

# Tour report

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28 January – 17 February 2025

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



The gang. Sav Saville.

**Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**

## Participants

Francis Wu & Grant Price, Catherine Harris, Karen van der Lee, Michael Austin, Mark Gawn, RT Cox

A “standard” Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ 21-day tour blessed by excellent weather (no rain at all, warm and sunny more or less throughout, might have asked for a bit more wind at sea, but at least that gave us calm water), a cheerful bunch of American and Canadian participants, and almost all of the birds one might hope to see. Notable aspects were the 5 species of penguin seen – a Wrybill record, and the 10 species of marine mammals – another Wrybill record.

## 28 January 2025 – Day One

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First stop was a forest area where parrots were the dominant thing – Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and Eastern Rosella – both introduced, and a calling fly over Kaka got the ball rolling. Then to an Australasian Gannet colony which was as brilliant as ever with hundreds of birds performing just in front of us, in a wonderfully scenic setting.

It was just after lunchtime that we arrived at a wonderful predator free area, where we spent the afternoon.

The predator free nature of this location allows the birds inside to thrive in a way that they just cannot outside. The place was swarming with endemic birds – Whiteheads, Tui, Bellbirds, NZ Pigeons, NZ Fantails were everywhere. Four Brown Teal showed well as did a couple of North Is Saddlebacks and we had another 4 Kaka. Inexplicably missing in action was North Is Robin – normally a hard to miss bird.

As we were driving out a pair of massive Takahē were seen in a paddock by the main track – a real bonus!

## 29 January 2025 – Day Two

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One of the missing birds from yesterday was Banded Rail, so our first stop this morning was to rectify that – and so we did with great views of a sometimes skulky species. Then it was onto the main event of the day, our first pelagic.

The first pelagic in New Zealand is often quite a surprise for visitors, with short distances before the action starts and then the sheer number of birds that are present. Today was no exception as we started to see small flocks of Fluttering Shearwater almost immediately, but were then distracted by the Little Penguins floating about, and by the Arctic Skuas chasing White-fronted Terns above the shearwaters, and so on through the day!

Species diversity wasn't brilliant, but the fact that we had over 50 New Zealand Storm-petrels (which outnumbered White-faced Storm-petrels by about 25%) and an estimated 40 Black Petrel trying, and failing, to hide among the 100+ Flesh-footed Shearwaters squabbling at the back of the boat, and 500+ Cook's Petrel through the day more than made up for that in most people's eyes. To cap it all off we had a huge, close Bryde's Whale showing fairly well.

## 30 January 2025 – Day Three

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Only really one (daytime) target today – the critically endangered NZ race of Fairy Tern. Around 40 individuals exist – so it should be easy enough to find one.....ha!

We tried 4 sites where they have been seen very recently without success before finding 2 birds foraging in an estuary. Views were distant but distinctive, and we had lovely close looks at NZ Dotterel as consolation.

Having used up quite a bit of time on the tern, we set off northward, stopping at a few places for quick looks at waterfowl, shags and grebes – particularly Australasian Little Grebe and New Zealand Grebe which co-exist on a suburban lake. A Brown Teal was also present there.

Fairy Tern is not the main target bird of the day though, because after dark we were off to look for kiwi! The area where they are found is a combination of open grassy paddocks and manuka scrub with some larger trees – and the birds might be anywhere. We heard lots (20+) of kiwi calls in a couple of hours, both male and female and had views of 4 different birds. One was very close but brief, with the best view being more prolonged but at about 30m distance. There were also Morepork calling all around but none made it into the spotlight.

## 31 January 2025 – Day Four

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Another day, another pelagic. This time with skipper Steve on the excellent Sumo. There was NO wind, and a flat calm sea. First up was a quick visit to an island in Whangarei harbour where we had 4 Reef Egret, and then we set off for the Mokohinau Islands. The one benefit of having a flat calm day is the ability to motor out there for Grey Ternlet which visit to moult in late Summer. We were able to get nice and close to see 35+ individuals, mostly sitting on the rock face but also flying about a bit. Super little beasts.

