

# Tour report

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**28 January - 17 February 2023**

**21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**



The magnificent Buller's albatross, seen on our Stewart Island pelagic. Max Schwenne.

**Led by Fraser Gurney, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**

## **Participants**

Bill Hebner, Lora Leschner, Ellen & Max Schwenne, Jeff Hopkins, Kathleen Keef, Timothy Pendill

## **Images**

Bill Hebner, Max Schwenne

What a fantastic three weeks of birding! Great company, great birds, and lots of moments that will become fond memories to look back on. Unseasonably heavy rain and a tropical cyclone did their best to curb our fun, but in the end we had a fair slice of luck with the weather on this trip. Despite road closures, cancelled pelagics and called off ferries, we were able to adapt and after all didn't miss any birds because of the weather. More importantly, we managed to safely go ahead with the tour, not at all a certainty with 260 millimetres of rain in 18 hours and a state of emergency being announced during the tour's early stages.

We ended on a nice round 150 species, with four more heard only (Indian peafowl, Okarito kiwi, mottled petrel and chukar). Our total of 150 included 65 breeding endemics and 26 species of tube-nosed seabirds, all very respectable numbers. We did miss rock wren, a very hard bird in New Zealand these days as the only easily accessible site is shut to the public. Okarito kiwi also eluded us despite some intense stalking, as did mottled petrel and grey-backed storm-petrel on our Stewart Island pelagic. We didn't even have a chance to hear great-spotted kiwi, as a slight alteration to the itinerary meant we didn't stay in Arthur's Pass, to avoid the hoards competing in Coast-to-Coast adventure race. However, all of this was far outweighed but what we did see. Highlights were masses of New Zealand storm-petrel right by the boat, brilliant close range views of kaka, a fantastic 24 hours on Tiritiri Matangi Island, a very lucky encounter with an Australasian bittern, at least six individual New Zealand falcon, an epic stalk for great views of yellowhead on the mainland, close-range crested grebes with chicks, exceptionally close views of both spotless and Baillon's crake, multiple southern brown kiwi and four penguin species in a day, including the bonus of an erect-crested penguin.

The results of voting for bird of the trip can be seen on the next page. The guests were asked to rank their top eight birds of the trip, with their number one receiving eight points, number two seven, so on and so on down to one point for their eighth placed vote. Votes were spread across an incredible 34 different species, which shows the range of great encounters we had, but there were two clear front-runners. Buller's albatross was the winner, this stunning albatross being the only bird to make it into everyone's top eight. Second was southern brown kiwi, just five points back, which reflected the prolonged and close-range views we had of multiple birds on Stewart Island. There was then a big gap of 19 points back to kaka in third place, with the other 31 species following with a more even spread of points.

A huge thank you to all the participants, you helped make the tour exceptionally enjoyable for me as a guide, especially as it was my first tour as a solo leader! Any exaggeration or artistic licence in this report is meant in a loving way, I can't stress enough how wonderful you were. I was also blown away by the number and quality of the photos volunteered for this report, thank you very much!

**Fraser Gurney** (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

Bird of the Trip								
Species	Bill	Lora	Ellen	Max	Jeff	Kathy	Tim	TOTAL
Buller's albatross	7	7	6	6	1	8	4	39
Southern brown kiwi		8	8	5	7	6		34
Kākā	2		7	4			2	15
North Island saddleback		3	3	8				14
Southern royal albatross		6					7	13
Black stilt					4		8	12
North Island kōkako			5	7				12
Tui	8		1			2		11
NZ storm-petrel		5	4					9
Erect-crested penguin					8			8
Yellowhead					2		5	7
Australasian gannet						7		7
NZ falcon							6	6
Salvin's albatross	6							6
Wrybill					6			6
Spotless crane						5		5
South Island saddleback	5							5
Black-billed gull					5			5
Red-crowned parakeet						4		4
Little penguin		4						4
Stitchbird	4							4
Northern giant petrel							3	3
Paradise shelduck						3		3
NZ fantail	3							3
Australasian bittern				3				3
Takahē					3			3
Black-fronted dotterel		2						2
South Island robin				2				2
Tomtit							1	1
Cape petrel						1		1
Blue duck		1						1
Baillon's crane	1							1
Fiordland crested penguin			1					1
Kea				1				1

## 28 January 2023 – Day One

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Day one dawned dull and gloomy in Auckland, with news broadcasts detailing the torrential rain lashing the upper North Island. This dampened the mood for pre-departure briefing – several roads were shut and as things stood, we couldn't get to our accommodation for the evening, or tomorrow's pelagic trip. Everyone took this news surprisingly well, especially considering it also meant not seeing kiwi this evening. Nevertheless, we set off with an altered plan to bird around the Auckland region.

Our first stop was in west Auckland, where we had mudflats to one side of the road and a water treatment pond to the other. Straight away we picked up several endemics in the treatment pond, including New Zealand grebe and black-billed gull. Turning to the other side of the road we searched for a broad-billed sandpiper which had been seen here recently, but to no avail. Unfortunately, the tides were against us, and most birds were a fair way from the road. We struggled against the rain to pick out birds on the mudflats but did manage wet and distant views of both wrybill and banded dotterel.

We then headed to a petrol station for breakfast, where the slang of "servo" or "gassy" was introduced, as well as our first pies of the tour. Better yet, news came through that one of the roads north had reopened, so we set off north with high hopes. This was a sobering driver which revealed the full damage of the rainfall; lots of damaged road, flooded fields and even a few vehicles floating beside the road.



