

Tour report

18 July – 1 August 2025

15-day winter tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



A spotted shag looking splendid in breeding finery

Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Maureen & Jesse Kemp

Images

Matt Jones

A winter birding tour of New Zealand is not something I, nor Wrybill Birding Tours had done before. We knew that there would be advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages were that some birds would not be present like the cuckoos, migratory shorebirds, and some seabirds. There would be colder shorter days, and that some businesses close for the winter season.

But now having done the tour, there were many advantages, and fewer disadvantages than envisaged.

Some species were a lot easier to locate, including Blue Duck, South Island Takahe and Nankeen Night Heron to name but a few. Most of the birding sites we had to ourselves, and the roads and motels were quieter.

We dipped on NZ Falcon and Fairy Tern, but had great looks at Yellow-eyed Penguins, Orange-fronted Parakeets, Stitchbirds and many more.

We were super lucky with weather - a few frosty mornings were not unexpected but had sunny clear days for the most part.

We travelled just over 3,700 km from Auckland to Queenstown and saw a very respectable 125 species.

I think this trip report and checklist show that a winter birding tour of New Zealand can produce a highly rewarding venture, thanks to Maureen and Jesse for being the first brave souls!

Matt Jones (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

18 July 2025 – Day One

The trip started with a bit of a bang!!

Matt picked up Maureen and Jesse from their downtown Auckland hotel and instead of heading north we headed south along the foreshore in search of Shore Plover. This tiny endemic wader was found around ten days earlier by fellow Wrybill Guide Dave Howes, so we parked along the sea wall and soon found the mega rare Shore Plover.

We grabbed some images and counted our first Variable Oystercatchers, Kelp and Red-billed Gulls and Little Pied Shags. All this in amongst the hustle and bustle of New Zealand's largest city, with dog walkers, joggers and folks heading off to work.



Shore plover

Happy with the first major tick on our list we headed north out of Auckland. Our next stop was at a suburban sewage ponds, where we encountered some local water and wildfowl: New Zealand Scaup, Pacific Black (Grey) Duck, Australian Shoveler, Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, plus a few Canada Geese to make Jesse and Maureen feel at home. Also, we saw a number of endemic New Zealand Dabchicks including last year's chicks.

A drive around the gravel roads rewarded us with Eastern Rosella, Grey Warbler, NZ Fantail, Sacred Kingfisher, Welcome Swallows plus a few bonus Royal Spoonbills snoozing by a pond. All seen well.

Around the corner on a quiet beach, we found our first New Zealand Dotterels along with a few Variable Oystercatchers, Pied Shags and couple of distant Australasian Gannets offshore.

Further north at the next stop our timing was a little out – the tide was high at a coastal estuary - but we still added Caspian Terns, Fluttering Shearwaters, Masked Lapwings and a few Eurasian imports, Eurasian Skylarks, European Goldfinches, to the list.

Our final stop on our journey north was in the middle of modern housing estate proving you can find good birds anywhere! We saw at least 11 Australasian Grebes swimming alongside 4 or 5 New Zealand Dabchicks which provided a good opportunity to compare the two species. Also seen were plenty of Pukeko, Australasian Shovelers, New Zealand Scaup and Mallards, and Welcome Swallows hawked over the water.

We checked into a quiet tree-surrounded motel and headed out to a local restaurant. After a fine meal it was time for a final bit birding for the day. As we arrived at the site there was not one but two North Island Brown Kiwi feeding by the road. I turned the car off and we got out for good looks at our first kiwi of the trip. In the next hour we watched another 4 or 5 birds and heard more male and female kiwi calls. Plus at least 2 Morepork were heard.

A great start to our first full day on tour we headed back to hotel for a well-earned nights rest.

19 July 2025 – Day Two



Early morning fog

Heading south we tried our luck once more at the coastal estuary we visited yesterday. The tide was low so this visit proved a little more rewarding. Plenty of Variable Oystercatchers, New Zealand Dotterels, plus a couple of new shorebird species for the trip: a lone Ruddy Turnstone, 4 Pied Stilts. White-faced Herons fed on the mud banks, and Pied, Little Pied, and Great Cormorants fed in the water on the ebbing tide. Swamp Harriers cruised around looking for an opportunistic meal and NZ Fantail and Tui did the same in the car park. Matt was hoping a Fairy Tern would put in appearance, but no luck. We tried another location but still no Fairy Terns. Our wader list took a shot in the arm - a few overwintering Bar-tailed Godwits flew in and landed in front of us. They were joined by Banded Dotterels, at least 5 Wrybill, plus Jesse spotted a lone South Island Pied Oystercatcher amongst the Variable Oystercatchers.