A huge flock of several thousand Red-billed Gulls were feeding on baitfish with about 300 Fairy Prions mixed into the flock allowing us excellent views. The only other species present was Short-tailed Shearwater and 4 of them showed well including one which swam more than 100m right to the back of our boat.

On our way back towards base the wind finally got up – not much, maybe only 5 kts, but enough to stir the air and bring some birds. Four or five NZ Stormies, about double that of White-faced Stormies, some Black Petrels and at least two Pycroft's Petrels came into our chum slick.

Rafts of Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters were passed on the way home.

A mixture of satisfaction and frustration on the water, and a day without sea mammals when the conditions were absolutely perfect for spotting them (??).

## 1 February 2025 – Day Five

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Tiritiri Matangi Island! Always a highlight of the tour is the day and night spent on the magical Tiri and this was no exception.

The ferry across was quiet with another windless, waveless day and so onto the island.

The slow stroll up to the bunkhouse through the Wattle Trail brought most of the desired birds – colourful male Stitchbirds, lots of noisy North Is Saddlebacks, the North Is Robins that we missed elsewhere, Red-crowned Parakeets, Brown Quail and a ton of Tui, Bellbird and Whitehead. Kokako are always a prized species here and we had a total of eight sightings through the afternoon, also Takahē (a pair with a large chick), Spotless Crake showing on a tiny pond, and a vagrant Australian Painted Lady butterfly. “Best non-avian” prize went to the large Tuatara that some saw (an ancient reptile in its own scientific Order).

After a BBQ dinner at the bunkhouse, we set off to look for kiwi as it got dark. Not 10 paces from the bunkhouse we were stopped in our tracks by a Morepork which gave great views for a few minutes. Tiri has one species of kiwi, that is Little Spotted Kiwi and it wasn't too long before one was heard calling. Slow walking along the trails fairly quickly paid dividends with a kiwi seen by the side of the main road before scuttling across in front of us and disappearing into the bush.

Some took that as a sign to head to bed, and though the rest stayed out searching for a while longer, no more kiwi were found.

## 2 February 2025 – Day Six

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Early morning Tiri birding with many “better looks” achieved and then we took a water taxi off to the mainland.

Often we would head to Miranda at this point, but the tides were all wrong so a location on the Manukau Harbour seemed a better bet. And so it was – 1000+ Wrybill provided quite a spectacle along with at least 2000 Bar-tailed Godwit and the supporting cast of a few Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone and NZ Dotterel. Bonus birds here were 3 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and our first Black-billed Gulls.

Then down to Miranda for the night.

## 3 February 2025 – Day Seven

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We spent the morning at Miranda, where another 1000+ Wrybill were on display meaning we had seen nearly 50% of all the Wrybill in two days! Additions to our list included the 60+ Pacific Golden Plovers, a lone Red-necked Stint and 10+ Banded Dotterel that were present.

Soon though it was time to put Wrybills behind us and see some more forest endemics, so we set off for Pureora Forest.

Magnificent old trees and a bunch of great endemic birds – what a cool place! Excellent looks at Yellow-crowned Parakeet, lots of Kaka, North Is Robins calling all around and the harsh “screeeech” of Long-tailed Cuckoo were the highlights of our time here. The cuckoo is a notoriously difficult bird to actually see, but we were lucky and had decent flight views of two birds.

In the late afternoon we arrived at Turangi where we were to spend the night. It seemed prudent to try for Blue Duck that evening, and although the first two spots produced nothing our third site held a pair of these extraordinary ducks with three pretty much full-grown young which gave us fantastic close-up walk-away views.

