

# Tour report

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20 January – 9 February 2024

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

## Participants

Sujan Chatterjee & Pampa Mistri, Patricia & Gerard Meunier, Art & Alicia Hulse, Andrew Cockburn, and Jan Lok

## Images

Matt Jones

We had a great tour of New Zealand, but sometimes the weather certainly felt like it was against us. Especially when looking for Okarito Kiwi and Rock Wren.

But those lowlights were outshone by the highlights. Awesome looks at New Zealand Storm-petrels. Seeing Fairy Terns. A magical day trip to Tiri where we found confiding NI Kokako, and Takahe at the last minute. The close encounter with Wrybill at Miranda. The wader-fest at Hawkes Bay. The fantastic looks at Orange-fronted Parakeets, the mind blowing looks at the Baillon's Crake. Sujan finding a very relaxed Falcon.

The Southern Brown Kiwi and the Stewart Island pelagic, not forgetting the Black Stilts.

Some of those sightings are extra special, as like the rest of the world, New Zealand and its bird life is struggling. Birds like the Fairy Tern, Kea, Yellow-eyed Penguins, Black Stilts, and the Kiwi hold a special place on this list.

We finished the tour with a respectable 148 species, including Great Spotted Kiwi heard only.

**Matt Jones** (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

## 20 January 2024 – Day One

After packing the van, we left our Auckland city hotel by 8am and headed north to a forest patch to familiarise ourselves with a few of New Zealand's more common birds. We found our first endemic NZ Pigeons, NZ Fantail and the abundant Pukeko aka Swamphehen, which were joined by the more exotic Sulphur Crested Cockatoo, Eastern Rosella and California Quail.

Then to our first sewage ponds for NZ Scaup, Paradise Shelduck, the tiny NZ Dabchick and a few Australasian Shovelers.

Around the corner we parked near a sheltered beach and had great looks at a pair of New Zealand Dotterels with two very cute chicks. This very confiding endemic wader is always a firm favourite. They were joined on the beach by the larger Variable Oystercatcher that also had a pair of fluffy chicks, plus our first Red-billed Gulls, Kelp Gulls and Pied Shags. The surrounding bushes held a few more NZ Pigeons and Tui.



Local signs

Next stop was a forest reserve – good weekend weather meant most visitors were near the beach but we headed inland and into the native forest. This was our first chance to find some of New Zealand's rarer bush birds. We soon heard and saw Bellbirds and Tui. A small creek that ran through the forest was home

to quite a few Brown Teal which is a huge testament to predator control in this area, for this once very rare duck.

A juvenile Banded Rail was encountered along with some special birds to add to the list: Whiteheads, North Island Robins, the super charismatic Kaka – and our first stunning North Island Saddlebacks. We tried to find the small and shy spotless crake as we left the park but unfortunately not all of the group connected with this elusive bird.



Brown Teal

A great first day was under our belt.

## 21 January 2024 – Day Two

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Day two and our first pelagic. Before we headed out to sea, we got a better look at Banded Rail, our first South Island Pied Oystercatcher and Royal Spoonbill. Plus more looks at New Zealand Dotterels, Pied Stilts and Bar-tailed Godwits.

Once we left the wharf we soon picked out Kelp and Red-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns and their larger cousin the mighty Caspian Tern. Our first Australasian Gannets arrived, followed by the tiny Fluttering Shearwaters.

An hour steaming out to deeper water and our first chumming location - it didn't take too long for our guests to arrive. Cook's Petrels, Flesh-footed Shearwaters, and the gorgeous looking Buller's Shearwater kept the cameras running hot. Black Petrel aka Parkinson's Petrel put in an appearance and a single Fairy Prion briefly flew through. As so often is the case, the Storm-Petrels steal the show. White-faced Storm-petrel and the awesome New Zealand Storm-Petrel.



