

Tour report

18 November – 8 December 2023

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



North Island kokako. Paul van Giersbergen.

Led by Brent Stephenson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Humphrey & Jackie Sitters, Paul van Giersbergen, Jantien Benders, Ursula & Jan Ekkers, Stijn Vincent & Melina Kyametis

Images

Paul van Giersbergen, Humphrey Sitters and Ursula Ekkers

During this tour we logged 150 species, including one heard only – Spotless crane. To be fair we heard it in two different places, and put in some effort trying to get a look, but it wasn't to be. However, we were pretty fortunate with sightings of other species during this tour.

The first night with pouring rain and a female Northern brown kiwi feeding in front of us for several minutes was a sign of things to come! Takahe had been incredibly difficult during the nesting season, and thankfully we managed to find the family group on Tiritiri Matangi Island. As well as getting all the great stuff like kokako singing in the sunshine, stitchbird chasing each other around and a bonus tuatara.

Our Northern pelagics were excellent, with really nice views of target species like Pycroft's petrel, New Zealand storm-petrel, and black petrel.

Nice close wrybill, yellow-crowned parakeet at arm's length, a perched falcon, and several blue duck families made the central North Island well worthwhile.

Our crossing to the South Island with our first albatross, and then a morning in the Marlborough Sounds with King shag and orange-fronted parakeet started the South Island off the right way. But Kaikoura was rough and we failed to get on the water, a disappointment for sure. Kea in the mountains, an evening with Okarito kiwi, and some stunning forests and coastal scenes and we were heading ever further south. Despite an incredibly difficult season to date for finding rock wren we managed a cracking female in the sunshine, and then headed to Stewart Island for a great afternoon on Ulva with the needed targets of yellowhead and South Island saddleback, and then a great pelagic off Stewart Island where we managed to claw back a few seabirds 'missed' off Kaikoura. Wonderful Fiordland crested penguins and then the next day some amazing yellow-eyed penguins.

The last full day of birding saw amazing views of one of the World's rarest shorebirds – black stilt, and sunshine on Aoraki – Mount Cook.

Overall, a pretty amazing trip through New Zealand!

Brent Stephenson (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

18 November 2023 – Day One

As always, starting a tour and hearing solid rain on the roof will never be the way one wishes to start. The forecast looked pretty dire for most of the day with showers and rain forecast throughout the north, and especially in the Northland area during the evening...drat!

We all met in the carpark of the hotel and loaded the van. A short meeting and everyone introduced, we headed off to the north in the hopes we could evade the rain. Nearing our first stop the rain slowed and might I say almost allowed some light to get through the clouds.

We started birding and almost first off the rank was an adult buff-banded rail with a large almost fully grown chick. Then another just down the edge of the water, and we managed 'railly' nice views of both the couplets in the scope, and folks got photos. A few distant kaka flying high and then perched in a distant tree, as well as very close New Zealand pigeon and tui. A pretty cracking start! A few minutes later, great views of brown teal, including an adult with a gaggle of large juveniles.



Buff-banded rail adult and chick. Humphrey Sitters.

We did a little drive further north, and then visited our first bakery. Not too shabby for our first go, but room for improvement ☺ We then ate our lunch beside an estuary. With the tide high we knew a little patience would be important, but there was plenty to spot in the meantime, with lots of variable oystercatchers, our first New Zealand dotterel, and then bar-tailed godwits feeding on the ever expanding mudflats.



New Zealand dotterel with a crab. Humphrey Sitters.

After a few hours we then spotted a small tern in the distance, buoying hopes. And finally all of a sudden there was a fairy tern flying past us, and landing on a mudflat. We got nice scope views and a few photos in the bag. With a chance for them again in two days, pretty happy to have this very rare endemic subspecies in the bag.

We headed north and into steady rain as we drove. Checking into our accommodation we then headed for dinner, and then a brief stop to don wet-weather gear, as it was raining pretty consistently ... not a good omen for kiwi spotting! We arrived at our spot, where the wind was gusting 15-20 knots and the rain was coming in waves. It was hard to even hear anything, but shortly after arriving we heard a male and then female Northern brown kiwi call... well could be worse? Not really... We headed off out into the rain and the best I was hoping for was a close kiwi call...at least that would be something right? Nothing for the first 20 minutes or so, although a few distant kiwi calls and then a distant morepork. And then, there she was! A large female, with a really long bill standing under some scrub, but completely in plain view. Everyone watched, and we shuffled a little on the trail to make sure everyone had a great view, and in the end after feeding in front of us for 4-5 minutes she shuffled off out of sight. Amazing! It was a rather unbelievable sighting in conditions as they were. We carried on down the trail, briefly glimpsing another bird, and then had a male and female call pretty close. Everyone was ecstatic, so we slowly made our way back to the van, briefly seeing the same female again but leaving her to her soggy evening. Everyone dreamt of kiwi as the rain continued to fall.

19 November 2023 – Day Two

Still raining as we packed the van and headed south. We had a bit of a drive, grabbing lunch at a bakery and then getting on to the boat at the Marsden Cove Marina. The rain had stopped and the wind seemed to have dropped, but the forecast and sea conditions suggested it was going to be rough.

We found a reef egret on the way out, a nice start, and then headed out towards the Hen and Chickens. As we got out of the shelter of the Whangarei Heads we started to get swell from the north, and at times 2.5-3m rollers were coming through. Needless to say it was a bit uncomfortable, but we had a plan! We got in to the shelter of the Chicks and set up chumming. After about half an hour we had three flesh-footed shearwaters in attendance. Something was not working! So, we headed out a bit further and got into a better situation with wind and passing birds. In short order we had a bunch of flesh-footed shearwaters around the boat, and the first black petrels were in soon as well. Fairy prions were passing, as were Cook's petrels, but nothing close. White-faced storm-petrels started to trickle in as well, and the odd Buller's shearwater passed by but didn't come in.

After about an hour and a half we had a good selection of birds, most of the targets, but not all. So, we decided to head further east in the hope the sea had dropped as suggested. It was pretty rough to the east of the Chicks still, but not as bad and the wind was dropping out. But as we started chumming the first bird in was a black petrel! We shortly had a good number of flesh-footed shearwaters, a bunch of black petrels in amongst and Cook's petrels really started to come past, giving good views. White-faced storm-petrels started coming in and then a couple of New Zealand storm-petrels – phew! And then a few surprises, some great looks at perhaps four grey-faced petrels, at least two little shearwaters, three or four sooty shearwaters, at least three Pycroft's petrels that gave excellent views and were clearly picked as different by most on the boat, and then a surprise in the form of a long-tailed skua that made one brief and not so close pass. In the end an awesome collection of birds, including great views of all the main targets and some little surprises in there as well.



