

Tour report

4 – 24 November 2023

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Bill & Ann Richards, Mike & Rose Collard, Mike Nelson, Barbara Greatorex, Andrea Nietvelt, and Wouter Van Gasse

Images

Matt Jones

Things outside of our control: not spending the night on Tiritiri Matangi; Robbie Williams playing a concert in Hawkes Bay; a hole in our interisland ferry! And we dipped on Black and Pycroft's Petrel.

Many things fell into place: the weather for almost the whole trip was great, sometimes too nice for pelagics! The group gelled very quickly and laughed and joked every day - I don't think I've ever laughed so much on tour! The birding was fantastic - seeing all the birds we needed in four hours on Tiri was remarkable especially the Takahē giving itself up at the very last minute. Incredible views of Wrybill. The Falcon flying over our heads. The showy Yellow-crowned Parakeets and Long tailed Cuckoo. Blue Ducks and Bitterns. Orange-fronted Parakeets. The fantastic second pelagic out of Kaikoura. The evening with Ian (Coops) Cooper. Finding Rock Wren. The awesome display put on by the Black-fronted Terns. Stewart Island Brown Kiwi sniffing around our boots. The Yellow-eyed Penguins right in front of us.

And a personal highlight, was seeing Rose on a pelagic.

As a guide it was real pleasure to show you around beautiful Aotearoa/ New Zealand and to find you some of its really special rare birds.

Birds like Black Stilt, Yellow-eyed Penguin, Fairy Tern, Kea, and most of the Kiwi are declining, so these sightings are always extra special.

We finished having seen 148 Species.

Matt Jones (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

4 November 2023 – Day One

At 8am we left our Auckland city hotel and headed north.

Our first stop was a bit of roadside birding at some sewage ponds, finding birds that we would regularly see over the next few weeks. White-faced Heron, Australasian Shoveler, Pied Stilts, and the endemic NZ Dabchick. We watched Welcome Swallows skim over the ponds while Tui and a couple of NZ Fantails flicked above heads in the bushes, all the while high flying Australian Swamp Harriers were overhead.

Driving past a few more roadside ponds we added Paradise Shelducks, Little Pied and Little Black Shags to our list, along with Pukeko and Australian Magpies.

Next, we stopped at a sheltered beach where we encountered our first NZ Dotterels, these very trusting birds kept the cameras happy. We also saw our first Variable Oystercatchers and Red-billed Gulls.



Variable oystercatcher pair

Heading north our next stop was our first bakery to buy lunch, which we enjoyed at a tidal lagoon. We found a distant pair of NZ Fairy terns, along with their larger cousin the Caspian Tern, plus White-fronted terns. We saw Bar-tailed Godwit and more NZ Dotterels feeding on the slowly dropping tide along with more noisy Variable Oystercatchers. Sacred Kingfisher was seen while we were serenaded by the Eurasian Skylark.

Our next stop was in the middle of a new housing estate. The small lake in the middle of this human habitat was a hotbed of birdlife! Black Swans, Masked Lapwings, NZ Scaup - plus the bonus of finding not only NZ Dabchicks but Australasian Little Grebes side by side. Pied Stilts yapped around us and three Brown Teal were found - this once mega rare duck has had an incredible recovery due to predator control.

We checked into our quiet motel and after a very nice meal in the local town we headed out to search for our first Kiwi of the tour. Kiwi are always tough birds to find. Nocturnal, shy, and with a great sense of smell and hearing, they can make you work for your view. Tonight was one of those nights. We all eventually got to see a North Island Brown Kiwi, and we heard a pair call right in front of us.

We drove back to our motel, with day one under our belt feeling tired but happy.

5 November 2023 – Day Two

Up early and on the road south. Today was our first pelagic. We headed out in calm weather which would be a theme on future pelagics. Leaving the harbour we noticed a selection of waders on the sand banks - NZ Dotterels and Bar-tailed Godwits and our first South Island Pied Oystercatchers and Red Knots. Our first stop was a small island that had a very showy pair of Reef Egrets, and a few Pied Shags that we added to our list. As we left and headed out, we had a brief view of our first Little Blue Penguin.



Reef egrets



Buller's shearwater



New Zealand storm-petrel

Once we got to deeper water, the wind dropped and the sun came out so it took a bit of time to gather our shopping list of birds. We connected with Flesh-footed, Fluttering and the smart Buller's Shearwaters, along with the shy Little Shearwater, Cooks Petrel and Fairy Prion. Plenty of White-faced Storm Petrels skipped around at the back of the vessel and we had good fortune that a couple of New Zealand Storm Petrels joined the White-faced Stormies in the slick.

A bonus bird from the south joined us, in the shape of our first Albatross. A lone White-capped Albatross. As we headed back towards the harbour we picked out a few Common Diving Petrels.



Cook's petrel

6 November 2023 – Day Three

We headed south again, towards the lagoon that we had visited a couple days earlier, re-connecting with the Fairy Terns. We had better looks at more Bar-tailed Godwits and NZ Dotterels along with noisy Variable Oystercatcher, and a small flock of Ruddy Turnstones joined our trip list.

