

Tour report

8-28 November 2025

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Kea. Paul Matson.

Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Gary & Jenny Howard, Barry Wright, James Hunter, Brendan Ryan, Mark Hows, Paul Matson, Charles Lowe

Images

Matt Jones and Paul Matson

A very successful tour, finding a very respectable 155 species. An underlying theme of this 21-day tour was the weather - we had it all - wind, rain, hot sunshine, and sometimes all in one day, literally four seasons in one day! The weather played its part in our two major dips, no wind whatsoever on the Marsden Pelagic, so no Pycroft's Petrel. Then a day later the weather turned to custard so no chance to overnight on Tiritiri Matangi as the ferry was cancelled, so no Little-spotted Kiwi. But saying that, the weather was perfect for our chance to look for Rock Wren, and the same could be said for our time at Stewart Island, particularly the Pelagic where we gained a couple of extra birds - an Antarctic Prion and a Soft-plumaged Petrel. We had fantastic looks at Kokako, Spotless Crake, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Rock Wren, Fairy Terns, Black Stilts and Yellow-eyed Penguins to name but a few.

This tour was a bit different in that most of the group knew each other from birding in Kent in the UK, so gelled together very quickly. And Matt knew some of the clients from his old roots. As I said to Brendan more than once, "trust me I won't let you down".

It was a privilege to show everyone around New Zealand, and to find and show most of its unique birdlife.

* Thanks to Paul for the use of some his wonderful Images in this tour report.



The team. Matt Jones

8 November 2025 – Day One

After leaving our downtown Auckland hotel, we headed north towards our first destination - a country park and golf course.

The first New Zealand endemic birds seen to kick off our trip list were the large, impressive New Zealand Pigeon, Tui and New Zealand Fantail. Welcome Swallows darted around hunting insects, noisy Masked Lapwings alarm-called from the fairways and a migrant Shining Bronze Cuckoo put a in brief appearance. Not everyone got onto to this small gem of a bird, but this was only day one! Two more colourful birds were seen - the flying paintbox which is the Eastern Rosella, and the larger Sulphur-crested Cockatoo.

Next stop was a Gannet colony - always a hit with visiting birders. Along with the hundreds of Australasian Gannets, we saw our first Kelp and Red-billed Gulls. These were joined by the more delicate White-fronted Terns which were full on busy with breeding duty. In the surrounding bushes we found more Tui & Silvereyes feeding on the flax. European imports seen were Blackbird, Song Thrush and Yellowhammer.



Australasian gannets. Matt Jones.

After grabbing some lunch, our next stop was a sewage pond. Wildfowl observed were the noisy but eye-catching Paradise Shelducks, Australasian Shovelers, the endemic understated New Zealand Scaup, plus Mallard, White-faced Heron, Sacred Kingfisher and a few Canada Geese. The star bird was the tiny New

Zealand Dabchick/Grebe. They are very common throughout the North Island on the right habitat, even a water treatment pond.

A drive further north, and we arrived at our final birding location for our first day - a large predator-proof fenced reserve. We were greeted by a large number of Purple Swamphens aka Pukeko. It was a busy Saturday afternoon, so we left the sun and sand worshippers alone and headed into the forest trails, not before seeing New Zealand Dotterel. Once on the trails, new birds came thick and fast. Whiteheads, Bellbirds, Grey Gerygone were all admired. Further on, the sought after North Island Saddleback put on a great display and our first North Island Robin put in a brief appearance. We soon found a small family of Brown Teal with fresh ducklings feeding in the forest stream. This bird is a true conservation success story, once numbering less than a hundred individuals. Now they are breeding and seen outside of predator-controlled reserves.

A brief appearance by South Island Takahe that skulked away from us into thick undergrowth - always so secretive and shy when they are breeding. Less shy were the Ringed-necked Pheasant, and California and Brown Quail. As we left the reserve we added Buff-banded Rail, and eventually Spotless Crake to our first day's tally. Always good to see rails and crakes.

9 November 2025 – Day Two

For our first pelagic of the trip we headed out into the Hauraki Gulf. One reason birders visit New Zealand is the seabirds, and today's haul was proof that New Zealand is the seabird capital of the World.

Leaving the harbour we picked out Kelp and Red-billed Gulls, Australasian Gannets and our first Little Blue Penguins. Fluttering Shearwaters were soon joined by Flesh-footed Shearwaters and the clockwork flight of Common Diving Petrels was seen as they whizzed past the vessel. At our first chum spot, Cook's Petrels flew around, and we caught sight of a Little Shearwater. Flesh-footed Shearwaters numbers built up and were soon joined by the rarer Black Petrel. Then the shout of Storm Petrel rang out, as a White-faced Storm Petrel skipped into view.