New Zealand Storm Petrel



Cook's Petrel

In amongst the Cook's Petrels Matt picked out a lone Black-winged Petrel and there was brief appearance put in by a Little Shearwater. For Sujan in particular, almost everything was a lifer as this was his first ever pelagic!

## 22 January 2024 – Day Three

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We left our motel after breakfast and headed north to search for one of New Zealand's really rare birds.

Walking along a sandy beach we watched New Zealand Dotterels running ahead of us and found our first New Zealand Pipits. At a small rivermouth we found our target. Fairy Terns. Two birds. An adult and a chick. The chick was fitted with a transmitter, designed to self-detach after a few weeks. We learnt from the volunteer monitoring these birds that the chick was a male and had been reared in Auckland Zoo to help with the breeding program. With less than forty of these birds left in NZ we felt lucky and privileged to witness a couple of these tiny birds in the wild.

Lunch was enjoyed at a tidal lagoon – as we devoured pies and coffee, waders fed on the dropping tide. Variable Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, NZ Dotterel, Double-banded Dotterel plus Royal Spoonbills and White-faced Herons. Little Pied Shags and Pied Shags swam in the receding water and Welcome Swallows and Sacred Kingfishers were added to our growing list.



Recently fledged Fairy Tern



Variable Oystercatcher and chick



New Zealand Dotterel

Our next stop was a small lake in an urban housing estate - probably not your typical birding location but the lake was here before the houses were built, and the birds have remained. We soon added Australasian Little Grebe to our list, including very fresh chicks, which shared the lake with a couple of New Zealand Dabchicks. Nice to compare these two small grebes side by side. NZ Scaup, Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks and some noisy Pied Stilts were also seen.

Our motel for the night was surrounded by bush and our evening meal was at a very nice waterfront restaurant. After dinner we headed out to search for our first kiwi species of the tour. For overseas birders kiwi are very high on the wish list, but they are shy and can be difficult to find.

We strolled around in the dark. Birds were calling close by and the tension grew. A highlight of the tour for self-confessed "Owl-a-holic" Patty, was a very showy Morepork sitting in a tree calling. We left the owl and headed up a hill where Matt spotted a male Northern Brown Kiwi. Not everyone got onto it, but fortunately the bird didn't move too far and everyone got their first ever kiwi. Job done we drove back to the motel for a well-earned sleep.



## 23 January 2024 – Day Four

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The weather looked a bit unsettled as we headed out for our second pelagic of the tour. As we left the channel there were a few waders on the beaches, Variable Oystercatchers and New Zealand Dotterels.

Arriving at a small island we found a couple of Pacific Reef Herons that breed here, which they share with Pied and Little Pied Shags. Heading out to open water the Australasian Gannet numbers increased, joined by Red-billed and Kelp Gulls and plenty of small Fluttering Shearwaters.

Our Skipper Steve came up with a plan to steam straight out to some distant islands where sometimes Grey Noddy/Grey Ternlets roost. Once there we searched with no joy, plenty of breeding Gannets but no Ternlets. Fairy Prions joined us, giving the faint hope of Ternlets ... but no.

At our first chumming location, the wind had picked up and it didn't take too long for seabird numbers and species to rise. Heaps of Cook's Petrels swirled around the boat. Buller's Shearwaters, Flesh-footed Shearwaters, Black Petrels, more Fairy Prions, and great looks at White-faced and New Zealand Storm-Petrels skipping on the sea behind the vessel.

A visitor from the south put in brief appearance - an adult White-capped Albatross flew past the boat a couple of times. These birds breed on the Subantarctic Islands south of mainland NZ and we would see plenty more of these special birds as we headed south. But for some folks it was their first albatross, an unforgettable moment.

The weather began to turn, the skies turned black and it started to rain. And rain it did, for the next twenty-three minutes it poured down. Even the birds disappeared. We headed back into the shelter of the land, stopping to encourage a few close looks at some more Fluttering Shearwaters.

