

Tour report

15 February – 7 March 2025

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Mt Cook behind Lake Pukaki. Henry Schaefer.

Led by Mathieu Poot, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

BK Stafford, Peary Stafford, Henry Schaefer, Deborah Schmitt, Stuart White, Shin-Ju Ye, Diane Hutton, Sarah Collins

Images

Henry Schaefer & Mathieu Poot

What a fantastic Tour of New Zealand! We had a mix of everything along the way – great people, good weather, bad weather, great sightings and a few unfortunate dips.

The highlights of the trip are too many to list, but the Kiwi's definitely spring to mind. Great close views of Northern Brown, Southern Brown, Little Spotted and Okarito as we moved down the country. "Moss" the Okarito Kiwi was a particular standout, appearing out of the bushes metres in front of us, after hours of searching. Black Stilts in Tekapo, Kokako on Tiritiri Matangi and Kea in the Mountains were other memorable moments.

The birds didn't always make it easy for us, with Orange-fronted Parakeet, Black-fronted Dotterel and South Island Saddleback waiting to the last possible second to show themselves. Despite our best efforts, some birds did not show, leading to our main dips for the trip – Fairy Prion and Fairy Tern.

The weather kept us on our feet – cancelled first pelagic, gales in Mangawhai and heavy rain on our last pelagic. Luckily this was contrasted by lots of beautiful sunny days. They say New Zealand gets four seasons in an hour and it definitely seemed like that on this trip!

We finished the trip on 156 species, plus Great-spotted Kiwi heard only. Bird of the trip was the Black Stilt, with Okarito Kiwi and Southern Brown Kiwi as runners up.

Thanks to everyone for joining the trip, and a special thanks to Henry for the amazing photographs.

Mathieu Poot (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ Leader)

15 February 2025 – Day One

After loading up the van, we left our central Auckland Hotel and headed to a patch of Kauri Forest. We found our first endemics such as Grey Warbler, NZ Pigeon, Kaka and Tui. We also found a few Aussie introductions, adding Eastern Rosella and Sulphur-crested Cockatoo to the list.

We headed for a nearby Gannet colony, seeing distant Red-billed Gull, Kelp Gull and variable Oystercatcher on the walk out. At the Gannet Colony, we watched hundreds of Gannets interacting, with adults feeding their young and juveniles practicing flapping their wings.

Our next stop was our first bakery, fairly chaotic but we got in and out in a reasonable time and headed for our lunch spot. We had lunch at a beautiful beach watching NZ Dotterel, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatcher and White-fronted Tern. Strong gusts of wind made the usually lovely beach a bit less pleasant, so after finishing lunch we headed off.

Next up was a predator-fenced reserve where we went for a walk through the bush, following a stream. As we walked, we saw Bellbird, North Island Robin, Sacred Kingfisher and Brown teal, before spotting several large birds on the path up ahead – Takahe! We had great views of a pair and chick, all interacting and feeding in the bush. Further along the track we added North Island Saddleback, Whitehead and Banded Rail (seen by some) to the list. Finishing the walk, we thought we had seen all we could, when Stuart spotted a bird in a nearby Puriri Tree. – a Morepork! We noticed that it was holding a struggling Bellbird and watched as it dispatched it and flew off, being chased by angry Bellbirds. A quick stop at the entrance of the reserve netted us another Banded Rail, a big relief for those that missed the first!



Takahe. Henry Schaefer.



Morepork with Bellbird. Henry Schaefer.



Banded Rail. Henry Schaefer.



Warning Sign. Henry Schaefer.

16 February 2025 – Day Two

We awoke to a windy morning and the forecast of 25 knots didn't promote confidence. After a quick look around the marina, we climbed aboard the boat and headed to sea. Making our way out into the Hauraki Gulf, we started seeing Fluttering and Buller's Shearwater, White-fronted Tern and Little Blue Penguin. The sea conditions worsened as we reached the Kawau Channel, with big swells and chop making for an uncomfortable ride. Coming out of the channel, it was apparent that the sea conditions were not going to get any better and the call was made to turn around. A few Flesh-footed Shearwater and Cook's Petrel provided a silver-lining to an otherwise disappointing start to the day.