It did not take long for the star of the show to appear - a smart looking New Zealand Storm Petrel arrived – we ended up with least half dozen New Zealand Stormies, which were joined by the stunning Buller's Shearwater. Bonus birds for the day was a lone Sooty Shearwater and a fly by Northern Giant Petrel, giving us a taste of the southern birds to come.

Mammals gave birds a run for their money - we found Bryde's Whale, Short-beaked Common Dolphins, and our first New Zealand Fur Seal. The best was yet to come – as we returned to the harbour we were escorted by a pod of five Orca, including a very impressive bull.

What a day at sea!



New Zealand storm petrel. Matt Jones.



Killer whales. Paul Matson

10 November 2025 – Day Three

We left the motel bright and early and headed north. By 8:30 we were watching a pair of Fairy Terns hawking on a dropping tide only a few meters in front of us. Also seen were Royal Spoonbills, Pied and Little Pied Shags, Pied Stilts and Bar-tailed Godwits.

A change of location and a few more wader species were added to our list. The endemic South Island Pied Oystercatcher, Double Banded dotterels, not forgetting Ruddy Turnstones. Another two tiny Fairy terns were spotted, possibly the same pair from the first location, with so few birds. They were joined by their larger cousin the Caspian Tern.

Lunch was enjoyed at a beach side inlet while viewing more waders: Variable Oystercatcher, NZ Dotterel, Bar-tailed Godwits. Our first Buff-banded Rail played hide and seek in the long grass – and a bonus second pair of Fairy Terns were spotted.

Further north we stopped at a suburban site for Australasian Little Grebe, which looks very similar to the little grebe found in Europe with the yellow tear drop on the cheek. This would be our only real chance of seeing this recent coloniser. They shared the pond with New Zealand Dabchicks, which was handy to compare the two species. We also found Pukeko, Black Swans, Australasian Shovelers and a single Pacific Black duck aka Grey Duck.

Later that evening we headed out under the cover of darkness to find our last new bird for the day – Northern Brown Kiwi. We spotted a male feeding beside the track and everyone in the group got onto it – and we ended up seeing four different individuals. Job done!

11 November 2025 – Day Four

Bright and early start today we headed south for a full day pelagic. Leaving the sheltered harbour we counted large numbers of roosting South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits, and our first Red Knots. We approached a small island covered in nesting Little Pied and Pied Shags and soon found a pair of Pacific Reef Herons.

Once into open water, Fluttering and Flesh-footed Shearwaters built up. The wind was less kind to us than on our previous pelagic but we got better looks at Little Shearwaters. A single NZ stormie was joined by a handful of White-faced Storm Petrels, and a lone Wilson's Storm Petrel was a new addition, plus a single Northern Giant Petrel.

Black Petrels and a few Buller's Shearwaters bulked the list, including Australasian Gannets, but again the mammals put on a good show. Long-finned Pilot Whales, Short-beaked Common Dolphins, at least one Bryde's Whale, plus Bottlenosed Dolphins with calves bow-riding the waves.

After a pretty calm day at sea, once ashore Matt received a phone call to advise that strong winds were expected the following day and our ferry to Tiritiri Matangi had been cancelled. It was a bitter pill to swallow but we can't control the weather. Over dinner that evening we hatched a new plan.

12 November 2025 – Day Five

Instead of going to Tiritiri Matangi as planned, our Plan B included heading back to the coastal inlet reserve for Variable Oystercatchers, Pied Stilts, Masked Lapwings, NZ Dotterels, Bar-tailed Godwits and a lone Ruddy Turnstone. Caspian and White-fronted Terns were joined by four Fairy Terns, plus another Pacific Reef Heron was seen.

Heading south we stopped at a Hunting & Fishing store so Gary could purchase a new pair of binoculars. This store proved popular and we had to leave before everyone bought camouflage coats, hats and boots!!

A lunch stop at a small coastal park proved fortuitous as we found a Laughing Kookaburra. This introduced species has a stronghold in New Zealand (north of Auckland) and not regularly seen on our tours. A bit more rewarding was the Shining Cuckoo that sat calling from the top of tree, as not everyone had seen the bird on day one.

We spent the afternoon back in the predator-proof fence reserve where plenty of endemic forest birds were seen, including Tui, Bellbird, NZ Fantail, Whitehead, and Kaka. This large forest parrot was seen calling and flying around above the forest canopy, never giving themselves fully up.

More Brown Teal were counted along with Buff-banded Rail with tiny fresh chicks.

As we left the car park Sacred Kingfishers and Eastern Rosellas were added to the day list along with a bagful of introduced species, Common Myna, Yellowhammer, European Goldfinch and Chaffinch.

As we sat in the restaurant that evening, the promised storm arrived with strong winds and heavy sideways rain blasting down the street - it wouldn't have been a pleasant night on Tiritiri Matangi!

