

Tour report

24 January – 13 February 2023

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Dave Howes, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

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Images

Dave Howes

24 January 2023 – Day One

We left Auckland at around 7:30am under a dark and brooding sky which promised some rain later in the day. Our first stop was the gannet colony which is amazing with around 600 Australasian Gannets present with many of them having already left and the bulk of the remaining chicks very close to fledging. Likewise, the bulk of the White-fronted Terns that nest here had left with only a handful still around. We also added Tui, Silvereye, Variable Oystercatcher, Sacred Kingfisher and surprisingly, a pair of Canada Geese to our list.



A gannet surveying the colony.

We picked up lunch from a bakery and headed north to eat our lunch alongside an estuary where we had hoped to find Fairy Tern and some waders. An extremely high tide combined with very strong winds cut down the birding potential, but we ate our lunch before continuing north to another estuary where we were rewarded with good views of South Island Pied Oystercatcher, Paradise Shelduck, NZ and Banded Dotterel, Bar-tailed Godwit and an assortment of gulls and shags. After about half an hour, we got a glimpse of a single Fairy Tern feeding close to the shore but quite a long way away. Everyone got onto the bird for rather unsatisfying, distant views and then it obliged by flying right over us and feeding close by, before settling on the sand for excellent views. Feeling quite happy with that, we carried on northwards and into the rain, which was quite heavy at times. We checked into our accommodation, headed out for an early dinner after which we set out to look for our first kiwi of the trip, the North Island Brown Kiwi.

We weren't overly optimistic about the weather as it had poured down during dinner but as we headed out of town, the rain stopped and by the time we reached our spot, it was dry and looked as though it hadn't rained there for a while. We walked in just on dark and after no time at all, had kiwi calling, the first time I've heard them call before Morepork, which only started calling a bit later. The first kiwi shot across the patch right at my feet and I think was only seen by one of the group which was not ideal. The next 2 or 3 showed well, although not for long but gave the group good views. It was a tired bunch of birders that headed back to the motel for some well-earned sleep.

25 January 2023 – Day Two

An early start saw us heading south to Marsden Cove for our first pelagic of the trip. The wind was up a bit which promised for a sporty day at sea but the skipper had confirmed that we were "all go". We were joined by Phil Hammond, another of Wrybill's guides with his two clients and two casuals along just for the trip.

Leaving the harbour we had a flock of circa 500 Bar-tailed Godwit on the exposed sand bank along with Pied and Variable Oystercatchers and 3 Barbary Doves sitting on a powerline! Once outside the sheltered water of the harbour, the trip out was lumpy and slow going but we managed Buller's, Flesh-footed and Fluttering Shearwater through the spray.



Black-winged petrel.

The plan was to push on to the Mokohinau Islands to look for the Grey Ternlets which roost there in the summer but after about an hour of bashing into the Easterly, the call was made to give up on the islands and concentrate on the other endemics we had hoped for.

We started our first drift and started chumming and the first bird to the boat was a Black-winged Petrel, which was a nice surprise as they're not particularly common in NZ. It was followed in short succession by White-faced Storm-petrel, Cook's Petrel, Fairy Prion, Flesh-footed Shearwater and then three of our sought-after birds – New Zealand Storm-petrel, Black (Parkinson's) Petrel and Pycoft's Petrel, the latter not seen very well by all, but we did have great views of the other two species with at least 15 NZ Storm-petrels around the boat at one point. We moved chum spots twice and added another three Black-winged Petrels, Australasian Gannets, Buller's Shearwaters and more Cook's Petrels to the list, before the skipper decided it was time to head in. A stop on the way home gave us great views of a feeding flock of White-fronted Terns, Little Pied Shags, Red-billed (Silver) and Black-backed Gulls and three Reef Herons.

I think a few the group who had succumbed to *mal de mer* were glad to be back in the harbour and we headed to our motel, then another great meal and once again a good night's sleep for some tired bodies!