Once back ashore, we called in at a garage where an engineer checked out a warning light on the van. We were given the all clear and headed to the motel and awesome meal before calling it day.

## 24 January 2024 – Day Five

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Heading south on SH1 there seemed to be roadworks and traffic lights at every corner, but we arrived in time to catch the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi, often known just as "Tiri". This small, wonderful predator free island sits in the entrance to Auckland harbour in the Hauraki Gulf.

With just a day trip we had a shopping list of species to try and see in that time. After the briefing, we headed out on the forest trails to search for this island's special residents. First was North Island Robin, a brief Rifleman showed but not everyone got onto it. At the first feeder we watched Stitchbirds - these amazing looking birds are always a firm favourite and a welcome lifer. The Bellbirds made sure they were heard and further up the trail we were blessed to find three North Island Kokako sitting and feeding above us. These birds can be tricky to find so that eased the pressure. Incredibly near the Tui feeders another pair of Kokako were hopping around on the ground. We had already encountered Whiteheads and North Island Saddlebacks a few days earlier, but it's always good to see them at Tiri too.



North Island Kokako



New Zealand Pigeon

After a quick refreshment and lunch stop we headed out again. Brief looks at Red-crowned Parakeets and we heard Fernbird, but no sign of this shy often difficult little bird. Time was running out and we were missing our final target. Matt walked the group to the far end of the island, and BOOM not one but three South Island Takahe feeding in the long grass! We skipped back to the departing ferry, our metaphorical shopping basket full of rare endemic lifers.

We drove through Auckland traffic and headed south of New Zealand's biggest city to our comfortable motel. An awesome pub meal that night and toasted another epic day in the field.

## 25 January 2024 – Day Six

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Up with the lark, we scanned the mudflats as Eurasian Skylarks sang around us. Spotted our first distant Wrybills, a couple of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, hundreds of Bar-tailed Godwits and Pied Stilts, thousands of South Island Pied Oystercatchers, a few Double banded Dotterels and Masked Lapwings. A lone Glossy Ibis (not a very common bird in New Zealand) fed with twenty-plus Royal Spoonbills, a Great Egret flew over the marsh, and a single completely leucistic Welcome Swallow hawked the islands with the more conventional-looking Swallows.



Wrybill

A change of location rewarded us with amazing close looks at a flock of Wrybill which kept the cameras happy. Andrew especially wanted to see Wrybill. White-fronted Terns and Caspian Terns sat on the beach along with more South Island Oystercatchers. At the main Reserve we added thirty-plus Pacific Golden Plover and around four hundred Red Knot to the trip list. Plus, over a thousand more Bar-tailed Godwits. White-faced Herons, Royal Spoonbills, Grey Teal and a juvenile Banded Rail.

In amongst the Red-billed Gulls were a handful of Black-billed Gulls. The tide was dropping and the heat haze was getting worse so we headed to Miranda Shorebird Centre for a bit of retail therapy and a chat with Keith Woodley, the reserve manager. Then by way of a change we headed out to a local café for a late breakfast /early lunch.

After a couple of hours of downtime, we revisited the main reserve in the late afternoon before heading out for another awesome pub meal.

## 26 January 2024 – Day Seven

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Before the drive south, we did a brief check of the main reserve - fifty plus Pacific Golden Plovers. Onto a new site, we added three Australian Terns. Our next stop was a large native forest which gave us a lifer. Yellow-crowned Parakeet, a super cute looking bird. To be fair it was pretty quiet but there was always something calling or flying. New Zealand Pigeons, New Zealand Kaka. On a forest walk we found Bellbirds, Tui, Whiteheads, NI Robins, Silvereyes and Grey Warblers. We were hoping to hear some cuckoos or see a New Zealand Falcon, but we came up short.

We headed off and Matt stopped at a location he had seen Long-tailed Cuckoo before - almost instantly we heard and saw a pair of showy LT Cuckoos calling and flying around. Awesome!

