurant as the rain and mist rolled in to hide the wonderful view. Time to call it a night.

9 December 2022 – Day Fourteen

The rain had eased somewhat by the morning so after breakfast we headed back into the village. First for a bit of retail therapy, and then into the bush for a walk, finding Rifleman, South Island Tomtit, Robin, Grey warbler and NZ Fantail.

The rain was with us most of the day as we headed towards the stunning West Coast, but in between showers we managed lunch at Ross Beach on the way to the very small village of Okarito. We found a new bird driving into the village in the shape of a Great Egret or White Heron. This is the only place in New Zealand where these birds breed. We met Ian Cooper for a debrief about this evening's kiwi spotting, and once we were all up to speed we went for a walk. Matt heard a distinctive call. A few minutes later we all had seen the very skulky Fernbird. We should have seen this shy bird earlier on the trip so good to get this one back.

Once at our motel we all attempted to dry some clothing off and headed next door to the restaurant, listening to more rain hitting the roof. The rain eased enough for us to try and attempt kiwi spotting, but the gods were not with us tonight. We didn't even hear a call. Seeing Kiwi in the wild is always a challenge and Ian had tried his best. Sadly, the rarest Kiwi had gotten away from us.

10 December 2022 – Day Fifteen

Rain, rain, and rain was to today's theme. The drive down the West Coast can be stunning but the only thing enjoying today's weather was the wiper blades on the van. They didn't stop.

From Franz Josef south towards the next village of Fox Glacier, we stopped for coffee for us and some fuel for the van. A bush walk to a remote beach north of Haast was an opportunity for the weather gods to drench us all once again. Trudging back to the van the weather began to ease and we were rewarded with a male NZ Falcon flying. At a lovely area of native forest we hoped to hear and find Yellowhead/Mohua but again came up short, but we did get good views of Rifleman.

Southwards we eventually left the constant rain behind us, and arrived into the small lake town of Wanaka. We ate a fantastic Indian meal that night and retired to our warm comfortable motel. After a very challenging day, good food and a well deserved beer, the day didn't seem too bad.

11 December 2022 – Day Sixteen

We left Wanaka before sunrise and drove through the stunning alpine Cardrona Pass, stopping to check out the view towards Queenstown. Through the Southland farmland we arrived at Te Anau to purchase some lunch and stretch our legs before heading back into the mountains. Today was all about finding one species. We arrived at a small car park and were greeted by the local Kea.



A short walk into a clearing at the base of some impressive mountains we searched and listened for a very nervous hour and half, but couldn't locate our prize. The group split up - Matt was standing alone on a large boulder, when a call and movement caught his eye. In front of him stood a female Rock Wren, with its bobbing up and down motion, it came straight towards him. He got everyone's attention, and everyone got onto this fantastic little alpine bird. It got better as the female was joined by a cracking little male. With an awesome encounter in the bag we headed back to the van, and drove towards Milford Sound, where we shared lunch with sand flies. We had brief views of a Weka, as we headed back through the pass, along with a few more Kea.



A curious Kea.





A great walk through some fantastic beech forest we found South Island Robin, Rifleman, Bellbird and Tomtit. Closer to the river, we got amazing views of Black-fronted Terns and South Island Pied Oystercatchers. Back into Te Anau, a walk through the local park on the way to the restaurant that evening got us plenty of Common Redpoll enroute.

12 December 2022 – Day Seventeen

A brief stop during our early drive through Southland we added Marsh Crake aka Baillon's Crake to our ever growing trip list. Black-fronted Terns and Black-billed Gulls were seen feeding in the fields. At Invercargill we filled the van with fuel and continued south to the town of Bluff for the ferry sailing to Stewart Island, the home of our guide Matt.

A big island with 400 or so permanent residents and in birding terms very important to the trip. Our group was spread around in different accommodation for this trip, so once everyone was checked in we reconvened for a quick bite to eat before heading over to Ulva Island by water taxi. A quick search for Fiordland Crested Penguins on the way but no luck. Ulva Island is home to a lot of special birds but our two main targets were Yellowhead and the super rare South Island Saddleback. On our walk through the beautiful primeval forest of Ulva Island we had great encounters with the very friendly South Island Robin and inquisitive Stewart Island Weka, good looks at Brown creeper, Rifleman, Red-crowned Parakeet and Kaka - as well as the gorgeous Yellowhead and super rare South Island Saddleback. A bonus large male NZ Sealion too.

After dinner we headed out to look for Stewart Island Brown Kiwi (Tokoeke) the largest of the kiwi species, and our final kiwi species of the tour. A juvenile female showed well for twenty minutes, and we grabbed good looks at one of this year's chicks.

13 December 2022 – Day Eighteen

Today was our final pelagic of the trip. With lunch purchased at the local supermarket it was a short walk to the wharf to board Aurora Charters, skippered by Nate. Historically we've seen some very good birds in Stewart Island's waters from this large comfortable catamaran, so expectations were high. We didn't have the best start as our known sites for Fiordland-crested Penguins didn't pay off. It was the first time Matt had missed this species on tour.