Our next location was a reserve with a large predator-free fence around a large peninsular. Our forest birds took a shot in the arm. The flying paintbox which is the Eastern Rosella was added to our list but more important were the NZ endemics; Bellbirds, Whiteheads, North Island Saddlebacks, and eventually North Island Robin, along with showy Kaka, NZ Pigeons, NZ Fantails and Grey Warblers. We had a fly over calling Shining Bronze Cuckoo and as we walked the bush paths, we added plenty of Brown Teal to our list as they sat next to a forest stream.

Leaving the reserve we found a good spot for Spotless Crake and were rewarded with good but brief views of the skulking little bird - always a treat to add this bird to the list.



Once we checked into our hotel for two nights, we headed out for a great meal at the local eatery.

7 November 2023 – Day Four

Back out on the water today for our second pelagic of the trip. First, we found a couple very obliging Buff-banded Rails in the mangroves near the Harbour. Out of harbour the weather was the same as a couple of days previous, calm warm and windless.

We re-connected with the small Fluttering Shearwaters, the handsome Buller's Shearwaters, noisy Flesh-footed Shearwaters, Cooks Petrels, Fairy Prions, Common Diving Petrels, Australasian Gannets and White-faced Storm-Petrel. And the prize of finding a couple more New Zealand Storm-Petrels. Unfortunately, on both these northern pelagics we had failed to get Pycrofts Petrel or Black Petrel. Definitely the weather - or lack of weather - had played its part in not finding these two species.



Little penguin



White-faced storm-petrel



New Zealand storm-petrel

After another good but quiet day on the water we headed for home, finding Variable Oystercatchers and Bar-tailed Godwits on sand bars near the harbour. We looked in vain for a Laughing Kookaburra on our journey back to the motel but found its smaller cousin, the Sacred Kingfisher.

8 November 2023 – Day Five

Today was a bit different. We would usually overnight at Tiritiri Matangi, the predator free island, but unfortunately this particular tour only a day trip was possible. In short, this meant finding all the birds we needed today whilst we were there - with the exception of Little Spotted Kiwi, which now was out of our reach.

We left our motel, and once again headed south towards Gulf Harbour to meet the ferry. We paid a short visit to a small park where Rose added Buff-banded Rail to her list, as she didn't see them the previous day. The 30-minute crossing was uneventful and after a briefing on arrival to Tiri we headed out to find our birds.

First North Island Robin feeding young, then Whiteheads calling all around us. To our first sugar water feeding station for the sought after Stitchbird or Hihi. The stunning male with his white ear tufts, and the washed out females, zipped in and out joined by plenty of Bellbirds singing and squabbling. Further up the track we heard and briefly saw our first Red-crowned Parakeets, and the more showy North Island Saddlebacks.

New Zealand Fantails, Tui and New Zealand Pigeons were seen as we came towards the end of our first trail. Matt tried a short path where he had seen Takahe in the past. No luck with Takahe but we stumbled across a daytime roosting Morepork ... bonus!

We were still missing a couple of species so Matt led the group along a little used path heading North/East. We saw plenty of species that we had already seen; Saddleback, Stichbird, Whitehead, Pigeon and Bellbird, but then we bumped into a small party of Rifleman. Being NZ's smallest bird and very active not everyone managed to get onto this tiny endemic before it disappeared. While trying to relocate the Rifleman, Matt heard a familiar call - a North Island Kokako was calling close by. After a bit searching, Mike got eyes on it and BOOM we all had looks this large grey bird which is very shy and very good at hiding. Sometimes called the 'grey ghost' we found at least three of these birds.

Walking back towards the lighthouse with a bit of a spring in our step we found a very obliging pair of Brown Quail and heard NZ Fernbird, but it did not show itself.



Male stitchbird

Time was running out for our last target bird – our last and only chance of finding Takahe. We walked around the usual spots, but with no joy. This time of year they are breeding, so it's likely due to them becoming super cautious and shy if they have a young chick in tow. We took a break and sat down for the first time in while, ate some lunch and relaxed. We'd had a great day. As we walked to the wharf to catch the ferry, Matt and Mike were walking together when, yes, out the corner of his eye a pair of Takahe were feeding their chick under a small bush. Awesome!

Everyone got on to our final target and we skipped back to the wharf with all our possible targets ticked, seen and some photographed – with time to spare as we boarded the ferry.

We jumped back into the van and fought the slow road through Auckland traffic, leaving New Zealand's largest city behind us. We arrived at our accommodation, dumped our bags and headed out for a slap up meal at the local pub. And toasted a great day in the field!



9 November 2023 – Day Six

No rest for the wicked. Yesterday was history. The plus side of missing out on a night on Tiri, was that we had a full day to bird at Miranda. Miranda is New Zealand's wader/Shorebird hot spot.