Buller's shearwater. Paul van Giersbergen.



New Zealand storm-petrel. Paul van Giersbergen.

We decided to head back towards the marina, with a relatively comfortable ride back in. A few shorebirds around the mudflats as we entered including both oystercatchers, NZ dotterel, barwits and red knot. A delicious dinner to cap off a very fine day!

20 November 2023 – Day Three

We headed out to a small lake after checking out, and quickly found a few new targets. Both Australasian little and New Zealand grebe (dabchick) were scooting around the place, several of the former on nests. We also had our first Australasian shoveler and New Zealand scaup, so a good haul on the waterbirds.

Heading south we checked out the same estuary we had previously had a fairy tern at, and this time on a low tide that was coming in almost instantly had three birds foraging over the channel. They were not close, but one did get closer a few times, and it was great to be able to see some behaviour, with the bird hovering and dipping down to grab prey in its characteristic fashion. Barwits, ruddy turnstone, New Zealand dotterel and variable oystercatchers were present as well.

We headed further south, to another estuary, and as we drove through part of it spotted a little egret and got some views. From another part of the estuary we had two more fairy terns feeding and sitting on the mudflats, and a little courtship feeding also. Fingers crossed they get going!

Heading south we headed to a forested area, where we had lunch in the sunshine – had almost forgotten what that was. Then we did a great forest walk, with excellent whitehead, a good number of saddleback, loads of brown teal, and a couple of kaka feeding right over our heads. The one kaka completely destroyed a small Puriri tree branch trying to wrinkle out a grub, but seemed not to succeed? A brief flyover shining cuckoo left better views desired for everyone! A nice last sighting was a pair of brown quail feeding in an open grassy area.

We headed to our accommodation, had a bit of a break, and then the oh so familiar rain came pelting down. At dinner we contemplated our next move, and as the rain cleared decided to go for it. We made a bit of a drive to a spot where we hoped we might at least hear a little spotted kiwi. As the dark came in we walked a forested trail, ears and eyes peeled. We had lovely glow-worms, and heard a few morepork, glimpsing one. But not a peep from a kiwi.... Oh well.

21 November 2023 – Day Four

The morning looked promising weather wise as we headed to grab lunch and then to Sandspit to get on our boat. We headed out with the sunshining, and a light breeze which we hoped would bring in the birds. As we headed out we spotted a lone little penguin, which we got pretty close to and got nice views, before leaving it to its day.

Out into the open ocean and we had a good raft of fluttering shearwaters which we got great views of, and then a heap of common diving petrels in small rafts all over the place. We were able to get really great

views of these tiny tubenoses as they flew off and landed. And then had another bigger raft of fluttering shearwaters.



Fluttering shearwater. Paul van Giersbergen.

We decided we needed to press on to our first chumming, spot, seeing a few flesh-footed shearwaters and Cook's petrels as we got out further. Arriving at our chumming location we put out a good slick with a pretty stiff 15 knot breeze. Within moments we had a virtual cloud of Cook's petrels, with perhaps over 100 birds coming in and feeding over and around the chum slick. Fluttering and flesh-footed shearwaters, and fairy prions came in quickly also, and then white-faced storm-petrels. A bit later a black petrel arrived and showed off really well, and then the first of probably 10 NZ storm-petrels. With nothing new coming in, and feeling like a change might be good, we decided to move out further.

We headed out further and found a large feeding flock of about 500 fairy prions, foraging over a school of trevally. Pretty cool to see, and we set up drifting from there with the chum out again. We had good numbers of fairy prions come in, Cook's petrels in a slow stream and white-faced storm-petrels, then a few flesh-footed and one black petrel. But our hoped for Buller's shearwater did not eventuate, taking its place a single sooty shearwater passed by. Pretty great numbers of birds, and the seas and wind dropped, making for a nice run back in to Sandspit. On the way we kept an eye out for cetaceans, but rather surprisingly nothing.

A nice dinner and then an early night.



White-faced storm-petrel. Paul van Giersbergen.



Red-billed gull. Paul van Giersbergen.

22 November 2023 – Day Five

Up and away with the sun shining. We rolled into Gulf Harbour, scanned the coastline, and when the ferry arrived boarded for Tiritiri Matangi. Nice conditions and a few fluttering shearwaters on the way, before docking at Tiri.

We waited anxiously for the briefing, and then headed up the hill, within moments hearing a kokako singing. And moments later it was in view, at the top of a pohutukawa tree, in the open, singing with wings flapping and the whole 9-yards! Awesome! The shutters were clicking and the smiles were evident. We watched it for a bit before it bounded and then glided off, returning again to bounce around again in the tree. Magic.



Male North Island kokako. Paul van Giersbergen.

We headed on further, and within another few minutes had our first views of stitchbird, males and females coming in to one of the feeders. Ok, well let's get going, we have a blue chicken to find! We headed off and to a spot we hoped to find one of the two pairs of takahe on the island. Now with a chick we hoped they would be out and maybe we could find them.



The Tiritiri Matangi Lighthouse. Ursula Ekkers.

I searched ahead a bit, and suddenly there was a takahe. It saw me and did a little run, I feared into the bushes forever.... But gathering the group we watched and scanned from a vantage point, and then one came back in to view. Brief view of the chick, before it disappeared and the other adult appeared. In the end we had stunning views of three birds, the chick hiding away. They settled and just fed nearby, allowing great photo opportunities and wonderful views of this prehistoric looking creature.

We then had a fernbird sitting up in some twigs nearby calling away, and had lunch overlooking a pond. A brown teal snoozed nearby.

After lunch we found a morepork roosting, sleeping solidly, and then headed to find another target, a tuatara. We were in luck and had great views of a large beast. Another fernbird crept along the forest floor like a mouse, showing really well, and more stitchbird came in. Lastly as we got near to the wharf and leaving time we had some more brief views of red-crowned parakeet, some more brown teal, all whilst being serenaded by the first kokako we had seen.

We left on calm seas, a few more fluttering shearwaters, and then into Gulf Harbour and on the road, and into awful Auckland traffic! Yuck! Eventually we made it to Miranda, where the tide was not ideal and no sign of a wrybill. So off to a lovely dinner, and then bed!



South Island oystercatcher. Paul van Giersbergen.

23 November 2023 – Day Six

It was up and away super early. Arriving at our target spot we quickly found two wrybill, and then a few minutes later a red-necked stint appeared seemingly from behind a shell! Nice to have great views of wrybill, and the shutters were clicking!

