

Tour report

31 January – 20 February 2026

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Juvenile New Zealand falcon. Matt Jones.

Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Therese & Dan Sheffer, Lynne & Ron Demaine, Rob Leighton, Bill Baliey, and Ken Harris

Images

Matt Jones

Overall, this 21-day tour was highly successful. We saw a very respectable 155 species. Our only major dip was not finding a Little Spotted Kiwi while we on Tiritiri Matangi, which at the time was a hard pill to swallow. But that low point was completely overshadowed by the high points. First the weather, over which we had no control, overall was great, when it rained, we seemed to be in the van driving. We had a lot of luck in connecting with some tricky birds. South Island Takahe, North Island Kokako, Black Stilt, Grey Noddy, to name but a few, even though Fairy Terns and Yellow-eyed Penguins made us work. Incredible looks at Baillon's and Spotless Crakes, an amazing Okarito Kiwi experience, not forgetting the wonderful NZ Falcon. We grabbed a few bonus birds like the Glossy Ibis, Cattle Egret, Hoary-headed Grebe. And two pelagics at either end of the country provided two very rare mainland birds: Wedge-tailed Shearwater in the north and White-headed Petrel in the south.

The group gelled together well, relaxed and birded like a team. Other highlights were seeing Dan attack his first fry up! Bill, rating every sticky date pudding that he ate - there were a lot! As a guide it was a pleasure to show you around New Zealand, and find and show you most of its special bird life.

31 January 2026 – Day One

We left our downtown Auckland hotel, with everyone and on time- I say this because Matt had a message from Lynne, to say Ron, Bill and herself were going to be delayed in Hong Kong by 24 hours. Ah the joys of international travel! As we were packing the van to begin the tour, Lynne, Ron and Bill arrived straight from Auckland airport.

Our first spot of birding was at local reserve (a country park and golf course!) and new birds came thick and fast. Our first endemics seen were the iconic Tui with its clicky whistly call, the tiny Grey Gerygone, and the larger New Zealand Pigeon. A few introduced birds joined the list: Ring-necked Pheasants, Spotted Dove, Eastern Rosella and the noisy Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. On the golf course itself were Purple Swamphens aka Pukeko and Masked lapwings, as Welcome Swallows hawked insects off the fairways.

Next stop a Gannet colony. This mainland colony is not very far from New Zealand's largest city, and like a city, there was a lot of noise and hustle and bustle in amongst these Australasian Gannets. Because it was later in the season there were a lot of speckled looking chicks. Kelp and Red-billed Gulls flew around plus a handful of White-fronted Terns. Our first couple of Sacred Kingfishers were spotted, plus Tui, Grey Gerygone, and Silvereyes sang from nearby bushes.

Our next stop was not far away, thanks to fellow Wrybill guide Dave, who had found a close Australasian Bittern. We pulled over on a busy road and searched a flooded cow paddock - after a little confusion about which black cow it was standing next too - we all had very reasonable looks. Beyond the Bittern we saw Indian Peafowl, Australasian Swamp Harrier, and a White-face Heron.

A cross-country drive from West to East, we headed to our first sewage ponds of the trip for a good selection of wildfowl and waterbirds! The endemic New Zealand Dabchick was a pleasant addition to the list, plus New Zealand Scaup, Australasian Shoveler, Mallards, Canada Geese, Paradise Shelducks, a couple more White-faced Herons - and the rare Brown Teal. This endemic has become a much more common sight in recent years.

After a bit of a drive around the area we found three species of Shag - Pied, Little Pied and Little Black. A bonus bird put in a brief appearance - a New Zealand Pipit. As soon as it was spotted it took flight and disappeared, but we also saw a pair of endemic New Zealand Dotterels sitting on far beach.

Heading north towards our first piece of North Island forest, the first challenge was to find a place to park near the fenced reserve. It was a sunny Saturday at the end of the school holidays, so to say the place was heaving was an understatement. Fortunately, the humans were crowded onto the beach area and not looking for the birds!

We found our first Bellbirds, with melodic song, then the rattlier call of the Whiteheads. More endemics came in the shape of our first North Island Saddlebacks and North Island Robins. New Zealand Fantails, and more Tuis were encountered, along with splendid looks at New Zealand Pigeons, and a small family of Brown Teal.

We left the reserve as the car park was emptying out and the local Pukeko were feeding around our van. By now Lynne, Ron and Bill were feeling pretty shattered as they had been on the go for over 24 hours. After our evening meal Bill seemed to be revived by his first encounter with a Sticky Date Pudding!

1 February 2026 – Day Two

Before boarding the vessel for our first pelagic today, we checked out a small lagoon and spotted at least three Buff-banded rails, and our first South-Island Pied Oystercatchers along with the larger Variable Oystercatchers and a group of Pied Stilts. A small party of distant Kaka and a Caspian Tern was also seen.

Once aboard, we headed out of the channel to open water, enroute we found a couple of Little Blue Penguins. Fluttering Shearwaters were joined by the larger Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters, then Cook's Petrels started to tack past the vessel.