We left our comfortable units at 5:50 am but the reward was immediate as we spent the next couple of hours in the company of a least 60 plus Wrybill. This tiny endemic wader is the only bird in the world where the bill curves to the right. An adaptation to help it feed on small invertebrates that are under small stones.

In amongst the Wrybill was a single Red-necked Stint. This long distance migrant has become a less common visitor in the last few years. After the cameras had a good work out we headed towards the hides. Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots, Pacific Golden Plover, New Zealand Dotterels, Pied Stilts, Masked Lapwings and not forgetting South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers. Waders a plenty!

We saw our first Black-billed Gulls, had looks at Royal Spoonbills, Caspian and White-fronted Terns and every pool was home to a White-faced Heron. Welcome Swallows hawked over the pools for insects, all the while the backing track was the constant song from the Eurasian Skylark.

Time for some retail therapy. We arrived at the Visitor Centre and met with Keith Woodley the Centre manager (and wader guru!!) and got some early Christmas shopping done!

It was still morning so by way of change we had an early lunch / late breakfast sit down meal in a local café and went back to our accommodation for a couple of hours down time. Heading back out later in the afternoon now that the tide was rising we watched Godwits and Knots take flight in a spectacular fashion at the hides. Back where we had watched Wrybill earlier that morning, they were still there along with very showy Black-billed and Red-billed Gulls. Great to see them sitting side by side, along with some photogenic White-fronted Terns all in nice light.



Wrybill



Red-necked stint



Shorebirds galore



Black-billed gulls

From there we drove back to the local pub, and for a second night in a row the meal did not disappoint. Another epic day finished.

10 November 2023 – Day Seven

Another early start saw us adding a couple of new species to our growing list. Not one but three Australian Terns (Gull-billed Terns) sitting on a muddy island and then we found a flock of seven Eastern Cattle Egrets, a couple of which were in very golden breeding plumage.

Onwards to the local bakery, which by now the team had become a well-oiled machine when it came to lunch time bakery stops! A brief stop at a wetland in the hope of finding Australasian Bittern. No joy, but plenty of wildfowl - NZ Scaup, Australasian Shoveler, Black duck, Grey Teal, Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, Canada Geese, Pukeko and Australasian Swamp Harriers. Plus, a brief but showy Shining Bronze Cuckoo that landed on the overhead lines.

Then a bit of a drive, passing Hamilton as we pushed onto our last true bit of North Island forest birding. Once at the site, the weather was a turning into a perfect day. We walked a forest trail seeing our first Yellow-crowned Parakeets and their bigger cousin, the Kaka. We also found NZ Fantail and North Island Robin.



Yellow-crowned parakeet

A lunch stop at an open area gave more views of Yellow-crowned Parakeets, Whiteheads, Silvereyes and Grey Warblers. While eating lunch and watching Tui and distant Swamp Harriers, a yap yapping call was heard. As we looked skyward our first male New Zealand Falcon came into view above the forest. He circled above us calling and keeping the area clear of harriers and everyone got onto this endemic, a sometimes elusive raptor.

We tried another location for Long-tailed Cuckoo (Koel) and found a bird that just didn't settle and gave the briefest of views. Then into forest, we found more Yellow-crowned Parakeets and Bellbirds feeding on the native flowering fuchsia. Near the tower we had brief views of Kaka.

Matt had a tip off about a sighting of a Long-tailed Cuckoo seen a week earlier. The site was near paddocks that backed onto another piece of native forest so we stopped there as we headed towards our motel for the night. As soon as we jumped out of the van, we heard a distant bird calling. The bird flew towards us and sat at the top of a tree close to the track. Amazingly it sat in plain view for the next twenty minutes, calling, preening, stretching. Scope views, movies and still photos taken - we were all happy and Wouter even had time to take some cow photos!!



Long-tailed cuckoo

Back into the van and onwards to the lake town of Taupo. The place was busy with Robbie Williams fans (who were going to a concert in Napier the following night) so it was good to be able to walk from our motel to the restaurant that evening.

11 November 2023 – Day Eight

We were on the road the next morning heading back to the forest. Probably the hottest day of the trip so far, blue skies no clouds and very little breeze.

We re-found North Island Robin, Whitehead, Silvereve, Bellbird, Tui, Grey Warbler and Kaka but no sign of the falcon. Phew for the good look yesterday!

At one stage we had a Bronze Shining Cuckoo and a Long-tailed Cuckoo on show at once.

The Long-tailed played hide and seek with us in the bushes and got flushed more than once by a Tui but the stars of the show today were Yellow-crowned Parakeets that came down to eye level. They fed on seed heads only a couple of meters away from us, keeping photographers and birders very happy.

No joy at a site we checked for Blue Duck as we headed to our motel for the night.

12 November 2023 – Day Nine

We left the motel at 05:58am and by 06:06am we were watching a pair of Blue Ducks feeding upstream from us! A path along the river's edge enabled us to get great views of this very special duck. Photos taken, scope and bin views were soaked up and it was time to find some new birds at a change of location.