A black-billed gull braced against the weather. Bill Hebner.

Eventually we made it to our next stop, an estuary where a break in the rain brought decent views of New Zealand dotterel and both variable and South Island pied oystercatcher. Unfortunately, our target species here – fairy tern – eluded us, but we would be back. After grabbing the first of many bakery lunches we

continued north to our accommodation, spotting pukeko and masked lapwing out the van window. A short afternoon walk around the accommodation grounds brought our first views of silvereye and a big group of nine New Zealand fantails feeding together.

After an excellent first dinner we ventured out into the twilight for our first attempt at a kiwi. A long drive along a (very) bumpy road brought us to our destination, with the unexpected sighting of a great egret flushed from the side of the road in the gathering dark. As guide Fraser gave a quick briefing of how the kiwi-spotting would work, a morepork began to call very close by. As we moved towards the call an owl made a sally from a hidden perch right out in front of us, morepork in the bag and a potentially tricky species out the way already! Kiwi now began to call all around us, and it wasn't long before most of the group had a brief view of one moving away from us near the path. We were all satisfied about an hour later as we found a bird feeding relatively in the open, seemingly unbothered by our presence. Heading back to our accommodation we were all happy, especially as we knew we lucky to have made it as far as we had, and with the weather clearing in the evening for kiwi-spotting!

**Day total:** seen = 47 (+ Indian peafowl heard only); new for the trip = 47; total for the trip to date = 47

**Bird of the day:** North Island brown kiwi (five votes), morepork (one vote) NZ fantail (one vote)



A male New Zealand scaup sitting on the water. Bill Hebner.

## 29 January 2023 – Day Two

An early start today as we had a two-hour drive south to catch a boat from Marsden Cove for a day of pelagic birding. On arrival the skipper informed us he had found a reliable spot for eastern reef egret, and

sure enough just about the first bird we saw on exiting the harbour was a reef egret feeding in a tidal channel. Also present were hundreds of oystercatchers, bar-tailed godwits, red knot and a few NZ dotterel, but we had a date with the seabirds so sailed on.

The trip out was fairly rough, a decent swell and chop and running against our course kept most people in their seats. We had brief glimpses of many species, including a couple of brief storm-petrels, but we were travelling too fast (and bouncing around too much) to be able to see them properly. Once we stopped however, we were in for a real treat. As soon as we started chumming, swarms of flesh-footed shearwaters appeared, and it wasn't long before we spotted our first black petrel (Parkinson's petrel) among them – as usual appearing seemingly from nowhere right next to the boat. We didn't have long to wait before one of our target species bounced into view, New Zealand storm-petrel! Over the course of the day their numbers built to at least 50 at one time, putting in a fantastic show as they swarmed in close around the boat. Also mixed in with them were a few white-faced storm-petrels, usually the more common species but today outnumbered by the star of the show.



A pair of New Zealand storm-petrel dance above the waves. Bill Hebner.

Our next challenge was trying to identify both Cook's and Pycroft's petrels, two nearly identical species found in these waters. We'd seen dozens of birds called as Cook's/Pycroft's before a few came close enough to be called as definite Cook's, but still no Pycroft's. Then, a real surprise, a white-necked petrel cruised past – a species very rarely seen on daytrips from mainland New Zealand. It didn't stop there, as a few moments later a black-winged petrel came into view and performed a lap of the boat, another uncommon species for mainland pelagics. These were followed by nice close views of a Pycroft's petrel, which showed the stubby head and defined collar that separate it from Cook's petrel.

Before heading back to shore we had time to see grey noddy, Australasian gannet and fairy prion at an offshore island group, as well as kākā and New Zealand pipit from the boat at another island stop on the way back. Back at Marsden Cove we had more views of reef egret, and a dicey moment as the boat momentarily ran out of fuel! On to our accommodation for a nice early night.

**Day total:** seen = 48 (+ North Island saddleback heard only); new for the trip = 21; total for the trip to date = 68

**Bird of the day:** NZ storm-petrel (three votes), black-winged petrel (one vote), white-faced storm-petrel (one vote), flesh-footed shearwater (one vote), Australasian gannet (one vote)



A Cook's petrel races by. Bill Hebner.

## 30 January 2023 – Day Three

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Our first stop on day three was a small urban lake, where despite the drizzle we had a good look at Australasian grebe, New Zealand grebe, New Zealand scaup and a pure Pacific black duck. Hybridisation with mallards means pure Pacific black ducks are harder and harder to come by, making this an encouraging find.

We headed south through the rain, stopping at two more estuaries for fairy tern, but again with no luck. Despite our best efforts it looked like we would dip on this critically endangered tern; there are only about 40 of them left in the country. A nice consolation was a very close New Zealand dotterel and some red knots, but the conditions were pretty challenging and we spent more time in the van than out.



A whitehead feeding in a cabbage tree. Bill Hebner.

However, our luck and the weather turned in the afternoon and we spent a brilliant few rain-free hours in a predator-free regional park. Brown teal and paradise shelduck right outside the van window on the way in was a great start, but it was the forest birding that was the highlight. New Zealand pigeon, kākā, tui, bellbird, whitehead, North Island saddleback and North Island robin made up a fantastic haul, with everything being seen at nearly point-blank range. The kaka and saddleback were particularly popular. It took us a long time to leave the park as we kept spotting new things out the van window, including a banded rail out in the open which perfectly rounded out the day. We headed to our accommodation very happy despite a morning mostly lost to the elements.