We tried another location for Fairy Terns, this time along a stunning sandy beach, but came up empty handed again. Great looks at New Zealand Dotterels and more relaxed Variable Oystercatchers.



New Zealand dotterel

Our final stop of the day was our first bit of forest birding we drove to a preserve and became surrounded by Pukekos. Near the car park in amongst the throngs of Pukeko was their larger cousin – a pair of much sought-after South Island Takahe. These huge flightless rails were only rediscovered in 1948 having thought to have been extinct. We stopped the car and grabbed some images.

As we entered the forest trails, new birds came thick and fast. Whiteheads were feeding and calling above us. A pair of North Island Saddleback eventually gave themselves up. Next a Bellbird joined our trip list. Matt spotted a skulking Brown Teal sitting quietly by the stream and several Kaka flew above us calling but never really showing well. On the other hand, a New Zealand Pigeon posed very nicely for the cameras. A

North Island Robin put in a brief appearance and farther down the track a Buff-banded Rail was spotted by Matt and Maureen as it ran across the track. Other endemic birds seen included Tui, NZ Fantail and more NZ Dotterel. And as we drove from the park we saw more Brown Teal, plus Australian Magpies and a male Ring-necked Pheasant. Another day done and dusted!



New Zealand pigeon

20 July 2025 – Day Three

Up early and on the road south, our first stop was a country park where we hoped to spot a Buff-banded Rail that Jesse had missed the day previous.

We checked the usual spots without any luck and watched Pied Stilts and Masked Lapwings squabble with each other. Matt heard a couple of familiar calls and with a bit of searching (and luck!) we saw a tiny shy Spotless Crake run for cover. At least three NZ Fernbirds hopped around the small scrubby pondside bushes – awesome!

It was time to catch the ferry over to Tiritiri Matangi Island, fondly known as Tiri. This small predator-free Island is only a 25-minute ferry ride from the mainland and is home to many rare endemic birds. We had a bit of time pressure as there was only one returning ferry so after listening to the rangers briefing we headed off to find the birds.

First up were a couple of Red-crowned Parakeets feeding in the flax which were joined by four Brown Quail. Then as we entered the trail we heard Whiteheads, Stitchbird and a North Island Robin. There was another call so we backtracked and found the source – the iconic North Island Kokako sitting in the top of a tree. One of our most wanted birds was on our list- a great start!

Further up the trail we found a North Island Robin that showed a bit better than the individual we encountered the previous day. At the first set of sugar water feeders we saw and heard many Bellbirds. A stunning male Stitchbird came to the feeder and was joined by another male and the less colourful female. Often known by their Maori name of Hihi, their call is a sharp electric sounding ‘zip’. The early European settlers thought the call sounded like the word ‘stitch’ and that’s how the bird came by this unusual name.

Walking the trails we saw North Island Saddleback, more Whitehead, Tui, Bellbird, Robin, Pigeon, Parakeets and Fantail and a tiny Rifleman put in a brief appearance. Out of the trail, we entered a grassland area with plenty of Pukeko feeding on the grass and overlooking the cliffs we found three South Island Takahe enjoying the morning sun on their backs as they fed. Magical! In the nearby bushes a small party of Silvereye hunted for food and it was also time for us to have a spot of lunch - while watching Tui and Bellbirds at the feeders and another Kokako played hide and seek in the nearby trees!



South Island takahe

On the return journey to the wharf we found more Robins, Saddleback, Stitchbird and Parakeets plus a lone Brown Teal snoozing in the afternoon sun by a small pond. The ferry ride provided views of plenty of Fluttering Shearwaters and few Australasian Gannets.

Heading south we drove through New Zealand’s biggest city. Leaving the bright lights of Auckland behind us by the time we arrived at our motel the winter sun had set on another day.



Tui

21 July 2025 – Day Four

A bright sunny morning greeted us at Miranda. The tides and timings are so important but unfortunately the tide was super low and the birds were a country mile away. Plus, we were looking into the rising sun, so not great. After a couple of different locations and seeing plenty of Pied Stilts we visited the reserve centre for a little more retail therapy.