A brief stop to look for Blue Duck on the way to our motel but no luck. That would be tomorrow's job. This evening we toasted a successful first week of birding in New Zealand.

## 27 January 2024 – Day Eight

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We were up before the sun this morning in the hope that the early birdwatcher catches a glimpse of a duck!!

At our first stop by a clean fast flowing river, initially we couldn't find any Blue Duck but as we were about to leave a pair flew up the river calling. Further up the river (and after a bit of a run-around!) we had magical views of a pair of Blue Ducks feeding opposite us. Photos taken, birds ticked, we headed to another site.



Blue Duck

The van brakes – and Matt’s reaction - were tested as a New Zealand Falcon being chased by a Tui flew across in front of us. Matt parked the van up and the Falcon landed in a tree providing scope views of the bird.

Still pre-breakfast, we stopped at a large reed bed to add Little Black shag, Fernbird, Redpoll and Coot to our growing list. Australasian Bittern are trickier to find once they start breeding, and there was no sight nor sound of them. Back at the motel we had breakfast and then hit the road towards Napier which still showed scars of the hurricane over a year ago.

A walk out to marsh nestled between the main highway and airport produced a bit of a wader fest. The list is as follows: 63xPied Stilt, 1x Variable Oystercatcher, 4x Pacific Golden Plover, 6x Black-fronted Dotterel, 7x Masked Lapwings, 51x Double-banded Plover, 1x New Zealand Dotterel, 1x Whimbrel, 53x Bar-tailed Godwit, 3x Marsh Sandpipers, 5x Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, 1x Pectoral Sandpiper, at least x6 Black-billed Gulls, x6 Royal Spoonbills plus a lot more common species.

We checked out an urban park - great looks and photo opportunities for Grey Teal, Australasian Shovelers, Pukeko, Black-billed and Red-billed Gulls, and breeding Little Pied Shags and Royal Spoonbills.

From our very smart motel we walked to a fine Indian restaurant for dinner to celebrate Alicia’s Birthday and another great day’s birding.



New Zealand Dabchick



## 28 January 2024 – Day Nine

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A bit of a drive lay ahead of us today, travelling between the East and West coast. After a relaxing start we headed out of town and drove to get stunning views across Hawkes Bay. We even saw a New Zealand Pipit in the car park.



New Zealand Pipit

En route we found a few wild turkeys and Indian Peafowl before stopping for a café lunch.

We checked into our smart clean motel, before heading out for a meal.

## 29 January 2024 – Day Ten

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Our last day on the North Island began with us looking across an Estuary. South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Pied Stilts, Red Knot, Double-banded Plovers, a handful of Wrybill, along with Grey teal, White-faced Herons and Royal Spoonbills.

We picked up some lunch, and then stopped at a local water treatment ponds to find a couple of tiny Black-fronted Dotterels on the concrete apron. On the water were lots of wildfowl. Grey Teal, Australasian Shovelers, Mallards, Paradise Shelducks and New Zealand Scaup.

We drove the fast highway in Wellington, New Zealand's capital city, and checked in for the early afternoon ferry to the South Island. The ferry crossing was pretty good, a strong wind kept the birds happy. We saw x3 White-capped Albatross, x5 Salvin's Albatross, 1x Northern Royal Albatross, a couple of Cook's Petrels, a single Buller's Shearwater, Sooty Shearwaters, and only Matt got onto the Mottled Petrel.

The wind eased a little as we made our way into Queen Charlotte Sound and we picked up plenty of Fluttering Shearwaters and Australasian Gannets. We also saw a couple of Arctic Skuas harassing White-fronted Terns and only Matt and Art saw a single King Shag.

It was a short drive to our Picton motel for the night.

## 30 January 2024 – Day Eleven

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The North Island was done, a new day a new island. At 7:30am we were back out on the water, exploring Queen Charlotte Sound.