We enjoyed the early morning light with South Island oystercatchers as well, and bar-tailed godwits started to move along the coast as the tide dropped. We decided to check out the main roost and got there to find everything way out with the smallish high tides at the moment. So on to another site, but nothing new, although nice views of grey teal, pied stilt, etc.

We had a relaxed breakfast and then packed the van and headed off. We checked out another couple of coastal sites, this time with a lovely white-fronted tern and black-billed gull colony. The birds seemed to still be early laying, with a lot of coming and going, copulations, courtship feeding etc. Some birds seemed to just be on eggs as well. Great to watch the whole thing unfold before us.



Wrybill. Paul van Giersbergen.

We then headed inland and visited a wetland area. Great to scan and watch harriers soaring, and lots of grey teal and a few shoveler. Nothing of great note, so off to grab some lunch and then eat it beside a peaceful little lake. A couple of little black cormorants were a nice addition to the list.

Then a big drive south and to Taupo, where we did a short walk to admire Huka Falls. Nearby a shining cuckoo called from the top of a tree, allowing views before it flew. The mountains had been showing themselves, so a few photos taken, before heading to the Motel and then a cracking Thai dinner.

24 November 2023 – Day Seven

Off we go, grabbing lunch at a bakery and heading off to the forest! We made good time and despite a shower of rain pre-dawn it looked like it had moved on and it was dry.

We arrived at our first stop and enjoyed watching over the forest, seeing kaka fly past calling, and then several yellow-crowned parakeets. Two birds flew over and looked like they landed nearby, so we investigated and found them foraging just off the ground and managed to watch them from about 4m away! Amazing views of these stunning little parakeets. The shutters were clicking! With a little bit of moving back and forth, we watched them together for about 25 minutes, just magical.



Yellow-crowned parakeet. Paul van Giersbergen.

We moved on and did a forest walk, with huge podocarp trees in the realm of 800+ years old. Amazing forest, lots of ferns, and other beautiful plants. Great views of a North Island robin feeding a recently fledged juvenile, and whitehead calling all around us. We heard a rifleman, but couldn't spy it high up in the massive trees.

A quick stop with a rain shower in another location, but nothing new, until we then heard several shining bronze cuckoos calling. We saw the one bird fly, and then Stijn spotted the other perched in a tree and quickly had the scope on it. So great views of that bird for several minutes before it too flew off. We carried on, spending some time in overlook locations to see what would fly by, and then did a second forest walk. Kaka, robin, and a distant calling falcon.

On our drive out we had a great little male tomtit perching nearby and flying back and forth. Nice to find this little guy after a bit of searching. And then doing another bit of a walk the rain started to come down. We made it back to the van and decided to drive in search of a pipit. Which we found 3-4 of them in fact. But the temperature had dropped like a stone and the rain was coming down, so good but brief views before we decided to head for Turangi.

We checked out a river near Turangi, and we were about to leave to check another spot when Melina spied our quarry. Tucked in on the bank was a pair of blue ducks with their half-grown chick! We spent some time watching these guys as they woke up and then paddled in the river, with the duckling actively feeding in the fast-flowing river.



Forest views. Ursula Ekkers.



Blue duck adult and duckling. Paul van Giersbergen.



New Zealand fantail. Paul van Giersbergen.

Deciding we had nothing to lose we checked out a wetland area, and as we walked heard a bittern boom. And there it was, quickly we had it in the scope, but it didn't stay long enough for everyone to make it out. And then we spotted another just 25m away. It stayed for a minute and then decided we were too close and flew, which gave great views as it flew off over the wetland. Fernbird called, and we spotted some little black cormorants amongst the other cormorants, as well as scaup and dabchick with a large chick.

We headed to our accommodation, warmed up and had a great dinner before an early night.

25 November 2023 – Day Eight

Up early with the sound of strong winds all night and as we ate breakfast. We headed out and were in search of crakes and bittern. This time we just heard bittern, and although we had crakes calling, we just couldn't get a glimpse in the dense reedbed. Another quick stop to look for waterfowl and we had close dabchick and our first Eurasian coots.

We then headed for the forest and did a forest walk through beautiful trees and ferns. We were on the search for rifleman, but the strong winds were not helping. We had nice views of a male tomtit, and several kaka, and then found a 'gaggle' of fantails with 6-7 of them coming in to check us out. As we almost arrived back at the vehicle we had a rifleman call, but could not locate it before it seemingly evaporated. And then, right at the last moment we had a bird call and a few minutes later spotted it really nice and close and got outstanding views of a little male foraging on a crane fly. Yes!

We headed back towards the motel, and just before we arrived something glided across the road in front of us. A quick stop on the side of the road, and searching in the trees above suddenly had a falcon in plain view! Excellent views of it perched in the tree, before it then flew to another tree and a little more obscured, and then took flight to really put the virtual 'cat amongst the pigeons' as it disappeared into the neighbourhood. What a cracking bird!

We quickly loaded the van, checked out and then headed to another site to look for blue duck. This time we found a pair immediately on the river. They were sitting on boulders on the river's edge, but a little distant. And then we found another pair upstream, this time with FOUR small ducklings just maybe a week old. We spent quite some time just watching them and enjoying their antics, feeding in the really fast rapids, as mum and dad looked on. As we got back to the van a snippet of long-tailed cuckoo call caught our attention over loud wind-noise. We searched for a bit and then a bird flew past us giving pretty excellent views before swooping up into a tree and completely vanishing. Despite knowing roughly where it landed the bird could not be found, and five minutes later it disappeared off around the corner. Another bird called across the river, but that was that, and no bird showed itself again.

It was now time to start making our way towards Hawkes Bay. We checked out a small wetland area for fernbird, and although we heard a couple, nothing showed itself. Heading towards Taupo, the cyclists doing the 'Round Taupo' race were plentiful, and we marvelled at the number of them competing.



New Zealand falcon. Paul van Giersbergen.

As we headed over SH5 towards Napier the weather deteriorated, with the wind increasing and the rain starting to fall. At the top of some of the passes we were completely soaked in, which was a shame. Coming down into Napier we made a quick stop for a nice breeding colony of Royal spoonbills and little pied cormorants of all plumages. One little black cormorant was also there for contrast. Then at another stop we met Sav Saville, and he helped get us on to several pairs of double-banded plovers and then a very confiding black-fronted dotterel. One of the double-banded pairs had tiny little chicks just a few days out of the egg!



Banded dotterel (double-banded plover). Paul van Giersbergen.

Onwards, we headed to another site for a pipit in a Force 10 gale! And then to our accommodation and a delicious Indian dinner. Let's hope the weather is better in the morning!