As we left the shelter of land, we counted at least five Arctic Skuas. At the first chum location it didn't take too long for Flesh-footed Shearwaters to arrive followed by a few Buller's Shearwater, and we picked out our first Black Petrel aka Parkinsons Petrel. A Little Shearwater zipped through but not everyone got onto this bird. A shout went out - Stormie! A White-faced Storm Petrel skipped into the slick, and Matt picked up the main target of the day - a New Zealand Storm Petrel arrived! This tiny black and white bird put on a great show over the next couple of hours and it was joined by another two New Zealand Stormies.



New Zealand storm petrel. Matt Jones.

We steamed out further to a group of isolated rocks and reached the outcrop. It was a gamble which paid off. Roosting on the rocks were 23+ Grey Noddy aka Grey Ternlets. They don't breed at this location (it's just a summer roosting site for this tropical bird) but we were glad to see them. While watching the Noddys we spotted a small flock of Fairy Prions, similar in size and colour to the Noddys, feeding in amongst the upswell from the rocks. There was a good size colony of Australasian Gannets. Happy with our gamble and looks we headed back to our first chum location. Once back in position we witnessed a pod of Bryde's

Whales which fed all around us. The slick was doing its thing which attracted another New Zealand and White-faced Storm Petrel. More Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwaters showed up bringing in a lone Short-tailed Shearwater.

On the way back to land we found a couple more showy Little Blue Penguins in amongst the Fluttering Shearwaters.

2 February 2026 – Day Three

Our first stop today was to search for Laughing Kookaburra. This large kingfisher has a stronghold north of Auckland - we came up empty handed but we did see more Kaka and NZ Pigeons and found our first Song Thrush and California Quail.

The next part of the day would be playing 'find me if you can' with Fairy Terns. They almost beat us! Our first stop didn't pay off because of the high tide, so Plan B was to go and buy lunch and try a different location. While waiting we saw Bar-tailed Godwits, Banded Dotterels, New Zealand Dotterels, Ruddy Turnstones, plenty of Variable Oystercatchers, Masked Lapwings and Pied Stilts, a pair of juvenile Buff-banded Rails ... but no Terns. Plan C was put into action - go back to the original site! Within minutes of arriving Lynne and Matt spotted a pair of distant terns. They had given us the runaround, but everyone got onto them as they hunted up and down the creeks left by the falling tide. Phew! We also added a small flock of Red Knots, to the trip list.

With the day sort of back on track, an hour or so later we parked the van in a very urban looking housing estate. The modern houses overlooked a large pond and we found the main target bird - Australasian Little Grebe - actually around 15 birds including some very fresh-looking chicks. This recent coloniser is becoming more widespread throughout the north of the North Island and looks very similar to the Little Grebe that's found in Europe with chestnut neck and yellow tear drop at the base of the eye. They share this pond with a small number of New Zealand Dabchicks, a few Australasian Shovelers, New Zealand Scaup, Masked Lapwings and Red-billed Gulls. Around the estate we also saw Spotted and African Collared Doves.

Later that evening, Matt walked around the motel grounds after getting a tip-off about a Morepork. And there it was snoozing in a punga - a juvenile Morepork, New Zealand's endemic owl. Everyone stopped unpacking their bags to come out and see this nocturnal hunter, and we also saw some African collared doves feeding on the lawn.

Our big day was not quite over - we headed out to search for our first Kiwi, the Northern Brown Kiwi. Just like the other four kiwi species, they are shy and do not want to be seen, so being quiet and patient is key (plus a bit of luck!). We heard males and females calling as we walked around in the dark. We saw four birds and each look got better. The final bird walked on the path in front of Rob and then disappeared into a thick bush. Matt moved the group into a clearing, and a male kiwi walked out into the open in front of everyone. Day complete!

3 February 2026 – Day Four

Today would be our second pelagic. Skipper Steve took us to a small harbour island which was home to plenty of Pied and Little Pied Shags. We also found a pair of Pacific Reef Herons that also breed here.

We left the island and headed out into deeper water, seeing the common Fluttering Shearwaters that are a coastal Shearwater. Our next stop was for a pair of Little Blue Penguins, one of which wasn't very blue! This bird was leucistic, so looked pale in the plumage. We left the Penguins, and further out found Australasian Gannets, Buller's Shearwaters and Flesh-footed Shearwaters. As we steamed out to the first chum location we noted our first Cook's Petrels and a single White-faced Storm Petrel.

Steve found the spot and started to chum and lay a slick. There was a little more breeze than a couple of days ago, so hopes were high. We pretty much stayed drifting in the same area for the next several hours. The birds found us - we counted over twenty White-faced-Storm Petrels, at least seven New Zealand Storm Petrels, which put on an awesome show, skipping and hopping past the stern of the vessel. We had at least six Black Petrels, that can play hide and seek in amongst the more common Flesh-footed Shearwaters - there must have been over fifty birds. In amongst the Cook's Petrels we picked out at least two good Pycroft's Petrels, but there was definitely another couple of possible Pycroft's that got away! A single Black-winged Petrel put on a show and good appearance, picked out by it being much darker on the outside of the underwing and a pale grey neck collar. A single Fairy Prion joined the Stormies in the slick.