13 November 2025 – Day Six

Despite the overnight stay at Tiritiri Matangi not happening, the folks behind the scenes at Wrybill were able to get us booked on a day trip. Just before catching the ferry, we spent a bit of time birding a small wetland area and added New Zealand Fernbird to the trip list. This sometimes-skulking endemic grassbird can be a challenge but a couple of birds showed very well. A large number of Brown Teal were also seen along with another glimpse of a Buff-banded Rail.

The weather still looked grey and changeable as we stepped onto Tiritiri Matangi and we had the added pressure of finding all possible new birds in a much shorter timeframe.

Birds came thick and fast as we walked along the forest trails. Our first Red-crowned Parakeets called and flicked on the flax bushes. Bellbird and Tui song filled the air. At the first feeding station one of our main targets was gathered – a smart Stitchbird/Hihi waited patiently for his time at the sugar water and was joined by a more subdued female. With his golden crest and zapping call, it was a pleasure to witness another rare endemic.

Further along the paths we saw Whiteheads, North Island Saddlebacks and few North Island Robins. Matt heard the eerie call of the North Island Kokako singing in the rain, after a brief search we located the bird. It disappeared but we re-found it, along with its mate, and we enjoyed good views of the grey ghost.

We searched for Takahe, but our luck ran out. The weather improved and as we ate lunch we had epic views of Kokako feeding in the tree above our heads, and Tuis had their lunch at a nearby feeder.

After lunch we found Brown Quail, Pukeko, Silvereye, and NZ Fantails. Still no luck with finding Takahe. On the ferry crossing back to the mainland we saw Fluttering Shearwaters and Australasian Gannets. As Tiri disappeared behind us we counted ourselves very lucky to claw back some super rare species.

The next couple of hours were spent navigating Auckland's rush hour traffic, thankfully leaving it in the rear view mirror as we headed south.

14 November 2025 – Day Seven

After breakfast we headed out to catch the dropping tide at Miranda – which means waders!

Scopes up we found our first Wrybill of the tour – the iconic small wader with a bill that curves to the right. They breed on the South Island's braided rivers but each summer a few older individuals or non-breeding birds don't travel south. Great Cormorants flew over us, Barry spotted Indian Peafowl, wild Turkey and Ring-necked Pheasants in the fields behind the estuary – and we forgave him for turning his back on Wrybill!



Pied stilts. Matt Jones.

In amongst the Wrybill was a lone NZ Dotterel and a Ruddy Turnstone, plus larger numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots and South Island Pied Oystercatchers.

This was the first day that we found all three New Zealand gull species for our list - a few smart looking, Black-billed Gulls, that joined Red-billed gulls and the bulky Kelp gulls. As we left the Miranda Visitor Centre, Brendan spotted a few small waders on the main pools – three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and a single Curlew Sandpiper were added to our expanding list.

We picked up some lunch and headed south for our next stop - a North Island forest. Almost immediately as we stepped out of the van a male New Zealand Falcon flew over us and out of view. Bugger! Not everyone got onto it. We waited but it didn't show itself again. We added Yellow-crowned Parakeet to the trip list - this small green parakeet was very vocal as it flew around and occasionally one would stop and perch. Also seen was New Zealand Pigeon, Kaka, Tui, Bellbird, Whitehead – and a showy Shining Bronze Cuckoo.

Then an alarm call from Tui, we looked up, and yes, the Falcon reappeared and everyone got onto it. We went on the hunt for Long-tailed Cuckoo, without success - unfortunately a recurring theme of this trip! We also tried for better views of Rifleman, but alas no luck.



New Zealand falcon. Paul Matson.

Before checking into our motel, Matt threw a curve ball – to see if we could find Blue Duck. The gamble paid off - we watched a family of Whio aka Blue Duck, two adults and a pair of very fresh ducklings learning to swim and feed with their parents. What an epic way to finish off the day.

15 November 2025 – Day Eight

A week into the trip and it was fair to say the weather had not been our friend. The alarm went off early this morning and we were back at the river at first light. We re-found the Blue Duck family but they were a little more distant this morning – and also found another lone duck further down the river.

We changed to a new location and found Little Black Shags, Eurasian Coots which were new birds. Plenty of Black Swans, NZ Scaup, NZ Dabchicks. Also, another NZ Fernbird.

After a change of angle, we were rewarded with a pair of Australasian Bittern flying over the reedbed, always a bonus when a bittern is seen - and all this before breakfast!

After breakfast we hit the road and a couple of hours later arrived a forested reserve. We walked amongst tall lush native trees grabbing better looks at Rifleman, we briefly saw another Kokako, plus Whitehead and our last North Island Robins.