We headed for a nearby island, having great views of Little Blue Penguin along the way. On the island, we all grabbed a hot drink from the café, before setting out on a walk. Indian Peafowl and Weka were soon added to the list as well as a Damara Wallaby, seen by some. Back on the boat, we had lunch floating in front of an old copper mine, and spotted our first Caspian Tern, before heading back to the mainland. A trio of Arctic Skua were sitting on the water along the way and we had great close views as we passed.

Back on land, we headed back to the motel for a few hours rest, before heading out to do some Crake hunting. A bit of searching and waiting, and then a Spotless Crake came out of the flax, allowing brief but good views. We had dinner and then headed to bed for a well-deserved sleep.



Little Blue Penguin. Henry Schaefer.



Weka. Henry Schaefer.

17 February 2025 – Day Three

We awoke to a dreary rainy day, had breakfast and hit the road. Our first stop was a beach, and we jumped out of the van to find rain and high winds - not ideal for a beach walk! Raincoats on, we headed down the beach, dodging the odd big wave. Red-billed Gull and a few Variable Oystercatcher dotted the beach, while Buller's Shearwater flew offshore. A distant NZ Pipit flew up into the dunes calling followed by a second, seen by all but with better views desired. We reached a tiny estuary, seeing a few NZ Dotterel and a Pied Stilt. This was usually a good area to look for Fairy Tern – the main target for the day, but with the entire beach being periodically inundated by waves, perhaps not today!

We returned to the van to find some Brown Quail crossing the road and disappearing into the bushes. Not everyone saw them, but we were soon distracted from that by a close NZ Pipit. It picked around in the grass as we watched and was great to see after our average views earlier. Leaving the beach, we saw a small group of Brown Quail on the side of the road, with good van views for all.



NZ Pipit. Henry Schaefer.

We headed to a large estuary, continuing our search for Fairy Tern. We checked a couple of likely spots, but found the tide still too high and decided to go have lunch. With little improvement after lunch, we checked a small lake, seeing Great Cormorant, Eastern Rosella and general waterfowl. Back to the estuary and at the first spot we found the tide dropping, with birds feeding on the waterline. Mostly Bar-tailed Godwit and Red Knot, with Variable Oystercatcher at the periphery. After a little scanning, the call went up for a Curlew Sandpiper and before long everyone had scope views of this uncommon wader. At our second estuary spot,

the mudflats were just starting to emerge from the tide. We spent as long as we could here, hoping for Fairy Tern, but with conditions worsening and time running out, jumped in the van and aimed North.

We arrived at our accommodation, checked in, had dinner and then headed out for our first round of Kiwi spotting! Not far from the van we saw our first North Island Brown Kiwi, with the front half of the group getting great views. A tiny baby Kiwi was next, and then another adult, before running into the first once again. More Kiwi called, as well as Morepork, and the stars put on an amazing show.



North Island Brown Kiwi chick. Henry Schaefer

18 February 2025 – Day Four

Up early and out the door! We were heading South for our second pelagic attempt, with conditions looking much more favorable this time around.

We stopped at a small lake where we had great views of both New Zealand Dabchick (Grebe) and Australasian little Grebe. We watched an Aussie Little Grebe family, with the parents maintaining their nest full of chicks. Other waterfowl included Brown Teal and a Grey Duck (Pacific Black Duck).

We passed through Whangarei and found a bird that we'd surprisingly missed so far – the Barbary Dove. Arriving at the marina we got our lunch for the day and jumped on the boat. We circled a small Island and found several Pacific Reef Heron, as well as Pied and Little Pied Cormorant.