And we found a spot at the lakes edge in-between a reed bed, on the lake were hundreds of Black Swans, plus New Zealand Scaup, New Zealand Dabchicks and Eurasian Coot - a new bird for the list. Plus there were plenty of Great Cormorants, Little Black and Little Pied shags on the old wharf. A distinctive booming sound of a Bittern was heard so we searched the road in-between the reeds hoping to see a bittern's head sky pointing. No luck. However, another bird caught our attention with the repetitive bleep-like call ... a New Zealand Fernbird. This endemic grass bird can be super sulky but not today. A couple of birds showed really well hopping around in front of us, climbing up reed stems and keeping our cameras hot.

We changed location and played the waiting game with a little more height and the rising sun behind us. Silvereys, Dunnocks, Grey Warblers and NZ Fantails kept us amused while the occasional Bittern called. Black-billed gulls flew over; an Australian Swamp Harrier swooped over the reeds making us all think it was a Bittern. The waiting game paid off after a couple of false alarms - an Australasian Bittern exploded from the reeds not too far in front of us. There was mild panic to make sure everyone got onto this shy bird, but we need not have worried – the bird flew and stayed in view for a long time, flapping its lazy flight over the huge reed bed.

Stomachs rumbled, reminding us we hadn't even had breakfast yet so we drove back to our motel and by 08:20am we were tucking into breakfast talking about lifers before the first meal of the day!

Back on the road and up into the hills to a new site, we eventually found a male North Island Tomtit. Down at the river we found another pair of Blue Duck with a single duckling and just before we hopped back into the van, another showy Shining Bronze Cuckoo called and sat up in the car park.

Driving through the stunning Tongariro National Park we stopped to take a few tourist shots of snow-capped mountains. A New Zealand Pipit flew up from the roadside lay-by and skipped either side of this fast road, thankfully dodging the traffic.

At a lovely little café - probably the best location in New Zealand for seeing Nankeen Night Heron – we came up empty. We saw a couple of empty nests, but no birds. At this time of year the birds are breeding and they are very good at hiding in the dense foliage. Well, we had a great early start of the day and if you going to dip, it might as well be in a café drinking tea and eating cake!

At the restaurant that evening, I made my apologies to Rose & Andrea who are not Indian food fans. The restaurant staff did a great job helping us out and our comfortable motel was a welcome sight after a long day.

13 November 2023 – Day Ten

At the Manawatu Estuary the next morning, the rising tide pushed waders towards us. Bar-tailed Godwits, some with their tracking aerals visible, and plenty of leg bands on show. A few Red Knot joined them, a few distant Wrybill were spotted along with Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers. Our first Banded Dotterel were seen and joined our growing list. A bonus was seeing all three of New Zealand's gulls together.

After picking up lunch, naturally we headed to a local sewage ponds! Three tiny Black-fronted Dotterels were found along with Australasian Shovelers, NZ Scaup, Grey Teal and Mallard.

Onto the new super-fast highway into Wellington, New Zealand's capital city. We arrived at check-in with time to spare for our ferry to Picton on the South Island but were met by "high viz" jacketed staff advising that our ferry was cancelled due to a large hole in it!! We managed to get the next ferry which meant waiting at the wharf for over three hours, but the silver lining was we spotted our first Spotted Shags and a little blue penguin.

We left windy Wellington behind us later than expected but the crossing was fruitful. A few White-capped Albatross, our first Northern Giant Petrel and White-chinned Petrel. Plenty of Fairy Prions, the occasional Sooty Shearwater and as we got closer to the Sounds we saw plenty of Fluttering Shearwaters. A Reef Heron was spotted flying close to the shore and a lot more Spotted Shags, plus plenty of Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns.

With the North Island done we were almost at the half way point of our trip. Our motel was in the centre of Picton and headed out for a great meal with thoughts of what the South Island would hold for us.

14 November 2023 – Day Eleven

We were heading into the Sound at 08:15am by boat this morning with two big target birds needed.

We found one within thirty minutes of leaving the wharf; a lone ringed female New Zealand King Shag sat amongst the company of Spotted Shags. This super rare bird number less than 900 individuals. Plenty of photos were taken, and of the photogenic Spotted Shags and our first New Zealand Fur seals.

We were briefly joined by a small pod of Dusky Dolphins as we sailed to our next destination, which was a small predator free island. Once ashore we were met by the welcoming committee in the shape of another new bird; the confiding Weka. This flightless rail is definitely not a shy bird - two or three of them walked amongst us.



Spotted shag

Our next target was close - a short distance along a bush path and we were quickly joined by a pair of Orange-fronted Parakeets. These tiny bluey green Parakeets were very relaxed and allowed some great photo opportunities. With the two targets safely added to our list we strolled around taking photos of Bellbirds, NZ Pigeons and the Weka. With a celebratory hot chocolate and cookies back onboard the vessel we headed back towards Picton, and picked up some lunch for the journey south heading towards the east coast.



