

# Tour report

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20 April – 3 May 2024

14-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Led by Dave Howes, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

## Participants

Malcolm Boswell & Michael Boswell

## Images

Dave Howes

This 14-day, private tour was organised and led by Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ. We were lucky with the weather on our tour with wind and rain on only a couple days and no real time lost or birds missed because of it. The birds played their part too, with us seeing 128 species and hearing another 1, with 52 of those being endemic species, during the course of the tour. Malcolm and Michael, having visited New Zealand before, had a target list and we managed to see most of the birds possible at this time of year.

All in all, a great trip with two great people.

**Dave Howes** (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)



Brown Teal

## 20 April 2024 – Day One

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The first thing that greeted me when I opened my curtains was rain! Not the start we were hoping for, but we left Auckland at around 7:30am and lost no time in heading north, having caught up the evening before, done introductions and had a discussion on health and safety and a broad outline of our plans for the coming days.



Birding in the rain.

We headed north to an estuary where we had hoped to find a few New Zealand Dotterels, but these had all moved off to form their post-breeding flocks elsewhere, so we continued northwards. A stop at a regular Brown Quail hangout failed to produce any quail but did get us good views of quite a friendly New Zealand Pipit. Half an hour later we were watching a group of Royal Spoonbill feeding in a nearby estuary – we'd hoped we may see a NZ Fairy Tern, but these too had moved on post-breeding. Another estuary a bit further north produced New Zealand Dotterel, a couple Ruddy Turnstone and about 160 Variable Oystercatchers.

A small pond at the northernmost point of our trip produced the desired NZ Dabchick and Australian Grebe as well as good-looking pair of Grey Duck. On our way south to our accommodation for the night, we couldn't resist another quick look for Brown Quail and this time they obliged with a family group of 6 birds producing lots of photo opportunities.

After checking into our accommodation and spending a bit of time freshening up, we headed out to a nearby location, collecting pizza on the way. As it was still early when we arrived, we spent some time

birding and were rewarded with good views of Buff-banded Rail, Brown Teal, NZ Fantail and Grey Warbler and distant, flight views of Kaka.

Dinner was calling so we had our pizza before heading out on a trail to look for kiwi. It didn't take too long before we had views on our first NI Brown Kiwi, right in the middle of the track! Another circuit got us good views of a second adult male and brief views of quite a young bird and although we heard several Morepork calling, we never got to see one. We decided to call it a day and headed back to our motel, satisfied with our results on what had looked to be a miserable, rainy day.

## 21 April 2024 – Day Two

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After breakfast, it was back to the same location as the night before, with rain again threatening. A short bush walk saw us add some endemics like Whitehead, North Island Saddleback, NZ Pigeon, Takahe, North Island Robin, NZ Fantail and Kaka (again only flight views), as well as great views of a pair of Morepork – always a treat during the daytime. Along the road and in the surrounding paddocks we also saw Swamp Harrier, White-faced Heron, Pukeko and a host of introduced passerines.



Takahe

We left and headed south a little way, trying to avoid the threatening rain looming on the horizon, ending up at a nearby wetland where we got looks at most of the more common waterfowl like Black Swan, Paradise Shelduck, Mallards, NZ Scaup, Australasian Shelduck and Canada Geese as well as NZ Dabchick, Grey Warbler and Royal Spoonbill. The nearby water treatment plant produced more of the same and the

rain had arrived, so we continued a little way south to another spot where we spent some time looking for Spotless Crake which we could hear calling but didn't show. A couple of NZ Fernbirds, on the other hand appeared very interested in the birders and showed well!

It was past lunchtime, so we had a break to eat our sandwiches before heading out in search of Crakes once more. After trying various spots to no avail, we finally got relatively good views of two birds at the original spot we'd tried.

We had a very tasty dinner locally and after dark headed back into the bush in the hope of finding a Little Spotted Kiwi. After more than an hour of traipsing around we heard a single male calling but a long way away and decided to call it a night.

## 22 April 2024 – Day Three

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Another overcast and very windy morning with showers greeted us as we drove south towards Miranda. After battling Auckland's notorious traffic, we finally got to Miranda at around 9:30am, an hour and a half after the high tide which should have been perfect. Unfortunately, it was very small tide and the bulk of the birds were already on the mud flats behind the shell bank.