26 January 2023 – Day Three

The next morning, we headed a short distance north to a small manmade lake where we had a mixed bag of waterfowl including NZ Dabchick and Australasian Little Grebe after which we headed south again to one of Auckland's predator free sanctuaries.

At a small creek the group had great views of Brown Teal but the water level was too high for the resident Buff-banded rail. A short bush walk saw us get great views some endemics like Whitehead, North Island Saddleback, NZ Pigeon, Bellbird, NZ Fantail and Kaka, with a brief glimpse of a Red-crowned Parakeet. We had lunch on the trail in the shade of the native bush and shortly after lunch got great views of Grey Warbler and 2 Shining Bronze-cuckoo. Along the road and in the surrounding paddocks we also saw Swamp Harrier, White-faced Heron, Pukeko and a host of introduced passerines. The water level at the creek had dropped by the time we returned, and we had two Buff-banded Rail out feeding on the mud and as we were driving out, a pair of Brown Quail walked out into the open to show themselves for a while. A quick stop to look for Kookaburra on the way to our motel yielded nothing, so we carried on to Warkworth to check into the motel.

The rain had started on our way into town and by the time we went to dinner, it was bucketing down with the river running through the town looking angry and swollen. The wind had also picked up and we got news that our pelagic out of Sandspit the following day had been cancelled.

27 January 2023 – Day Four

A leisurely start in the rain saw us collecting lunch and coffee and heading south to a small wetland north of Auckland. The rain had really put a damper on things and there weren't too many birds out and about at what can usually be quite a productive spot. However, we persevered and added Royal Spoonbill and Australian Shoveler to the list plus a bunch of other waterfowl.

Further south to another of Auckland's predator-free sanctuaries got us great views of at least 6 Buff-banded, Brown Teal, Pied Stilt, Spur-winged Plover and a short walk yielded NZ Pigeon, Grey Warbler, Silvereye, and great views of a Fernbird.

A short move coincided with a break in the weather, and we managed a short walk through some native bush and had plenty of Bellbird, Tui and NZ Pigeon and our first Eastern Rosella and brief views of Red-crowned Parakeet. The break in the weather didn't last long and we headed back to the van and then back to our motel where we received news that all ferries to Tiritiri Matangi tomorrow had been cancelled due to bad weather.

28 January 2023 – Day Five

Over coffee, we read reports of road closures and slips and made the call to head south to try and get ahead of the bad weather. A storm was now lashing the upper North Island with heavy rain and winds. After negotiating slips and fallen trees, we managed to get through to State Highway 16 and head to Miranda.



The tides were perfect for us and although very windy, we were treated to great views of over 800 Wrybill close by as well as Pied Stilts, Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots, Black-billed Gulls and Royal Spoonbill. Although the tides were great, a strong north-easterly had the birds hunkered down behind the shell bank which made for tough viewing the higher the water level got. After lunch and a visit to the Shorebird Centre, we carried on southwards and shortly after leaving Miranda, it started raining and the rain stayed with us all the way to Taupo!

29 January 2023 – Day Six

We left the motel about 7:30 and it appeared that the rain had eased from the night before. After the obligatory stop for coffee and to collect lunch, we headed to an area of native forest with the emphasis on bush birding. Unfortunately, the rain had returned but we persevered none the less and did a short walk through the forest. Although most of the birds were huddled up out of the rain, we were rewarded with good views of North Island Robin, Kaka and NZ Pigeon and a “flyover” view of Yellow-crowned Parakeets. We heard 2 or 3 Long-tailed Cuckoo calling but they were staying well-hidden and didn’t even give us a flyover.

A break in the weather gave us an opportunity to have our lunch at the local campsite, where we once again had Yellow-crowned Parakeet fly over and a family of California Quails which entertained us during lunch.



Looking for Blue Duck on a very swollen Tongariro River.