26 November 2023 – Day Nine

The morning was windy, but we headed back to look for pipit. Up into the cloud and rain again, with a strong wind! Damn! We had nice views of a pipit and then found a slightly more sheltered spot and found another. Perfect, even the photographers were happy!

We headed to a wetland site, and set about looking and listening for spotless crane. Nope, nothing there, nope nothing there, and nothing there... After a couple of hours and not a peep to show for it, we were about to give up. We found some nice obliging dabchick, several shoveler and some scaup and grey teal. But no cranes. As we headed for the exit, Stijn had something...not our actual target crane, but a Baillon's! It didn't show for a bit and then out into the open and scope views. Amazing! Not often that everyone sees a Baillon's crane, and through a scope! We watched it in and out of the reedbed for about 20 minutes which was just great.



Searching the swamp. Ursula Ekkers.

We did another little circuit, and heard a spotless, but nothing showed. Well, you win some and lose some. We headed south and ate lunch in the countryside to the sound of Indian peafowl. Quite a few birds around including males in full display with their tails spread. Heading further south we crossed the Tararua Ranges and then headed for Foxton. We checked in to our accommodation, the temperature was quite a bit warmer than on the eastern side of the ranges, and there was just a light wind for a change.

So, we headed to the coast and to a large estuary. The tide was right out, but there were some godwit and a few knot visible. We also saw a few distant wrybill and double banded plover, South Island oystercatcher, and various other bits and bobs. Back to the Motel, and a sumptuous BBQ dinner. Very nice to relax outdoors and have a BBQ dinner in the garden. A colleague of Brent and Humphrey, Phil Battley, joined us after dinner to recount stories of wader work around the World.

27 November 2023 – Day Ten

Waking up to no wind, what a pleasure! We headed out from the Motel with the minivan packed, ready to go. Our first stop back at the estuary we had been to the previous afternoon. But this time the tide was coming in. We had barwits, a few red knot and then spied some wrybill and a distant red-necked stint. The other usual suspects were around, and then some distant Pacific golden plover. A bird of interest we relocated a bit closer and got reasonable views of three birds in non-breeding plumage out on the mud edge.

We then headed off south, a quick stop for lunch and some fuel, and then a second estuary stop. This one had had a whimbrel over the preceding weeks, and so as the tide continued to come in we hoped we might spy it. The godwit flock was found, but most of the birds had bills tucked away as they slept. At one stage they all got up and flew, but nobody was able to locate the whimbrel as they flew, and after they resettled they all went back to sleeping again. The tide was at its highest, and our luck had run out. Although on the way back to the van a shining cuckoo called and put in a very brief appearance, and then a falcon flashed past with a tui in pursuit for some of the group to see!

Pushing further south, we made it to the ferry terminal and waited in line, boarding just after midday. As we steamed out of Wellington Harbour we spied a single common dolphin, and the wind picked up, and with a relatively wind-whipped but calm sea we had good numbers of birds. A number of white-capped, a single Northern Royal and two Salvin's albatrosses put in an appearance. As did a handful of Westland petrels, a single grey-faced petrel, and a couple of Northern giant petrels. A single Hutton's, two sooty, and a handful of flesh-footed shearwaters were seen, along with hundreds of fluttering shearwaters and fairy prions. Once we entered the Marlborough Sounds the scene changed, with a few feeding flocks of fluttering shearwaters and gulls, and then three separate groups of dusky dolphins. Several penguins, and a bunch of spotted shags on the way into Picton.



The ferry in Wellington. Ursula Ekkers.

Docking in Picton, we drove to our Motel, had a brief rest before another great dinner.

28 November 2023 – Day Eleven

It was breezy this morning as we headed to the marina to get on our boat for the morning. But luckily the Marlborough Sounds don't generally get rough, and there are lots of little bays and coves to tuck in to. We headed out at 0800 and were on the lookout for our targets.

Seemingly within a few minutes we had small rafts of fluttering shearwaters, and then a small spotted shag colony. Lucky for us there was a King shag with them, and we had amazing views of the birds and great photographic opportunities. Very nice to see this key endemic shag so well, and a couple of the spotted shags also had a bit more colour than most we had seen so far.



Spotted shag. Paul van Giersbergen.

We headed on out further, spotting lots of fluttering shearwaters in some fairly large rafts. We also had a couple of penguins that showed for a bit and then disappeared. Calling into another bay we were on the search for a slightly different target, Hector's dolphin. And within a few minutes we spotted one and circled back around. Sure enough this one came in to see us and was happily swimming around the boat giving us a great opportunity to see the World's smallest oceanic dolphin.

We headed off, leaving it in peace, and made our way towards one of the islands. We stopped briefly at a location with a number of King shags roosting, before then landing on a beach. Our target here was orange-fronted parakeet, and we headed to a spot where we hoped we might be lucky. Sure enough, within a few minutes we had a bird fly in, and another then appear. Really great views of both birds, before

they disappeared. After a bit of time, one came back in and then the second. Getting more great views we decided it was time to leave them in peace also. We carried on hoping for a few other species, and we managed to get great views of a male South Island tomtit, and then a weka really close to us. The weka came right in to check us out, and amazed everyone with how unafraid it was. We later had two chasing each other on the beach. And a variable oystercatcher pair nesting on the beach was a nice addition.



Weka. Paul van Giersbergen.

We boarded the boat and then headed back towards Picton. On the way we spotted a few Arctic skua, both a dark and pale morph. And then a couple more penguins. An excellent trip all around with all of the targets.

We loaded into the van, grabbed some lunch at the famous Dutch Bakery, and then headed to a spot to enjoy our lunch in the countryside. We were on the lookout for cirl bunting, and one was spotted briefly. Also Royal spoonbills, and a few species of waterfowl. A second lake stop saw three species of grebe – the only place in New Zealand where this is possible. Dabchick, hoary-headed (with a large juvenile), and great crested grebe – excellent. Also, more waterfowl, with nice close shoveler and grey teal. A couple of passing eels, and some damsel and dragonflies kept everyone entertained.



Marlborough countryside. Ursula Ekkers.

Then a coastal stop with our first good views of New Zealand fur seal, with lots of pups and mums, and quite a few bulls still around. A nesting colony of white-fronted terns and red-billed gulls was also great to watch and photograph, and some rather 'ugly' chicks in a spotted shag nest. We rolled in to Kaikoura, checked in to accommodation and then had a picnic dinner of beautiful fish and chips on the lawn. A dessert of Hokey Pokey ice cream rounded things out, but the birding was not yet done. We headed into the hinterland and managed to find a pair of little owls, and then another single bird. Another great day!