We soon found one of the main targets, a couple of New Zealand King Shags. This very localised endemic was happy to have photos taken as they sat with the more abundant Spotted Shags. A few Australasian Gannets flew around fishing, as did Fluttering Shearwaters. Near a small island we found a larger group of King Shags along with a few New Zealand Fur Seals.

Landing on the small forested island we were greeted by the local Weka. This flightless rail has obviously never heard that rails are shy and hard to see.

Our target was the super rare Orange-fronted Parakeet (Malherbe's Parakeet) which we found quickly and were able to watch an adult feed a large chick right in front of us. Amazing! A bonus South-Island Saddleback skipped through. Other birds seen were South Island Tomtit, New Zealand Fantail, Bellbird, Tui, New Zealand Pigeon and Silvereyes.

Back on the boat we looked for dolphins but no luck. However, we watched an interesting battle between at least x7 Arctic Skuas and the local White-fronted Terns.

Back on land we picked up lunch and drove south, stopping at a roadside lake to stretch our legs. This location is known for a relatively new coloniser to New Zealand, the Hoary-headed Grebe, and we found a lone bird. On the lake itself were plenty of wildfowl: Canada Geese, Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, Australasian Shovelers, Mallard, Grey Teal and New Zealand Scaup. The standout stars of this place were two Baillon's Crakes (Marsh Crakes) that fed and walked around out in the open edge of the reedbed. I have never had such a great encounter with a bird that is normally super shy and elusive. Needless to say the cameras got a work out.





Fluttering Shearwater



Orange-fronted Parakeet



Baillon's Crake!

Further south we stopped just north of Kaikoura at a large New Zealand Fur Seal colony to watch the comings and goings of these creatures. Our Kaikoura motel was home for the next two nights. We dropped off our bags and headed out for dinner, toasting our first full day on New Zealand's South Island.

## 31 January 2024 – Day Twelve

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The main reason to spend a couple of nights in the coastal town of Kaikoura if you are a birdwatcher is to get out on a pelagic. At 6:30am we set off with the very experienced Tracy as our skipper. The location of the Kaikoura canyon sits not far from the shoreline so marine wildlife is plentiful so you don't have to venture out very far to see seals, dolphins, whales and birds.

Our first Kaikoura pelagic produced fantastic close views of some amazing seabirds. The huge Gibson's Wandering Albatross, along with both Northern & Southern Royal Albatross, the smaller White-capped and Salvin's Albatross, Northern Giant petrels, Cape petrels, and a couple of Hutton's Shearwaters whizzed through. Our first Black-fronted Tern was seen feeding with a group of White-fronted Terns and at least four Arctic Skuas were spotted.



New Zealand Wandering Albatross at sunrise



Southern Royal Albatross

Dusky Dolphins and the World's smallest oceanic dolphin, Hector's Dolphin, tried to steal the show – we got fantastic looks at these incredible creatures. But all too soon it was time to head back to shore where we let the cameras cool down while we enjoyed brunch.



Hector's Dolphin

At 1pm we headed out for our second Kaikoura pelagic. Our afternoon list was the same as the morning but with the addition of 2x Westland Petrels, a single Sooty Shearwater, better looks at the local Hutton's Shearwaters, plus more playful encounters with Dusky and Hector's Dolphins.

After a filling meal that evening, we drove back to the motel through farmland in the hope of finding Little Owl, an introduced species that calls this place home. Unfortunately, no luck, but as we drove back to the motel Matt had the window of the van open, and heard an owl calling. Almost opposite our motel we found it sitting in tree – with birding not getting much easier than that we called it a night.



Northern Giant Petrel

## 1 February 2024 – Day Thirteen

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Yes, a chirp, a wheezy chirp. Then a little brown bird hopped into view on an open branch. Everyone got onto our first Brown Creeper/Pipipi. This small endemic forest bird is only found on the South Island and on the outskirts of Kaikoura this was our first sighting of this little bird. Further out of Kaikoura we stopped to watch at least 200+ Dusky Dolphins leaping out of the water as they moved northwards.