Exiting the harbour, we turned towards open sea, heading for a distant group of Islands. Buller's, Flesh-footed and Fluttering Shearwater flew past the boat as we steamed out, as well as the odd Cook's Petrel and White-faced Storm-petrel. Reaching the Islands (/tiny offshore rock stacks) we found good numbers of Grey Ternlet, counting 37 in total. This species comes into Northern New Zealand waters every summer in low numbers, a cool bird to see! We had lunch at a nearby Island before steaming back in shallower. The wind had picked up and the ride in was much bumpier.



Grey Noddy. Henry Schaefer.

We reached our chumming location, and it didn't take long for the birds to start arriving. Black Petrel and Flesh-footed Shearwater surrounded the boat, with various other species flying through. White-faced Storm-petrel started appearing in the slick and before long we had our first NZ Storm-petrel come through! Next up was a juvenile Wandering Albatross, likely a Gibson's, that arrived at back of the boat to much excitement.

Feeling tired and satisfied after a big day on the water, we headed back in.



NZ Storm Petrel. Henry Schaefer.

19 February 2025 – Day Five

Another early start and another drive South, and we were at another marina ready to start our day. We were headed to Tiritiri Matangi Island, one of the crown jewels of NZ's conservation estate.

After arriving on the island, we listened to the Welcome Introduction with Bellbird, Red-crowned Parakeet and Tui flying in the background. We started our walk and soon found lots of Stitchbird at a sugar feeder, North Island Saddleback and several Giant Weta. North Island Robin, NZ Pigeon, Whitehead and other forest birds filled the forest as we ambled along the paths.



Bellbird. Henry Schaefer.

We checked in and stopped for lunch at the Bunkhouse, and took a few hours to relax in the heat of the day. Some visited the small shop, some had a nap and some spent time with the Takahē that appeared out of the bushes nearby.

Heading out for our afternoon walk, the Island was much quieter (people-wise) as the day visitors and school groups had left. The birds were out in force however and as we started our walk we saw our first Kokako! A foraging pair with one on the ground and one in a tree, offering great views.



North Island Robin. Henry Schaefer.



North Island Kokako. Henry Schaefer.



Little Spotted Kiwi chick. Henry Schaefer.



Morepork. Henry Schaefer.

We got to the Northern end of the island and saw another Kokako, before coming out of the forest and into a more open area. A large patch of Flax had lots of Red-crowned Parakeet, Bellbird and Tui, all flying around and landing on the stalks. We headed back to the bunkhouse, seeing more Whitehead, Parakeet and NZ Pigeon along the way.

A few drinks and a traditional BBQ dinner had us refuelled and ready to head out chasing our next Kiwi species – the Little Spotted Kiwi. We heard one by the bunkhouse before heading down the hill, quietly walking the tracks and stopping to listen periodically. Several in the group had a distant glimpse of a Kiwi disappearing into the bush, and we saw a Giant Weta scurrying along the forest floor. Reaching the coast, we started along another track and heard something small rustling close by. It was a baby Little Spotted Kiwi! With great close views, we headed back towards the bunkhouse, stopping to check out a Morepork in a tree along the way. With some opting to sleep outside, we tucked in for the night, no doubt to dream of Kiwi.

20 February 2025 – Day Six

With half of the group opting to sleep in, the rest of us were up at dawn and headed down to a nearby pond. We enjoyed the early morning bird song and saw Saddleback, Stitchbird, Fernbird, Brown Teal and Spotless Crake – much to Shin's excitement as she had missed the first Crake. On the way back to the bunkhouse we saw the Takahe pair and chick once again.

Back at the bunkhouse, everyone was starting to wake up and have breakfast. We got ourselves ready, packed our bags, loaded the truck and hit the tracks again, heading down to the wharf. With a little time to spare, we photographed Terns, explored the beach and relaxed in the sun, before it was time to jump into the water taxi and leave the island. On the mainland we retrieved the van, loaded up and hit the road south, stopping to get lunch along the way.