South into the Hawkes Bay for our final bit of birding for the day, topping up on the waders - Pied Stilts, South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers, Banded Dotterel, NZ Dotterel, along with Masked Lapwings, and more Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knot.

New birds seen: a single tiny Red-necked Stint, a lone Eurasian Whimbrel, one Black-fronted Dotterel and a couple Pacific Golden Plovers. And as walked back to the van an introduced Rook flew over us – I'm not sure the boys from Kent were super stoked about this sighting! Another big day in the field complete, Blue Ducks, Bitterns, Kokako, and a good selection of waders seen.

16 November 2025 – Day Nine

The next morning looking north towards Napier we saw flighty New Zealand Pipit (that didn't seem to want to settle) and into an urban park which gave the photographers the opportunity to grab some close images of Black-billed Gulls, Royal Spoonbills etc.

Our next stop was to search for Spotless Crake; we had reasonable views over a week ago but were blessed with awesome looks this time around as this tiny, often shy, bird strutted around on the exposed mud bank. A bit of a drive day today as we left the east coast and headed southwest, stopping along the way for a sit-down lunch at local café.



Spotless crane. Paul Matson.

17 November 2025 – Day Ten

Today we were leaving the North Island to head across the Cook Strait to the South Island. On the way to the ferry terminal we headed towards an estuary where the tide was coming in, pushing the roosting birds toward us. Kelp, Red-billed and Black-billed gulls were seen, more Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knot. Five Pacific Golden Plovers, Caspian Terns and White-face Herons were joined by more South Island Pied Oystercatchers, and their larger cousin, Variable Oystercatchers.

Our final bit of birding on the North Island was at a small sewage pond, with a good selection of wildfowl: Black Swans, Australasian Shovelers, Paradise Shelducks, Grey Teal, NZ Scaup and some Mallards.

Early afternoon our ferry slipped away from downtown Wellington harbour and the crossing itself produced a few birds: Fluttering Shearwaters were by far the most common species on the crossing, but we also saw our first Albatross (a couple of White-capped), plus Westland Petrels were a new one. We also saw Buller's Shearwater, Fairy Prions, Australasian Gannets a single Arctic Skua. Cruising through Queen Charlotte Sound we saw our first Spotted Shags.

18 November 2025 – Day Eleven

The next morning we were back on the water on a small charter vessel. Once we got out into the open water we picked up some White-fronted Terns, Red-billed Gulls, and Kelp Gulls. We found a flock of Fluttering Shearwaters feeding and were joined by Australasian Gannets and a small pod of Dusky Dolphins. In amongst the Fluttering Shearwaters was a lone Flesh-footed Shearwater. Then one of our main targets was spotted - a couple of King Shags sitting on a rocky shoreline along with some of their smaller cousins, the Spotted Shag.

King Shags are only found (and breed) in this location. With around 500 individuals, it's always a pleasure to see them. We encountered another Arctic Skua and Reef Heron – and a small pod of Hector's Dolphins. This critically rare tiny dolphin with its Mickey mouse-shaped dorsal fin is endemic, and they are never a guaranteed sighting. As we approached our island destination, we found a larger flock of King Shags (over thirty in total) a significant percentage of the world's population. Once ashore, we were met almost immediately by a family of Weka - this flightless endemic rail is never shy! While the group filled the camera cards with Weka images Matt spotted not one but two Orange-fronted Parakeets feeding quietly above the Weka. This mega rare endemic was our second major target of the morning and suddenly the focus changed and cameras were grabbing shots of this wonderful little parrot. A complete bonus bird was the adult South Island Saddleback, that showed well but briefly, calling and foraging in low bushes. Other birds seen on the island were NZ Pigeons, Bellbirds, Tui, and Silvereyes. What an awesome introduction to the South Island.



Orange-fronted parakeet. Paul Matson.

Once back ashore in Picton, we grabbed some lunch and hit the road south. We naturally stopped at sewage ponds for lunch and found another new bird for the trip. Glossy Ibis are a pretty common global bird, but here in New Zealand they are a very recent natural coloniser. We watched them taking nesting material onto a small island that they shared with a large number of Royal Spoonbills. Being a water treatment plant, there was plenty of other wildfowl: Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, Grey Teal, Canada Geese, Eurasian Coots. Skylarks, Yellowhammers and Dunnocks sang all around us.

A bit further south, our next stop was a fabulous little lake that holds some pretty special birds. This would be our only chance to see Hoary-headed Grebe - we counted at least eight birds. Like the Ibis these grebes are a recent natural coloniser from Australia. There have been historic records of birds breeding in New Zealand but in recent years this small unassuming lake has become their stronghold. They shared the lake with a couple of NZ Dabchicks and the Australasian Great Crested Grebe, another new bird for the trip. The Australasian Great Crested Grebes look almost identical to the Great Crested Grebe found in Europe, but unlike their northern hemisphere cousins these birds never go into winter plumage and keep the fine head plumes all year. Maybe an armchair tick for the future, let's hope so.