We spent a bit of time at the Stilt Ponds but apart from some Pied Stilt, Grey Teal and a lone Wrybill, it was very quiet, and we made the decision to leave and head to the other coast where the tides were more favourable. And so we found ourselves in a viewing hide at another estuary just in time for lunch.

The shell bank had a large flock each of Wrybill and Pied Stilt and small numbers of a few other waders, most of them having already left on their pilgrimage north to breed. Interestingly, we still hadn't seen a Red Knot but did find a Grey-tailed Tattler on the outskirts of the Wrybill flock. The next shell bank along had a decent flock of Royal Spoonbill and again, a few mixed waders, gulls and terns and with rain setting in we decided to retreat to our vehicle and head back to Miranda, after a brief visit to the nearby storage pond and canal neither of which appeared to be holding anything out of the ordinary.

The coast a bit north of Miranda is where we started again and with the tide starting to flow, the birds were slowly being pushed closer. The sun had made an overdue appearance, so we made ourselves comfortable at a likely looking spot and waited for the birds to come to us. We were rewarded with close views of Wrybill, NZ Dotterel, Silver, Black-billed and Kelp Gulls, a large flock of South Island Pied Oystercatchers and finally, a flock of Red Knot flew in. There were also 5 Ruddy Turnstone feeding along the shoreline in full breeding plumage – what stunning little birds!

A quick stop on the roadside adjacent to the stilt ponds in great light produced a Whiskered Tern, a rare visitor to New Zealand as well as thousands of Pied Stilts and most of the Bar-tailed Godwits that hadn't flown north – an impressive sight.

After a quick freshen up, it was off to Thames for a very pleasant Thai meal.



Wrybill

## 23 April 2024 – Day Four

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A cool, clear morning awaited, and we loaded the vehicle and headed to a nearby spot as the tides were just right. Although works were still underway, they were happening at the far end of the stopbank and we were allowed in to view the birds.

The sheer number of Pied Stilts was impressive, and they looked stunning in the morning light. A couple hundred Wrybill were also on the roost and foraging around in front of us were 6 Sharp-tailed and 2 Pectoral Sandpipers, neither particularly common in NZ. Also present were the long-staying Australian Terns as well 7 Cattle Egret which tend to show up in this area for the winter.

A good start to the day, but we had to leave and continue our journey southwards. Our usual stop at a dam on the way to Pureora was quiet with a few of the more common waterfowl present and a single Eurasian Coot.

On to Pureora and our lunch stop. During lunch we had Yellow-crowned Parakeet fly over not giving great views but also had Tomtit, Whitehead, Bellbird and Grey Warbler showing well at close range around us.



Pied Stilts

A short drive after lunch gave us better views of a couple parakeets as well as some Yellowhammers. Our first walk in the forest was fairly quiet but we still had good views of North Island Robin, Bellbirds, Grey Warbler and a group of four Rifleman feeding close to the track. A second forest walk was even quieter with several birds heard high up in the canopy but very few seen.

It was now time to head for Turangi and check in to our motel for the night.

## 24 April 2024 – Day Five

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A cold, early start with frost on the ground and the temperature gauge in the car showing 3 degrees celcius, and had us at a spot on the lake, looking for Australasian Bittern. Although past the time of the year for them to be breeding, the area does hold a number of bitterns all year round and we were hopeful of finding at least one. We had a NZ Fernbird show well, but after about half an hour we made a short move to another spot on the lake. After a while a bittern took off from the *raupo* close to where we'd just been but unfortunately, I was the only one who saw it – every guide's nightmare! We spent a bit of time looking at and photographing the waterfowl before moving back to our starting point. Within a few minutes, a bittern, possibly the same bird, took off from quite close to us and everyone had good flight views and even managed a couple photos. Before leaving, we had a glimpse of a Spotless Crake which we'd heard calling while looking for the bittern.



Blue Duck

We headed back towards Turangi and to the Tongariro to look for Blue Duck. Our first stop seemed to be a bust, but we took a small detour on the way back to the car and there, in the middle of the river was a Blue Duck. We settled down to watch and take some photos and before long another one appeared and then another and before long, we could see 8 Blue Duck on the river in front of us!

With no more target species in the area, we changed our itinerary somewhat and packed up and headed south. A quick coffee stop at Upokongaro yielded an empty tree where we'd hoped for a Nankeen Night-heron, but after such a great morning, we carried on in good spirits.