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## 4 February 2025 – Day Eight

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A dawn visit to the edge of Lake Taupo didn't produce the hoped-for bittern, but we did get tremendous looks at two Fernbird. Back to the motel for breakfast and then the long dusty drive to a forested site. The drive was interrupted at a couple of points by NZ Pipits showing on the road – a widespread endemic that can be strangely difficult to pin down, so a bit of a relief!

This forested area is a great place for Rifleman, and at least four birds were seen fairly easily. There were NI Robins everywhere, and quite a few Whitehead. A Long-tailed Cuckoo was heard only, but the star of the show was a female NZ Falcon which came to investigate us and perched (albeit not for long) in a tree just above our heads.

From there it was down to the East coast and a large shallow lagoon which held some Black-fronted and Banded Dotterel, a couple more Red-necked Stint and three more Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. Then finished off with dinner at my house.

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## 5 February 2025 – Day Nine

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Across the country to the West coast, via a couple of stops. One was an abortive attempt at crakes – water levels too high, two was for Indian Peafowl(!) where a large introduced population is feral, and three the general area around Foxton Beach.

Foxton produced the goods for the photographers among us with a group of extremely approachable Wrybill. 19 birds only, compared with the thousands seen before, but these were at about 10m range and were just charming. Three more Sharp-tailed Sands were also present with about 40 Banded Dotterel in post-breeding mode and nice close looks at both Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit with some in great breeding plumage.

## 6 February 2025 – Day Ten

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To the South Island on the Cook Strait ferry, but not before a stop at a Beach to look at the massive White-fronted Tern colony – that just wasn't there!! No idea where those birds might have gone, nor why? Our last two NZ Dotterel of the trip were present – the most southerly pair on that coast.

The ferry journey is infinitely variable in terms of birds and today we had the “lots of diversity, but not huge numbers” day – I'll take that when there are 5 species of albatross involved! As an introduction to albatross ID the ferry can be quite useful – and so it turned out. One Northern Royal, one Southern Royal and one NZ Wandering Albatross (plus another two more distant “great” albies) were scattered among the c10 White-capped and Salvin's Albatross that we saw. Enough birds to give everyone a taste for what might be to come later.

We also had 5 species of shearwater including several Hutton's and Spotted Shags were new for the list. Four Arctic Skuas harassed White-fronted Terns in the Sounds.

Two pods of about 20 Short-beaked Common Dolphins and one of about 10 Bottle-nosed Dolphins added to our meagre mammal tally but then.....”Oh, look a whale blow”, when I was directed to the spot there was a massive blue shape on the surface of the sea – a Blue Whale just sitting in the middle of Cook Strait. How cool is that?

## 7 February 2025 – Day Eleven

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Another big day on the itinerary with some very rare birds in the cross-hairs. A boat ride back down the Queen Charlotte Sound to look for King Shag, Orange-fronted Parakeet and Hector's Dolphin (among others).

The King Shags were easy enough with a total of 37 birds seen – some extremely close, with a good number of Spotted Shag thrown in for good measure. With a world population of c600 this is a truly “rare” bird.

Orange-fronted Parakeets were put on a predator-free island some years ago and have thrived there to the point where we rather expect to see them – and this morning they performed well. Two pairs showed at very close range. They share their island with some other good things as well – we had a cool young South Island Saddleback (a “jackbird”), a lovely showy male Tomtit, three inquisitive Weka prowled around our feet.

The Hector's Dolphins also put on a bit of a show. At least 15 individuals were seen well right beside the boat.

Added bonus Reef Heron and tremendously close looks at Arctic Skua on the water completed the boat charter.

So then we were off South to Kaikoura. Picked up lunch in Picton, and away to a lake where Hoary-headed and NZ Grebe were seen, with best views at close range of both Grey Teal and Australasian Shoveler. Karen saw a Baillon's Crake briefly.

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## 8 February 2025 – Day Twelve

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Kaikoura pelagic day. We all did the morning pelagic, then most opted for Whalewatch in the afternoon while Mark and I did the pelagic again.