**Day total:** seen = 51 (+ greenfinch and skylark heard only); new for the trip = 12; total for the trip to date = 80

**Bird of the day:** Kaka (four votes), North Island saddleback (three votes)





A banded rail stalks through the grass. Bill Hebner.

## 31 January 2023 – Day Four

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We awoke to yet more rain, and the bad news that today's pelagic had been cancelled. With a severe weather warning in place this was pretty much unavoidable, and everyone handled the news really well. It helped that we'd seen so much on our pelagic two days ago.

The silver lining to the cancellation was that we had one last chance to look for fairy tern, so we headed north again along what was now an extremely familiar piece of coastline. The awful weather really hampered our chances, and we saw very little at our first two estuary stops. However, as we pulled into the last spot, a fairy tern finally was spotted battling the gale not too away. Everyone piled out for decent looks and photos (especially considering the conditions), with the tern hanging around for five or so minutes. Phew!



Female paradise shelduck. Bill Hebner.

For the rest of the day, we were reduced to taking photos of blackbirds and song thrush, although another afternoon break in the rain saw us back at the same regional park as yesterday for some more photography. We spent some time searching the backroads for the introduced laughing kookaburra, but again the weather didn't want to play ball and we ran into some completely flooded roads. Despite this we still managed a couple of good birds, including very close views of juvenile variable oystercatcher and New Zealand pipit, so we headed for home feeling we'd made something of a potentially bleak day. That evening, the bird of the day vote saw our first unanimous winner for the trip, with fairy tern unsurprisingly running away with the honours.

**Day total:** seen = 40; new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 83

**Bird of the day:** Fairy tern (seven votes)



A North Island saddleback peers down from the treetops. Bill Hebner.

## 1 February 2023 – Day Five

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Another morning, another boat cancellation. This time it was the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island, a predator free island heaving with bird life which is usually a real highlight of the trip. After a few phone calls, a second ferry company agreed to take us, with the warning that it would be a very rough crossing. We braced ourselves, but in the end it was a relatively straightforward crossing, calmer than our pelagic had been a few days ago! And boy were we glad we made it, the weather was good and the group started to see lifers before even stepping off the wharf.

The walk up to bunkhouse brought us red-crowned parakeet and North Island kōkako (guide Fraser's favourite bird), with a kōkako pair duetting their mournful song through the bunkhouse briefing from the ranger. What followed was brilliant afternoon of birding, with wonderful looks at whitehead, red-crowned parakeet, brown teal, stitchbird, takahē, North Island saddleback, brown quail and a roosting morepork. The takahē allowed very close approach, but the highlight was sitting in the nice cool forest, away from the muggy conditions, watching the dozens of bellbird, tui and stitchbird as they fed. A few people also had a brief glimpse of a shining cuckoo, and a few others a quick look at a spotless crane, but they were both birds we would have more chances to see.



A South Island Takahē browses the lawn on Tiritiri Matangi. Bill Hebner.



Male stitchbird. Bill Hebner.

After dinner, we headed out for an attempt at our second kiwi species. We were out listening for calls as darkness fell, but heard nothing, and it looked like it might be a long night. That thought was quickly dispelled as a kiwi sprinted straight past the group, with almost everyone getting a decent look as it paused just off the track. Not long after we heard a call very close by, and after only a few minutes we had a second kiwi! This one was a bit calmer, allowing us to get a good look, even pausing in the middle of the track for a few moments. When all was said and done, we were back at the bunkhouse within an hour, an extremely early finish welcomed by more than a few tired but delighted souls.

**Day total:** seen = 38 (+ skylark, fernbird and silvereye heard only); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 89

**Bird of the day:** North Island kōkako (three votes), little spotted kiwi (two votes), stitchbird (one vote), takahē (one vote)

## 2 February 2023 – Day Six

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Today we said goodbye to Tiritiri Matangi Island, but still had time for another search for spotless crane (heard only), photos of some very obliging brown quail and one last session watching the nectar feeding stitchbird, bellbird and tui at work in the forest. As we left the island on the water taxi we were all incredibly grateful to have been there at all, especially with the wild weather which had been hammering this part of the country.



A North Island Kōkako watches us pass by. Bill Hebner.

Back on land we headed south through Auckland, stopping to have another look for the vagrant broad-billed sandpiper. Unfortunately, the tides were again too far out, so the best we managed was more distant views of wrybill. We continued south and stopped in at the fantastic Miranda Shorebird Visitor's Centre for a look around (and a quick shop) before heading on to our accommodation. On the way to dinner, we stopped at the Miranda godwit hide to catch the shorebirds coming in with the tide. We were greeted by over 1000 wrybill, some of them quite close to the hide, by far our best views of this iconic species. There were also a couple of banded dotterel, again the closest we had seen this species so far. Part of the spectacle of Miranda are the 3000-4000 bar-tailed godwit and red knot, all roosting together as one flock. Among this mass of birds we picked out 18 Pacific golden plover, and the star of the show, an eastern curlew. This large wader has a huge, decurved bill, and made quite the sight as it strode among the godwits, which scattered out of its way.

After another delicious dinner we headed for bed, hoping for fewer mosquitos in our rooms than we had put up with the night before in Tiritiri Matangi!

**Day total:** seen = 56 (+ North Island kōkako and spotless crake heard only); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 95

**Bird of the day:** Eastern curlew (two votes), royal spoonbill (two votes), wrybill (one vote), stitchbird (one vote), brown quail (one vote)



A Red crowned parakeet on Tiritiri Matangi. Bill Hebner.