The lake also held good numbers of New Zealand Scaup, Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal, Paradise Shelducks and Black Swans.



Hoary-headed grebe. Matt Jones.

Just north of Kaikoura we watched a large rookery of New Zealand Fur Seals. Large bulls lazed around on boulders making them look comfortable to sleep on, while the smaller females squabbled over space and a few tiny pups took the award for looking super cute.

We checked into our motel, which would be our base for the next two nights, and went to a local restaurant for a fine meal to toast our first day's birding on the South Island. What a first day it had been with plenty of new birds and mammals seen!

19 November 2025 – Day Twelve

Today hopefully our seabird section of the trip list would get a boost.

But first we had a chance to add an endemic land bird to our list. We drove to some farmland to a quiet piece of native bush and within a few short minutes we were graced by the presence of a single Pipipi aka Brown Creeper, a member of the Mohouidae family.

Related to the Whitehead, that we saw in the North Island, and the Yellowhead that we had yet to find. The Pipipi always reminds me of a North American Chickadee. The bird shared the trees with NZ Fantails, Silvereyes, Grey Gerygone and our first Redpolls flew over us calling.

Just gone 9am we left South Bay. The great thing about a pelagic at Kaikoura is you don't have travel too far – at our first stop we were joined by Northern Giant Petrels and the odd Cape Petrel. We stopped a couple of times over the couple of hours and the birds came thick and fast. The results were as follows: Northern Royal Albatross x2, Gibsons Wandering Albatross x7, White-capped Albatross x5, Salvin's Albatross x6, Northern Giant Petrel x11, Cape Petrel x9, Grey-faced Petrel x1, White-chinned Petrel x1, Westland Petrel x12, Short-tailed Shearwater x1, Hutton's Shearwater x23, Australasian Gannet x1. Plus, Red-billed and Kelp Gulls, White-fronted Terns. The Grey-faced Petrel was a bonus bird, which flew around the vessel a few times. Both Northern Royal Albatross, made us sweat with their late appearance. And always great to see Hutton's Shearwaters, a local endemic, breeding in the mountains behind the town of Kaikoura.

We celebrated with a sit-down lunch, and free afternoon. On the way to our evening meal Barry spotted a Little Owl perched in a tree. This small introduced owl is never a guarantee on tour, so another new bird. Kaikoura had been very kind to us.



New Zealand wandering albatross (Gibson's subsp). Paul Matson.

20 November 2025 – Day Thirteen

Taking the coastal road south out of Kaikoura, our next stop was a large estuary near Christchurch. We set up the scopes and started scanning the mudflats and tidal creeks. Scanning through wildfowl of Canada Geese, Black swans, Paradise shelducks, Australasian Shoveler and Grey Teal. We picked our first Black-fronted Terns hawking above the river, a smart looking dainty tern with a black cap and grey plumage and striking orange bill. They were joined by White-fronted Terns and the larger Caspian Terns. White-faced Herons and Royal Spoonbills fed along the water's edge. Another chance to see all three species of Gull together, Black-billed, Red-billed and Kelp.

The waders were represented by Masked Lapwings, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Banded Dotterel, Wrybill, Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot, and Pied Stilts with yapping call. As we left the estuary we picked up our one and only Mute Swan of the tour. A lot bigger than the Black Swans, it shared the tiny river location with nesting Pied Shags, New Zealand Scaup and Coots.

We stopped for lunch at the world-famous Sheffield Pie shop. Once pies had become crumbs and coffees inhaled, we headed west towards the spine of South Island, the Southern alps. A roadside field along the way had at least a dozen Black-fronted Terns hunting insects, providing a closer look than we had earlier. Once we were in the mountains we headed to a forest walk and stretched our legs. Two South Island Robins looking a bit paler on the belly than their northern cousins. We also saw Tomtits, the South Island males having a yellow breast as opposed to the North Island birds that have a white breast, plus NZ Fantails and Bellbirds.



Out in the field. Matt Jones.

Into Arthurs Pass village which sits at the halfway point between east and west is a good location to find the world's only alpine parrot, the Kea. Unfortunately, Kea tend to hang around the local shops and cafés trying to steal food from unwary people. We found four birds, doing just that. Personally, I always find it a little sad and uncomfortable seeing these wonderful intelligent rare birds in this sort of environment. Normally we try to spend the night in the village, but being a small place motels sometimes get booked out more than two years in advance. So, with Keas in the bag (not literally!) we headed west towards the coast for the night.



Kea. Paul Matson.