New Zealand fur seal



King shag



Weka



Orange-fronted parakeet

A brief stop at a water treatment plant failed to provide the Glossy Ibis or Cirl buntings that are known to breed at this location. Our next stop at a small lake next to the State Highway was more rewarding. It didn't take us long to find a pair of Hoary-headed Grebes with a mature chick. This grebe is a recent arrival to New Zealand, and slowly establishing. We also found a lone New Zealand Dabchick and the larger splendid Australasian Crested Grebe, looking identical to the Great Crested Grebes you would find in Europe. But these birds never moult into winter plumage. So, they look very dapper all year round. Also on the lake were Black-billed Gulls, Black Swans, Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal and NZ Scaup. Not forgetting the White-faced Herons, a couple of Royal Spoonbills and two Long-finned eels.



Australasian shoveler



Hoary-headed grebe



Australasian crested grebe

Further down the road the sea came back into view and we stopped at a car park overlooking a large New Zealand Fur Seal colony. That cleared the nostrils! A bonus was the Red-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns and Spotted Shags that breed above the seals on boulders and cliffs, all making for some rewarding photos.

We checked farmland where Little Owl are known to breed but had no joy. A smart little motel in the coastal town of Kaikoura was our base for the next two nights. Some folks walked to the beach at the back of the motel to photograph the Banded Dotterels that breed here, and others gave the washing machine a good workout! We ate at the old hotel overlooking the town and bay of Kaikoura and our full first day on the South Island had gotten off to a roaring start.



White-fronted tern



Red-billed gulls upsetting a white-fronted tern

15 November 2023 – Day Twelve

The main reason for us visiting Kaikoura is its wonderful wildlife. Whales, dolphins and seals can all be viewed from this small town. But we were here mainly for the birds. At 6am we left South Bay on the first of our two pelagics. The weather was a bit sloppy but we saw Cape Petrels, Westland Petrels and more Northern Giant Petrels, 1x Southern Royal Albatross, 6x Gibson's Wandering Albatross, 2x Black-browed Albatross, several White-capped and Salvin's Albatross, plus an unusual sighting of a single Cooks Petrel.



New Zealand (Gibson's) wandering albatross

But the most rewarding and unexpected sight was Rose out on a pelagic. Well done, Rose, we're proud of you.

After an awesome sit-down lunch and a bit of retail therapy, we went back out on the water for pelagic number two at 1pm. The weather had brightened up and the swell had eased. Heading out to deep water, within twenty minutes we were rewarded with a Southern/Antarctic Fulmar that zipped across the wake of the boat a couple of times. This southern species is a regular visitor to Kaikoura in the winter months but quite unusual at this time of year.

We reached our chumming stop, the guests slowly arrived: 6x Gibson's Wandering Albatross, 2x Northern Royal Albatross, 2x Southern Royal Albatross, 3x White-capped Albatross, 5x Salvin's Albatross, 1x Grey-faced Petrel, 1x White-chinned Petrel, 10 Westland Petrels, 1x Cooks Petrel (probably the same bird from the morning trip), 1x Buller's Shearwater, 1x Sooty Shearwater, 1x Short-tailed Shearwater. Plus, quarrelsome Northern Giant Petrels and chatty Cape Petrels. As we cruised back towards the harbour we picked out a few Hutton's Shearwaters too.



Banded dotterel



Southern fulmar



Salvin's albatross

Both pelagics were skippered by the legend that is Gary Melville, AKA Gazza, who made sure we got to where all the birds were. Thanks mate!

Before our evening meal we had another fruitless search for Little Owl but otherwise toasted a very successful day in Kaikoura.

16 November 2023 – Day Thirteen

It's always good to start the day with a song and we sang "Happy Birthday" to Mike who was celebrating his special day in Kaikoura, a place he had wanted to visit for many years.

Our first stop of the day was a small forested area surrounded by farmland for our first Brown Creeper/Pipipi. This small forest bird is only found on the South Island and this was our first shot at finding one. Keeping the 'colour' theme going we also found Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Redpoll, Yellowhammer, Silvereye, Blackbird. Plus, a showy California Quail.

A very British-looking arboretum was our next stop which had plenty of wildfowl on the lake - Black Swans, Canada Geese, Paradise Shelducks, NZ Scaup, Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal, and Eurasian Coots. At an estuary, almost immediately we found a Little Egret, a bird that's uncommon in New Zealand. Bar-tailed Godwits, Banded Dotterels, Red Knot, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatcher also seen. The tide was slowly dropping so the Royal Spoonbills were happily feeding when our first Black-fronted Tern floated into view. This gorgeous small tern is always a firm favourite. Down towards the water's edge we were rewarded with more great looks at Black-fronted Terns and Black-billed Gulls that fed right in front of us on the ebbing tide.