29 November 2023 – Day Twelve

During the night the forecasted wind hit hard right on time. And it seemed not to have dropped as it was supposed to in the morning. We headed to a spot to look out over the ocean, and the sea was clearly very rough, with a stiff breeze still in effect. We saw a bunch of Hutton's shearwaters whizzing past not that far out, and then a fishing boat had a few white-capped and Salvin's albatross with it. The boat was really moving around, and we were glad to still be on land. With a bit more scanning we had several Northern giant petrels, at least one Northern Royal albatross, and a New Zealand wandering albatross all visible through the scope. Several gannets passed by, and a couple of larger dark petrels, but too far to ID the latter.



A rough Kaikoura coast. Ursula Ekkers.

We decided to head to see if we could conjure up a cirl bunting, but not luck, and headed to a lookout where it was again pretty clear why the boat hadn't left! We then collected some of the group that had stayed sea-watching, and grabbed lunch, hoping the afternoon would be a go. But the news was all bad, with the boats being cancelled for the afternoon as well! Drat! That left a few options for afternoon activities, with some opting for a hike, whilst others chilled, did laundry and caught up on other bits and pieces. It's relatively rare that we can't get out of Kaikoura at some stage during the day.

We headed out for a delicious dinner at one of the local restaurants, and then an early night!



Silvereye. Paul van Giersbergen.

30 November 2023 – Day Thirteen

Up early and away with the sun shining. We headed inland and made a quick stop for coffee, and then on to an estuary. The tide was dropping slowly and we spotted some black-fronted terns and black-billed gulls feeding out over the water. A few barwits and pied stilts steadily spread out feeding, and a couple of banded dotterel were spotted.

We made for a nearby cormorant colony and had nice close views and photographic opportunities with pied and little pied cormorants. There were little pied cormorant chicks all over the place with most of them having recently fledged, so it was nice to see these really well. A swamp harrier trying its best to nab a duckling or two, just wasn't quite nimble enough.

We then made for a river stop, and had awesome black-fronted terns passing by really close and feeding over the river. Made for great photography and views in the sunshine. Then on to the 'World Famous Sheffield Pie Shop' where we caused utter chaos... we had started so well ;) We munched on our lunch at a nearby park, and then headed up in to the mountains where the weather looked a bit cloudy and threatening. But on the western side of the foothills the sun was still shining and we made for Arthur's Pass village.

We did a couple of quick stops, but no kea. Then a short forest walk where we had beautiful beech forest and amazing views of a pair of rifleman at just a few metres. So great to see the male and female together

to see the difference in plumages. Then a couple of male tomtits as we walked back to the van. And who was waiting for us in the carpark, but a kea! Great views and a few nice photos, before it spread its wings and took to the sky.



Male rifleman. Paul van Giersbergen.

We headed to another spot, and scanned the mountains. No kea, but a couple of Chamois high on the mountains was a cause for excitement. Driving through to the West Coast we got a little rain and then broke out in to sunshine again. A quick scan of some sewage ponds gave nothing new, but good numbers of scaup, mallard and a few Pacific black duck.

Into our accommodation, and then a great dinner before bed.

1 December 2023 – Day Fourteen

We were away slightly later than normal, with the knowledge that tonight we will be out looking for kiwi! We grabbed lunch and then headed south along the coast to a beautiful lake. We found a few weka soon after parking and watched their antics as they raced around the place chasing each other. Always a fun bird to watch. On a short forest walk we had a black morph New Zealand fantail, which is always a great bird to see, being relatively uncommon. Also, several bellbird, silvereye and grey gerygone, but not our target. We did find some lovely greenhood orchids in flower though.

We then enjoyed some time in the sunshine, overlooking the lake with beautiful scenery, and a great egret flew in and landed right in front of us. Very nice!

We then headed to a different spot, with a lovely forest walk. This time a shining bronze cuckoo greeted us in the carpark, and then during the walk we found a couple of tomtit, but again fairly quiet and none of the targeted brown creeper!

Again, we enjoyed the scenery and the views and then continued our journey south. We ate our lunch at a picnic spot beside a lake. Another great egret flew in and landed right in front of us. And the sunshine was definitely nice.

Further south, and then to another forest walk, with a great viewpoint. On the way we spotted a few brown creeper, but none came in to investigate us. Very strange! Lovely views out over the forest, and more brown creeper, but again they just wouldn't show. So, we headed back along the trail, finding a very obliging male South Island robin that came right in to say hello. That's better! And then back in the carpark brown creeper came zipping in to see us! Finally! Great views and great photo opportunities. We had a bit of a look for fernbird, but other than a brief call in the distance, nothing.

We called in to see Ian Cooper from Okarito Kiwi Tours to get a rundown on this evenings kiwi adventure! We were part way through the briefing when two fernbird showed themselves right outside his door – one chasing several house sparrows away! We broke off the meeting as the fernbird pair set about courting, the female grabbing a feather for a nest that was obviously nearby, and they just stunned us with brilliant prolonged views! Amazing! We carried on with the briefing with Ian after they disappeared into the shrubbery!

It was then on to Franz, and we checked out the now very sad looking Franz Josef glacier, which has retreated something terrible in the last few years. A few birds, some more greenhood orchids, and a few spider orchids, but not with flowers.

An awesome dinner at King Tiger, and then out for our kiwi adventure! We headed out and met up with Coops and headed into the forest. The light was catching the tops of the podocarps and everyone was excited. Coops gave us a further run down and some training on how we planned to operate, and we then settled in as the light faded and the forest came alive. In the end we shuffled around a little as we tracked a bird by ear through the forest. This was the female of the pair whose territory we were in – Rico. Moss – the male – was moving around a fair bit. Not long into the evening, we had Rico really close just inside the forest, skirting around the edge of a small clearing. But not showing. Moss was moving around a fair bit still, and we realised that perhaps he was quite close, and with a click of the torch there he was, running along the track for all to see. He ran a good 30m in the open and was then gone into the forest and continued feeding – what an amazing encounter. About ten minutes later he let rip with a string of calls and we waited for the response of the still close by Rico, as she then let rip on a string of calls. We had the full experience. Looking up, we were treated to incredible stars in a clear and cool evening, and as we walked back to the van we stopped to discuss what had happened several times. Another wonderful Okarito kiwi encounter with the magician that is Ian Cooper!

2 December 2023– Day Fifteen

Up a little later after the excitement of the previous evening. A kea was our alarm clock as it squawked and called from the roof of the Motel! We headed south as the rain started, and our first stop was a wee way down the coast. The rain seemed to ease a little as we stopped in a carpark and prepared for a walk through stunning mossy forest, to a beach. At the beach we hoped to find Fiordland crested penguin. And literally 15 minutes in to our wait we had a bird surf up the beach and trot out of the water! Scopes on the bird, and camera shutters clicking. It didn't linger long, but gave everyone a great view before disappearing out of sight.