The spectacle of great albatrosses, literally at arm's length, ripping into a block of frozen fish scraps, while Northern Giant Petrels and Cape Petrels squabble around them, is one that nobody ever quite expects – but everyone gets to see on these trips.

The morning trip gave us mostly the same species seen at distance from the ferry but of course at point blank range, and many more individuals. Additionally, we had both Westland and White-chinned Petrels.

The Whalewatch guys had a fine time with good looks at Sperm Whale and a couple of Killer Whale. Mark and I also did well with a decent pod of Dusky Dolphins and then the sight of a huge commercial trawler which had a cloud of birds behind it. Numbers were hard to estimate in the frenzy of activity but probably 300 or so various albatrosses which were mostly White-caps and Salvin's, but included at least 10 each of Northern and Southern Royals. There were more White-chinned Petrels than I have ever seen in one place – at least 200. It was pretty amazing.

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## 9 February 2025 – Day Thirteen

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Leaving Kaikoura by the coast road South we stopped in Goose Bay to watch about 500 Dusky Dolphins hunting – which for them includes leaping, splashing, tail-slapping and somersaulting! Brilliant!

Our major stop for the morning was an Estuary where Black-fronted Tern was duly seen, though the hunt for a bunch of NZ semi-rarities (Terek Sand, Little Egret, Common Tern) was interrupted by some local young birders who had just found an Erect-crested Penguin on the beach about 1.5 km away. Erect-crested is one of the more difficult penguin species to connect with anywhere in the world, so this was a big deal. We marched off as quick as our legs would allow and sure enough there it was – looking quite happy right in the middle of the beach with people, dogs, vehicles all around. It was eventually collected and moved to a more secure location.

And then we were away to the mountains and Arthur's Pass. A couple of Kea were around the café right in the centre of the Arthur's Pass village which made that an easy tick, and then we were lucky enough to find an active Rifleman nest so could watch both parents go in and out for a while. Tomtits and South Is Robins were also around and we found a spot where about 15 Black-fronted Terns were feeding, with three NZ Pipits on the shore.

Our evening foray for Great Spotted Kiwi yielded only a few Moreporks calling, though none seen, and no sign of the kiwi.

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## 10 February 2025 – Day Fourteen

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Starting off towards the West Coast we made a quick stop where there were at least seven Kea marauding about – much better than the café! We had Weka and Tomtit en route to Okarito where we spent most of the afternoon including getting our briefing for tonight's outing with the incomparable Ian Cooper of Okarito Kiwi Tours. Birds included Fernbird, lots of Tomtits, Great Egret, a black phase NZ Fantail and a Long-tailed Cuckoo calling.

After an early dinner in Franz Josef we were back out to Okarito to meet up with Coops and we went in search of a male Okarito Kiwi called "Moss". Moss gave us a bit of a run-around but gave a reasonable view and then called very close to the track (brilliant!). Finally we heard him in the bush – maybe only a metre or so in – with his c4 Month old chick in tow making low mumbling sounds that were just wonderful to hear.

Lots of Morepork calling in the night and noisy Kea as well.

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## 11 February 2025 – Day Fifteen

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Leaving Franz and travelling South we stopped at a carpark where NZ Falcon had been recently seen. We were rewarded with the sight of an adult male making a food pass to a juvenile female with lots of associated calling – very cool indeed. Also here was our first Dunnock of the trip!

Further on a forest area gave us more Tomtit, Rifleman and Brown Creeper sightings, and then we went on down to Wanaka where Great Crested Grebes have man-made floating nest sites. Plenty of NZ Scaup there too.

Excellent dinner at Ashraf's Kashmiri restaurant.

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## 12 February 2025 – Day Sixteen

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This was just one of those days that bird guides hate. A long drive to a site that is the only possible site for a tiny bird is bad enough, but when the weather is perfect and you put eight pairs of eyes to work for over three hours and still turn up nothing you do wonder....