Our next stop was an estuary, just north of Christchurch. Matt had been in touch with local birder and fellow Wrybill guide Dave Thomas (DT), who had a his scope set up on an uncommon visitor to New Zealand - a Common Tern. We took a walk along the beach to look through the scope and grab our next trip tick – the Common Tern (Eastern subsp) sat amongst a large flock of White-fronted Terns as a few smaller Black-fronted Terns hawked up and down the water's edge.

The larger Caspian Terns flew around as well and Black-billed and Red-billed Gulls were also present. There was a large flock of Bar-tailed Godwits close by so there was plenty to keep us happy. The tide started to drop as we watched Variable and Pied Oystercatchers, Double-banded Plovers and a lone Wrybill.

A flock of Pied Stilts flew in, giving their familiar yapping call. Among them was an adult Black Stilt! Not a complete surprise as a female has been in the area for a few years, but for us this was our first sighting of one of the World's rarest birds, and arguably the World's rarest wader with less than 200 birds left in the wild. She was a bit distant, but we were happy she had joined our trip list. We thanked DT for his help and left the reserve, finding a couple of Mute Swans near the exit.

Driving through a bit of Christchurch traffic, we headed inland towards the spine of the South Island, the Southern Alps. But first a stop for lunch at the world-famous Sheffield Pie shop! As the road climbed up the views became more spectacular. Time to explore, we walked our first real bit of South Island forest and found our first inquisitive South Island Robin. NZ Fantail and Bellbirds were also seen along with plenty of Lesser Redpolls.



Sujan found a very confiding New Zealand Falcon just sitting in a tree so all the cameras sparked into life. This was a far better view than our first bird on the North Island over a week ago. One of the great things about this tour is the multiple chances of seeing most species.



Sujan's New Zealand Falcon

We drove into Arthurs Pass village towards our smart hotel in the hope of finding a Kea but no joy. A few more Brown Creepers were seen. After a lovely evening meal Pampa and Sujan joined Matt in the search for Great-spotted Kiwi. This is by far the most difficult Kiwi to find and tonight was no exception. Walking along a forest trail we saw and heard nothing. The weather was definitely a factor – the wind and rain was picking up – but just as we were leaving we heard a male Kiwi calling so we called it a night and headed for our hotel.

## 2 February 2024 – Day Fourteen

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We woke up to a very wet view of the mountains. In the village we dodged the heavy rain as best we could and held onto the vain hope of seeing a Kea. The rain got heavier so we enjoyed coffee and some retail therapy in the village, but still no Kea.

Today was easy to see why the West Coast is sometimes called the Wet Coast!! In Hokitika the wind was so strong a Fairy Prion landed in the road and took off inland. Crazy stuff. Thankfully lunch was in a dry café.

Later when the rain and wind had stopped, we met Ian Cooper (Coops) at his home for a briefing about the world's rarest kiwi. Ian would be our guide later tonight for Okarito Kiwi.



Tui

First, we had a bit more birding to do. A forest trail revealed our first Kea of the trip and we heard and saw South Island Robins and Brown Creepers. After checking into our smart motel we headed out for an Asian-fusion meal prior to the drive out to meet Coops that night to search for Okarito Kiwi.

Unfortunately, the bad weather had reappeared. Ian tried his best, but the birds never gave themselves up. They got within 15-20 meters of the path but turned around and headed back into the forest away from the constant drizzle. We tried a couple of different sites but without success. It was not meant to be.

## 3 February 2024 – Day Fifteen

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The rain kept falling all night, but the surrounding mountain tops were covered in snow. BBRRR!

We left the small village of Franz Josef behind us but stopped in the village of Fox Glacier for a coffee and some fuel for the van. The weather started to improve to reveal some of the stunning rugged scenery.