We arrived at Miranda, one of NZ's best shorebird sites, and as we jumped out of the van could see a massive flock of swirling birds. We walked to a hide, which had thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits and South Island Pied Oystercatchers, all periodically taking off and flying around. Heading further on, we found a large group of the company's namesake bird – Wrybill!! They were accompanied by Double-banded Plover, Pacific Golden Plover, and after some searching, two Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and a Red-necked Stint.

With everyone feeling quite tired, we headed to the accommodation. A few hours off was a chance to do washing, go swimming and relax. Dinner was next and then off to bed.



South Island Pied Oystercatcher. Henry Schaefer.



Sarah under the Bar-tailed Godwit flock. Mathieu Poot.

21 February 2025 – Day Seven

With a big drive ahead of us, we loaded into the van and were soon at our first stop, a wetland. We scoped it out from a hide, finding two Wrybill and a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, as well as plenty of Pied Stilt, Grey Teal and general wetland birds. We saw some Royal Spoonbill in a distant tree as well as a single Cattle Egret. An Australian Tern flew over the wetland, and we all watched as it circled and then flew off. Henry had been taking photos of the Tern and was reviewing his photos, when he saw a different-looking bird. It was a White-tailed Tropicbird! An extremely rare bird for New Zealand, and we had all missed it while looking at the Australian Tern! We stuck around for a while to see if it would come back, but with no sign decided to push on.



White-tailed Tropicbird. Henry Schaefer.

We had a big drive, stopping first for a bathroom stop, then to pick up lunch, before arriving at a large patch of forest. Our main birding location for the day, this area of old-growth native forest held several interesting endemics. We had lunch at the forest edge, watching Kaka and NZ Pigeon flying around, before heading further into the forest. Our first target for the day was Yellow-fronted Parakeet, and after a little patience, we had great views of these bright little birds. Around the corner, we added Tomtit to our list, before carrying on in search of our next big target for the day – the Long-tailed Cuckoo. We slowly cruised down a long gravel road, listening for their distinctive call. We stopped the van and climbed out to listen more carefully, and after a short time heard a distant bird calling. Moving along the road, the bird came closer and closer until eventually it flew over the road, providing great flight views.



Yellow-crowned Parakeet. Henry Schaefer.



Rainbow over the Accommodation. Henry Schaefer.

With most of our forest targets accounted for, we headed on in search of our next target, Blue Duck. We arrived at a large river, finding Greenfinch, Chaffinch and a White-faced Heron at the first spot but no Blue Duck. We moved on to a bridge, and as we crossed, Bingo! Several Blue Duck were swimming under the bridge at the far end.

22 February 2025 – Day Eight

A very early start had us up at dawn and at a large reedbed, with Bittern booming faintly as we jumped out of the van. We soon saw an Australasian Bittern flying low over the reeds, followed by a second a few minutes later. A short walk to the edge of a lake netted Fernbird, as well as NZ Scaup and Australasian Shoveler.



Fernbird. Henry Schaefer.

We headed off, stopping for a coffee before arriving back at the accommodation. A bit of time for pack-up and breakfast, then we were back in the van and on the road.

The first stop was another patch of beautiful old-growth forest. We went for a nice walk, finding amazing trees, Red Admiral Butterflies and New Zealand Falcon! An adult and sub-adult bird sat on top of the trees and called, a great bird to add to the list!

Next spot was a large estuary where we briefly caught up with Sav, one of the Wrybill bosses. A walk along the estuary netted us Banded Dotterel, Pied Stilt, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Marsh Sandpiper. On the walk out, Shin spotted a last minute Black-fronted Dotterel, a bird we had hoped to see here but thought we'd missed.

We checked into the accommodation before heading out for a great dinner.

23 February 2025 – Day Nine

After a bit of a sleep-in, we headed to a nearby wetland where we saw NZ Grebe, Black Swan and Shin picked out a Spotless Crake.