## 3 February 2023 – Day Seven

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Our first birding stop today was a large area of mainland forest, with several possible targets to look for. Almost immediately we saw the first of these, with more than 10 yellow-crowned parakeet flying around and perching in emergent trees above the canopy. In the same place we saw our first tomtit of the trip, but almost immediately we were distracted by a shining cuckoo flying past close by. After a bit of searching, we spotted two of these well camouflaged birds perched nearby, where we got fantastic looks at their iridescent plumage. Despite the great views, they didn't get a single vote for bird of the day (much to the guide's surprise)!

Carrying on to a nearby forest walk we had close encounters with North Island robin and much closer looks at tomtit. We could distantly hear another of our target species, long-tailed cuckoo, calling, but this skulking species can be very difficult to spot, and they didn't come any closer. As we were listening for the cuckoo, a dark shape rocketed down the road beside us, not a long-tailed cuckoo but a New Zealand falcon! Fleeting views but a good start for what can be an elusive species.



A shining cuckoo showing off its iridescence. Bill Hebner.

Further south we arrived at a stretch of river which is usually a great spot for our final target species for the day, blue duck. The river was very high and dirty after all the rain, but at almost the first spot we tried, bingo! A blue duck right in front of us, coping remarkably well with the swollen river. Unfortunately, the

duck disappeared very quickly and didn't reappear, and we had no luck at a couple of nearby stretches of river. Another flyby falcon kept us interested, before at the last stop of the evening we managed to spot a distant roosting blue duck. Better yet, a couple of juvenile blue ducks, barely older than ducklings, came within camera range and showed off their white water skills against the far bank. Despite a lot of driving today, the birding had been very enjoyable, plus we felt like we had begun to leave the bad weather behind us. On to tomorrow.

**Day total:** seen = 37 (+ long tailed cuckoo, grey warbler and greenfinch heard only); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 101

**Bird of the day:** Blue duck (four votes), tomtit (three votes)



A blue duck rests on the riverbank. Bill Hebner.

## 4 February 2023 – Day Eight

An early start saw us out and about in the dawn gloom looking for cryptic wetland birds. The high water was great for the masses of black swan, New Zealand scaup, Eurasian coot and multiple cormorant species, but not so conducive for crake and bittern. Before long, we also had great views of a pair of New Zealand fernbird, with at least three calling and scurrying around within a few metres. While we watched the fernbird we could hear the calls of multiple spotless crake in the reeds, but again this species frustrated us and would just not come into view. We drove slowly along in the van, stopping at likely-looking spots, but



to no avail. However, our final stop did produce a good look at an Australasian bittern, which flushed from the reeds just in front of us. This was a great find, this species is incredibly shy and particularly hard to come by at this time of year.

Before leaving the area we had one last look for blue duck, getting our closest views yet of a bird roosting on the riverbank. We also had yet another falcon zoom past us, this one perching distantly on the top of some pine trees. Not a bad start to the day!



The Australasian bittern we flushed as it flew away. Bill Hebner.

We drove east towards the coast, taking a winding gravel road to another mainland forest area. Almost immediately after getting out of the van we could hear long-tailed cuckoo calling, and after a short walk we were rewarded with a bird flying overhead. This was the only sighting of this species for the trip, thankfully everybody got a look before it disappeared out of sight. Continuing to walk we had more sightings of friendly North Island robin and tomtit, with a couple of high-pitched rifleman squeaks being heard but unfortunately no positive sightings. Despite only hearing spotless crake in the morning and rifleman in the afternoon, we had picked up Australasian bittern and long-tailed cuckoo - two of New Zealand's more elusive birds, making the day a successful one and getting two difficult birds off the to see list. A tired but happy van full of birders headed for their accommodation.

**Day total:** seen = 46 (+ spotless crake and rifleman heard only); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 104

**Bird of the day:** Australasian bittern (four votes), blue duck (one vote), North Island robin (one vote), Eurasian coot (one vote)



A very friendly North Island robin. Bill Hebner.

## 5 February 2023 – Day Nine

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We started day nine looking for black-fronted dotterel and spotless crane but had no luck with either. The crane in particular was a little disheartening, everywhere we had tried so far had very high water levels from all the rain, making seeing a crane very difficult indeed. The wetland we tried today was no different, although we got very close looks at Eurasian coot, both greenfinch and goldfinch, plus lots of red admiral butterfly.

We then hopped coasts from east to west, arriving at an estuary where we got nice and close to some wrybill and banded dotterel. However, the most interesting thing here was a flock of around 90 bar-tailed godwit, many of which were banded. Some sharp photography work by guests caught some of the band information, as well as one bird with a transmitter aerial sticking out above its tail. These birds make an epic non-stop migration from Alaska to New Zealand every year, the Pukorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre Facebook page provides updates on the birds with transmitters. After the trip, information from people who had banded these godwits revealed that one bird we had seen was over 20 years old! Awesome stuff.



Bar-tailed godwit. Max Schwenne.



A royal spoonbill wings its way downstream. Bill Hebner.

A couple of hours later, at the fourth spot we had tried today, we finally came across some black-fronted dotterel at a water treatment plant. These tiny dotterels were worth the wait, their black mask and red bill make them a very smart-looking bird. We managed to get a decent look at them, despite viewing them through a chain link fence.

Our final stop saw us on a windy sandspit, watching white-fronted terns fly past at eye-level just a few metres away as they came to and from their breeding colony. Not a bad day to end our last full day on the North Island, tomorrow we were heading across Cook Strait to the South Island!