We headed back to Taupo via Turangi and although we failed to find an Australasian Bittern, we added Little Black Shag and Eurasian Coot to the list as well as getting good views of a host of other waterfowl. The Tongariro was flowing at close on 20 times the volume it had been over the previous month and the usually gin-clear water more resembled chocolate milk. Luckily, we managed to find a pair of Blue Duck with 3 almost fully grown ducklings. Feeling like we had made the most of what could have been a pretty bleak day, we headed back to Taupo for a great dinner.

30 January 2023 – Day Seven

We left Taupo and again headed for the native forest stopping at a small lake area enroute. All the regular waterfowl were present as well as an unexpected Caspian Tern.

The weather in the forest was somewhat dryer than the day before but the birds still seemed hesitant to come out. We repeated the walk of the previous day, for similar results. A different walk yielded a few NI Robin and a bonus Morepork sleeping on a dead tree. Before lunch we got reasonable views of a feeding flock of Yellow-crowned Parakeet and then had a couple Tomtit showing off for us during our lunch stop.



It's in there somewhere!

We headed back to Turangi, making a couple stops to look for Blue Duck and got distant views of a pair a little way downstream from where we'd had them the day before.

31 January 2023 – Day Eight

An early, pre-breakfast start had us back at the lake looking for bittern and crake. The really high water levels meant that even the road was flooded and our search was in vain. We did have 2 or 3 Shining Bronze-cuckoos feeding in a tree right in front of us which was great to watch.

After breakfast we headed back along Lake Taupo, stopping at an area of native forest on our way into Hawkes Bay. We heard a couple of Long-tailed Cuckoos calling and after patiently listening to at least 3 of them calling backwards and forwards, were rewarded with a great view of one flying directly over us. We had no sooner started along the forest track when a New Zealand Falcon called noisily overhead, but unfortunately, was only seen by one member of the group. On the walk we had a pair of Rifleman at really close range as well as numerous Tui, NZ Pigeon, Bellbird and Whitehead. Just short of the end of the trail some movement overhead alerted us to a single Kokako, which was an absolute bonus and a bird we thought we weren't going to get after missing out on Tiritiri Matangi.

With raised spirits we drove into Hawkes Bay to visit a couple wader spots, which all had very high water levels and very little mud showing. We did manage a few Banded Dotterel (Double-banded Plover), a Dunnock and our best views to date of a flock of Grey Teal. A second stop in blustery conditions got us our first Black-fronted Dotterel for the trip as well, in a puddle on a flooded lawn!

We checked in to our motel, freshened up and headed for out for another great dinner at a local Greek restaurant.

1 February 2023 – Day Nine

A 7:00am start saw us heading out in rainy, blustery conditions to a local lookout point where the resident NZ Pipits put on quite show for us, after which we headed out to a private property where a pair of falcons had bred earlier in the summer, but after about an hour of them not showing, we had to move on. A short drive to a nearby wetland had us mainly looking at waterfowl as the recent rains had left water levels really high meaning there was no exposed mud for the frequently seen crakes to feed on.

From here we had one of the longer driving days as we headed over to Foxton on the west coast, with a brief stop to look for falcon again, which resulted in good views of Indian Peafowl, but no falcon. We picked up some lunch on the way which we ate at the estuary. Once again the tide was quite far out so the waders were spread out and a long way away and fairly difficult to find. After an hour or two of wader watching, we went to our motel before heading out for a great Indian meal.

2 February 2023 – Day Ten

We left Foxton around 7:00am for Wellington to catch the ferry to Picton and stopped at an “inland island” sanctuary we got good views of Tui, NZ Pigeon, Kaka, Red-crowned Parakeet, Whitehead and NI Saddleback. We also added Stitchbird and South Island Takahe, which were also birds we thought we may have missed due to not visiting Tiri. Two of the group had views of a falcon flying over and, as a bonus, we got to see 3 or 4 Tuatara basking in the early morning sun.



South Island Takahe.

From here it was straight on to the ferry to cross the Cook Strait, which was delayed by 2 hours, which was frustrating as the time spent sitting in the van could have been spent birding. This can be a particularly nasty stretch of water at times, but we were fortunate and had a smooth, if windy crossing. The birding was fairly slow, but we did have Fluttering and Hutton’s Shearwaters, Silver Gull, Australasian Gannets, our first Westland Petrel and one NZ White-capped Albatross. We were accompanied on the first part of the crossing by a pod of Common Dolphins, which are always great to see.

