

# Tour report

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**28 September – 4 October 2024**

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



Mount Cook / Aoraki

**Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**

## **Participants**

Gillian Horgan and Martin Bowman

## **Images**

Matt Jones

Something a little different - a short bespoke South Island tour which started in Christchurch and ended in Oban, Stewart Island. Birding around a few of the South Island's hotspots and seeing some the special birds that call this part of the World home.

## 28 September 2024 – Day One

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Early afternoon Matt picked up Gillian and Martin at Christchurch International Airport, flying into New Zealand from Sydney, Australia.

From Christchurch it was a short drive to an estuary. Unfortunately, the tide was incoming and high but we kicked off our list with Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, Australian Shovelers, Grey Teal and the endemic New Zealand Scaup. We also found Black-billed Gulls along with larger Kelp Gulls plus Caspian Terns. Even though the tide was high we found a few waders: Pied Stilts, Masked Lapwings, and a lone Double-banded Plover/Dotterel. In the surrounding bushes we heard and saw our first Grey Warbler, and then a Sacred Kingfisher gave himself up. As we left the Estuary a couple of Royal Spoonbills flew over the car heading towards the water.

We drove north towards the coastal town of Kaikoura, passing Australian Magpies and Australian Swamp Harriers in the green farmland of north Canterbury. Once we had checked into our Kaikoura motel we had time for a bit of grocery shopping and then a search for the introduced Little Owl. Unfortunately, this came up blank but we added Pukeko aka Purple Swamphen to the day one list before heading to a local restaurant for a fine evening meal.

## 29 September 2024 – Day Two

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A bright sunny morning greeted us. After breakfast we headed towards the Peninsula where the birding got a shot in the arm: Variable Oystercatchers, Ruddy Turnstones and Red-billed Gulls fed amongst the rocks. Looking further out to sea we picked out a huge feeding flock of Hutton's Shearwaters. This very special local bird breeds in the snow-capped Kaikoura range which sits behind the town. The shearwaters were joined by a Northern Giant Petrel along with our first dainty White-fronted Terns. A few White-faced Herons were seen in the surrounding fields as we drove to South Bay.

The Albatross Encounter pelagic is always a great way to start the day. As we steamed out, we were soon joined by our first Giant Petrel, then the huge shape of a Wandering Albatross loomed into view. We stopped at our first chum site and the birds showed up: Gibson's Wandering Albatross were joined by squabbling Northern Giant Petrels and the chattering Cape Petrels. White-capped and Salvin's Albatross kept their distance and our first Westland Petrels circled the vessel. A couple of Fairy Prions were spotted and an Arctic Skua was chased off by the local Kelp gulls. It was an unusual time of year to see the Arctic Skua.



Northern giant petrel.

Onto our next stop and a change of location and a change of birds. A single Antipodean Wandering Albatross joined the Gibson's Wandering Albatross and a smaller juvenile Black-browed Albatross flew through. A lone White-chinned Petrel was picked out amongst the Westland Petrels and a steady stream of Hutton's Shearwaters flew past the boat, giving better looks than the birds we had seen earlier from land.

It wasn't just the birds that kept us on our toes. A small pod of playful Dusky Dolphins put in appearance. They were soon joined by the tiny, rare Hector's Dolphins. As we moved again, we spotted a Sperm Whale. The timing was perfect as we witnessed this mighty creature take a breath and dive, showing the iconic tail fluke.

And then the cherry on the cake - an Antarctic Fulmar flew past the vessel without stopping, but everyone got onto this rare visitor from the south. Wow! A cruise past Barney's Rock, added New Zealand Fur Seals, White-fronted Terns and breeding Red-billed gulls to our list to finish off an amazing morning at sea.

Before we left Kaikoura, we grabbed better looks at obliging Double-banded Dotterel on the beach and from here headed south, stopping briefly at small nature reserve. The lakes provided a few more waterfowl: Black Swans, Eurasian Coot, Grey Teal, Australian Shoveler, Mallard, Paradise Shelducks and New Zealand Scaup. Not forgetting the Canada Geese to make Gillian and Martin feel at home!

A brief lunch stop and revisit to an estuary, but again our timing was out and the tide was at its high point. We saw the same birds as the previous day and decided to keep moving to our next destination.