**Day total:** seen = 47 (+ shining cuckoo, chaffinch and yellowhammer heard only); new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 106

**Bird of the day:** Black-fronted dotterel (six votes), bar-tailed godwit (one vote)

## 6 February 2023 – Day Ten

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Before catching the ferry to the South Island we made one last effort for spotless crane, which is usually a much easier bird in the North Island. Again, we were thwarted by high water levels, but some New Zealand fernbird only two metres away was a nice consolation. After checking out another white-fronted tern flock, we were ready to board our ferry. The open water section of this crossing is a good chance to see pelagic birds, and we were all hoping for our first albatross of the trip.



A fernbird pauses its breakfast to check us out. Bill Hebner.

Leaving the harbour there were several arctic skua chasing white-fronted terns close to the ferry, as well as our first spotted shag for the trip. Once we were in the deeper water we were joined by thousands of fluttering shearwater, as well as smaller numbers of flesh-footed, Buller's and sooty shearwaters. As we were nearing the South Island, a very large bird was spotted sitting on the water... Albatross!! A white-capped albatross (which unfortunately flew straight away from the boat), which everyone was delighted with. Albatross are almost always high up the hit-list of visiting birders to New Zealand.

We entered the Marlborough Sounds and immediately were on shag watch. Before long we had better looks at spotted shag, another reef egret, and as we approached the end of the voyage we saw our first king shags. This species is the rarest shag (cormorant) in the world, being found only in the Marlborough Sounds at the northern end of the South Island. Brilliant to see. Only an hour later we were at our accommodation for the evening, with everyone looking forward to exploring the South Island and the new set of birds that came with it.

**Day total:** 40 (+ yellowhammer heard only); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 109

**Bird of the day:** King shag (four votes), white-capped albatross (three votes)



A king shag enjoys the sun. Bill Hebner.

## 7 February 2023 – Day Eleven

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A glorious sunny and still morning saw us back on the Marlborough Sounds for a private boat tour. The flat water was perfect for penguin spotting, and before long we had found a pair of little penguins which

repeatedly surfaced near our boat. Penguins are another group of birds people are ever keen to see when they get to New Zealand, so it was nice to have such calm water for viewing them. Next, we nosed in close to a roost of spotted and king shags, enabling us to enjoy these beautiful birds in the morning sun from just a few metres away. Another reef egret was bonus, as was a small pod of Hector's dolphin with a small calf which hung around the boat for ten minutes or so. This small endemic dolphin has a peculiar rounded dorsal fin and is always a real treat to see.

Our boat then dropped us off on a predator free island, where our target was the critically endangered orange-fronted parakeet. We slowly walked a usually reliable section of track but had only a very brief glimpse of a parakeet flying overhead. There were plenty of distractions however, with lots of birdlife around including the charismatic weka and a group of South Island saddleback at very close range, including two "jackbirds" – juveniles which have not yet developed the saddle which gives this species its name. An orange-fronted parakeet then made itself apparent, right by where the boat had first landed (of course), providing very close-range views of what is a very rare bird. We followed this individual for at least 10 minutes, with everyone getting a great look.



An orange-fronted parakeet camouflaged amongst the foliage. Bill Hebner.

After we were back from our tour we headed south, spotting another falcon at our lunch stop and shopping for some new binoculars along the way. Despite Bill making a new best friend, we continued south to a lake where we were looking for a couple of new species of grebe. Our luck was in and we saw both hoary-headed and great crested grebe, with the former coming quite close to the viewing platform.

We continued on to Kaikōura, a famous seabird destination where we would be spending two nights. After a delicious dinner we headed out into the fading light to look for little owl, seeing a pair in a huge old pine tree right on dusk. We had a fantastic day of birding, reflected in the wide spread of bird of the day votes, with iconic species like weka not even getting a look in! There was even more to look forward to tomorrow...

**Day total:** 56 (+ dunnock heard only); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 115

**Bird of the day:** Orange-fronted parakeet (two votes), South Island saddleback (one vote), little penguin (one vote), hoary-headed grebe (one vote), king shag (one vote), little owl (one vote)



A little owl prepares for a night of hunting. Bill Hebner.

## 8 February 2023 – Day Twelve

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The main event today was the mornings pelagic trip, with everyone looking forward to the chance of seeing more albatross. We weren't disappointed. At our first stop the boat was immediately surrounded by white-capped and Salvin's albatross, as well as northern giant and cape petrels. Before long the even bigger albatross turned up, with New Zealand wandering and southern royal albatross right off the back of the boat. It truly is special to see these gigantic birds at such close range.



A Salvin's albatross soars into view. Bill Hebner.

A northern royal albatross did a couple of laps of the boat, while later in the morning we had the unexpected bonus of a juvenile black-browed albatross, the only one we would see in our whole trip. As well as the six species of albatross, we got good views of white-chinned petrel, but strangely only one brief and distant flyby of a Westland petrel. Importantly, everyone managed to see a Hutton's shearwater, a species which breeds only in the mountain ranges behind Kaikōura. Towards the end of the boat trip, we had the bonuses of a juvenile black-fronted tern and yet another reef egret. This was our seventh reef egret of the trip, an astounding number considering this species is sometimes missed on these 21-day tours. All in all a very successful morning on the water, despite the chum running out earlier than intended.

During the afternoon guests went their separate ways to pursue various activities, with dolphin swimming, shopping, and relaxing all on the agenda. The day was capped by a traditional New Zealand dinner, fish n chips from the local takeaway shop.