We crossed from East to the West Coast, stopping for lunch before heading to an Estuary. Finding a group of White-fronted Tern, we took some time to scan the flock, looking for any odd ones out. No success, we turned our attention to a Kelp Gull eating a Flounder and a group of Royal Spoonbill feeding in the shallows.

With not much happening at the Estuary, we took a trip North, hoping to find one of NZ's more recent natives – the Nankeen Night Heron. We arrived at a café, grabbed some coffees and headed to the garden to scan the surrounding trees. The coffees were finished with no Herons spotted, so we opted for a walk around the surrounding area. As we walked, BK spotted a nest high up in a tree and after further inspection, we made out a bird crouched in the nest – Nankeen Night Heron! The scope was set up, and whilst the views weren't great, we eventually all had views of the back, head and bill of this cool bird.

24 February 2025 – Day Ten

We awoke to a clear day and started out towards the Capital City, to catch our ferry to the South Island. Along the way we stopped at an estuary and went for a walk, seeing Royal Spoonbill, Variable Oystercatcher and Pied Cormorant. At the end of a sand spit, we spied a group of Terns across the estuary and the scope was set up once again to look for anything unusual. We saw a slightly different looking tern – smaller and with dark primaries and carpal bar. After a bit of inspection and consultation we decided we had a Common Tern!

Arriving at the ferry terminal we lined up and were soon loaded into the ferry, fed and out on deck. We had Red-billed Gull, White-fronted Tern and Fluttering Shearwater in the harbour and soon after entering the straight started getting some great birds. White-capped and Salvin's Albatross were added to the list, and we had great comparison views of Hutton's and Fluttering Shearwater flying side by side. Buller's and Flesh-footed Shearwater flew past sporadically.

After crossing the straight we cruised up the Queen Charlotte Sound to Picton, before checking in and having dinner.



Royal Spoonbill. Henry Schaefer.



Crossing the Cook Strait. Mathieu Poot.

25 February 2025 – Day Eleven

We awoke to a beautiful sunny day, and a short walk down to a marina had us onto our boat and cruising out into the Sounds. We quickly found some White-fronted Tern and Fluttering Shearwater and saw NZ Fur Seal lounging on the rocks. A nearby Spotted Shag roost had a couple of King Shag mixed in. This is the rarest cormorant in the world, with a population of 6-700, and is found only in the Marlborough Sounds, so a great bird to add to the list! We arrived at an island and headed to a major King Shag roost, finding 30 birds, a decent chunk of the population!



King Shag. Henry Schaefer.

On the island we quickly found Weka and Tomtit but struggled to find our main target species – the Orange Fronted Parakeet. After searching high and low, time was up and we were headed back to the boat, only for Debra to spot one on the way out! Another very last-minute bird, but one we were very happy to see!

Arriving back on the mainland, we grabbed some pies for lunch and hit the road, soon arriving at our first stop - the local poo ponds. Very hot conditions meant the birds were all seeking shade. We saw Royal Spoonbill, Black Swan and Little Black Shag and then carried on.

Next stop was a lake where we saw Hoary-headed Grebe, a new native restricted to this location. We also saw Great-crested Grebe, Australasian Shoveler, Grey Teal and NZ Scaup. Sarah spotted a Crake in the rushes, and after ten minutes of staring through the scope it came back out – Marsh (Baillon's) Crake!

We stopped at a lookout over a NZ Fur Seal colony, watching the pups playing in the shallow pools with a few adults sunbathing nearby. Arriving at our accommodation, we checked in and then headed out to dinner, celebrating Peary's birthday.



NZ Fur Seal. Henry Schaefer.

26 February 2025 – Day Twelve

After checking in for our latest pelagic trip, we headed to the marina and boarded the boat. White-capped Albatross and Northern Giant Petrel followed us as we headed out to sea. We started chumming and soon had Northern and Southern Royal Albatross, Wandering Albatross and Salvin's Albatross surrounding the boat. Single Buller's Shearwater, Cook's Petrel and Flesh-footed Shearwater made brief appearances. On to the next spot and we had Black-browed Albatross, White-chinned Petrel, Westland Petrel, Cape Petrel plus the same species as before. Dusky Dolphins put on a great show on the way back in.