21 November 2025 – Day Fourteen

Heading south the next day we had a lunchtime stop at a lagoon where we saw a couple of Great Egrets (White Herons). These large birds are globally very common, but in New Zealand they are quite a rare breeding bird, but I am sure that some birds we see around New Zealand are local birds and vagrants coming in from Australia.

We had a walk around in the rain, finding Tomtits, Fernbirds, South Island Robins, Pipipi, NZ Fantail, NZ Pigeons, Grey Gerygone, Tuis and Bellbirds. The weather cleared and we tried once again to locate a Long-tailed Cuckoo, yet again we came back empty handed (we didn't even hear a distant call!), but we saw more Fernbirds, Robins, Tuis, Fantails, Pipipi.

The day's birding was not quite complete, as tonight we headed out to search for another kiwi species. We met our local guide Ian, who would help us see the world's rarest kiwi, Okarito (Rowi) Kiwi.

Kiwi are always a very difficult bird see in the wild. Their eyesight maybe not the best but they have incredible hearing and sense of smell – and they are shy. And you're trying to find them in the dark. Ian took us towards a location where he knew there was a pair, we waited and waited and listened. Nothing. It became apparent after an hour or so they were not going to appear. Ian Plan B into action and we headed to the territory of another pair of birds – within minutes we were looking at the male feeding out in the

open on the path. Phew! A collective sigh of relief as everyone watched the male walk away disappearing into the night.



Gary walking on water. Matt Jones.

22 November 2025 – Day Fifteen

Heading further south we grabbed lunch and coffee plus fuel for the van in Fox Glacier as there aren't many gas stations on the remote West Coast of the South Island.

Our next destination was a forest trail towards a remote beach for an opportunity to see Fiordland Crested Penguin. We were rewarded with watching a penguin crash land through the surf onto the beach and running up into the rocks and out of sight. Shortly afterwards a second bird mirrored the first individual. Offshore we noticed a fishing boat, so bins and scopes up, we picked out White-capped Albatross, Westland Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters and a single Buller's Shearwater. With the beach disappearing due to the rising tide, we decided to return to the car park.

Lunch was enjoyed in the car park area watching NZ Pigeons, brief looks at Shining Bronze Cuckoo, Tomtits and Bellbirds. As we were about leave, we heard the unmistakable call of a New Zealand Falcon, which we picked up briefly flying around the tops of the trees behind us. We waited for it to show itself again but no joy.



The Southern Alps. Matt Jones.

Continuing south passing some stunning scenery, our next stop was a splendid piece of forest which could hold our first chance of seeing Yellowhead. We grabbed much better looks at Rifleman - New Zealand's smallest bird was flicking around our heads and keeping the photographers happy - we also found Pipipi,

Grey Gerygone, Tui and Bellbirds ... but after an hour we hadn't heard or seen any Yellowheads. So, it was onwards south to the lakeside town of Wanaka, which is surrounded by mountains.

23 November 2025 – Day Sixteen

We were on the road by 6am today driving through some incredible scenery from steep mountain passes to lush open farmland. Today was all about trying to see one bird – the Rock Wren, sometimes known as the South Island Wren. It's a small green and yellow bird that is endemic to the mountains of the South Island. There are always a few bird species that, as a guide, you know are never guaranteed. Rock Wren is on that list! Huge factors in trying to locate this bird are terrain and weather, and its only ever possible with a fit group.

We set off with hope, fording several streams, scrambling over boulders and climbing through a forest to a large plateau. We decided to split up and search, and search we did, finding New Zealand Pipits, Dunnocks and Yellowhammers - but not our prize.

Mark was convinced he had seen a wren briefly higher up. This was our only lead, so we waited and waited, but nothing. Matt decided to climb higher. After another twenty minutes a movement caught his eye. Boom! A male Rock Wren hopped into view and straight towards him. Matt caught Barry's attention and then everyone scrambled higher and everyone got onto this iconic little bird, that at one point disappeared but returned with the female! Wow, what an effort, but we were rewarded.

We carefully made our way down to the plateau and ate a late afternoon lunch. Back down through the forest crossing the streams and eventually to the van we were met by a Kea that was wandering around the parked vehicles. They are known for their interest in rubber window seals, windscreen wipers etc and after a stern talking to by Jenny, the Kea hopped off our van and we headed south. A brief stop to see more Kea and Kaka flying around then down to a mountain river for awesome views of several breeding Black-fronted Terns that hawked up and down the river.

A big day was almost complete, but we hadn't yet seen a Morepork on this tour, so Matt made a call to fellow Wrybill guide, Neil, who lives near to where we were stopping for the night. After dinner we headed out to Neil's land and within minutes of arriving we saw two Moreporks sitting on fenceposts. We had not seen them in the North Island and our big chance would have been on Tiritiri Matangi (but the weather put paid to that). Thanks Neil!



