

Tour report

8 – 12 March 2025

5-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Anne and Merle Archie

Jill and Glen Engel-Cox

This short (5-day) tour was organised to fit with the Heritage Expeditions West Pacific Odyssey voyage which started the day after this tour finished. Starting and ending in Auckland with a brief journey down to the centre of the North Island.

8 March 2025 – Day One

First stop was an Australasian Gannet colony which was as brilliant as ever with hundreds of birds performing just in front of us – including one nearly fledged chick which had somehow got itself on the wrong side of the path.

Virtually all the rest of the day was spent at a wonderful predator free area, in two visits with dinner in between.

A Laughing Kookaburra on telegraph wires was a surprise at lunchtime, and possibly the same individual also showed nearby in the evening.

The afternoon session was most notable for the complete lack of Brown Teal – none were found anywhere. Everything else that should be expected did show up, with a couple of NZ Dotterel on the beach giving very close looks, Banded Rail on a lagoon and in the forest, several great views of North Is Saddleback and heaps of the commoner bush endemics – though Whitehead was heard only (and only heard once).

If the afternoon was good, then the night was great! After dinner, and the aforementioned Kookaburra, we heard a kiwi calling as we got out of the van. We walked a more-or-less flat trail for the next 90 minutes or so with several Morepork calling (and one very briefly seen) and at least 4 more kiwi heard. One kiwi was found feeding in some very noisy leaves but was only seen fleetingly as it was scared away by another group's lights (just slightly annoying!!). Two different Spotless Crakes were also heard calling at this spot, but we decided to back-track away from the other people and were quickly rewarded when another kiwi was located in the bush. Patience and quiet eventually allowed this bird to walk across the path between Anne and Merle, within a couple of feet of each other. It then travelled parallel with the trail and crossed again having walked almost over my foot. How cool and what a great way to end day one – North Island Brown Kiwi.

9 March 2025 – Day Two

We were up nice and early to visit a few places en route to the ferry for Tiritiri Matangi Island. First up was a sewage treatment plant where NZ Grebe and NZ Scaup were added to the endemic list, and another spot where a flock of Eastern Rosellas included a couple of Red-crowned Parakeet and a NI Saddleback performed briefly. Hoped for Brown Teal again failed to materialise.

Next was a real disaster! I had mistakenly noted the departure time of the ferry and we missed it by about 5 minutes. So a hastily rearranged last day trip to Tiri was in order and Plan B for today meant shorebirds instead of the island endemics.... Never before (and hopefully never again!!).

Our consolation prize was in the form of about 50 Wrybill showing well if not super-close, along with heaps of Bar-tailed Godwit, some Red Knot, Banded Dotterels, both endemic oystercatchers and a bonus three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers.

Eventually down to Te Kuiti for the night.

10 March 2025 – Day Three

Starting at Te Kuiti meant that we were handy for the Pureora State Forest Park and so the entire morning was spent there.

The forest is stunning with giant, ancient trees and some excellent birds. Lots of good views of Yellow-crowned Parakeets were had, and a confiding male Tomtit was seen. Kaka were calling virtually constantly overhead and a couple were found perched for good looks. North Is Robins were vocal with many more heard than seen. We did not have any sight nor sound of any cuckoos, falcon and Whitehead was conspicuously absent where they are often plentiful.

After a morning there we decided to leave for the Turangi area to give us best chances of Blue Duck. A stop on the edge of Lake Taupo for Black-billed Gulls, lots of various shags, NZ Grebe, coots and hundreds of Black Swans did not produce the Australasian Bittern that I was hoping for, but our river stop river did turn up a single Blue Duck (one of this year's birds) that gave prolonged and excellent views.

We tried several sites for more ducks but only found the one individual. Another visit to the Bittern site also drew a blank.

11 March 2025 – Day Four

A bit of a "mopping-up" day with our only big objective to get back to Auckland in preparation for Tiri tomorrow.

Some spectacular success and some barely explainable failure. Fernbird – great success with point blank views of a couple of birds. Blue Duck – none! All the available sites were checked at least twice to no avail. Bittern – no, hardly a big surprise at this time of year but still disappointing. NZ Pipit – very nice looks at a bird running up and down an unsealed road and eventually Whitehead showing well. Rifleman – none in a cool stretch of forest that they normally inhabit. The whole forest was awfully quiet. The ups and downs of birding...

12 March 2025 – Day Five

Checked and double-checked (and yeah, triple-checked) the departure time for the Tiri ferry. Quick visit to eventually find four Brown Teal near the ferry and then we were off.

The ferry produced Fluttering and Flesh-footed Shearwater as well as one Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger). Once on the island we had a three major targets:

1. Stitchbird. Easy enough to find as always with several great looks at both males and females. Mostly seen near the feeders with scores of Bellbird and the larger Tui frustrated that they couldn't get in.
2. Kokako. Two sightings of presumably the same bird feeding on the ground trackside, one more close to us but in trees and partially obscured, and a couple more calling. More than satisfactory.
3. Takahe. The last birds of any note that we saw were a pair and full-grown chick, a fitting end to the day. These are simply extraordinary beasts!

We also saw good numbers of other things too – Red-crowned Parakeets, NI Saddlebacks, NI Robins and Whitehead.

Overall the 5 days produced a total of 30 endemics, which was slightly better than anticipated, with the wonderful kiwi experience and the Takahe being the avian highlights for me at least.