Our luck changed at a different location – the sun was behind us and the tide was turning. On the pool in front of the hide were plenty of Pied Stilts and South Island Pied Oystercatcher. From our right a large flock of Eastern Cattle Egrets flew in and landed in front of the hide – we counted 37 birds, picked out amongst the 30 plus Royal Spoonbills. At the back of the pool we found the long staying pair of Glossy Ibis which were busy feeding. Around 8 Godwits flew in and landed on the scrapes. With a bit of scanning through the scope we soon realised that 7 of them were the expected Bar-tailed Godwits, that had not travelled north to Alaska to breed. The eighth bird was smaller and more uniformed, grey in appearance. Awesome - it was the Black-tailed Godwit! It had been reported sporadically in this location. To underline our ID the bird started to preen, showing the large black tail band. We also found a closer showier Wrybill. In just under an hour we had added three new species to our growing trip list.

Next was a bit of a drive south to put some kilometres on the car, but first a brief stop to add a group of Indian Peafowl to the list. Another stop at some native North Island forest we got Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Tomtit, Kaka, North Island Robin, Grey Warbler, Bellbird, Tui and NZ Pigeons.

We finished the day topping up with groceries and enjoyed a fine meal at our motel restaurant.

22 July 2025 – Day Five

We were up before the lark the next morning and left our motel before sunrise. At a fast-flowing river the fly fishermen were already casting as we scanned the area. Matt spotted a couple of Blue Ducks close to us. Boom! That's the way to start the day. We eventually counted 9 Blue Ducks all within close proximity of each other. This sought-after rare endemic duck can sometimes be tricky to locate. Happy with our haul we changed location for Eurasian Coot, Black-billed Gull and Little Black Shag along with plenty of Black Swans, Canada Geese, NZ Scaup and NZ Dabchicks. Then some incredible luck - an Australasian Bittern exploded from the reeds in front of us and flew across the reed bed. Wow! Super happy with our early morning birding we returned to our motel for breakfast.

After breakfast we headed south and west, stopping to take a few images of Mount Ruapehu cloaked in a dusting of snow. Driving through some stunning scenery we encountered large flocks of Indian Peafowl. Time for a cup of tea and cake. The café we stopped at is one the best places in New Zealand to see Nankeen Night Heron. This fairly recent naturalised coloniser to New Zealand can be super shy. But winter is probably the best time to look for them. We counted at least 7 birds, ranging from adults, sub-adults, and speckled juveniles. The tea and cake was pretty good as well!



Mt Ruapehu

Heading further south to our quiet motel for the night with another amazing day of birding completed. Tomorrow another island awaited us, and lots of new birds to be seen.





Adult Nankeen night heron

23 July 2025 – Day Six

At 5:30am we left our cosy motel and drove south on SH1 towards Wellington, New Zealand's capital city. Just after 8:30am the ferry departed the North Island towards the port of Picton on the South Island. The ferry crossing was fairly quiet, but we spotted White-capped Albatross, Salvin's Albatross, a single Black-browed Albatross, a single White-chinned Petrel, around 19+ Fairy Prions, plus at least three Northern Giant Petrels and a few Black-fronted Terns. Close to the entrance of the Tory channel on the South Island a small pod of Dusky Dolphins were spotted. Once in the channel, Fluttering Shearwater numbers increased along with a few Australasian Gannets, and our first Spotted Shags. Also, our first New Zealand Fur Seal for this trip.

We arrived into a sunny Picton around lunchtime and fortunately were able to check into the motel a bit earlier. We had some down time in the afternoon to recharge, do laundry, emails, and some retail therapy.

24 July 2025 – Day Seven

Our charter boat slipped away from the wharf just past 8am heading for Queen Charlotte Sound for our first day of birding the South Island. A pair of Little Blue Penguins swam around us, preening and soon more Little Blues joined. Heading towards the headland, in amongst the Spotted Shags was one of the main targets for the morning – King Shag – three to be exact, standing taller and heavier than their smaller cousins. This rare endemic is only found around the waters of the Marlborough Sounds and has an estimated population of less than 800 birds.