Once into Queen Charlotte Sound, the water was glassy calm with hundreds of Fluttering Shearwaters, White-fronted Terns, Silver Gulls and gannets. We also had views of Little Pied, Pied and Spotted Shags on our way into Picton.

3 February 2023 – Day Eleven

After breakfast it was down to the wharf for a safety briefing before departing for Blumine Island. Not long into the cruise, we pulled into a cove where we had close views of both Spotted and King Shags. The King Shag is an endemic that only breeds in and around Queen Charlotte Sound so it was really exciting to see these. We were also very fortunate to find a Hector's Dolphin with a calf which showed really well for us.

Over to Blumine Island where a Weka was waiting for us on the beach and was soon joined by another 2 or 3 as they made their way around the group looking for food. The star of show, the Orange-fronted or Malherbe's Parakeet seemed a bit shy and it took nearly an hour to show itself as 2 of them flew through the clearing and into some nearby bushes. We eventually had good views of them and a Tomtit and heard SI Saddleback calling but they never showed themselves.



Blumine Island

On the return trip, we had an Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger) harassing some feeding terns.

Back in Picton, we picked up some lunch and started our trip south to Kaikoura, stopping briefly at a water treatment plant where Glossy Ibis have been known to breed. We didn't manage to find one amongst the 80-odd Royal Spoonbills roosting in the Ngaio. There were however good

numbers of Grey Teal, Australian Shoveler, Paradise Shelduck, Black Swan, Canada Geese and Mallard. We carried on our journey stopping at a lake a bit further south where we found our first Great Crested Grebe, which are interesting as they don't moult into basic plumage but remain in breeding plumage the whole year. We also had great views of Hoary-headed Grebes and 2 Baillon's or Marsh Crakes which showed well, despite the really strong winds.

After checking into our motel, we headed out to a great dinner at the Pier Hotel with its stunning view over the bay on to the mountains behind. After dinner, some of the group went out in search of Little Owl and in very little time found 2 of these stunning little owls sitting on fence posts right on dark



King Shags on Blumine Island.

4 February 2023 – Day Twelve

Today was possibly the most anticipated pelagic of the tour as Kaikoura is world renowned for its seabird trips. Part of what makes it so special is that the continental shelf is not very far offshore creating all sorts of upwellings and meaning that you don't have to go too far to see birds and marine mammals. The morning was bright and sunny with virtually no wind and hopes were high!

The trip out was quiet by Kaikoura standards but our first chum spot wasn't far away and although it wasn't long before we had Northern Giant Petrel, Westland Petrel, and 2 Wandering Albatross (Antipodean and Gibson's), it was quiet by usual standards and we opted to move a short distance.

Three stops later it was evident that the lack of wind and hot temperatures had slowed the birding activity right down, although our last stop did produce a Northern Royal Albatross, Northern Giant Petrels, White-chinned and Grey-faced Petrel and Buller's and Hutton's Shearwaters.



A Northern Royal Albatross glides past.

With the mercury predicted to hit 34 degrees after lunch, we decided against an afternoon trip with some of the group opting to go whale / dolphin-watching , some to spend the afternoon relaxing and some to spend the afternoon exploring the town. A dinner of fish and chips and a couple of cold beers at the motel rounded out a fantastic day.

5 February 2023 – Day Thirteen

An early start had us back down at South Bay for a 6:00am pelagic. There seemed to be more birds around and we added Salvin's Albatross and Cape Petrel to our list and had fantastic views of a

few Northern Royal Albatross. On the way back to South Bay, we managed to find a lone Little Penguin having a preening session on the surface who didn't seem to be fussed with us watching and all the cameras going off.