As the rain started to come down again and the wind picked up, we decided to head back along the trail and enjoyed the walk back through the rainforest, as it should be, in the rain.

We ate lunch in the car, hoping for a break in the weather, but it didn't come. So, driving further south we made a coffee stop in the town of Haast, before heading up into the mountains. The rain continued to fall and by the time we got to our next planned stop it was still falling. But donning out wet weather gear again we headed into the beautiful mossy beech forest. This time with some great views of more rifleman, several tomtits and some fledgling fantails with hardly a nub of a tail. A flyover yellow-crowned parakeet, but no other target birds. Back at the carpark we had a very very distant yellowhead, but couldn't place it and didn't hear it again. And the rain continued. So, on through to Wanaka, where it stopped raining literally 5kms before getting to town.



Tomtit. Paul van Giersbergen.

We made a quick stop at the lake with incredible views of many pairs of great crested grebes, a raft of scaup, and then a delicious Indian dinner at Ashraf's. Another great day!

3 December 2023 – Day Sixteen

Up early after a night of rain, and as we headed south back into it. A coffee stop in Frankton, and then south with the windscreen wipers on. We basically headed for Te Anau, grabbed some lunch and then towards Milford Sound.

As we got closer to the Eglinton Valley the rain eased, and there were patches of blue sky. But still atmospheric cloud around the mountain tops. Perhaps the weather forecast would actually hold true?

We arrived at our spot, and parked, then headed for our location. The sun was almost shining and the wet weather gear was peeled off. Within about 15 minutes we heard a rock wren calling, but there was no sign of it, and then it stopped calling.... Hmmmm. It was almost an hour later that Jan and Stijn had something and indeed a rock wren was out! This bird was a female, and she was clearly just off a nest as she bathed in a pool of water three times, at one stage sharing it with a dunnoek! Each time after bathing she stood in the open and preened for several minutes, giving amazing views and photographic opportunities. We even had the scope set up on her much of the time.

In the end she disappeared over a small ridge and then a few minutes later reappeared briefly, and was gone. All in all she was in view for at least ten minutes, giving incredible views. We headed back to the vehicle relieved and very happy!

We drove through to Milford Sound, and had some kea on the way. And then clear blue skies at Milford with Mitre Peak standing tall and proud. Back through to the Eglinton, we looked for Blue duck, but nothing stirred, and then did a forest walk. Within a few minutes we had a beautiful male South Island robin with a beak full of food. We heard rifleman, but couldn't spot any, and had several tomtit calling. Lovely forest and mosses, and then a female robin also.

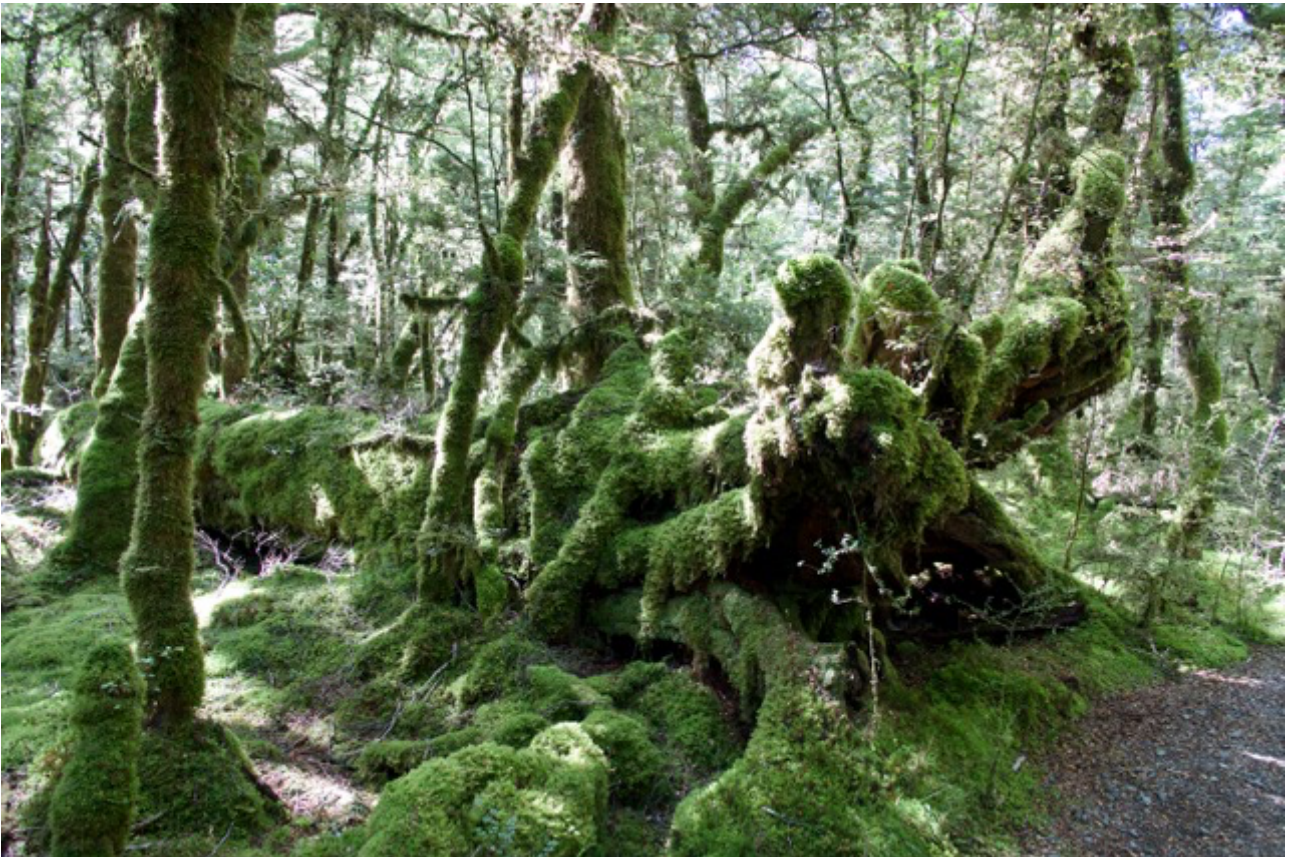
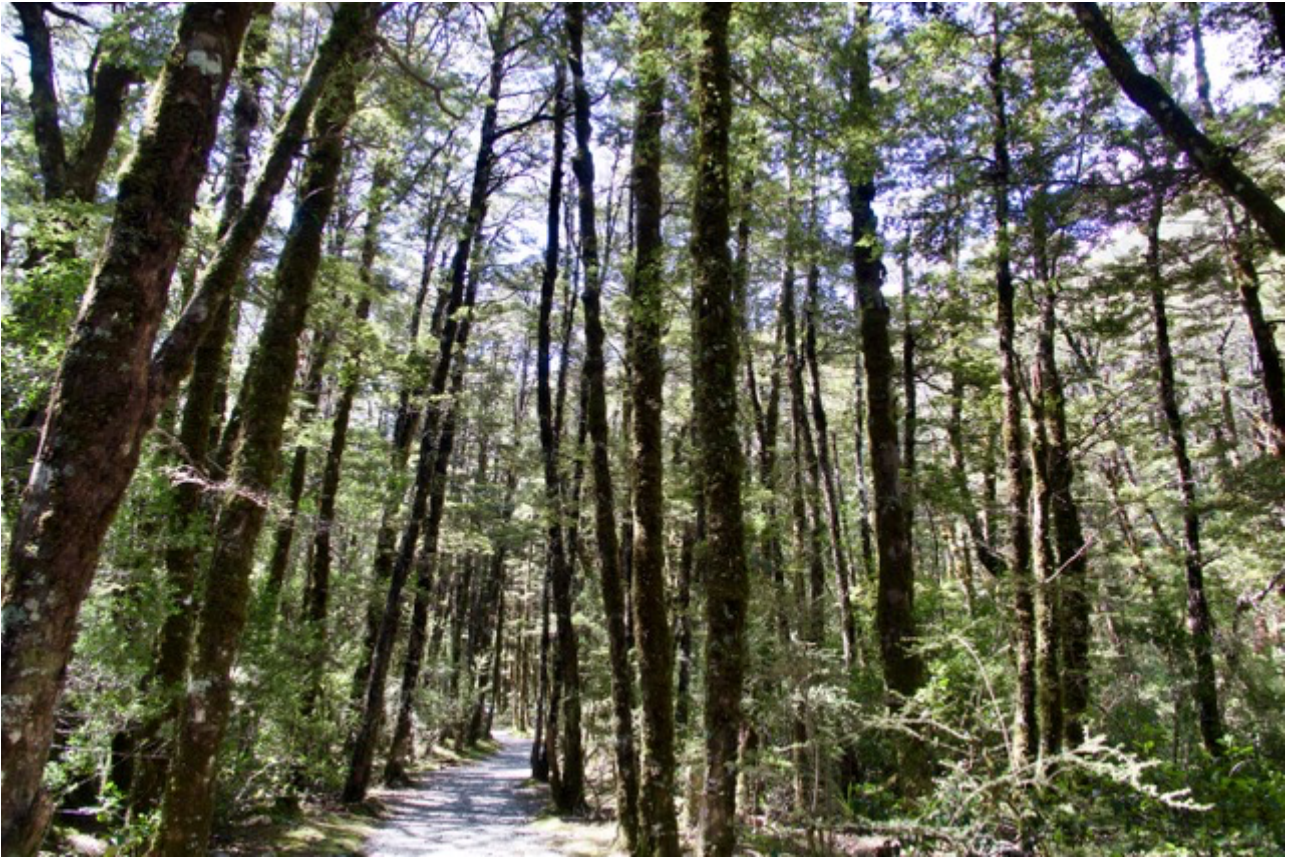
We headed for Te Anau, checked in to our accommodation and then had a lovely dinner. A fitting end to a great day!