We had lunch and then it was time to split up, with some going back to the motel, some going whale-watching and some heading back out birding. We all had a great time, with the whale-spotters seeing Sperm Whale and Dolphins, and the birders having more great Albatross encounters, including a Campbell Albatross.



Northern Royal Albatross. Henry Schaefer.



Seabirds at the back of the boat. Mathieu Poot.



Dusky Dolphin Aerobatics. Henry Schaefer.



Sperm Whale. Henry Schaefer.

We had a traditional kiwi dinner of Fish n' Chips, before heading out to look for Little Owl. We stopped at the first spot and started searching, hearing one calling in distant trees. Moving closer, we again started searching and caught a glimpse of an Owl as it was chased by a magpie. With the bird hiding in thick cover, we moved on to the next spot and luck was on our side – Henry soon spotted a Little Owl sitting on a sign. It flew into the paddock, dive-bombing another Owl we hadn't seen, and then flying from post to post in the dying light.

27 February 2025 – Day Thirteen

With a big day ahead, we hit the road South, with a large estuary as our first stop. We went for a walk, finding feeding Royal Spoonbill and a vagrant Little Egret, as well as lots of other shorebirds. Black-billed Gull and Black-fronted Tern were new ticks – both great endemics to add to the list. We scoped in on a distant flock of Banded Dotterel and could see a bird with bright orange legs and an upturned bill. It was a Terek Sandpiper, another uncommon bird for New Zealand.



Royal Spoonbill. Henry Schaefer.

We left the Estuary and turned towards the Southern Alps, stopping to grab lunch at a famous local pie shop. We headed up into the Alps with the stunning weather highlighting the mountains around us. After a few photo and traffic stops, we made it to a small village we started looking for Kea - an endemic alpine Parrot. Finding none in the village, we headed to a lookout and had one Kea fly high overhead. Good to see

but with better views desired, we waited for a while and then headed to a nearby patch of forest. A small group of Riflemen passed through, seen by most, but once again better views desired.



Checking out the View. Mathieu Poot.



Tomtit. Henry Schaefer.

We checked in and had dinner, before most of us headed out for our next round of Kiwi-spotting. We were after the Great-spotted Kiwi, and after some time heard a male and then a female calling, as much as you can hope for with this species.

28 February 2025 – Day Fourteen

We awoke for round two of Kea-spotting and headed back to the lookout. It was quiet again, so we returned to the forest and immediately had a noisy flock of Pipipi (Brown Creeper) in the carpark. We again found a small group of Riflemen, this time seen much better and by everyone. We got coffee at the village café, seeing more Riflemen but still no sign of the elusive Kea. Back to the lookout and our luck changed – four young birds entertained us, playing in the rocks and one even jumping on the van. Great to spend some time with these charismatic and cheeky birds.



Rifleman. Henry Schaefer.

After navigating our way down the Western side of the Southern Alps, we hit the West Coast and turned South. Passing by another set of poo ponds, we spotted a Great Egret from the van and piled out, only to find it had flown away. We continued on, stopping for lunch at a beautiful lake, in the presence of scavenging Weka and a more accommodating Great Egret.



Kea. Henry Schaefer.



The Boys checking out their shots. Mathieu Poot.

We arrived for our briefing with Ian Cooper from Okarito Kiwi Tours, spotting another Great Egret on the way in. We went over our plan for the evening before heading to Franz Fraz Josef for dinner, then back to Okarito.

We headed into the forest in the falling light and went through some training with Ian. We learned what to expect then set off down a track, periodically stopping and listening, and repeating this process for quite some time. Eventually, after being expertly positioned by Ian, we heard rustling on the edge of the track and Moss the Kiwi stepped out. He stood in the open a few metres away for perfect extended views, before running up the track and calling back and forth with his partner.