Spotted shag in breeding plumage



King shags

On the way to our next destination, a small predator-free island, we found another group of 23 King Shags and our attention was caught by a small pod of Dusky Dolphins. These playful, often curious animals provided us with great views. On arrival at our destination, we climbed down the ladder from the bow of the vessel to set foot on the island. Two or three Weka fed on the shoreline along with a few Variable Oystercatchers. We soon heard our next target, but only Matt got onto the brief fly over.

A pair of Orange-fronted Parakeets (sometimes known as Malherbe's Parakeet) gave themselves up. They preened and chatted right in front of us, and amazingly were joined by a juvenile South Island Saddleback, in its all over chocolate brown plumage. We had two of New Zealand's rarest species right in front of us. Wow! Other birds seen on the island were Silvereye, Bellbird, Tomtit and Tui.

All too soon it was time reboard the vessel and head back to Picton. En-route we saw plenty of Pied and Spotted Shags, Fluttering Shearwaters, Australasian Gannets, White-fronted Terns, Kelp and Red-billed Gulls, and a few New Zealand Fur Seals sleeping on the rocky shoreline.

Back on dry land we visited the musical toilets (which play classical music!) and hit the road south. Lunch was enjoyed at a small roadside lake which also happens to be the best place in New Zealand to find Hoary-headed Grebe. This small grebe is a recent arrival to NZ from Australia, where it's fairly common. We soon scoped three new species: at least a couple of Hoary-headed Grebes swam at the back of the lake. They were joined by another new bird for the tour, the larger grand looking Australasian Great Crested Grebe, and we also saw a couple of New Zealand Dabchicks. There can't be many places in New Zealand where you can see three grebe species on the same lake. Also seen were plenty of NZ Scaup, Australasian Shovelers, Black Swans, Canada Geese and our first Grey Teal. I was surprised that we had not encountered these ducks earlier on the trip, but better late than never! Other birds seen included Pukeko, Little Pied Shags, Masked Lapwings, and a fly over Black-billed Gull.