Kea coming in to land. Humphrey Sitters.



Male South Island robin. Paul van Giersbergen.



Beech forest. Ursula Ekkers.

4 December 2023 – Day Seventeen

Up early and away, to a small wetland area. We didn't have a lot of time, but listened and watched for crakes. A Baillon's was glimpsed, but no spotless showed itself. So off towards Bluff and our ferry rendezvous.

We grabbed some lunch on the way and then arrived at the ferry terminal, boarding our ferry just before 0945. It was a bit bumpy to start with, and we saw a fishing boat coming into Bluff with a couple of white-capped albatross behind it. As we got out a little the sea got a bit better, and with a stiff wind we expected a few birds. But it was fairly quiet, with a few distant common diving petrels, a couple of sooty shearwaters, and a few more white-capped albatross. Near Halfmoon Bay a couple of Foveaux shags showed themselves, and we then docked at the wharf.

A leisurely lunch and then we caught a water taxi to Ulva just after midday. It was a slightly bumpy ride to the island, but we saw three young Hooker's sea lions on a beach on the way. Once we arrived on the island we headed to a spot we had some information regarding South Island saddleback sightings. With a recent rat incursion on the island, the subsequent eradication has really decimated the population of this species, so this was a key target. We spent some time with ears and eyes strained, but after 45 minutes we had not a squeak! So, we decided to head out and wander the island to see if we could get good looks of other targets and maybe luck into a saddleback.

We had great views of red-crowned parakeets, got onto some yellowheads at close range, but briefly, and then some more slightly higher yellowhead. We continued our walk, through beautiful forest and enjoyed the sounds of bellbird, brown creeper, more yellowhead and kaka. After a few hours, we still hadn't had sight nor sound of a saddleback.... So we headed back to our stakeout location. As we approached we heard a bird calling about 60m off the track, but couldn't get on to it. It then vanished with no more calls. We spread out and continued to listen and look. And finally after about half an hour heard the bird again. This time it showed itself, raced across the track and headed up into the forest again. Most got a good look, but we wanted more, so we headed to a spot we thought it might appear. And sure enough it appeared and called. This timing showing a lot better. But it got even better with the bird finally coming in nice and close and really showing off. Phew!

We had a last little walk around, spotted a couple of little penguins from the wharf and then jumped in the water taxi to head back to the main wharf. On the way we checked out a couple of spots for Fiordland crested penguin, and managed to see three adults and a well grown chick.

A delicious dinner and then a chance for a rest before heading out to look for Southern brown kiwi. We got to our spot on dark, and started our walk. We quickly spotted a couple of white-tailed deer, and then our first kiwi. In all we had four kiwi, with incredible prolonged views of three of them. The shutters were clicking and everyone just revelled in the views of our third and final kiwi for the trip. A couple of morepork then put on a real show with amazing views of them also. It was bed time...



South Island saddleback. Paul van Giersbergen.

5 December 2023 – Day Eighteen

It might not have been an early start, but it felt like one! We headed out on our pelagic at 0815, and first stop getting more views of Fiordland crested penguin. In the end we had good views of several adults still with chicks in a couple of caves, and then another five birds on rocks and swimming. A great start.