1 March 2025 – Day Fifteen

We awoke to a beautiful day, some of the group had gotten up early and seen some Kea tearing a car's sunroof apart. We left Franz Josef and headed South, winding through beautiful Podocarp Forest.

Enjoying the scenery, we stopped for photos and watched NZ Pigeon as we crossed back over the Alps. We stopped at a popular hiking spot for lunch and had a NZ Falcon fly over the van, before heading into the forest for a short walk. The forest was quiet, but we enjoyed the river and old trees and got close-up views of several Tomtit.

Continuing on, we passed by more stunning scenery, with lakes and mountains, before reaching Peregrine Winery. Mat's brother Louis grows and makes their wine and took us through a tasting of some of their best vintages. After enjoying the tasting, and sending a few wines back to America, we had an unsuccessful look for Falcon before heading back to our accommodation. Mexican was for dinner, then off to bed.



Wine Tasting. Mathieu Poot.



Barrels. Henry Schaefer.

2 March 2025 – Day Sixteen

With a big day of driving ahead of us, we hit the road early. Crossing the Crown Range we stopped at a viewpoint, then continued to Te Anau to get lunch. We passed more stunning scenery as we wound up into the Mountains, towards Milford Sound.

We arrived at the site we would look for our main target - Rock Wren. After a quick briefing, we started to scan... and then continued, our patience being tested as we waited for birds to show up. At one point a Falcon flew past, fast and low to the hillside, seen by some. Cool to see but certainly wouldn't help our Rock Wren chances. Eventually Peary and BK saw a pair on the hillside above them, we all flocked to them and after some time all saw the birds up above us. A pair of birds bounced around the hillside for distant but diagnostic views of this iconic species.

With a little time to spare, we headed down into Milford Sound, admiring the sheer mountain cliffs and Weka in the carpark. Back to Te Anau and half of the group went out to see glowworms while the other half went to dinner. A big, busy and successful day!

3 March 2025 – Day Seventeen

Up and in the van, we were headed for Bluff to catch our ferry to Stewart Island. After checking in and parking up the van, we were on the ferry and boosting across the strait. It was overcast and relatively calm, resulting in few birds. A steady trickle of Sooty Shearwater were joined by a few White-capped Albatross and several Common Diving Petrel. As we approached Oban, several Foveaux Shags flew past, and we saw a group roosting on a rock.

After checking in on Stewart Island and having lunch, it was time to catch our water taxi. We walked to the wharf, spotting our first Redpoll along the way, then climbed aboard the boat. We followed the coastline, finding several small groups of Fiordland Penguin, our second Penguin species for the trip and a real treat to see. Before we knew it, we were off the boat and on Ulva Island, another pristine predator-free sanctuary.



Fiordland Crested Penguins. Henry Schaefer.

We started walking, winding through beautiful native forests and beaches. We heard Yellowhead calling high above us and before long they dropped down, giving nice views of a family group as they passed by. We saw plenty of showy South Island Robin, several Kaka and had brief views of Riflemen, Red-crowned Parakeet and Brown Creeper. We arrived back at the wharf still not having seen one of our main targets – South Island Saddleback – and with time running out, had one last chance to find them. Much to everyone's relief, a short distance away we found a family group with two youngsters, to cap off a great day.



Last-second South Island Saddleback. Henry Schaefer.

4 March 2025 – Day Eighteen

Our final pelagic of the tour, we boarded our boat and headed out to sea. We had another look for Penguins, with a number showing well amongst the boulders onshore. Cruising past a small Island, we saw Weka and a Brown Skua, as well as Southern Royal, White-capped and Buller's Albatross. A large raft of Sooty Shearwater were sitting on the water nearby, and we identified one outlying bird as a Short-tailed Shearwater.