Bushy Park was our lunch stop and after lunch a walk through the remnant native forest here gave us great views of NI Saddleback, 3 Rifleman at close range, Bellbirds, NZ Pigeons and Stitchbird. The estuary at Foxton was very windy and quiet bird-wise so we checked into our motel and headed out for dinner.

## 25 April 2024 – Day Six

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A casual start at around 8:00am had us heading south to ultimately get the ferry from Wellington to Picton. Enroute, we stopped at a small water treatment plant to look for Black-fronted Dotterel, another of our specific targets. We had good views of several species of waterfowl but it took us a while to find our target and when we did, it was way on the other side of the series of ponds and while we were able to get reasonable scope views of the bird, photographic opportunities were limited.



We were going to investigate the semi-resident tern flock at Plimmerton as there were reports of Black-fronted and Common terns being present with the White-fronted Terns, but on a whim, we stopped at Waikanae Beach and visited the estuary and the tern colony on the sandspit. After spending some time photographing the terns, we headed back to the ponds where we had good views and photo opportunities of Pied, Little Pied and Little Black Shags, as well as a bonus White Heron, an uncommon visitor to the area.



White Heron

It was soon time to head for Wellington, so we ended up having our lunch in the car while waiting in the ferry queue. The ferry crossing was very windy, with winds gusting in excess of 40 knots but with very little swell, so we were able to spend the entire crossing out on deck, albeit sheltering from the wind! The birds were rather scarce given the amount of wind, but we did manage to add our first seabirds to the list, including a very poor view of a Black-fronted Tern and less than average views of Westland Petrel.

## 26 April 2024 – Day Seven

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After breakfast it was down to the wharf for a safety briefing before departing for Queen Charlotte Sound. We cruised up through the Sound before stopping at a rocky outcrop where we had close views of Spotted Shags. In a cove a bit further along, we had good views of a small Pied Shag colony with several birds on nests. Unfortunately, the Hector's Dolphins sometimes seen here didn't put in an appearance, but we did see several New Zealand Fur Seals, both in the water and sunning themselves on the rocks.

A brief stop at the end of an island gave better views of King Shags at their roost and then it was off for our landing on the island. A Weka and a couple of Variable Oystercatchers were waiting for us on the beach, but they soon left us alone when they realised, we had no food to offer. We soon heard an Orange-fronted or Malherbe's Parakeet chattering away but didn't see it. After looking around their usual haunts without any luck, we walked along the track a bit more, all the time accompanied by Bellbirds and Fantails. A little while later, a single parakeet flew over and landed not far from us but very well concealed in the thick bush not giving us even half-decent views. The bird flew around a bit more and these, unfortunately were the only views we got of this gorgeous little parakeet.



Black-fronted Dotterel

Back along the trail, 2 South Island Saddleback showed very well and completely ignored us as they went about their business. We also had Tomtits around and a black morph Fantail which seemed to keep getting chased away by 2 or 3 "normal" Fantails. After a couple hours on the island, the boat collected us and we headed back to Picton, where we grabbed some lunch and headed south our next destination, Kaikoura.

We stopped for lunch at a water treatment plant – probably not everyone's first choice for a lunch stop but birders are a strange bunch!. There were good numbers of Grey Teal, Australian Shoveler, Paradise Shelduck, Black Swan, Canada Geese and Mallard present as well as a Mute Swan and a White Heron. Just as we were leaving, a Black-fronted Dotterel flew over calling prompting us to look around a bit more and shortly after, Michael found a pair feeding along a creek edge. On investigation, we found 7 birds and ended up getting great views and loads of photos.

We carried on our journey stopping at a lake a bit further south where we had distant scope views of a single Hoary-headed Grebe. There was a huge flock of Australian Shovelers on the lake, as there quite often is, and while scanning the flock, one bird instantly stood out – a Northern Shoveler! While not very exciting for our Canadian guests, it is still quite a rare bird for New Zealand and had the guide fairly excited!

After checking into our motel, we headed out to a great dinner at the Pier Hotel with its stunning view over the bay on to the mountains behind.

## 27 April 2024 – Day Eight

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Our first Pelagic kicked off at 9:00am and after strong winds the day before, the morning was clear with light winds, and we headed into town full of anticipation.