A pair of Fiordland crested penguins. Humphrey Sitters.

We then headed to an island and found the resident pair of brown skua, who came out to say hi and take a few snacks. Great views of these impressive birds. A slow pass by another island didn't find any yellow-eyed penguins, so off out to the reef we went.

There was bit of swell, mostly in the order of 1.5-2m, but the odd big 3m roller. We had white-capped albatross following us, and then started to pick up lots of common diving petrels. There were literally hundreds of them. As we approached the reef, we picked up more and more sooty shearwaters, and several Cape petrels.

As we stopped and started to chum the albatross came in, mainly white-capped with a few Salvin's. It took a bit for the first Southern Royals to arrive, but in the end we had a good 5 around the boat. A New Zealand wandering came in nicely, and then some Northern giant petrels, followed by a confiding Southern. Cook's petrels came past in a steady trickle, as well as a few fairy prions, and then a single white-chinned petrel. A late stage immature Campbell albatross made a couple of passes and was a really welcome sight.



Salvins (left), white-capped (middle) and Southern Royal albatrosses. Paul van Giersbergen.



Southern Royal albaross. Paul van Giersbergen.



Campbell albatross. Paul van Giersbergen.



Foveaux shag. Paul van Giersbergen.

Finally, we had a couple of distant mottled petrels that unfortunately went across the front of the vessel making viewing hard. It was then time to start heading in, and thankfully on the way in we had another closer and slightly better mottled petrel which most got on to. More Cook's petrels, loads of sooty shearwaters and common diving petrels passed by.

We checked out the island again for yellow-eyed penguins, and despite the timing being better, still no luck. A rock with lots of Foveaux shags nesting on it was a quick stop and then back in to Halfmoon Bay. A great day on the water and glad to have picked up a few things we missed at Kaikoura, as well as some other extras.

Dinner and then we headed out to look for long-tailed bats. A lovely evening but they really didn't show, with just a brief distant glimpse.



A Southern Royal albatross dwarfs a white-capped in flight. Humphrey Sitters.



New Zealand kaka. Paul van Giersbergen.



Common starling. Paul van Giersbergen.

6 December 2023 – Day Nineteen

Up at sparrows, for some even earlier, sneaking around Oban in the dead of night and finding kiwi roaming the streets! We met up for our ferry crossing back to Bluff at 0800. The sea was flat calm and like a mirror, and on the way out we saw at least 5 Fiordland crested penguins, with some swimming, and then about 20 little penguins. Lots of common diving petrels, a few white-capped albatross and sooty shearwaters, and a couple of Cook's petrels. Surprisingly a few birds despite the calm weather.



Southern brown kiwi. Paul van Giersbergen.

We loaded the van and headed to a wetland where we checked through the waterfowl for anything unusual. A good assortment of ducks, some Royal spoonbill, but nothing out of the ordinary. So onwards, grabbing lunch and fuel. It was a long run north, and we stopped for a nice lunch in a park, and then continued.

As we got to our yellow-eyed penguin location, the timing was perfect, arriving just around 1500. We wandered down and Paul who had gotten there earlier than the rest had two thumbs in the air already. He had seen a penguin come out of the bushes and walk into the sea and off! Damn. We spotted a couple of large fluffy chicks in some bushes, but getting any clear views was impossible. Another adult was spotted in the shrubbery, but again hidden. But then a bird walked up the beach from the sea, and then another. We had good scope views of them clambering up the hill and disappearing into the bushes. A little calling could be heard at times, and then about 15 min later two birds appeared and started to head down to the beach. These were obviously the mates of the birds that had just come in, after being relieved of their duties! We had lovely views of them heading down the beach, into the water and disappearing.



Yellow-eyed penguin. Paul van Giersbergen.

We decided that realistically that was probably most of the breeding population that we had just witnessed. So, we headed back to the vehicle and continued north. This time we stopped at an Otago shag colony, where there were a lot of birds coming and going, chicks begging and being fed, and a lot of action. Great for the photographers, and great for just generally watching the antics! There were also a lot of spotted shags coming and going as well. We spent quite some time enjoying it all, and then headed to the accommodations.

A brief rest and then another beautiful meal at the Star & Garter.

7 December 2023 – Day Twenty

Another early start and the sun was shining. We headed up the coast and then angled inland, taking the scenic route! We made a stop at the famous Fairlie Bakehouse to grab some food – I would call it lunch, but not a lot of it made it to lunch! We made it to the 'Stilt Zone' around 1000, and the first stop seemed to produce no targets, until one walked in to view in the distance. We readjusted and found a place to park closer to the bird, and walked to where it was, enjoying stunning views in the sunshine. The photographers were happy and managed to get some pretty nice shots.

With a nice adult under the belt, we decided to head for a couple of other locations where birds had been seen recently. Things change regularly here in this part of the World, with water levels changing, and ponds drying completely. But at one of the planned stops we found a pair of adults foraging. They were not too close, but gave good views, and then another pair of adults seemingly appeared from nowhere. The two pairs seemed to be showing some territorial defence type behaviours, and then as soon as they arrived, all four birds disappeared.



Black stilt country. Ursula Ekkers.

We ate lunch, or what was left, and then checked out a river where we found several black-fronted terns, but nothing else. We then did some driving for chukar, with lots of scanning but no seeing. Lovely views though and the day certainly was a stunner.

We visited a last spot, with incredible views of Aoraki – Mount Cook on the way. We found another two black stilt, our first immatures of the day, and watched them feed for quite some time. Again, the photographers were very happy with really close nice views.



Aoraki – Mount Cook. Ursula Ekkers.



Immature black stilt. Paul van Giersbergen.

We headed towards our accommodation for the night in the late afternoon, checking one last spot, but nothing found. It had been a really successful day, feeling very happy to have seen five adult and two immature black stilt!

A lovely last dinner together, and then to bed.

8 December 2023 – Day Twenty-One

A little bit of a lie in, and away with the sun still shining. Aoraki – Mount Cook was still out against a blue sky, and we stopped for another quick photo stop. We also quickly stopped at our first location yesterday, and this time spotted four immature birds. They were a wee way off and then three of them got up and flew past us, and then landed back on the shore. Great to see these birds again this morning!

We continued, stopping again for lunch at the Fairlie Bakehouse, and then aimed for Christchurch. Heading into downtown, we dropped Stijn and Melina at their accommodation in Christchurch, and then headed to the airport to drop everyone else.

It had been a great three weeks together, and with hugs and handshakes, it was onwards to new adventures!