**Day total:** seen = 37; new for the trip = 10; total for the trip to date = 125

**Bird of the day:** Salvin's albatross (four votes), southern royal albatross (two votes), cape petrel (one vote)





A New Zealand wandering albatross. Bill Hebner.

## 9 February 2023 – Day Thirteen

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An early start this morning as we had a lot of ground to cover, including crossing the mighty Southern Alps. As we headed south, we stopped at a braided river, where an obliging adult black-fronted tern made several passes in front of us where we had pulled off the highway. A couple of estuary and lagoon stops didn't produce anything new, so we turned west and pointed the van at the mountains.

Passing through stunning scenery we made it to Arthur's Pass Village, which was overflowing with people in the area for the Coast-to-Coast adventure race. Despite the activity we found a quiet spot to park, which worked out perfectly as a kea flew overhead as we pulled in! This bird perched in a nearby tree for an extended period, even showing off its vivid orange underwing a few times. While everyone was enjoying the kea, a South Island robin hopped into view only a few metres away, coming extremely close and showing the bold nature typical of this species.



A kea showing off its vivid underwing. Max Schwenne.



A male tomtit showing the yellow-tinted breast of the South Island subspecies. Bill Hebner.

Next up was a short walk in some alpine forest just beyond the village. Before too long we had tracked down both brown creeper and rifleman, as well as another very friendly South Island robin, which came very close to jumping onto our shoes! We continued on to the west coast of the South Island, having covered over 400 kilometres today and still somehow managed to squeeze some birding in. Despite a long time in the van everybody was happy with how the day had gone, it's always a good day when you see a kea!

**Day total:** seen = 48 (+ redpoll heard only); new for the trip = 4; total for the trip to date = 129

**Bird of the day:** Kea (three votes), rifleman (two votes), brown creeper (one vote), South Island robin (one vote)

## 10 February 2023 – Day Fourteen

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A morning stop saw us at a picturesque West Coast lake, where we followed a flock of brown creeper and tried to photograph this hyperactive species. A further lake stopped produced a dark morph little shag and a juvenile crested grebe being fed by a couple of adults (and a lot of sandflies). In the afternoon we arrived at Ōkārīto, where we found a fernbird (South Island subspecies) barely a metre away and had a couple of low flyovers by great egrets. We had time to fit in an afternoon walk to Franz Joseph Glacier, which didn't produce any new birds, but was a sobering reminder of how far New Zealand and the world's glaciers have retreated in recent times.



A male bellbird considering its next move. Bill Hebner.

The focus today was to see Ōkārito kiwi, so right on dark most of the group met with Ian from Ōkārito Kiwi Tours to give it a crack. After a briefing from Ian, we walked through the bush to a likely spot, having kea circling overhead and more fernbird in close by the track. What followed is always a special occasion, with Ian's knowledge and the nightlife of the forest coming alive around us as darkness fell. We could hear a kiwi moving through the undergrowth, paralleling the path we were on. Twice it seemed as if it was just about to step out onto the track, we could see ferns moving and even Ian was convinced we would see the bird. Unfortunately, it just didn't happen, which was incredibly frustrating after a couple of hours of patient stalking. We did get to hear two kiwi calling less than 50 metres away, which is special in itself and definitely made the night worth while. The fact that we didn't see Ōkārito kiwi, yet it still got two votes for bird of the day, is testament to Ian's guiding skill and the overall experience of an Ōkārito kiwi tour.

**Day total:** seen = 42 (+ Ōkārito kiwi, morepork, sacred kingfisher, South Island robin and dunnock heard only); new for the trip = 1; total for the trip to date = 130

**Bird of the day:** Kea (three votes), Ōkārito kiwi (two votes), redpoll (two votes)



A tui fluffing itself up on its roost. Bill Hebner.

## 11 February 2023 – Day Fifteen

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Today our travels took us through more typically stunning West Coast scenery, driving through temperate rainforest-flanked mountains. We tried a local spot for New Zealand falcon and were rewarded with our

best views of the trip, a briefly perched bird which swooped around us and momentarily pursued a passing New Zealand pigeon! Less spectacular, but equally important for the listers among us, was the first dunnock of the trip. We had heard this retiring introduced passerine several times over the previous days but without seeing it, so it was good to see one out in the open.

Our next stop was a lookout perched on a spectacular piece of coastline. We could see New Zealand fur seals on the beach below, but what drew our eye was a swarm of birds following a fishing trawler off the coast. The boat was being followed by over 150 albatross, mostly white-capped albatross, but there were also royal and possibly a wandering type mixed in. The real prize were several (distant) Westland petrels mixing with the albatross, it was good to catch up with this species after missing it at Kaikōura.



A yellowhead pauses for a fleeting glimpse in the treetops. Max Schwenne.

We continued on through more mountainous scenery, climbing in elevation before stopping in an area of beech forest. Our target here was yellowhead, an endemic passerine hard to come by on the mainland. After only about 15 minutes we heard their distinctive rattling calls, but frustratingly they wouldn't come closer and only a couple of people managed distant views. What followed was a long and tense stalk through the forest, desperately trying to spot the yellowhead amongst the treetops. After an hour of shadowing the birds, they finally conceded, coming right down to eye level and giving us staggering views. Everyone was delighted that our perseverance had paid off and we drove away feeling very satisfied.