We moved to check out some of the islands for possible Yellow-eyed Penguin and enroute caught sight of an Arctic Skua harassing White-fronted Terns in the bay. On one of the islands we found a single Yellow-eyed Penguin. Any view of this attractive bird is welcome - unfortunately it is becoming the rarest penguin in the world, on the brink of extinction on the mainland.

Around to another spot where three large bulky Southern Brown Skuas put on a great display. Further south to open water, on the eastern side of the island we were joined by White-capped Albatross, Salvin's Albatross and a few Cape Petrels. More birds slowly started to appear with another location change and

we saw a Buller's Albatross that didn't really want to show itself - this species of Albatross can be really hard to find on the pre-Christmas trips. Four Southern Royal Albatross joined the party - these huge birds are a wonderful sight. Then our fifth species of Albatross arrived – an awesome looking Campbell Island Albatross, with striking honey coloured eye. A very quick show from a Grey-faced Petrel that briefly joined the White-chinned Petrels and Cook's Petrels circled the boat.

Four species of Storm-petrel, which is good in any one's book. One being a target bird - three tiny Grey-backed Storm-petrels that whizzed and skipped past the boat; a single White-faced Storm-Petrel (not very common down in these parts); a Wilson's Storm-Petrel arrived, and amazingly as we were just about to move off Matt spotted a very unusual visitor from the south - a Black-bellied Stormie! Matt called to Nate to stop the boat and everyone got onto the Black-bellied Storm-Petrel which joined the Wilson's. Wow what a way to finish!

On the way back to land we saw Foveaux Shags, Common Diving Petrels, and of course plenty of Sooty Shearwaters.

14 December 2022 – Day Nineteen

We left Stewart Island on the 8am ferry. The island had shown us a good time and given us great bird sightings. Back at the van in Bluff on our way to Invercargill we stopped at Tip Lagoon for NZ Scaup, Aussie Shovelers, Grey Teal, Paradise Shelducks and lots of Black Swans. We took a bit of a detour and in a muddy puddle saw Pukeko, South Island and Variable Oystercatchers, and Pied Stilts. More importantly we added Sharp-tailed Sandpiper to the list! Once a bit more of a common visitor to NZ, but not so much now. Back on the road, we headed north leaving Southland behind and into Otago. Driving through the city of Dunedin we stopped at a headland to stretch our legs and saw in the distance a few Otago Shags flying past. A few NZ Fur seals were also seen. At a private reserve we had another chance to see Yellow-eyed Penguins, and were able to watch a couple of these super shy and rare penguins. Before checking into our motel for the night in the Victorian town of Oamaru, we saw several hundred Otago Shags. It was an amazing sight! In among the Otago Shags were a few Spotted and Little Pied Shags.



15 December 2022 – Day Twenty

Our final full day took us north on SH1, with an important stop at Fairlie Bakery! Into Mackenzie country, today was all about finding the rarest wader in the world - the Black Stilt. It has a population of less than two hundred birds in the wild. Matt drove past ponds and ditches where he had seen them previously, but no joy.

We drove into a local farm and Matt asked the farmer if we could look around. The farmer was very obliging and told us where he had seen Black Stilt recently on his land. So down farm tracks we went, scanning left and right as we passed by paddocks full of Merino sheep. On the far side in amongst a large flock of South Pied Oystercatchers, three small delicate framed birds were feeding in the lush green grass. Out of the van and scopes set up, we looked at three adult Black Stilts feeding! Also, amazing views of stunning Black-fronted Terns. With our prize on the list, we ate lunch under a shady tree and watched Banded Dotterels feeding in a dry riverbed - and a surprise NZ Dotterel in amongst them. Two Black Stilts were seen feeding on a small lake, but possibly were two of the same birds we had seen earlier.

Later, down a dusty dirt road looking for more Black Stilt, Matt was scanning the reeds at the back of a pool. An Australasian Bittern walked into view! We had great views and this bonus sighting was particularly appreciated by Pierre, who was particularly disappointed we had missed it earlier in the tour on the North Island, plus he hadn't seen them in Australia.

On a bit of a high we drove into the small town of Twizel and enjoyed our final meal together and toasted a very successful tour.



16 December 2022 – Day Twenty-One

Our final morning, saw us leave Twizel and Mackenzie Country with its great views of the Southern Alps. Scenery changed from rugged farmland to greener pastures, and we watched our last Swamp Harriers and Magpies fly over the road. The landscape became more suburban as we got closer to Christchurch. We dropped off Barry and Sharon, John and Hinke at Christchurch Airport first, to catch their long flights to Vancouver and London. Then to a nearby motel for Ginette and Pierre. Raymond and Philippe would spend a night before flying home to Canada the following day.