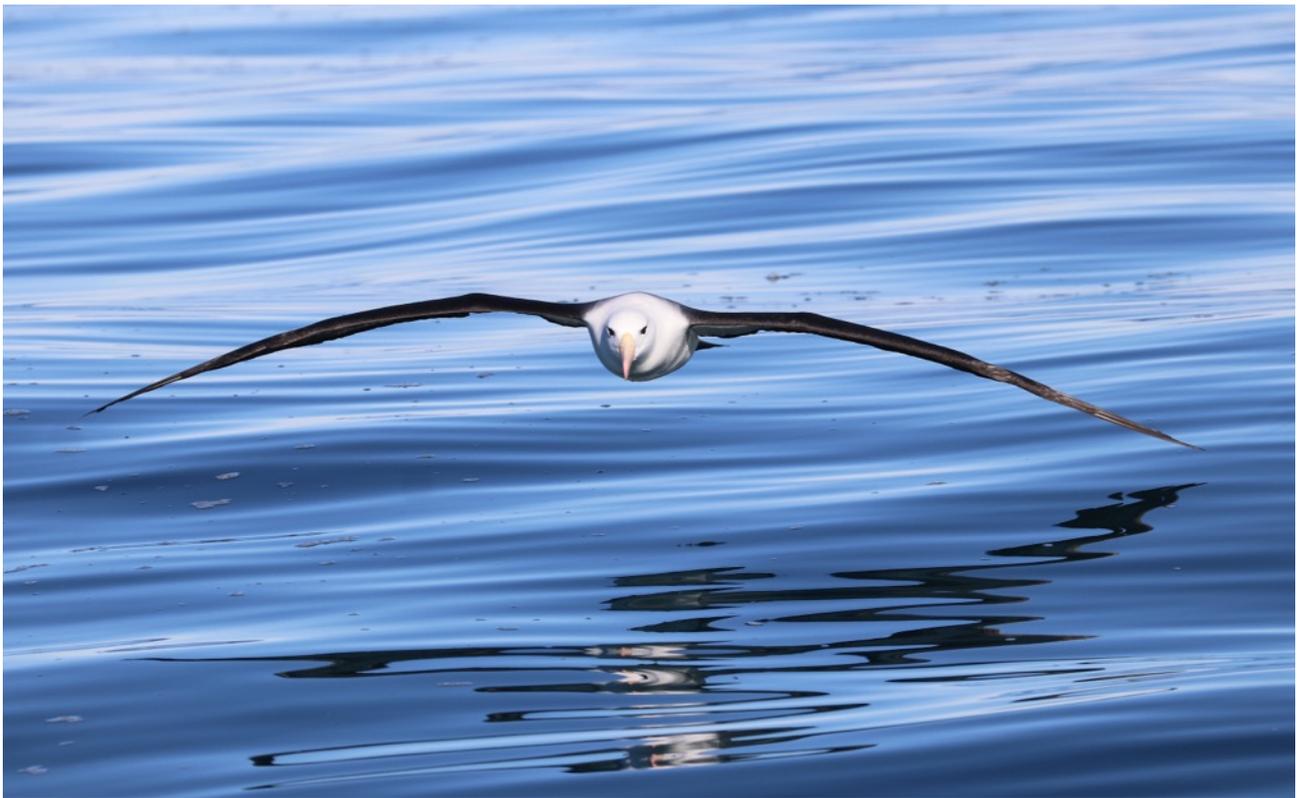
Orange-fronted parakeet

On the way to Kaikoura we stopped to admire (and smell) more New Zealand Fur Seals. Before checking into our motel for the next couple of nights we drove around the adjacent farmland in the hope of finding Little Owl. No luck there but it had been a good first day's birding on the South Island.

25 July 2025 – Day Eight

After a leisurely start we headed out to the peninsula to see more New Zealand Fur Seals sleeping on distant rocks and a few Banded Dotterels and Variable Oystercatchers feeding in the rock pools. In the car park we found our first couple of Dunnocks, but you don't come to Kaikoura to find Dunnocks – we were booked on the 10am pelagic with Albatross Encounter, in the safe hands of legendary skipper Gary aka Gazza. It was pelagic time.

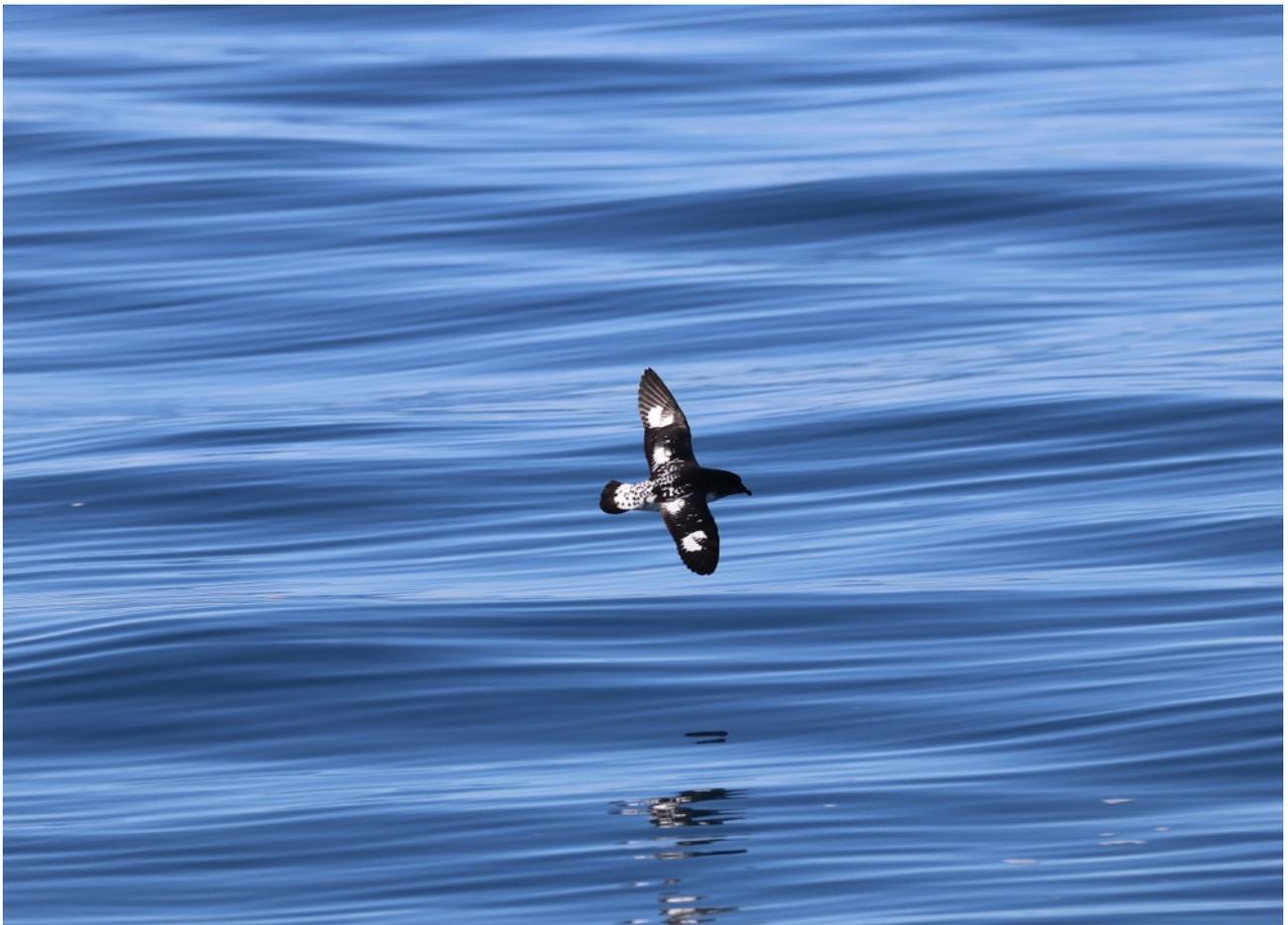
The weather was warm, calm and very little breeze but we found 1x Gibson's Wandering Albatross, 1x Northern Royal Albatross, 9x White-capped Albatross, 2x Salvin's Albatross, 9x Black-browed Albatross, 3x Northern Giant Petrels and 7x Cape Petrels. So not too shabby. Other birds seen: a couple of stunning Black-fronted Terns that were almost in full breeding plumage and soon would be heading inland to start breeding again.