Our final stop of the day was far more relaxed, as we spent some time admiring some great crested grebes using purpose-built nest boxes on an inland lake. This was a highlight for a lot of people as we saw chicks

riding the backs of their parents and being fed, all within 20 metres and in bright afternoon sunlight. A lovely way to end a very productive day.

**Day total:** seen = 37 (+ greenfinch, rifleman and kākā heard only); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 133

**Bird of the day:** New Zealand falcon (four votes), yellowhead (three votes)



A great crested grebe chick has lunch while its parent watches on. Bill Hebner.

## 12 February 2023 – Day Sixteen

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We were out the door early this morning as we prepared for a long day in beautiful Fiordland. Before we made a birding stop, we had already pulled over several times for the scenery, the drive here through the Eglinton Valley is one of the most stunning in the country.

Luck was on our side today. Right as we pulled in to our first birding spot, two busloads of tourists were just leaving the car park – perfect timing! We were at the last chance saloon for spotless crake, a species that had avoided us on at least five occasions so far this tour. Within a minute of reaching the viewing platform a crake was spotted, but to our surprise it was a Baillon's crake! We would have looked for this species later in the tour, but it was a real bonus to get one now. The Baillon's crake was not behaving as shy as crakes usually are, flying over the water and landing only 10 metres from where we were standing! Moments

later, two more crakes were spotted on the far side of the pond, and this time were both spotless. Finally! It didn't stop there, with a third spotless crake walking into view only ten metres from the other side of the viewing platform to the Baillon's. After having avoided us for so long, we had three in a few minutes... what's the saying about London buses?! However, within five minutes the next busload of tourists arrived, and the platform started to get a bit crowded. Although we got great enjoyment watching the tourists get very excited about what we were looking at, despite not really knowing what we were looking at, we decided to move on.



The Baillon's crake (left) and spotless crake (right). Max Schwenne.

We stopped at a nearby campground for lunch, where we were greeted by a weka running down the driveway, carrying a chicken drumstick it had just stolen from someone else's lunch elsewhere in the campsite. Next to greet us was a New Zealand falcon flying overhead (our seventh of the trip!!!), followed a few minutes later by a yellow-crowned parakeet which we got a decent look at. Carrying on up the road we had more stops for the scenery, including at Milford Sound itself, one of the non-birding highlights for people on this trip.

We stopped along a more alpine stretch of road to look for rockwren, but unfortunately access to the site for these birds has become increasingly difficult and we weren't able to spend much time looking. Despite this, we had all had a fantastic day, with lots of smiles in the van as we bid farewell to Fiordland and headed for our accommodation.

**Day total:** seen = 33 (+ kea, rifleman, dunnock, greenfinch and yellowhammer heard only); new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 135

**Bird of the day:** Spotless crake (four votes), Baillon's crake (two votes), Yellow-crowned parakeet (one vote)



The mighty weka, stealer of lunches. Bill Hebner.

## 13 February 2023 – Day Seventeen

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Another early start today, as we were up and driving to catch the ferry for two nights on Stewart Island, another real highlight of the trip. The ferry ride to the island produced thousands and thousands of sooty shearwaters, which breed nearby, as well as several trip firsts in common diving-petrel, Foveaux shag and best of all, yellow-eyed penguin. Once on Stewart Island, we immediately departed again, catching the water taxi to predator free Ulva Island for an afternoon of birding. On the water taxi we managed to spot four Fiordland crested penguin moulting on the rocks, completing the penguin trifecta for the day. Brilliant!

Once on Ulva we were immediately inundated with endemic birds. Our tour had been going so well up to this point that there weren't any likely new species for us in the island, but we had the opportunity to see several much better and in greater numbers. Over the next four hours we had fantastic views of both red and yellow-crowned parakeets, a few pairs of yellowhead, several very close kākā, a bathing South Island saddleback, some very friendly weka and a New Zealand sea lion sunning itself on the beach.





A little penguin cruising through calm waters. Max Schwenne.



A southern brown kiwi feeding just metres away. Max Schwenne.

Back on Stewart Island we had a couple of hours to rest and a fantastic dinner at the hotel, before heading out for our last kiwi-spotting attempt of the tour. Taking us out was fellow Wrybill guide Matt, a Stewart Island local, who was optimistic about our chances of seeing kiwi. Sure enough, after only a few minutes of walking, Matt had an immature southern brown kiwi in the torch beam. These birds are not particularly shy and allow quite close approach, even talking, while they continue to feed. This meant we could get a really good look at this iconic species, including a full-grown female calling right in front of us before she sprinted off to chase an intruder from her territory! This earned southern brown kiwi a unanimous vote for bird of the day, despite the fact we had seen two new penguin species. We headed for our accommodation as happy as birders could be, with morepork and the odd mottled petrel calling overhead.

**Day total:** seen = 47 (+ mottled petrel, morepork, silvereye, chaffinch and greenfinch heard only); new for the trip = 5; total for the trip to date = 140

**Bird of the day:** Southern brown kiwi (seven votes)

## 14 February 2023 – Day Eighteen

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Today was another pelagic day. We headed out from the Oban wharf, again stopping to see five Fiordland crested penguins, before continuing out to some islands to the east of Stewart Island. Again there were thousands of sooty shearwaters, with a pair of brown skua also putting on a great show right above the back of the boat. The real prize came when we spotted today's bird of the day (and bird of the trip winner) in the form of a Buller's albatross, which landed right beside the boat and delighted all with its perfect lipstick and eyeliner. This albatross is extremely pretty, almost gaudy for a seabird, to get to see it almost within touching distance is a real treat.