New Zealand (Gibson's) wandering albatross.



Black-fronted tern.

We headed west through the farmland and plains of Canterbury towards the spine of the South Island, the Southern Alps. Once in the mountains we found a field full of Black-billed Gulls and more importantly a new bird, the gorgeous Black-fronted tern. Looking very smart in their breeding plumage with orange feet and bills and black caps.

Onwards to the village of Arthurs Pass and we quickly found five or six Keas hanging around a car park. This super intelligent alpine parrot unfortunately is often found around human domains, which can lead them into conflict or trouble. We checked into our mountain hotel with its outstanding views, and finished the long but rewarding day with a great meal.

## 30 September 2024 – Day Three

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As we packed the car we found a pair of South Island Tomtits in the trees above us which was a nice start to the day. Leaving the mountains of the Southern Alps in the rear-view mirror we headed south, taking the scenic route through some of the South Island's stunning scenery.

We picked up lunch en route as we entered Mackenzie country. An extensive search for Black Stilt drew a blank but we did add a couple of new birds to our growing list: Australasian Crested Grebe and Lesser (Common) Redpoll, along with more Black-billed Gulls and Pied Stilts.

Driving further inland the weather was playing the game, as we approached Mount Cook / Aoraki. So often New Zealand's highest peak is hiding under low cloud, but not today. All 3724 meters was on show.



Mount Cook / Aoraki



Our next site came up trumps with a distant pair of adult Black Stilts. They moved closer towards us and then we found an even closer bird which showed very well. Always a treat to witness and observe the world's rarest wader in this wonderful setting. By now all three Black Stilts were showing very well. But it wasn't just the stilts. Black-fronted Terns hawked up and down the small creek in front of us. Banded Dotterels ran around squabbling over newly formed territories and then Matt spotted a single Wrybill. As soon as it was found it disappeared. A few minutes of searching revealed nothing. No pressure, but the Wrybill was Martin's most wished-for of New Zealand's birds. Incredibly, it reappeared right in front of us and joined Martin's life list and our trip list. This endemic and iconic little wader is the only bird that has a distinct and diagnostic bill that bends to the right.



Watching black stilt.

After a wonderful afternoon's birding, we decided to head to our accommodation. There was a final twist in store - as we left the site a large female New Zealand Falcon flew across the road in front of us and we all got onto it. We pulled off the road to search for it, hoping it had stopped and perched, but it must have kept flying. That evening we toasted a great day's birding in a great location.

## 1 October 2024 – Day Four

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With the car packed we left our smart Twizel motel and drove south. Our first stop was to see and add Otago Shag and Spotted Shag to the trip list. Arriving just before midday to a site with hopes of finding Yellow-eyed Penguins, we knew given the time of year it was a long shot, and we had no luck.

After a lunch stop, Matt decided to try a wetland site that he hadn't visited for many years just south of Dunedin, New Zealand's largest and oldest southern city. We watched Grey Warblers sitting up singing on Flax bushes. From the boardwalk Matt heard a call, and with a bit of searching and luck we all saw the super shy Marsh Crake also known around the globe as the Baillon's Crake. Always great to find a skulking crake. Further down the track we heard then saw several New Zealand Fernbirds. Like the crake, they can be tricky to find but eventually a couple gave themselves up, sitting up and calling in front of us. Another highlight of the wetlands walk was watching the display flights of the local Swamp Harriers. From here we drove to the small Otago River town of Balclutha, we checked in our smart lodge and ate another fine meal.

## 2 October 2024 – Day Five

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The first rainy day of the trip but fortunately it was a travel day and so after breakfast and a drink for the car, we drove the Catlin's scenic route. Our first stop was a remote beach where the weather held off long enough for us to walk the large sandy bay. We found a New Zealand Sea lion, a lone young male, snoozing in the drizzle. We walked back to the car, and watched a huge flock of Red-billed gulls roosting on the beach.

As we headed south the rain got heavier. We stopped for a sit-down brunch in a café in sleepy Owaka and watched rain drops race each other down the windows, and Song Thrushes and Blackbirds feed on the lawn.

After lunch we stopped to admire a pair of Royal Spoonbills feeding on a lake foreshore.