We continued out to sea, detouring briefly to a smoking boat, before arriving at an offshore reef. With rain coming and going, we started chumming and soon had good numbers of birds around us. Birds seen for the day included White-capped, Salvin's and Southern Royal Albatross, Black-browed Albatross, Sooty Shearwater and Cook's Petrel. Common Diving-petrel, Northern Giant Petrel, Cape Petrel and Gray-backed Storm Petrel.

We finished chumming and turned back towards Oban, immediately having several hundred Albatross following the boat. They flew with us at arm's length, putting on quite a spectacle and providing great photo opportunities. The rain had intensified throughout the day and conditions had deteriorated. We saw a pair of Prions flying a long distance away but couldn't identify them before they disappeared into the mist - disappointing as they were the first Prions for the trip. A Pomarine Jaeger was next, then we checked out a Foveaux Shag colony before arriving back at our accommodation.



Buller's Albatross. Henry Schaefer.



Rainy Cape Petrel. Henry Schaefer.



White-capped Albatross. Henry Schaefer.



Stuart (Left) and White-capped Albatross. Mathieu Poot.

A bit of time to relax, dinner and then were out Kiwi spotting for the final time. A short drive had us at the location and we started walking, soon finding an obliging Southern Brown Kiwi. It came to within a few metres of us, sniffing the ground and the air, before running away, tumbling over, and running away again. We saw several more birds, before calling it a night and heading back. No doubt to dream of Kiwi once again.



Southern Brown Kiwi. Henry Schaefer.

5 March 2025 – Day Nineteen

We checked in our bags, jumped onto the ferry and began crossing the Foveaux Strait, happy with our time on Stewart Island. The crossing was very quiet again, with Sooty Shearwater and a few White-capped Albatross to keep us company. Back on the mainland we retrieved the van and headed North, a big drive ahead.

Arriving at a Yellow-eyed Penguin colony, we went for a short walk. We had good scope views of two Penguins, and a third on the way back out. Our third Penguin species and final Banknote Bird of the trip!

Our final stop for the day was an Otago Shag colony, then we checked in, had dinner and headed to bed.

6 March 2025 – Day Twenty

Up and on the road. We headed North and then inland, with our first stop at the famous Fairlie Bakehouse. With breakfast/lunch secured, we arrived in Tekapo and got lucky at our very first spot! A pair of Black Stilt, our target species, were feeding on the waterfront. The birds let us get nice and close, and we had great views as they fed in a small pond. We also saw a hunting Falcon and a leucistic Grey Teal.



Black Stilt. Henry Schaefer.

We went up a hill looking for Chukar, finding none, but great views of the surrounding lakes and mountains. A pond was next where we saw NZ Scaup and Royal Spoonbill. We stopped for lunch on the edge of Lake Pukaki, enjoying stunning views of Mt Cook, then headed up to the top of the lake. The Sockeye Salmon were spawning, and we watched thousands of fish running up the creeks – the only place this happens in the Southern Hemisphere! The water had changed, making it difficult to get close to the lake's edge, but we saw Banded Dotterel and a distant Black Stilt.

We stopped in at a local salmon farm, getting great close views of NZ Scaup, Black-billed Gulls and Great Crested Grebe. A trip debrief was next over a few drinks, then out to our final dinner together.



Sockeye Salmon. Henry Schaefer



Great-crested Grebe. Henry Schaefer.

7 March 2025 – Day Twenty-One

After a bit of a sleep in, we loaded up the van for the final time and hit the road. We headed East, with stunning views of Mt Cook once again as we passed by. Returning to the same hill as yesterday, this time we got lucky and found a flock of 11 Chukar by the carpark.

Continuing on to Christchurch, we arrived at the airport to drop off BK, Peary, Deborah, Henry, Shin and Diane, then to some nearby hotels to drop off Sarah and Stuart.

Hard to believe our tour had come to an end. Some great birds, lots of laughs and an awesome group of people!



The Crew. Mathieu Poot.