White-faced heron (left), little egret (centre) and Royal spoonbill



Black-billed gulls feeding

We headed inland north of Christchurch and drove through farmland towards our highly anticipated lunch stop - the world famous Sheffield Pie Shop! After our savoury pie, we all enjoyed a slice of Mike's chocolate birthday cake, which Rose had made the night before!!!



Towards the spine of the Southern Alps and up into the mountains and its stunning scenery. We parked the van and walked a fantastic piece of native forest. It didn't take us too long to find our first South Island Robin as we walked through a fantastic area of native forest. A second third and fourth South Island Robin joined as well as a male South Island Tomtit.



Heading west into the village of Arthurs Pass our first Kea showed themselves hanging around the village car park. This incredible alpine meat-eating parrot is declining rapidly due to predators, persecution by farmers, but also their own curiosity. They are super intelligent, but they get themselves into trouble by eating the wrong food, usually given to them by humans. We also spotted a pair of Brown creeper feeding and calling in the bushes in the village.

The wet and windy weather was not in our favour and despite searching forest trails for more than an hour we did not hear or see any sign of Great Spotted Kiwi. We headed for the comfort of a warm bed at our hotel which arguably had one of the best views of the tour.

17 November 2023 – Day Fourteen

It was still wet and windy the next morning but we drove back into the village and walked the same forest trail as the previous night. Good looks at Kea, Rifleman, South Island Tomtit, South Island Robin and some obliging Brown Creepers.

We left the mountains behind us and dropped down towards the West Coast, giving the windscreen wipers on the van a bit of work out. A brief stop at sewage ponds for some more wildfowl including some pretty good looking Pacific Black Ducks/Grey Ducks. After buying lunch, we headed south and the weather eased, the rain stopped and the skies brightened.

At the tiny village of Franz Josef after checking into our accommodation there was a bit of a mess up at the restaurant, which had taken our booking but not reserved us a table. Go figure!! After our meal we met up with Ian, our guide for tonight's kiwi spotting trip. After a debrief and run through on the possible scenario for tonight we waited on small bush track, hearing Kea and Morepork calling all around us. Then our target kiwi pair, Moss and Rieko called not too far away. It went quiet for an hour as they both fed away from the path.

Like I said, all Kiwi are tough, and Okarito Kiwi is very tough. There are not many of them, and they are very sensitive and skittish. We could hear a bird walking towards us, Ian had us in the right location, the birds' footsteps got closer and louder – and then stopped. Ian flicked on his red torch and Moss was standing next to the path! He turned and walked back into the bush and we could hear him walking quickly, tracking the path. He doubled back and once again walked out into the middle of the path before crossing and melting into the darkness.

No birds are ever guaranteed, especially Kiwi. But tonight, with a whole lot effort from Ian we had glimpsed Okarito Kiwi.

18 November 2023 – Day Fifteen

The sun was shining the next morning and back towards Okarito we added Great White Egret / White Heron to the trip list. This is the only place in New Zealand where they breed. Around to the toilet block for fantastic looks at New Zealand Fernbirds, NZ Fantails, Silvereyes - and the top of Snowy Mount Cook!

Back on the road driving south on the stunning west coast road, we stopped in Fox Glacier for a caffeine break and a drink for the van, as coffee shops and gas stations are a bit limited on the West Coast. Once re-charged we put more Kms on the clock.

Our next location was a long but pleasing bush walk down towards a quiet beach. The tide was coming in, but we did not have to wait too long before two Fiordland Crested Penguins rushed down towards the breaking surf. The bush walk back to the van didn't seem so long after a penguin lifer!

A brief stop at an area of thick native forest got us Brown Creeper, Rifleman and Yellow-crowned Parakeet. We had the vain hope of finding our first Yellowhead. A Kaka called outside of the forest. Matt heard a Yellowhead call. A mad dash and a pair of Yellowhead popped up in front of us. But as quick as they

arrived, they disappeared. Frustratingly not everyone got onto them. This was our first chance and there would be other opportunities, as with the Fiordland Crested Penguins.

Our journey further south took us through some stunning parts of New Zealand to our destination - the busy little lakeside town of Wanaka.

19 November 2023 – Day Sixteen

At 6am we left the sleeping town of Wanaka behind us and drove up through the mountains. With a long drive ahead of us we stopped just outside Queenstown to fill the van up and head towards the farmland of Southland. Two hours later we arrived at Te Anau for a pee, coffee and a pie! Then back on the road climbing further into the mountains. We eventually arrived at our destination, parked up and got ready. A wee bit of nervous tension in the air, few words were spoken. Today was all about one species.

We had driven all this way to find the endemic Rock Wren. A small mountain bird that lives in these mountains all year round. The two previous tours ahead of us had failed to connect with this bird. Bad weather and limited access to the known site had made it very difficult. But today the weather was amazing. We got to the site without any problems. But we still had to find a bird.

Ten minutes turned into 20. Everyone looking and listening. 20 minutes turned into 25. Boom! A male Rock Wren called and flew into where the main group were standing! The bird sat up on a rock in plain view, bobbing up and down, similar to a dipper. Photos were snapped, views were obtained, and a new bird had joined our list. The long drive had been worth it!



