

Tour report

26 November – 3 December 2024

8-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



South Island scenery. Mathieu Poot.

Led by Mathieu Poot, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Mike Weaver & Ellen Miller

Images

Mike Weaver and Mathieu Poot

26 November 2024 – Day One

After meeting at a Christchurch Hotel we loaded the bags into the car, a tricky prospect with big bags and a small boot. We headed North and soon arrived at our first spot, a large Estuary. A short walk found us our first endemics; Wrybill, Black-fronted Terns and Black-billed Gulls. We watched Royal Spoonbills and White-faced Heron feeding in the mud and were dive-bombed by a nesting pair of Variable Oystercatchers. A quick look further up the estuary nettled us a Little Egret, a rare vagrant in New Zealand with this particular bird being a long-stayer at the Estuary.

We hit the road, sampling our first meat pies along the way – a lunch time staple in New Zealand. We stopped at a lookout over a NZ Fur Seal Colony and watched the pups as they played in a pool. Next up was a small lake where we saw Hoary-headed Grebe, a new arrival to NZ and restricted to this lake. Plenty of other waterfowl were around, including a family of Eurasian Coots and NZ Scaup.

Our final stop of the day was the local poo ponds (sewage works), which had Glossy Ibis, Royal Spoonbill, Little Black Cormorant and Black Swan. We checked into our accommodation for the night and headed out for a lovely first meal.



White-faced Heron catching an Eel. Mike Weaver.



Royal Spoonbill. Mike Weaver.

27 November 2024 – Day Two

We awoke to a beautiful sunny, flat calm day. A short walk down to the marina and we were on the boat and on the water. We spotted some Little Blue Penguins on the glassy water and shortly after, Dusky Dolphins. Fluttering Shearwater and Gannets floated nearby while Parasitic Jaegers chased White-fronted Terns. We saw a nursery pod of Hector's Dolphins and then a roost of King Shags! This is the rarest cormorant in the world, with a population of 6-700, only in the Marlborough Sounds, a great bird to add to our list.

Arriving at an Island, we left the boat and headed ashore. Moving up into the bush, we soon found our main target for the day – the Orange-fronted Parakeet. We spent some time watching a pair of these critically endangered birds feeding their chick. Baby bird season was in full swing, with young Oystercatchers and Weka on the beach, a young NZ Pigeon on a nest, and Bellbirds carrying nesting material. A close look at a South Island Saddleback capped off a wonderful time on the Island, and we took in the view as we waited for the boat.



King Shags. Mike Weaver.



Orange-fronted Parakeet feeding chick. Mike Weaver.



Ellen and Mat on Blumine Island. Mike Weaver.



South Island Saddleback. Mike Weaver.

Back on the mainland, we grabbed lunch and hit the road, our first stop, a nearby lagoon. We saw Pied Stilt, Paradise Shelduck and a pair of Black-fronted Dotterel. We revisited yesterday's lake, seeing the same species, plus flight views of a White Heron (Great Egret).

We arrived at our accommodation, had dinner, and were back out in the van to go Owl-spotting. Slowly cruising through an area of open farmland, we stopped once or twice with no luck. We arrived at a large tree and saw a bird sitting out on a branch – it was a Little Owl!



Little Owl. Mike Weaver.

28 November 2024 – Day Three

With much excitement, we arrived at the marina and jumped on our boat, ready for a pelagic trip. White-capped Albatross and Northern Giant Petrel followed us as we headed out to sea, and reaching our chumming location, many more birds quickly showed up. Northern Royal, NZ Wandering, Salvin's and White-capped Albatross squabbled at the back of the boat, while Westland Petrel and Buller's Shearwater circled us. Sooty Shearwater and Hutton's Shearwater flew through intermittently.



NZ Wandering Albatross. Mike Weaver.



On the water. Mathieu Poot.

We headed in, passing a rocky Island covered in Seals, White-fronted Terns and Spotted Shags. We had lunch, then with no major targets for the afternoon, tried our luck for Cirl Bunting. A quiet road had plenty of introduced passerines; Goldfinch Greenfinch, Yellowhammer, but no Cirl Bunting. We found a heap of fantail in some riverside bush, then headed back to the accommodation.

Traditional Kiwi Fish and Chips was the perfect way to celebrate Thanksgiving dinner, and cap off an exciting day.



Fish and Chips for Thanksgiving!

29 November 2024 – Day Four

We headed South, visiting the same estuary as day one, but from the other side. We walked down to the river, seeing Banded Dotterels, Black-billed Gulls and Pied Stilts. Back to the car and Ellen spotted a small bird – it was a Shining Cuckoo! This species was high on our target list and one that we'd been trying to find.



Shining Cuckoo. Mike Weaver.

