

Tour report

23 November – 6 December 2025

14-day South Island tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Blue duck with a hard to spot duckling. Sav Saville

Led by Sav Saville, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

David, Mallory, Ava & Sidney Shackelford

Images

Sav Saville

This trip was to combine a search for 22 species that David had not seen on a previous visit to NZ (when he was only on the North Island) and to have a family vacation – so included several non-birding events/days. Since the bird focus was strictly on the South Island endemics, we missed some normally visited locations and the trip-list became very unimportant.

Weather was pretty good throughout. Only one rainy day at Arthurs Pass curtailed our birding a little. Extremely windy on our day in the MacKenzie Basin. Other rainy interludes didn't bother us much.

Pretty much everything that was hoped for turned up with the notable exception of Great Spotted Kiwi (heard only). A total of 107 species along the way. And I think a good time was had by all – not least by me.

23 November 2025 – Day One

Pick-up at Christchurch Airport and drive to Kaikoura. Targets for the day were Black-fronted Tern and South Island Pied Oystercatcher.

After coffee at the Christchurch Antarctic Centre we headed for a nearby estuary where both of our target species duly appeared. The tern gave really nice close views. Also present were Wrybill, Banded Dotterel and White-fronted Terns to give a good comparison with the Black-fronted.

A brief stop at a small road-side pond added Australasian Shoveler and NZ Scaup to the list, and we had good looks at a pod of Dusky Dolphins near Goose Bay just before Kaikoura.

With a spot of time available before the scheduled Whale Watch boat trip, David and I got ahead of the game with some nearby Brown Creeper (Pipipi).

WhaleWatch Kaikoura produced a couple of Sperm Whales and several seabirds, including Northern Royal Albatross.

24 November 2025 – Day Two

Morning Albatross Encounter and drive to Picton. Target species, Spotted Shag.

Albatross Encounter with Gary Melville was good without being spectacular. About 20 albatrosses hung around with up to 10 Northern Giant Petrel, plenty of Cape and Westland Petrel, and four species of Shearwater. The best bird (for Kaikoura at least) was a Cook's Petrel.

Heading north we stopped to look for a look at a colony of Spotted Shags, along with plenty of NZ Fur Seals. Further stops to break up the journey added Hoary-headed and New Zealand Grebe, and Glossy Ibis. All good birds for NZ but only padding to the list.

25 November 2025 – Day Three

Marlborough Sounds and back to Kaikoura. Target species, King Shag, Orange-fronted Parakeet, South Island Saddleback.

E-Ko Tours boat out on Queen Charlotte Sound. Shared with Brent and his group who were on a 21-day tour.

King Shag was quickly found, a single bird on rocks quite close in to Picton. We also had Parasitic Jaeger, Little Blue Penguin and lots of Fluttering Shearwater on the way out. Non-avian highlight was a Hector's Dolphin with a tiny calf, and several pods of Dusky Dolphins too. The Southern tip of an island held a group of 47 King Shag (a good number for the site).

Once on the island we split into two groups – Brent and his group in one direction and us to another. Weka were immediately present, and within 3-4 minutes we also scored a couple of Orange-fronted Parakeet and a South Is Saddleback! I went to find Brent to tell him we were complete and ready to leave, but although we were only about 50m from Brent's group they still hadn't seen either of the targets.....so we waited and had further excellent views of both (as they also did).

26 November 2025 – Day Four

To Arthur's Pass. Target species, South Island Robin, Kea, Great Spotted Kiwi, Morepork.

Decent weather to start with and excellent pies at Sheffield Pie Shop, but drizzle and then heavy rain in Arthurs Pass village. Even in the drizzle we picked up South Is Robin without much bother, and a soaking wet Kea in the village was good enough for David.

After dinner and thankfully after the rain stopped we went out to look/listen for Great Spotted Kiwi. Nothing at either of my two favoured spots – and amazingly not a single Morepork call. David eventually returned to one spot at 03.00 next morning and at least heard a male Great Spotted Kiwi call.

27 November 2025 – Day Five

To Franz Josef. Target species, NZ Falcon, Okarito Kiwi.

Mid-morning was supposed to be a Zip-line ride on the West Coast, but a thunderstorm complete with lightning and torrential rain put paid to that idea. Instead we headed further south and after lunch got to Okarito. A brief foray there produced a few Fernbird and a perched male New Zealand Falcon which duly allowed scope views. We were then briefed on the evening kiwi session by the incomparable Ian Cooper.

Leaving Coops we stopped at another part of the forest where he had recently heard Long-tailed Cuckoo. Nothing for us but a couple of Brown Creeper and another NZ Falcon flew over.

Setting off at 20.25 with Coops, we strode off into the forest – shoes and socks off for the river crossing. At 21.40 we were treated to a duet of calls by "Moss" and "Rico", but then the long wait ensued. Coops thought that the male had crossed the path and headed away, so we went searching for another pair and at one stop for a burst of telemetry we had a Morepork in view perched above the vehicle.

By 23.15 the kids had had enough and so I retreated to the vehicle to keep them company while David, Mallory and Coops kept looking. At 00.55 they were finally rewarded with epic close views of "Moss" right on the road. Okarito Kiwi – tick.