Rock wren

After a bite to eat we headed through the Homer Tunnel to Milford Sound. By now the sun was shining and skies were blue. Photos of the beautiful scenery (along with some showy Paradise Shelducks) were taken and we watched a small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins swimming around the harbour entrance that Bill had spotted.



Mitre Peak and Milford Sound

Next stop was a small car park! We found a single Kea walking around, looking for entertainment or food! Then a familiar call high above us, as at least four to five Kaka flew overhead. Always nice to see these incredible parrot species together.

A lovely forest walk that passed by a large lake was where we found Yellow-crowned Parakeets, South Island Robins (some with young), New Zealand Fantails and a small party of Brown Creepers. Plus, we gained good looks at a pair of Rifleman, the forest cousin of the Rock Wren. On the lake were a handful of NZ Scaup.



South Island robin

Our next and final stop of the day was sitting by a clean flowing river where Black-fronted Terns put on a fantastic show, hawking and hunting flying insects. Wonderful to watch but more difficult to photograph.

It was a big but rewarding day and we parked up that evening more than 12 hours after we'd left Wanaka. That night in the restaurant we toasted the Wren that rocks!!



Black-fronted tern

20 November 2023 – Day Seventeen

At 6:15am we were watching a Baillon's Crake (Marsh Crake) play hide and seek in a scrubby pond in front of us. We probably saw two individuals – and very grateful to have access to this wonderful piece of private land. This was an awesome lifer for Barbara – what a nice way to start the day!

Spying Black-billed Gulls and Black-fronted Terns from the moving van as we drove through sleepy Southland farmland towards Invercargill. Further south into Bluff was as far as the van could take us. It was a long way from Kerikeri, which had been our northern most point of the tour. From Bluff our passenger ferry left the wharf – we were heading even further south to Stewart Island. A new island for us all, except for Matt, who calls it home.

The crossing was quiet bird wise with a few Albatrosses seen near a distant fishing boat.

We checked into our hotel in the centre of the Oban township and just after lunch we were on a small water taxi, heading to Ulva Island. Along the way we stopped at a little bay and found some more Fiordland Crested Penguins, which was a relief for Ann and Bill who had missed the birds a few days earlier.

Once at Ulva Island we had two main targets: the skulking South Island Saddleback and hopefully better looks at Yellowhead. Within a few minutes of being there Wouter spotted a pair of Saddlebacks just off the path. What a great start! As we walked around this fantastic predator free island, we found Kaka, Red and Yellow Crowned Parakeet, Tui and Bellbird, Brown Creeper, Yellowhead, New Zealand Pigeon, Grey Warbler – and the super inquisitive Stewart Island Robin, a sub-species of the South Island Robin. At Boulder Beach we found a very showy male South Island Saddleback that sat and called from the top of a bush. Fantastic!



Back at our hotel later that evening, after our meal we were out birding once again. Matt, who also guides for one of the local Kiwi Spotting companies at Stewart Island took us to an area of private land where we had an awesome encounter with a juvenile male Stewart Island Brown Kiwi (Tokoeka) a sub-species of the Southern Brown Kiwi. The kiwi walked up to the group sniffed around Bill and Ann's feet, before getting bored with us, and headed away to feed.

Another long but rewarding day, we were back at the hotel around 11:30pm for much needed sleep.

21 November 2023 – Day Eighteen

The final pelagic of the tour awaited us this morning, and like all the previous pelagics on this tour the weather was calm and flat. Not ideal but we jumped onboard the comfortable catamaran, The Aurora, with skipper Nate at the helm.

Fiordland Crested Penguins, with a couple of showy mature chicks kick-started the day. Steaming towards one of the Muttonbird Islands we had hopes of finding Yellow-eyed Penguin. Along the way we saw a few Foveaux Shags. A number of White-capped Albatross and couple of Salvin's Albatross had gathered and a pair of Southern Brown Skua put on a good flying display by dive bombing the boat.



Fiordland crested penguins

Further south to deeper more open water, the weather was still calm and flat which made it easy to pick out the plentiful Common Diving Petrels that were flushed by the vessel. Our saviour lay on the horizon - a local fishing boat was attracting the birds. We steamed towards it and not one but two Southern Giant Petrels, showing the peppermint green tip to their bills. We stayed close to the fishing boat for a few hours, watching the comings and goings of birds.

Numbers recorded for the day: 2x Variable Oystercatchers, 3x Southern Brown Skua, 5x Little Blue Penguins, 20x Fiordland Crested Penguins, 5x Southern Royal Albatross, 179x White-capped Albatross, 17x Salvin's Albatross, 1x Grey-backed Storm-petrel (flew towards the boat which luckily everyone got onto), 2x Southern Giant Petrels, Northern Giant Petrels 4x, Cape Petrels 88x, Westland Petrel 1x, Cooks Petrel 2x, Fairy Prions 1000x+, Sooty Shearwater 1200x+, Short-tailed Shearwater 1x, Common Diving Petrels 160x+, Spotted Shags 14x.