We stopped at Curio Bay but the wind and the rain had picked up and it wasn't a rewarding stop. Pushing on to Invercargill, the most Southern city in New Zealand, we returned our rental car and caught the shuttle bus down to Bluff.

The one-hour ferry crossing from Bluff to Stewart Island, was a little bouncy but a few new birds were spotted. Foveaux Shag, Buller's Albatross, Sooty Shearwater and Common Diving Petrel were all new. We encountered more White-capped Albatross, Fairy Prions and Cape Petrels. We checked into our hotel at Stewart Island, and had enough time to tick a couple of new endemic birds – Tui and Kaka – from the hotel grounds in the Oban township.

After a splendid evening meal we headed out for our final bit of birding of the day. You can't really be a birder and come to New Zealand, without trying to see a Kiwi! Stewart Island is home to one of the five endemic Kiwi species, the Stewart Island Brown Kiwi a sub-species of the Southern Brown Kiwi. An hour and half later we returned to the hotel, having seen three male kiwi. One in particular showed very well. A special bird had joined our trip list, and Gillian and Martin's life list.



The Catlins Coast

## 3 October 2024 – Day Six

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Our final full days' birding lay ahead of us. We caught the 8am water taxi to Ulva Island, a small predator free island just a ten-minute water taxi ride away from Stewart Island. This jewel in the crown of Rakiura National Park is a birdwatcher's paradise, its lush native forest is home to a lot of rare endemic birds.

We had a shopping list of birds that we hoped to see. First seen was a pair of Kaka that flew over our heads calling loudly. Next the large New Zealand Pigeon, then our first inquisitive South Island Robin. We walked along the beach and found a New Zealand Sea lion, an even larger male than we had seen yesterday, he didn't even stir as we watched him.

While watching another Robin, Matt heard a familiar call and soon we were watching a pair of South Island Saddlebacks. This bird is one of New Zealand's conservation success stories, as they only numbered 36 individuals back in the early 1960s. Great to watch them feeding on the bush floor in front of us. A large flock of Yellowhead/Mohua chatted loudly and flicked around us - wonderful forest birds! With two of our most wanted birds already on list, it was an awesome start to the morning. But it didn't stop, Matt soon found a roosting Morepork, always good to find an owl.





South Island saddleback.



Spider orchid.





Ulva Island birding.



As we walked the trails on Ulva Island for the next few hours we added new birds galore: Red-crowned Parakeet feeding on the path, a pair of Yellow-crowned Parakeets, Bellbirds, Grey Warblers, New Zealand Fantails, Tui, a small flock of Pipipi/Brown Creeper fed around us (cousin of the Yellowhead, looking somewhat like a chickadee). As well as the birds we found a few tiny Spider Orchids hiding in the umbrella moss.

All too soon our time was up and we caught the water taxi back to Stewart Island spotting a few seabirds en route: Little Blue Penguins, Fiordland-crested Penguins hiding in a cave, Buller's and White-capped Albatross, Common Diving Petrels, and Spotted, Pied and Foveaux Shags. As we arrived back at Oban we had a brief search for the vagrant Dusky Woodswallow with no luck. Our weather luck ran out too as a biting cold wind blew across the bay. A sit-down lunch in a local café warmed us with hot coffees and toasted sandwiches demolished.

That evening we ate another fine meal at the hotel, completed our final checklist and toasted some of the incredible birds we had seen in some amazing places. For a bit of fun, we voted on our top three birds of the tour, the results were:

1. Black Stilt
2. Stewart Island Brown Kiwi
3. New Zealand Fernbird

## 4 October 2024 – Day Seven

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On the short walk to the Stewart Island ferry terminal a brief search for the Dusky Woodswallow drew another blank. Matt checked Gillian and Martin onto the 8am ferry back to Bluff. We parted ways and said our farewells - Matt lives on Stewart Island and Gillian and Martin were travelling from Bluff to Invercargill and flying north to Auckland.

## In summary:

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We had travelled through some of the South Island's amazing scenery and found some very special birds. We had seen a very respectable 87 species in the 5½ days birding and been lucky with the weather, the worst day being a travel day.

If the 21-day full New Zealand birding tour is not do-able, this demonstrates that a shorter custom tour can be highly rewarding.