28 November 2025 – Day Six

To Wanaka. Target species, Fiordland Crested Penguin.

A slow start after last night's exertions, and coffee in Franz township – six Kea overflowed the middle of town.

We had very pleasant walk through forest to a beach, with a calling NZ Falcon overhead remaining unseen, and two Bush Giant Dragonflies, in warm sunny weather. The beach itself didn't disappoint though the tide was pretty high, with two Fiordland Crested Penguin making their way out of the surf and up the cliff.

About the only butterflies of the whole trip were a hatching of NZ Red Admirals near Pleasant Flat. A forested location that we stopped in was very quiet with just a few Rifleman being the highlight.

Great Crested Grebes showed well at a lake stop, and we had a great meal at Ashraf's. While walking back to the accommodation David had another NZ Falcon fly through the very centre of town.

29 November 2025 – Day Seven

Non-birding day to Queenstown.

Great scenery. Bungy Jumping at the Kawerau Gorge, the Queenstown Gondola and Luge and a jetboat ride on the Shotover Jet. A day of fun for all and almost no birds seen!

30 November 2025 – Day Eight

To Te Anau, glowworms and quickly into the Eglinton Valley. Target species, Blue Duck.

We pretty much headed straight for a spot where I judged the best chance of Blue Duck would be. A Kaka flying over the road was good, and we had several Black-fronted Terns over the grassy paddocks by the side of the road.

On arrival at said location, a Kea was in the car park. We split up to cover as much ground as possible and all of the various patches of water. It wasn't long before I found a Blue Duck which allowed the current to carry it right past/under us as we stood on a tiny bridge. David then found a pair with three ducklings which gave us ridiculously close views.

Back to Te Anau and the glow worm cave excursion was a successful end to a successful day.

1 December 2025 – Day Nine

Milford Sound.

Mostly a day of drizzle and rain, and cold! A bunch of quite nice birds through the day – Kea, Kaka, Weka, Tomtit, Black-fronted Tern. The family had a good time on the Milford boat, and then it was back to Te Anau.

2 December 2025 – Day Ten

To Stewart Island and Ulva. Target species, Foveaux Shag (Stewart Island Shag, southern subsp), Yellowhead, Southern Brown Kiwi.

The ferry ride to Stewart Island was fairly quiet on smooth seas. A Fiordland Crested Penguin was glimpsed, and Common Diving Petrel was new for the trip but the most surprising thing was good numbers of Fluttering Shearwater in Foveaux Strait – not something I'd seen before. A couple of Foveaux Shag were seen.

Lunch and then an extended water taxi ride to Ulva Island, where two adult Fiordland Crested Penguins showed well and one juvenile was seen in a cave.

Once on Ulva we only had one objective – Yellowhead. It turned out to be the most numerous species that we encountered – Yellowhead were everywhere! Also Yellow-crowned and Red-crowned Parakeet, several Kaka, Brown Creeper, Rifleman, Weka and three South Island Saddlebacks included one juvenile “Jackbird” which was good to see.

A female New Zealand Sea-lion almost blocked the way to Sydney Cove.

Our evening trip with Beaks and Feathers was very successful with at least 6 different Southern Brown Kiwi seen very well – prolonged close views for all.

3 December 2025 – Day Eleven

Stewart Is pelagic. Target, Yellow-eyed Penguin.

I had allowed the morning for a re-attack on Ulva if the weather had been unkind, but that was not required. Our afternoon pelagic was rather quiet by Stewart Island standards, but 60+ albatross around the boat is always nice. Diversity was low and there were no surprises, but all three species of breeding penguin were very welcome – particularly the one swimming and two land-based Yellow-eyed Penguins!

That night David went out on his own and found another kiwi and had great close looks at Morepork.

4 December 2025 – Day Twelve

Off Stewart to Oamaru. Target species, Otago Shag (Stewart Island Shag, northern subsp).

A brief Mottled Petrel from the ferry was a highlight and then the long drive up towards Oamaru. We stopped along the way and had two more Yellow-eyed Penguin – one very close and co-operative. Several Otago Shags flew past while we were there.

Then a breeding colony of Otago Shags visited.

5 December 2025 – Day Thirteen

Mackenzie Basin. Target species, Black Stilt.

As always, the end of the trip is all about Black Stilt. For some reason, this year they have been a little hard to pin down so far – and today was no exception. Many places where stilts might be were underwater with water levels very high indeed. We eventually tracked down a sub-adult Black Stilt at one location in an absolute gale. Standing up was hard enough and using a scope was almost impossible. Hardly the most satisfying individual, but at least we have some time to try again tomorrow

6 December 2025 – Day Fourteen

We had about an hour to rectify the missing adult Black Stilt deficit before hightailing it to the Antarctic Centre, and it just about worked. David spotted an adult which was rather distant but at least was in good light and there was none of yesterday's wind. With Banded Dotterel, and Wrybill for company as well as a couple of Pectoral Sandpiper (what on earth are they doing there?) this was to be our last bird of the tour.