Cape Petrel

After breakfast we departed for the west coast via an estuary where we saw our first Black-fronted Terns as well as Wrybill, Banded Dotterel, Pied Stilts, Black-billed Gulls and a Ruddy Turnstone. After an hour or so at the estuary we headed off for Arthurs Pass, stopping for lunch at the legendary Sheffield Pie Shop which certainly didn't disappoint!

As we approached Arthurs Pass, the weather started closing in and by the time we got to the village, it was raining. Luckily, we managed to find a couple Kea quite close to town.

We made brief stops at the lookout points but in the wind and rain, we didn't stay long rather opting to head back to our hotel and a beer before dinner.

6 February 2023 – Day Fourteen

The morning dawned with news that the heavy rainfall had caused numerous slips on roads down the West Coast. After much deliberation and many phone calls, the rather tough call was made to forego our chance at Okarito kiwi and stay on the west side of the Alps.

After coffee and better views of some Kea we headed towards the Hawdon Valley, where surprisingly, it wasn't raining. A relatively short walk gave us good views of South Island Robin, Grey Warbler and our first Lesser Redpoll for the trip.



Mt Cook.

The rest of the day consisted mainly of driving as we had a bit of ground to cover to get to our new destination – the McKenzie Basin. We tried a few regular spots close to Twizel, but again high water levels resulted in rather poor returns. After a great dinner, we headed for a well-earned sleep after what had been quite a tiring day.

7 February 2023 – Day Fifteen

A 7:30 start had us grabbing a coffee before heading off in search of Black Stilt – the rarest wader in the world, with a population of less than 200. We got lucky and had a single, very obliging bird at our second or third stop which was completely unfazed by the attention it was getting and allowed numerous photos to be taken. After searching the area for a bit longer and not finding any more Black Stilts, although we did see good numbers of their cousins the Pied Stilts, we opted to take a break from birding and visit Mt Cook.



Black Stilt in the McKenzie Basin

The clouds opened for long enough for us to get good views of the peak. On our way out, we tried several spots that have yielded good birds in the past, but all had extremely high water levels and a lack of birds.

We pushed on towards Wanaka, with a stop at what has been a reliable falcon spot in the past, but they too had decided not to play ball and didn't put in an appearance.

8 January 2023 – Day Sixteen

We left our very comfortable motel in Wanaka about 7:00am and headed for Te Anau, via the Crown Ranges with its spectacular scenery. A visit to Miles Better Pies in Te Anau had us stocking up for lunch before heading out towards Milford. The scenery along the way is spectacular and there is quite a lot to see along this road. We stopped along the way and had great views of 3 or 4 Rifleman, Kaka and good, although distant views of a small group of Yellowhead feeding high up in the Beech trees. The rain had set in again and although we made a couple stops along the way and had a couple Kea, the birding wasn't what it usually is.



Southland roadblock.

Through the Homer Tunnel to Milford where we had a short walk around before heading back to Te Anau. A stop on the way back at a small lake got us several NZ Scaup, a pair of Grey Duck and cracking views of a pair of Spotless Crake out in the open.

9 February 2023 – Day Seventeen

Another early start as we headed to Bluff to get the ferry across to Stewart Island. The ferry crossing was very windy but quite tame by Foveaux Strait standards although the birding was fairly quiet with some of the group getting a brief view of a Mottled Petrel.

Being on a fairly tight schedule, we dropped our bags at the hotel, collected packed lunches and boarded the water taxi to Ulva Island, which is another of New Zealand's predator-free sanctuaries. Enroute we got views of 2 Fiordland Crested Penguins moulting in a small sea cave and looking rather bedraggled as they wait for their new feathers to grow out. We also had Buller's and NZ White-capped Albatross accompany us on the crossing.



Lunch on Ulva Island.

Once again, the weather wasn't great and we had to work quite hard for the birds but we were eventually rewarded for our hard work by seeing all of our target species which included Yellowhead, Kaka, Red & Yellow-crowned Parakeets, South Island Robin, Brown Creeper, NZ Pigeon, South Island Saddleback, Tomtit and Rifleman. We also had a New Zealand sealion on the beach.