We left the estuary and turned West, towards the Southern Alps, stopping at a “World Famous” pie shop for lunch. Passing stunning scenery, we headed up into the Alps with heavy fog rolling in as we gained altitude. As we climbed further up, we broke out of the fog into a clear sunny day. We arrived in a small village and immediately found our target species – Kea. We spent some time with these charismatic parrots at the local café, where the birds were hanging out looking for food.

With our main target acquired for the day, we spent a few hours checking the rivers for Blue Ducks. Unfortunately no ducks, but lovely to spend some time around these mountain rivers.

We checked into the hotel, had dinner and were back out again, this time chasing the Great Spotted Kiwi. We heard one calling very distantly, several Morepork and had good looks at several possums.



Kea. Mike Weaver.

30 November 2024 – Day Five

We started our morning at a lookout, seeing a Kea, but once again no Blue Ducks. On a nearby forest walk we had brief views of Riflemen, Bellbird and Tui.

Next stop was another forest walk, with plenty of Tomtit and Grey Warbler, as well as our first South Island Robin. We heard a distant Brown Creeper, as well as Kaka flying overhead.

A big drive followed, which had us arriving mid-afternoon at a Lake Tekapo. We were on the hunt for the Black Stilt - the rarest wading bird in the world! We checked a few areas, and soon found a few birds feeding around a shallow pond. Great scope views were had of three adult birds and a sub-adult.

We stopped for some views of Mt Cook, NZ's tallest mountain, then to a river delta with great looks at Black-fronted Tern, South Island Oystercatcher and Wrybill.

Our final spot was a salmon farm where we saw Great Crested Grebe, NZ Scaup and other waterfowl.



Black-fronted Tern. Mike Weaver.



Wrybill. Mike Weaver.

1 December 2024 – Day Six

Up, breakfast and on the road South, with another big day of travel ahead. We stopped several times in the morning looking for Falcon, before finally, and to much excitement, finding a pair near Wanaka. This was a species high on our target list we had been trying to find so spirits were high having added it to the list. We stopped for lunch at a popular local pub and met Mat's family, sharing a few drinks and stories about our trip.



Family lunch. Mike Weaver.

Continuing on, we had a big drive to Bluff, to catch our afternoon ferry. We arrived, checked in our bags, parked up the van and loaded onto the boat. Crossing the Foveaux straight we saw Cook's Petrel, Sooty Shearwater, White-capped Albatross and Common Diving-petrel. As we approached Stewart Island, we saw our first Foveaux Shag.

We checked into our waterfront hotel, had dinner and were back out for our next round of Kiwi-spotting. After a small mix up with timings, we made it to the location and began searching. We found two birds and spent lots of time with the first, a young male, as it fed close by. We also heard Morepork and Long-tailed Cuckoo.



Southern Brown Kiwi. Mike Weaver.

2 December 2024 – Day Seven

We jumped on a water taxi heading for Ulva Island, a nearby predator-free sanctuary. We went for a walk across the island, soon finding our main target species, Yellowhead. Initially they were high in the canopy, but after a little patience we had great looks at eye-level. We interacted with friendly South Island Robins and saw a family of South Island Saddleback. Red & Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Brown Creeper, Kaka and Weka kept us entertained as we spent the next few hours exploring the Island.

On our return water taxi, we took a detour and headed out to a Foveaux Shag colony. A large rock was covered in dozens of these birds, with White-capped Albatross flying around the boat. Next, we scanned a length of coastline, finding seven Fiordland Crested Penguins, both in the water and on the rocks. Several of these striking birds preened and interacted on the rocks, allowing great views and photos.

We arrived back in Oban and spent a few hours relaxing, before having a debrief, deciding on Bird of the Trip, and our final dinner together.



Yellowhead feeding Chick. Mike Weaver.



Fiordland Crested Penguins. Mike Weaver.

3 December 2024 – Day Eight

We checked in our bags, jumped onto the ferry and left Halfmoon Bay, seeing more Fiordland Crested Penguins on nearby rocks. Crossing into the Foveaux Strait, we saw Sooty Shearwaters and Common Diving-petrels, as well as White-capped Albatross, a Cook's Petrel and a Fairy Prion.

Back on the mainland, we loaded back into the van and headed North. A few hours of driving later had us near Queenstown and stopping at a high-altitude ski-area. After a few a bit of searching we found what we were looking for - a NZ Pipit.

We arrived in Queenstown, had lunch, then headed to a pond. A Cape Barren Goose had been reported here recently and after a little searching, was duly spotted by Mike.

We headed to a hotel, where we said our goodbyes, with Ellen and Mike continuing on their New Zealand Adventures.

Overall we saw 101 species in just over a week of birding, plus 3 heard (Morepork, Great Spotted Kiwi and Long-tailed Cuckoo). We travelled the full length of the South Island, plus Stewart Island, seeing stunning scenery and tracking down lots of special birds.

Bird of the Trip was the Southern Brown Kiwi. second was Kea, and third was Fiordland Crested Penguin.