A brief stop at a roadside carpark, we scanned with scopes out to sea, seeing White-capped Albatross, Wandering Albatross and good numbers of Sooty Shearwaters. A close Fernbird called and showed itself by the path which was a bit of bonus.

After a couple of scenic photo stops, we stopped to bird a local bit of forest for great looks at Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Brown Creeper and Rifleman. A distant Yellowhead was heard; our first encounter with this South Island endemic. Heard but not seen.

Down into the lake town of Wanaka, we headed to the busy lakeshore and got good looks at NZ Scaup, Australasian Great-crested Grebe, and Black-billed Gulls.

A wonderful Thai meal that night.





New Zealand scaup

## 4 February 2024 – Day Sixteen

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We were on the road early, driving through the mountains before dropping down towards busy Queenstown. The poor weather that had cleared yesterday was back. In Te Anau we grabbed lunch and coffees and got back on the road for more mountain driving. Arriving at our Rock Wren location we knew it was going to be tough. The weather gods had the odds stacked in the Rock Wren's favour. Rain, wind and a cold bite in the air was going to make this a challenge.

Pampa, Sujan and Andrew joined Matt to give it a go but after an hour or more walking in the rain getting cold and wet, they returned to the van. The Rock Wrens had the better idea of hunkering down to avoid the weather!

Onwards to Milford Sound we walked a bush track next the water and saw Kaka and Kea flying around and heard a distant Long-tailed Cuckoo calling. There was a Weka in the car park, a Great Egret on the mud flats, in the forest were Tomtit, Tui, Bellbird and Silvereye.

Heading back through the tunnel into the driving rain the vans wiper blades got a workout. We stopped at another forest trail and found some South Island Robins, Kaka, Yellow-crowned Parakeets, Tomtit, Grey Warblers and at least three Rifleman.

A hot shower was most welcome in our Te Anau motel and we headed out for a nice evening meal.

## 5 February 2024 – Day Seventeen

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The next morning we set off early for the drive through the rural farmland of Southland, the most southern district in New Zealand.

The weather had eased as we drove first to Invercargill and then down to the harbour of Bluff. From there we would catch the ferry across to Oban on Stewart Island, the most southern point of our journey. Stewart Island is a big island, but only has around 400 permanent residents, one of which is Matt!

The ferry crossing was a bit quiet and we checked into our hotel on the foreshore and after lunch caught a water taxi to Ulva Island, one of New Zealand's predator free islands. We found a couple of moulting Fiordland-crested Penguins on the journey around to Ulva Island. This amazing island gave us some great birds - new to our list was the most wanted Yellowhead, these stunning looking birds are always a joy to see. Also seen was Brown Creeper, South Island Robin, Kaka, and a showy pair of South Island Saddlebacks. We also saw Rifleman, and a daytime roosting Morepork. It's easy to see why this island is very popular with visiting birders.

New for our mammal list were at least five New Zealand Sea Lions, seen charging around the beach.

After a hearty meal at the local hotel and restaurant, we headed out to try to find our final Kiwi of the tour, the Southern Brown Kiwi.

Matt took us to private land where he guides when he's not guiding for Wrybill. We saw four birds, including a juvenile female that walked straight up to us. Another long but very successful day.

## 6 February 2024 – Day Eighteen

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The next morning we set sail for our final pelagic of the tour. With Nate as our Skipper we found another couple of Fiordland-crested Penguins moulting near a cave entrance. The weather was pretty wet again which seemed to be a bit of a theme on this tour! After the penguins we saw a couple of showy Southern Brown Skuas that got close to the vessel.