After a short boat ride, we stopped and deployed the chum and in true Kaikoura style, we soon had seabirds right next to the boat – mainly Cape Petrels, but also good numbers of Buller's and Short-tailed shearwaters and good views of both Westland and White-chinned Petrels. This pattern continued throughout the morning, with us getting good, if brief views of a single Hutton's Shearwater, one of our targets for the day. While we didn't get vast numbers of albatross, we got great views of Antipodean (Gibson's), White-capped and both Northern and Southern Royal Albatross. A short detour inshore to Barney's Rock gave us views of 40-odd Spotted Shags on the rock and on the way back to the wharf we were treated to a pod of Dusky Dolphins jumping right beside the boat for a bit of "human-watching".



White-chinned Petrel

We had our lunch at South Bay Reserve in the hope of finding a Cirl Bunting but had no luck there and it wasn't long before we were back on the boat for the afternoon session.

The afternoon was much the same as the morning, but without any Hutton's Shearwater but we did get relatively good looks at Black-fronted and White-fronted Terns.

On the way back to our motel we made a couple stops in the hope of finding an elusive Cirl Bunting and while we had good views of most of the other introduced passerines, including a few Yellowhammers that got second looks, we didn't find a bunting.

After showering and changing we headed out quite early to look for Little Owl before dinner. It didn't take us long to find a pair and then a single bird sitting on a barn as we headed for an Indian meal at the end of a long day.

## 28 April 2024 – Day Nine

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An early start had us leaving Kaikoura in clear, but frosty conditions as we headed for Arthur's Pass via an estuary about 2 hours south where we hoped to catch the tide and where there had been recent reports of a Black Stilt.



Photographing New Zealand Fur Seals

The tide was still quite high when we arrived and we scanned the estuary on the dropping tide for over an hour and while we didn't find the Black Stilt, we did get our first Lesser Redpoll and Dunnock and a handful of waterfowl species. The shorebirds were a bit thin on the ground with most of them having gone north already but there were still a few Bar-tailed Godwit and a lone Whimbrel. The tern flock consisted mainly of White-fronted Terns with a few Black-fronted Terns.

We carried on to Arthur's Pass stopping at the famous Sheffield Pie Shop to pick up lunch. On the way up to Arthur's Pass, we stopped at a spot for lunch and drove by two hardy souls skinny dipping in the river on a day that had dawned at 2 degrees celcius – very brave!

A short walk after lunch gave us a close encounter with two South Island Robins, one of which was very intrigued by a camera placed on the ground!

We didn't have any Kea on our way through Arthur's Pass Village, which is quite common, but at the next spot we had at least 5 birds flying around and coming in to have a look at us and see if we perhaps had anything edible, as Keas do. We walked a little way along the track to see if we could find a Rock Wren on the slopes above us. We gave it a good go but apart from Silvereyes, Tomtits, Fantail and Dunnock, nothing showed.

Back at the car, the Keas were back and there were less people, so we spent a bit of time photographing them and also had a gorgeous male Tomtit come and pose for photos as well as a Dunnock that showed really well in the open.

We left the Kea and checked into the Bealey Hotel, had an early dinner and then headed out on a cold, crisp night to look for Great Spotted Kiwi – arguably the most elusive of the kiwi species. After over an hour of tramping around in the bush and through sodden grass and hearing only two distant Morepork, we decided to call it a day and headed back to the hotel and nice warm beds.

## 29 April 2024 – Day Ten

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The morning started with me scraping ice off the windscreen before we headed south towards the McKenzie Basin, via the famous Fairlie Bakehouse for a pie (yes, another famous pie shop!) and then it was on to search for our main target for the day, the Black Stilt.

We drove through Tekapo and to one of our favourite spots only to find the water level particularly high and the usual muddy shore and reed beds flooded! It was a beautiful day, so we sat and had our lunch anyway before continuing our search. At a small lake not too far away, we found a pair of adult Black Stilts and while we had good scope views of them, they were a bit too distant for decent photos.

We spent some time exploring a few other spots in the area and ended up with good views of Great Crested Grebe, Spoonbill and a few other waterbirds. Eventually, on a small body of water quite close to Lake Pukaki, we found another pair of Black Stilt which gave us better photo opportunities. One or two more stops yielded no more new birds, so after a long day of driving, we checked into our motel and went to the pub for a welcome meal and a beer.



Black Stilt

## 30 April 2024 – Day Eleven

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With the pressure off to find a Black Stilt, we opted to drive through to Oamaru to visit a shag colony, so after a leisurely 8:00am start, we headed to the coast.