Black-browed albatross



Black-fronted tern



Cape petrel



Hector's dolphin

It wasn't all birds - we found a few Dusky Dolphins that weren't that interested in us, caught sight of a distant breaching Humpback, and saw a few more snoozing NZ Fur Seals on Barney's Rock. The highlight on the mammal front was a small pod of super cute Hector's Dolphins. These tiny rare endemic dolphins are often found swimming around shallow stirred up water and can be picked out by their Mickey Mouse-shaped dorsal fin. We were fortunate to encounter around 10 of these amazing creatures.

Once ashore we had lunch and a free afternoon. Later in the day we tried once more for Little Owl but no luck- however we were rewarded with a large European Starling murmuration as they headed to roost in some large Poplar trees.

26 July 2025 – Day Nine

We left our motel the next morning and tried for the third and last time for Little Owl, hoping to see one before he or she turned in for the night. Once again, no luck. This Owl was good at hiding! Oh well you can't see them all.

We put some kilometres on the car driving south on SH1 towards the South Island's biggest city, Christchurch. Mid-morning at a tidal estuary we picked up the vagrant Little Egret that had been in this location for a while. On the dropping tide line were also Royal Spoonbills, Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal and Paradise Shelducks. A few waders were also present: Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Banded Dotterels, Masked Lapwings and, in amongst the Pied Stilts, was a lone hybrid Pied x Black Stilt.



Pied cormorant

A bit further down the road we added Mute Swan to our growing trip list. This introduced graceful swan's stronghold seems to be around the Canterbury region of the South Island. We also saw more NZ Scaup, Canada Geese, Black Swans, plenty of Eurasian Coot, not forgetting the black morph New Zealand Fantail.

We picked up lunch and headed inland towards the spine of the South Island, the Southern Alps. We climbed into the snow-capped peaks and entered the tiny village of Arthur's Pass. Almost immediately we saw a couple of Kea in the car park, our main target for the day. A wander around produced six more birds.

As a bird watching guide in New Zealand, it's wonderful to show birders from all around the world their first Kea but unfortunately this wonderful alpine parrot is in serious decline due introduced pests, and the bad habit of humans feeding them. I always find it quite uncomfortable watching them around human settlements.

We tried a more natural location for Kea but came up short. In a brief bush walk we found a Tomtit, and heard our first South Island Robin, but the bird never showed itself. Another day reached its end as we settled into our cosy alpine accommodation for the night.

27 July 2025 – Day Ten

The next morning we stopped to take a picture of the sunrise as we left the mountains in the rear-view mirror. Driving further south through arguably some of New Zealand best scenery, the snow-capped hill tops looked down on lush forest and sheep filled green pastures.