Then down to the reef, a place we often chum for birds. Here are the totals for the day:

x2 Brown Skua, x2 Fiordland crested Penguin, x6 Little Blue Penguin, x1 Yellow-eyed Penguin, x5 Southern Royal Albatross, x8 Buller's Albatross, x100+ White-capped Albatross, x9 Salvin's Albatross, x1 Northern Giant Petrel, x5 Cape Petrel, x8 Mottled Petrel, x9 Cooks Petrel, x11 Common Diving Petrel, x10 Fairy Prion, x260+ Sooty Shearwater, x2 Short-tailed Shearwater, x2 Buller's Shearwater, x2 Grey-backed Storm-Petrel, x2 White-faced Storm-Petrel. A very respectable haul of birds.

The lone Yellow-eyed Penguin was found on an Island as we were finishing the pelagic. The Grey-backed Stormies showed very well at the back of the vessel, and the Mottled Petrels gave some great flybys showing that sooty smudgy belly.

Other birds of note were a couple of Black-fronted terns in amongst the White-fronts. And least x200+ Foveaux Shags.

We returned to Halfmoon Bay very happy with our last full day at sea.

## 7 February 2024 – Day Nineteen

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We waved goodbye to Stewart Island from the 8am ferry, this island had showed us some of its very special birds.

From Bluff we headed towards Invercargill but first a brief stop to look over a lagoon. We found lots of Black Swans, Australasian Shovelers, NZ Scaup, Grey Teal, Paradise Shelducks and Royal Spoonbills.

Leaving Southland behind we headed north into Otago and through New Zealand's largest city in the deep south, Dunedin. Our next port of call was a reserve to look for Yellow-eyed Penguins. Finding one on Stewart Island the previous day had eased some of the pressure, but it was still great to find a couple of birds at this location. Yellow-eyed Penguins are in real trouble on NZ's mainland and now have the title of the world's rarest Penguin.

We found plenty of NZ Fur Seals and saw a few Spotted Shags and Otago Shags.

In the small Victorian looking town of Oamaru we found more Otago Shags – lifer! It was great to finish the day with a lifer. We checked into our smart motel and headed out for a splendid pub meal.

## 8 February 2024 – Day Twenty

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Our last full day lay ahead of us. We left the town of Oamaru in the rear-view mirror and drove north, stopping inland at a bakery to grab lunch. The main target for today was Black Stilt. We had seen a bird over a week earlier, but that individual was distant.

A few locations were checked with no luck. Matt parked the van near a lake where he had seen them before and right on cue a pair of Black Stilts flew along the edge of the lake and landed not too far away. We spent the next hour or so in the company of the world's rarest wader. The cameras got a workout and the birds showed very well.

We had a relaxing lunch near the lake and photographed some nearby Australasian Great-crested Grebes.

After lunch at a different site, we found breeding Wrybill, Double-banded Plovers, Black-fronted Terns, and a New Zealand Pipit. Best of all was Mount Cook/Aoraki showing herself. New Zealand's highest peak often keeps herself in the clouds, but not today. We could see all 3724 meters.

Taking the long way round to our motel, with the vain hope of finding more Black Stilts, our luck ran out. At a nearby restaurant that evening we enjoyed our final meal of the tour together.



Black Stilt



Australasian Crested Grebe



Mount Cook-Aoraki

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## 9 February 2024 – Day Twenty-One

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We left our comfortable motel at a comfortable hour and headed north. The bags felt heavier as scopes and cameras were packed ready for the journey home. Leaving the stunning Mackenzie country, famed for its high mountains and blue lakes behind us, the landscape changed into lush green farmland. Swamp Harriers and Australian Magpies were seen from the moving van.

We were a long way from Auckland, 21 days earlier. The roads got busier as we moved closer to Christchurch, the South Island's biggest city. We broke the journey north with a coffee and snack stop and got back into the suburban traffic.

Sujan & Pampa, Art & Alicia, Patty & Gerald, and Andrew were all flying home and so they were farewelled at Christchurch International Airport that afternoon. Jan was spending a few weeks longer in New Zealand and Matt dropped him off at his accommodation nearby.