As a birding spectacle, the colony didn't disappoint with hundreds of Otago Shags roosting on the disused wharf structure, as well as good numbers of Spotted Shags and a few Pied and Little Pied Shags. As we were leaving, a passing local told us about an Elephant Seal in front of the penguin colony, so it was off to have a look! Word had obviously got out as there was a constant stream of people to view this massive mammal.

We picked up lunch on the way out of town (not from a famous pie shop this time!) and headed to a wetland on the way back to Twizel. After lunch in the adjacent campsite, we explored the lake edge in the hope of finding a Marsh Crake. Apart from various waterfowl, we did spot a white harrier right on the other side of the lake and while we had relatively good scope views of the bird, it was too distant to work out whether it was an albino or simply leucistic – either way a stunning bird.

A couple moves put us in some likely looking habitat and after only a few minutes on the track, we found a Marsh Crake foraging on the mud at the edge of a reed bed. In true crake style, it scurried off when it saw us only to emerge cautiously a few minutes later and then continued to feed completely unperturbed by our presence.



Southern Elephant Seal



Photographing Black Stilt

With our main two targets for the day “in the bag”, we headed back towards Twizel and to a river delta where we hoped to get better views and photo opportunities of Black Stilt. We weren’t disappointed as soon after arriving, we found a very accommodating stilt which we sat and watched for over an hour with a stunning backdrop of Lake Benmore surrounded by mountains.

## 1 May 2024 – Day Twelve

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Today was to be predominantly a travel day, so we packed up and left fairly early for Invercargill airport, stopping briefly in Wanaka to pick up lunch and look for birds along the waterfront. The usually co-operative Crested Grebe and Black-billed Gulls obviously didn’t like the rain either and the only birds present were some miserable-looking Mallards and the ever-present House Sparrows, so we didn’t stick around.

We checked in for our flight to Stewart Island, ate our lunch and then did what you do in airports – sat around and waited! The flight was smooth with great views of the island as we approached, the rain having cleared nicely. A short walk to the hotel and we were checked in and had the rest of the afternoon at leisure.



Southern Brown Kiwi. Michael Boswell



The weather held and after dinner we walked the short distance down the road to join our kiwi tour – our target being the Southern Brown Kiwi or *Tokoeka*. A short briefing by the guide out of the way and we were off! It didn't take us long to find our first kiwi, a young male who, probably quite used to being a rock star, carried on with his business without taking any notice of us. He was joined after a while by a second young male, possibly a brother and a scuffle broke out with one the birds disappearing into the bush.

Several Morepork were heard calling on our walk and at least another 4 kiwi with 2 males duetting very close, but we couldn't locate them. A light drizzle set in as we left the kiwi to their business and headed off to bed after a long day.

## 2 May 2024 – Day Thirteen

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After breakfast, we collected some lunch and headed down to the wharf to board the water taxi to Ulva Island, which is another of New Zealand's predator-free sanctuaries. We were on the wharf early and as it happened, one of the other boats from the same company was about to leave for Port William so jumped on board and had a bit of a tiki-tour enroute, adding Foveaux Shag to our bird list.



We hadn't been on the island long when we heard a flock of Yellowhead, one of two main targets for the day, but frustratingly, as is often the way with these birds they were feeding high up in the canopy and we had rather average views of them. Brown Creeper or *Pipipi* were more obliging and showed well although they can be frustratingly difficult to photograph as they don't sit still for very long.

After lunch we came across a small flock of Yellowhead feeding on and close to the ground right next to the track so spent some time watching and photographing them.

We also had great views of Kaka, Red & Yellow-crowned Parakeets, South Island Robin – confiding and obliging as always, Grey Warbler, NZ Pigeon and Rifleman, but by the time we left, we'd failed to see a Weka or a Saddleback, although we did hear one or two Saddleback calling.

We walked back to the hotel from Golden Bay, freshened up and met for a well-earned beer and our final dinner of the tour.

## 3 May 2024 – Day Fourteen

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Our flight to the mainland was only at 10:30am so we had a bit of time to wander around Oban in the morning, before heading to Invercargill, then Auckland where said our farewells and headed off home in three different directions!

We finished the trip on 129 species, 52 of which were endemics, plus 1 heard only and 6 species of mammal.