Back to the hotel for a dinner, after which a few of the group opted for a short nap before heading out to look for South Island Brown Kiwi with Matt Jones. We met at the appointed time and had a kiwi in the main street before we'd even got in the van! At our destination, we had fantastic views of another 3 birds. It was a very tired, but satisfied group that headed back to the hotel.

10 February 2023 – Day Eighteen

After collecting our packed lunches, we boarded the boat for our final pelagic trip of the tour. Luckily the wind had dropped a bit overnight and a cruise of the inner Bay got us views of 6 Fiordland Crested Penguins, White-capped Albatross and Spotted Shags.



Albatross scrum!

A bit further out at Flat Rock the local Brown Skuas were playing hard to get but we eventually got views of one roosting on top of the rock.

Our next stop was Wreck Reef where we stopped and set up a chum trail. In what seemed like no time at all, we had 100 plus NZ White-capped, a couple of Salvin's, a Buller's and a Southern Royal Albatross around the boat along with Fairy Prions and Sooty Shearwaters. There was a steady stream of Common Diving Petrels flying past, as well as handful of gulls. Although impressive,

there seemed to be birds missing so we decided to move a few miles further out which paid off with us getting great views of Grey-backed & White-faced Storm Petrels, Cape Petrels and a couple of Cook's Petrel. It was soon time to leave and a stop at some rocks on the way home gave us excellent views of a breeding colony of Foveaux Shags and a better look at a Brown Skua flying by.

It had been another long day and the group was glad to head out of the rain and back to the comfort of the hotel.

11 February 2023 – Day Nineteen

Our return ferry crossing at 8:00am was much calmer, but the birding was equally tough with mainly Sooty Shearwaters and a few others including an Arctic Skua and we didn't add any new birds to the list.

On our trip north, we made a detour to a wetland area where we'd hoped for some waders. Once again, the high water levels put paid to any decent wader watching conditions but we did get good views of a flock of Black-fronted Terns, some waterfowl and an incredibly confiding Fernbird which gave excellent views.

Next stop north was a Point where we were lucky enough to get great views of 4 Yellow-eyed Penguins as well as numerous NZ Fur Seals on the rocks.

From here we headed on to Oamaru, where we were to spend the night but not before heading down to the harbour to view the massive breeding colony of Otago Shags there. The Otago Shag was recently split from the Stewart Island Shag (now Foveaux Shag), although not all taxonomists have accepted the split.



Otago shag colony.

12 February 2023 – Day Twenty

After breakfast, we headed up towards Christchurch and stopped at a lagoon where we had heaps of waterfowl, various common waders and 2 Cape Barren Geese. We continued up to Lake Ellesmere where we systematically started working the spots looking for waders.

It was really windy with high water levels so not ideal for wader watching and our first spot yielded mainly waterfowl and a handful of Bar-tailed Godwit, Banded Dotterel, Pied Stilts and some Wrybill. Our second spot was more productive and after a bit of a walk (by some of the group) we came across a loose flock of waders comprising Wrybill, Banded Dotterel, Pied Stilt, Red-necked Stint, Pectoral Sandpiper and a lone Sharp-tailed Sandpiper which didn't stick around to give us good views. Our third stop had very high water levels and after a brief look, we decided to head to the motel.

After checking in and unloading our bags, we went out for our final dinner and night together as a group.

13 February 2023 – Day Twenty-One

The plan had been to drop some of the group off at the airport by 11:00am but the news first thing was that all flights into and out of Auckland had been cancelled due to the impending arrival of Cyclone Gabrielle. Some of the group still opted to go to the airport early to try and sort out what was going on, while the rest of us re-visited a local estuary where we were treated to great views of a couple Black-fronted Terns fishing right in front of us but no new waders.



Black-fronted tern fishing

A quick stop at a local wetland got us several waterfowl and a few Mute Swans after which it was back to the airport and various motels to farewell new friends.

We finished the trip on 147 species, 65 of which were endemics.

Dave Howes

Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ Guide