Sunrise near Arthur's Pass

After a coffee and pie stop, we headed into Mackenzie Country with one bird in mind. The trick to finding the world's rarest wader is to check out every location you have seen one before! We drove down the road checking every muddy puddle, lake and pond. Nothing! The sealed road turned into a gravel road, then Matt hit the brakes. BOOM! Spied through the roadside trees were two black shapes. Bins up ... yes two Kaki, or Black Stilts, feeding on the flooded area close to a lake. We parked the car and enjoyed distant but good enough views of these wonderful all black waders, with their constant yapping call. They were joined by Grey Teal, Australasian Shoveler, Mallard and Paradise Shelducks. A large flock of Eurasian Skylarks flew in and landed and Yellowhammers and House Sparrows were also in large winter flocks.

We checked out another couple of sites for Stilt and Chukar but apart from the stunning views we didn't find any new birds. We hit the road again for our next stop which was at the base of Mount Cook/Aoraki, New Zealand's highest peak standing over 3700 metres high (or in old money over 12,200 feet). Even in the summer months this peak has snow on it so she was looking very white at this time of year.



Aoraki Mt Cook

We walked around riverbeds that flowed from the mountains into the lake and soon picked up another 10 distant Black Stilts, all in adult plumage. A single Banded Dotterel seemed early back on the breeding grounds, and a large count of South Island Pied Oystercatchers plus a few distant Black-billed Gulls.

28 July 2025 – Day Eleven

A cold winter morning greeted us for the drive out of the mountains towards the coast. At the Victorian town of Oamaru we added a new species to the list - a large number of Otago Shags roosting, coming in two colour morphs Pied and Bronze. These are large heavy looking shags and they shared the spot with plenty of the smaller, but equally smart looking Spotted Shags, and even smaller Little Pied Shags.

After lunch an hour or so further down the coast towards a private reserve for possibly our only chance to try find the rarest penguin in the world. The Yellow-eyed Penguin is really struggling to maintain a grip on being a mainland species, due to climate change, bycatch in fishing nets, starvation due to a lack of preferred food, habitat loss for breeding sites, and human disturbance. Throw in dogs, sealions and avian malaria – it's not a great looking future for this wonderful bird.

Patience was the name of the game. We sat and waited at a spot where Matt had seen them in the past. We waited and waited. Then Matt caught sight of something out the corner of his eye. Yes, two Yellow-eyed Penguins came ashore, and preened in front of us. They were soon joined by another three birds, purposefully porpoising in towards the beach. We watched five birds together preening and calling and shared the scope with other visiting folks, happy to add this mega rare endemic bird to our list, we departed. Another great day out in the field.

29 July 2025 – Day Twelve

Today was a bit of a drive day, back on SH1 south through the city of Dunedin and the scenic route through the stunning Catlins. A stop at Curio Bay to stretch our legs, rewarded us with a couple more Hector's Dolphins playing in the surf.

We reached the end of the road and New Zealand's southern-most port of Bluff with plenty of time to catch the ferry across to Stewart Island / Rakiura, which is home for Matt and where we'd stay for the next two nights. The ferry crossing was super calm, but we still spotted a few new birds: Buller's Albatross, Common Diving Petrel, and plenty of Foveaux Shags were seen. We also saw White-capped Albatross, Cape Petrel, Blue Penguins.

Arriving at Oban, the only village on Stewart Island, in the late afternoon Maureen and Jesse checked into the hotel. The day wasn't done just yet - after dinner there was one special bird to try and find. Matt took Maureen and Jesse to some private land outside the village and within minutes of arriving we spotted a male Stewart Island Brown Kiwi feeding out in the open. The Stewart Island Brown is a sub-species of the Southern Brown Kiwi found on the mainland.

We watched as he was soon joined by his much larger mate, and then we were super lucky as the pair called in front of us. Incredible! The next few moments the pair scuffled and chased each other around but they seemed to get bored with each other's company and went their separate ways. We heard a few more pairs calling distantly, along with calling Morepork. On the way back to the van we saw the same male from earlier feeding by itself so we let him carry on his night as our day was done!

30 July 2025 – Day Thirteen

On all New Zealand tours, Stewart Island can hold the key to adding quite a few new birds to the overall total. Today would be no exception – we'd have the morning at Ulva Island, home to plenty of endemic forest birds – and an afternoon pelagic. Our Water taxi departed for Ulva Island at 9am and we had three hours exploring. Main targets were South Island Robin, Pipipi (Brown Creeper) and Yellowhead.