As we headed for deeper water the birds kept coming, with several huge southern royal albatross and a range of other species, all of which we had previously seen on the tour. The most interesting birds were a flesh-footed shearwater, a long way south for this species, and a sooty shearwater with a plumage aberration that resulted in extensive white on its head, neck and chest. Unfortunately, the chum used to attract the birds ran out far earlier than expected, so we headed back to shore after only a few hours on the water. The silver lining was that several tired souls (including the guide!) had an opportunity for a rest in the afternoon, while others enjoyed several kākā in the gardens around our accommodation and a little penguin swimming and the Oban wharf in the evening.

**Day total:** seen = 43; new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 142

**Bird of the day:** Buller's albatross (six votes), southern royal albatross (one vote)



A brown skua circles the back of the boat. Max Schwenne.



One of the giant southern royal albatrosses. Max Schwenne.



A white-faced storm-petrel seen on our Stewart Island pelagic. Bill Hebner.

## 15 February 2023 – Day Nineteen

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This morning we bid farewell to idyllic Stewart Island, with the two nights spent here having been extremely enjoyable (as usual). The ferry ride back to the South Island was fairly quiet, with most people relaxing and enjoying their last boat trip of the tour.

Once back on the mainland we stopped at a couple of coastal lagoons, with the second stop producing two white-winged black terns, a relatively rare species in New Zealand. Although the terns were fairly distant, they were clearly different from the nearby black-fronted terns as they hawked over the thousands of waterfowl on the lagoon.

After driving east and north along the coast, we stopped at a beach where a moulting erect-crested penguin had been recently seen. This penguin is usually only found on New Zealand's subantarctic islands and is a rare visitor to the mainland. Unfortunately, we couldn't find the erect-crested penguin, but a moulting Fiordland crested penguin was a nice consolation. We quickly left this bird in piece and continued north in the van.

Our next stop was also focused on penguins, as we called in at a yellow-eyed penguin colony in the late afternoon to try and spot some coming ashore. After about 15 minutes a penguin was spotted coming ashore, after which we saw as many as seven individuals, including one which was surfing in the breakers

just offshore. It was great to get better views of this endangered penguin, as we had previously only had a brief sighting of a bird in the water from the Stewart Island ferry.

The final stop of the day was a wharf where over 1000 Otago shags breed and roost. This species was recently split from the Foveaux shag we had seen around Stewart Island (previously the two species were together call Stewart Island shag) and was the last shag species for the tour. However, these shags were largely ignored when we arrived as we searched for a second moulting erect-crested penguin which had been recently seen here. The bird was spotted in due time, delighting everyone as a real bonus bird and the fourth penguin species for the day. A great way to finish the day, we even had time to admire the Otago shags wheeling overhead!

**Day total:** seen = 51 (+ red-crowned parakeet, bellbird, fernbird and greenfinch heard only); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 145

**Bird of the day:** Erect-crested penguin (six votes), Fiordland crested penguin (one vote)



A moulting Fiordland crested penguin. Note that we left the area immediately after spotting this bird to avoid disturbing it. Max Schwenne.

## 16 February 2023 – Day Twenty

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First up was a quick stop at a coastal lagoon, where we spotted a Cape Barren goose feeding among the feral greylag geese. We didn't spend long here, as we were all keen to head inland and look for our target for the day: black stilt. This endemic stilt is the world's rarest wading bird, with fewer than 200 individuals left, and is always high on the list of target species for birders in New Zealand.



New Zealand pipit looks down from its rocky perch. Max Schwenne.

Luck was with us, at nearly the first pond we stopped at a black stilt was spotted on the far side. Brilliant! The bird kept disappearing behind long grass and we were viewing from the side of the road, so we moved on to try and find some better views. A river delta just over an hour away did provide better views of an adult and a juvenile, with at least eight more black stilt seen distantly through the heat haze. After the stilts moved on, we continued up the road to get a close view of Mount Cook. The scenery around Mount Cook village is fantastic and we enjoyed some more relaxed sight-seeing for the afternoon.

We had our final dinner of the tour this evening, enjoying one of the tastiest meals of the whole trip and reflecting on the last three weeks. We compared our birds of the trip, with Buller's albatross and southern brown kiwi being the clear favourites, but the wide range of birds that received votes showed what a brilliant trip it had been. It was also apparent how lucky we had been with the weather, avoiding the worst

of the torrential rain at the start of tour and the cyclone that hammered the North Island while we were further south.

**Day total:** seen = 39 (+ dunnock and yellowhammer heard only); new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 148

**Bird of the day:** Black stilt (seven votes)



A banded dotterel near Mount Cook. Max Schwenne.

## 17 February 2023 – Day Twenty-One

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Our final morning together! Before heading for Christchurch, we had a quick look for chukar, hearing their distinctive call but the birds stayed hidden on the rocky hillsides. We then stopped for a sunny morning view of Mount Cook across Lake Pukaki, after which we made our second stop at the Fairlie Bake House for breakfast (there's no greater recommendation than a repeat dining!). Near Christchurch we had time to look for sulphur-crested cockatoo, spotting them just as we had given up and were leaving the area. We then quickly checked a tern flock at a nearby beach, finding a little tern and reaching the nice round number of 150 species for the trip. We began to say our goodbyes and drop people off at the airport and nearby hotels, again reflecting on what had been a very enjoyable three weeks. Thank you all and happy birding!

**Day total:** seen = 27 (+ chukar heard only); new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 150



The team lined up by a very important road sign!