Another look for Yellowed-eyed Penguin came up empty again but we got a good look at the breeding Foveaux Shags on Whero rock before calling it a day. Considering the weather was not great pelagic weather we very happy with our haul.



White-capped albatross



Southern Royal albatross dwarfing a white-capped albatross



Southern giant petrel

22 November 2023 – Day Nineteen

At 8am the ferry departed Stewart Island's Halfmoon Bay Wharf and we began to head north towards Bluff. Luggage collected and into the van once more we made a quick stop at Stirling Point in Bluff. This is where State Highway One (SH1), ends or starts. We had travelled up and down this road, leaving it and re-joining it on our long journey. Tourist shots were taken beside the famous signpost before we journeyed north on SH1 to Invercargill.

A quick stop at a lagoon just south of Invercargill and a brief search for the female Northern Pintail. No luck but we found lots of Black Swans, Australasian Shovelers, NZ Scaup, Mallard, Grey Teal, Paradise Shelducks, Pied Stilts, Great Cormorants and a couple of Little Black Shags.

Lunch and supplies re-stocked we passed farmland and small towns on the way to the biggest city in the south, Dunedin. Lunch and an opportunity to stretch our legs was taken at an estuary with a few Royal Spoonbills, Bar-tailed Godwits and White-faced Herons for company.

We arrived at our target location, mid-afternoon. This would be only chance to see and find Yellow-eyed Penguin. These birds are heading towards extinction on the mainland, through predation, fishing, disease and a combination of factors. We waited at this private reserve (which is open to the public) for around 40 minutes before an adult Yellow-eyed Penguin appeared out of the sea. It preened itself before walking up into some nearby bushes. The pair called - a change of parenting responsibilities - and the second bird appeared out of the same bushes and walked slowly out to sea. With plenty of time to look, gaze and photograph, possibly the world's rarest penguin.

Birds were a little easier to find at our next stop. The old wharf in front of us was covered in Otago Shags, a species split from the Foveaux shag a few years ago. Great looks at these prehistoric looking birds, as well as quite a few Spotted Shags.

23 November 2023 – Day Twenty

The weather looked good for our final full day of birding and we had one main target bird in our sights. Black Stilt!

In Timaru, the local cop provided unintentional entertainment for us while we waited to fuel up the van – as his vehicle sirens and lights wouldn't turn off! Dusting off our pie crumbs and a kick of caffeine inside us we headed inland to check out a known site on the way to Tekapo. No joy.

Black Stilt are the rarest wader in the world with around 200 birds left in the wild. Finding them can be tricky. The ultimate needle in a haystack! So, the plan, formed by Matt would to be drive slowly and look at all known previous sites. First up, a small roadside pond had dried out. Next, a dirt farm track revealed White-faced Herons, Pied Stilts, Masked Lapwings, South Island Pied Oystercatchers. No Black Stilts. We checked a large lake. Black Swans, NZ Scaup, Black-billed Gulls, Australasian Shovelers. No Black Stilts. Another farm track where last year Matt had seen four Black Stilts. Still nothing.

As we bumped along the journey in reverse, Matt spotted something out the corner of his eye. A gap in the trees. He stopped and reversed the van. Yes! A pair of Black Stilts!

Walking from the van to a puddle of water in a dried-up lagoon, we saw feeding along the edge were a pair of Black Stilts. Great looks through scope and bins and our final endemic and target was in the bag! 148th species of the tour.

Also feeding in and around the puddle was a single Wrybill, a few Banded Dotterel, and in the water were three Royal Spoonbills along with a handful of Australasian Shovelers. We enjoyed the moment with these special birds and congratulated each other on a mission complete.

We decided to call it a day – at another potential Black Stilt hotspot the wind was strong we could hardly stand up. Another couple of locations were explored but came up empty and even Mount Cook was hiding under thick cloud.

24 November 2023 – Day Twenty-One

A leisurely start for our final day. After breakfast we left the sleepy town of Twizel at 8:30am with Christchurch Airport our destination of the day. Along the way Mount Cook briefly poked her head above the clouds for a few photos; we left flat plateaus and snow-capped mountain as the scenery changed into lush green farmland.

Swamp Harriers and Australian Magpies were spotted from the moving van and Geraldine was an almost coffee stop except that a tourist bus beat us to the café! We kept on moving and rejoined SH1 for one final time through Ashburton to see a huge breeding colony of Black-billed Gulls from the bridge. Traffic built up the closer we got to the urban outskirts Christchurch and we arrived at Christchurch International Airport, early afternoon.

New friends farewelled one another: Bill & Ann, Mike & Barbara and Wouter were all catching flights north or out of New Zealand. Andrea was dropped off at an airport motel as she was flying out the next day and Mike & Rose were hiring a car and driving back to Kaikoura to enjoy another couple of weeks in New Zealand.