Rock wren. Paul Matson.



Rock wren hunters. Matt Jones.

24 November 2025 – Day Seventeen

From Te Anau we headed southeast through farmland, leaving the mountains behind us, watching Black-billed Gulls and Black-fronted Terns feeding in and over sheep paddocks towards Southland's largest city, Invercargill, and further south still to where the road finishes and the harbour town of Bluff.

We caught the ferry across the Foveaux Strait towards Stewart Island, which would be our base for the next two nights. Stewart Island has the real possibility to make or break a tour. It's near the end of a tour and can provide several new species and give the trip list a shot in the arm.

Stewart Island (Rakiura) is New Zealand's third largest island, but only has a population of 400 permanent residents, of which Matt is one!

The one-hour ferry ride was rewarding - we saw several Sooty Shearwaters, White-capped Albatross, a Southern Brown Skua and a single Buller's Albatross were new for the trip - not forgetting the endemic Foveaux Shag.

After lunch we were back out on the waves catching a water taxi across to Ulva Island. Enroute we stopped to see a group of Fiordland Crested Penguins with some fluffy chicks, and also saw Little Blue Penguins, White-fronted Terns and a few Spotted Shags.

Once at Ulva Island, our main target was Yellowhead. This would be our last shot at finding this species. We were greeted by a friendly Stewart Island Robin (a sub-species of the South Island Robin) and further up the trail Matt heard the familiar call of the Yellowhead. Around the corner there was a family feeding flock! They were joined by their cousin the Pipipi, Red and Yellow-fronted Parakeets and a NZ Fantail. Further along we encountered Kaka and South Island Saddlebacks. At Boulder Beach we found Weka with chicks, and several New Zealand Sealions, which were a new endemic mammal.

That evening we headed out to try and find our final Kiwi, the Stewart Island Brown Kiwi (a sub-species of the Southern Brown Kiwi that is found on the mainland). The first bird we encountered was a Morepork hunting moths! We concluded an epic first day on Stewart Island with four Kiwi, which included an adult female, a male, a juvenile and one of this season's chicks!



Yellowhead. Paul Matson.

25 November 2025 – Day Eighteen

Our second and final day on Stewart Island would be spent at sea on a full day pelagic. We stopped again to see the Fiordland Crested Penguins, seeing four birds. A search for Yellow-eyed Penguin was fruitless but we did see Northern Giant Petrel, Cape Petrel, and several White-capped Albatross, which is by far the most common and expected Albatross in this area. Before heading south, we paid a visit to the Southern Brown Skuas that breed on an isolated rock. They put on a great show - a lot more rewarding than yesterday's brief distant view.

We spent the next forty minutes heading out into the open ocean, to a spot that has always been good for the birds. We arrived and with help of some chum soon the birds started to appear. We changed location a few times to keep it fresh and try to attract new birds. The list of birds we saw over the next few hours:

*Southern Royal Albatross, x17, White-capped Albatross x50+, Salvin's Albatross x13, *Campbell Albatross x1, Northern Giant Petrel x3, Cape Petrel x46, White-chinned Petrel x3, Westland Petrel x1, Cook's Petrel x5, *Mottled Petrel x7, *Soft-plumaged Petrel x1 Common Diving-Petrel x33, Fairy Prion x3, *Antarctic Prion x1, *Grey-backed Storm Petrel x2, Sooty Shearwaters x200+.



Mottled petrel. Paul Matson.

The * were new birds for us on this tour. The Southern Royal Albatross you would expect to see, Campbell Albatross, Mottled Petrel and Grey-backed Stormie are not too unusual, but no guarantee. The two big bonus birds were the Antarctic Prion and the Soft-plumaged Petrel. The prion arrived first, first called quickly as a Broad-billed Prion as it flew past, but a second look, and checking some of the images taken, this visitor from the south was an awesome addition. The Soft-Plumaged Petrel came in like a rocket; Matt picked it up early and fortunately everyone was onto to this very uncommon visitor from the Sub-Antarctic islands.



Stewart Island pelagic team shot. Matt Jones.

We headed back towards Halfmoon Bay and tried to find a Yellow-eyed Penguin again – scanning the beach we spotted a few Weka and Variable Oystercatchers, plus several NZ Fur-Seals. Steph who had joined us only for this pelagic spotted an adult Yellow-eyed Penguin swimming around. We got great looks. We then stopped to check out the breeding site for Foveaux Shags, then another look at the Fiordland Crested Penguins, before heading ashore seeing a few Little Blue Penguins in the harbour.

That evening we toasted a magical couple of days at Stewart Island and a fantastic final pelagic: 4 Albatross species, 3 Penguin species, and a total of 16 Tubenoses.