Almost instantly a pair of South Islands Robins appeared and happily fed in front of us. Like the Kiwi this a distinct sub-species of South Island Robin, often called the Stewart Island Robin – it is a lot whiter on its breast than its northern cousin. The Robins were soon joined by a Red-Crowned Parakeet, Kaka and our next target Yellowhead, at least half a dozen birds fed high in the canopy and were seen well along with their buzzy calls.

Along the trail we found a couple more Robins, our first Pipipi/ Brown Creeper was heard but not seen and then we found a small family group feeding close to the path. They were joined by a single, Yellow-crowned Parakeet.

As we got closer to the beach we heard the roar of a New Zealand Sea Lion. At the sheltered beach we witnessed and added a new endemic animal to our list - six young male New Zealand Sea Lions jostled and jousted with each other. This play fighting is practice for when they are mature and need to defend and impress the females. A small rusty coloured Stewart Island Weka fed on the beach in front of the sea lions, oblivious to their noise. Other birds seen as we strolled through the native forest, were a shy pair of South Island Saddlebacks, a Rifleman, Tomtit and better looks at some closer Pipipi.

The afternoon was spent on a large comfortable catamaran, skippered by Nate. Leaving Paterson Inlet we headed south in the open waters, where a couple of Buller's Albatross soon joined us. Forty minutes later we arrived at Wreck Reef and put some chum in the water. It wasn't long before we were surrounded by 40+ Buller's Albatross, a small but very attractive Albatross with bright yellow upper and lower mandible. They were soon joined by our seventh Albatross species of the tour, the very large Southern Royal Albatross. This huge albatross is always a pleasure to see, we counted at least eleven individuals.

Another two species of Albatross were seen, the more common White-capped Albatross, and a single Salvin's Albatross. These were joined by three Northern Giant Petrels and several chatty Cape Petrels. We were surprised at the lack of smaller birds, and of course just as we were about to depart a single Southern Giant Petrel showed up!

Heading towards land we added two Southern Brown Skuas to our days haul of good birds, more Foveaux Shags, and picked up two distant Yellow-eyed Penguins before finding our final great bird of the day - five Fiordland Crested Penguins! These migratory penguins had only just arrived back to their breeding grounds.

Stewart Island had given the trip and list a shot in the arm - we had seen seven new species of bird, and better looks at others.



Buller's albatross



Southern Royal albatross

31 July 2025 – Day Fourteen

An earthquake over 10,500 km away put a bit of a spanner in the works this morning! A huge 8.8 magnitude earthquake in Kamchatka, Russia had the potential to cause a tsunami throughout the Pacific. Our ferry to leave Stewart Island was delayed by Maritime NZ who oversee the safety of New Zealand's ferries.

So, with a bit a spare time Matt showed Maureen and Jesse around his island home. First stop Observation Rock for stunning views overlooking Paterson Inlet, Golden Bay, Iona Island and Ulva Island. Then to the end of the road - Lee Bay where the trail to the National Park starts and where we added a new bird for the trip – a small flock of Redpoll feeding on grass seed heads along the side of the beach. As we watched a large New Zealand Pigeon soaking up the morning sun we got a call to say the ferry was going to be further delayed until late afternoon so our Plan B kicked in and we got the last three seats off the island on the 1:30pm flight. We arrived at Invercargill airport at 2pm, Matt jumped into a cab back down to Bluff to pick up the car, drove back to collect Maureen and Jesse from the airport for the drive to Te Anau, where we'd stay that night.



Iona Island

1 August 2025 – Day Fifteen

For our final morning of the trip Maureen and Jesse were booked on the glow worms cave tour. Matt walked the lake front, seeing 18 species but adding nothing new for the tour. At lunchtime once Maureen and Jesse had finished their tour, Queenstown was loaded into the Sat-Nav as our final destination. We drove through Southland farmland seeing our last Swamp Harrier hawking over the fields flushing Australasian Magpies and Masked Lapwings.

A quick coffee stop to break up the journey before we reached the hustle and bustle of Queenstown in ski season. We said our goodbyes at their lake front hotel – a bag full of memories and lifers from our 15-day birding tour of New Zealand from Auckland to Queenstown!