Anyway, that's birding I suppose. We failed, for no apparent reason, to find Rock Wren, and in doing so spent most of the available day. Tiny compensation was the beautiful beech forest we stopped at on the way home, where at least Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Brown Creeper and South Is Robin put in an appearance.

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## 13 February 2025 – Day Seventeen

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Early morning drive to the Stewart Island ferry. First looks at Foveaux Shag from the crossing, which was amazingly quiet. Only a couple of hundred Sooty Shearwaters and a handful of White-capped Albatross on show, until we were just about to dock and a Buller's Albatross was sitting right there in the middle of the harbour!

The afternoon was to be spent on Ulva Island with a "Penguin Pelagic" en route. The water taxi was chartered for 30 mins to look for Fiordland Crested Penguin – which we duly found quite quickly, but then a real surprise, another Fiordland looked "wrong" because it was in fact a Snares Crested Penguin (!!) – another really big bonus bird.

Onto Ulva and birds were everywhere, including our only remaining endemic target – Yellowhead. We must have seen well over 50m birds in all, they were calling and singing all around us. Several South Is Saddleback, South Is Robin, Brown Creeper, Rifleman and Tomtit were also seen along with plenty of Red-crowned and a few Yellow-crowned Parakeets, and a few Weka – including one catching and eating a freshwater crayfish.

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## 14 February 2025 – Day Eighteen

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Another big day in prospect – Stewart pelagic (and kiwis tonight?). The Stewart pelagic can be utterly mind-blowing and today was better than most. 20 species of tube-nosed seabirds and three species of penguin can't be bad.

This was yet another pelagic becalmed with almost no wind all day but still we managed to attract a flock of 150+ White-capped Albatross, about 10 gigantic Southern Royals, at least eight Buller's and two Campbell Albatross. Thousands of Sooty Shearwaters flowed past, three species of storm-petrel including a Black-bellied and two Grey-backed, four more Fiordland Crested and one Yellow-eyed Penguin (pressure off for tomorrow!), Brown Skua taking bits of fish thrown to it just above our heads, and eight Mottled Petrels some of which really put on a show – it was an exciting day on the water.

Then we had to go out and have the surreal experience of a male Southern Brown Kiwi walk right up to us, sniff my trousers and then just saunter away. What a fantastic day.

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## 15 February 2025 – Day Nineteen

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Off Stewart on the early ferry with hundreds of Sooty Shearwater, tens of Common Diving Petrel and quite a few Fairy Prions. Mark and I had brief views of what had to be a Broad-billed Prion but perhaps not quite conclusive enough. Then the long drive up to Oamaru, stopping off at a site for Yellow-eyed Penguin en route. Two immature Yellow-eyed Penguin was an encouraging sight for a species really struggling on the

mainland. A huge flock of 1000+ White-fronted Terns just offshore was being harassed by at least three Arctic Skuas.

A large male NZ Sea-lion was spotted on an adjacent beach, and then we went to see an Otago Shag colony where at least 150 birds were present. A long drive and a big day tomorrow...

## 16 February 2025 – Day Twenty

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There is only one big bird to go – Black Stilt. Nothing else matters – we just have to find this species!

After a couple of hours driving and having very briefly checked a couple of spots with no result, we stopped at one of my favoured locations and Bingo! Seven adult Black Stilts. Not tremendously close, but Black Stilts!! We watched them for ages.

With the pressure off we spent some time looking for Baillon's Crakes at a spot where we could hear at least three individuals, but maybe the water level was a bit high, and then moved to another good Black Stilt location where we had another eight adults and two near adults, a couple of which allowed really close approach. Several Black-fronted Terns gave excellent views here too.

There didn't seem much option but to head to base and have a tour debrief over a glass of wine before dinner. Our job was done.

## 17 February 2025 – Day Twenty-One

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More or less a straight transit to Christchurch airport, with a couple of quick stilt finding stops en route. Nothing new nor unusual. Farewells were said and everyone set off on their long, long journeys home.