26 November 2025 – Day Nineteen

Stewart Island Rakiura had been super generous to us with 12 new birds for our trip list. During the one-hour ferry crossing back to Bluff we picked up a few good birds: a Fiordland Crested Penguin, White-capped Albatross, Cape Petrel, Spotted and Foveaux Shags and another Arctic Skua.

A brief stop south of Invercargill to check out a local estuary we got Paradise Shelducks, Black Swans, Grey Teal, Mallard, Australasian Shoveler, Pied Stilts, Bar-tailed Godwits, Red-billed and Black-billed Gulls. Plus, Great Cormorants and Little Pied Shags.

Heading northwards from Invercargill we left Southland behind and into Otago. Early afternoon we stopped at a reserve. Within 10 minutes of being there we spotted the main target: a Yellow-eyed Penguin was standing near the bush line. We watched as another pair walked from the bush and entered the sea, maybe to cool off as it was hottest day of the trip so far.

Looking out to sea we spotted a White-capped Albatross, Northern Giant Petrel, Fluttering Shearwater, and Australasian Gannets. A new bird was the fly by Otago Shag in amongst the Spotted Shags.

Another adult Yellow-eyed Penguin emerged from the sea and preened itself right in front of us. By far our best view so far! These penguins are endemic to New Zealand, and in recent years have slipped into the unenviable position of being the world's rarest penguin, with only 150 pairs left on mainland New Zealand. Their stronghold has become the Auckland Islands in the Subantarctic Islands. They will definitely become a bird that will be difficult (if not impossible) to find on future tours. The Māori name is Hoiho which translates as 'noise shouter' and they grace the New Zealand \$5 note.



Yellow-eyed penguin. Paul Matson.

Our final stop of the day was a breeding colony of Otago shags. These were once known as Stewart Island Shags, then became split as a separate species. Recently they were lumped back as Stewart Island Shag by eBird, and although on the Wrybill checklist they are split by subspecies, they only count as one for the checklist tally.

27 November 2025 – Day Twenty

Our final day of birding - today was all about trying to find one species - Black Stilt!

We headed west towards the Mackenzie Basin at the base of the mountains of the Southern Alps. The theme of this tour was changeable weather, the clouds moved in and the rain got heavier and heavier...

Matt drove to where he had seen stilts previously, searching every puddle, pond, and ditch. With all the rain the area had had recently there were lots of options! Finally, a head was spotted - not one, but a pair of Black Stilts! Boom! The last endemic had joined our list.

With raincoats on we approached the birds slowly letting them get comfortable with our presence. We were rewarded with amazing views. The pair were feeding in a flooded area near a lake. They would separate, keeping in touch with each other by their yapping call. After nearly an hour, we headed back to the van. The views were so great that we almost forget about the rain.



Black stilt. Paul Matson.

After lunch there was a collective decision to go and get more looks at the Stilts. You can never have enough of Black Stilt, the world's rarest wader. Yet again, this is another endemic species with around 180 birds left in the wild. They struggle with introduced and natural predators, they also struggle to find mates, so will often hybridise with the more common Pied Stilts. While watching the stilts we also saw Australasian Great Crested Grebes, Eurasian Coots, Black Swans, New Zealand Scaup, Grey Teal, and Australasian Shovelers on the nearby lake.

The wind had picked up so our chance to go and look for the introduced Chukar was taken away as the road was closed to high sided vehicles. We drove around checking out a few other sites. Our final birding stop was at the base of Mount Cook/Aoraki but unfortunately most of its 3724 meters was covered by low cloud. We checked for more Black Stilts, but without any success. We did find a single Wrybill, Banded Dotterels, South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Black-billed gulls and smart looking Black-fronted Terns.

Our last night over dinner and a few beers we recounted stories about our past three weeks' birding.



Team shot. Matt Jones.

28 November 2025 – Day Twenty-One

A leisurely start this morning. Bags, scopes, tripods and cameras were packed away and Christchurch was loaded into the Sat-Nav.

We left the landscape of rugged snow-capped mountains and the scenery changed into rolling hills and then lush farmland. Our last Swamp Harriers were seen, a species that we had seen on almost every day of the trip. Australian Magpies, Masked Lapwings and Paradise shelducks seemed to be in almost every paddock and field.

The traffic built up as we headed towards the largest city on the South Island. We broke up the journey with a caffeine break in Geraldine and then onwards to Christchurch International Airport. James was flying straight home to the UK. Brendan was flying to Australia. Mark was heading to Auckland for 24 hours, before heading home. Paul was flying up to Hamilton to meet up with some friends. Barry was dropped off at the airport motel, and Garry, Jenny and Charles were dropped into city motels.

We said our goodbyes, with a bagful of memories and lifers.