Bird of the day went to the Wedge-tailed Shearwater. This rare visitor from the more tropical north was a surprise addition to the day. Not a striking looking bird, it was a dark morph individual, so looked like a



Wedge-tailed shearwater. Matt Jones.

large Sooty Shearwater but with the longer bill and a long tail, that would often form the wedge shape as it banked around the vessel. It stayed with us for a good 20+ minutes, even landing on the sea a few times.

It wasn't all birds, we had a two metre Shortfin Mako that was attracted to the slick, and on the way back we found at least a couple more Bryde's whales that were feeding near a large group of diving and plunging Australasian Gannets. On the way back into the harbour we saw plenty of waders: Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers, and a few New Zealand Dotterels.

4 February 2026 – Day Five

An early start towards bright lights of Auckland and the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi. "Tiri" as it's often called, is a predator-free island and is a beaming light of New Zealand's conservation efforts to save its rare and endangered species.

We were in the privileged position of getting to spend the night on the island. As we waited at the harbour we watched a Little Blue Penguin swimming around, and a Pacific Reef Heron on the sea wall. During the 20 –25 minute ferry crossing we saw a couple of Arctic Skuas, Fluttering Shearwaters, and one Buller's Shearwater.

Once on the island, we listened to the briefing from the Ranger and went birding. It often seems like a trolley dash in a supermarket! We had a shopping list of birds we hoped/needed to find as in some cases this island would be our only chance of finding them.

We set off on a favoured forest trail. Brown Teal on a small pond, a pair of Red-crowned Parakeets called and flew over. A North Island Robin appeared, Bellbirds and Tuis were all around us, a large New Zealand Pigeon slept in a tree above the path. There were the constant rattling calls from parties of Whiteheads. We came to a sugar water feeding station and there was one of our main targets - a stunning male Stitchbird (Māori name Hihi). The early settlers gave the bird the name Stitchbird, thinking the call was the word "Stitch". To me it sounds like an electric zap. With his golden yellow side crests on his black head he is a striking looking bird. He was soon joined by a less colourful looking female as they jostled with the Bellbirds for a feed.

A bit further along we found another new species, New Zealand's smallest bird - the Rifleman. This tail-less New Zealand wren is not overly uncommon but because of the size and very high-pitched call can be tricky to find but we saw a family of three birds flicking around in the undergrowth. As we continued, we encountered North Island Saddlebacks. The group ahead of us stopped. We stopped. Above them was another major target for the trip – a North Island Kokako was feeding in a fruiting tree. We watched as this sometimes-elusive bird gave great views. The Kokako is a member of the New Zealand wattle birds. Related to the North Island and South Island Saddlebacks, the extinct South Island Kokako and Huia.

Some rustling in the forest behind us, our first Brown Quail was playing hide and seek. Once in the clearing, we encountered plenty of feeding Pukeko and searched (unsuccessfully) for their larger cousin the South Island Takahe.

After lunch and some retail therapy at the Visitor Centre we spent the afternoon birding and found more North Island Kokako, North Island Saddlebacks, North Island Robins, Whiteheads, Stitchbirds, Red-crowned

Parakeets, Bellbirds, Tuis, and more Brown Teal. A couple of New Zealand Fernbirds showed briefly - not everyone got onto them, but we have other chances of this bird. Other birds seen were Brown Quail which showed better than the first sighting, a pair of Spotless crakes sort of showed themselves, Eastern Rosellas, Sacred Kingfishers, and Welcome Swallows.

We headed back to the bunkhouse accommodation for our BBQ dinner cooked by Matt and helped by Dan and the team. Lamb, Gurnard, salad and potatoes were served with a beer or wine or both!

An early evening walk around towards the lighthouse, Matt spotted a family of South Island Takahe. Rushing back to the bunkhouse, everyone enjoyed great views of this dinosaur-bird, thought to be extinct up until the late 1940s. Two adults were helped by a juvenile, as they cared for this year's chick, just awesome to witness.

As darkness fell, it was time to try and locate a Little Spotted Kiwi. Trying all the usual places Matt had found them previously, revealed Tuatara and a Little Blue Penguin but no kiwi. It was a bitter pill to swallow, particularly for Matt who has never *not* found this bird on previous trips.



South Island takahe. Matt Jones.

5 February 2026 – Day Six

We had a pre-breakfast walk around some of the trails - the Takahe family, were still happily feeding where we'd seen them the night before. More North Island Saddlebacks, North Island Kokako, North Island Robins, Stitchbirds, Whiteheads, New Zealand Fantails, Tuis, and Red-crowned Parakeets, were all seen. Yesterday's lifers had become today's ticks as we headed down to the wharf to meet our water taxi back to the mainland.

The traffic on the motorway was clear as we headed south of Auckland and we made good time to our next stop. Timing was spot on as the tide was just starting to drop and there were plenty of waders to be seen from the hides at the Miranda Shorebird Centre.

We spent the next few hours enjoying the spectacle of a huge number of waders. These included our first Wrybills - a tiny endemic wader with a bill that curves to the right – which were in amongst thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knots, at least forty-five Pacific Golden-plover were spread amongst the Banded Dotterels and a few New Zealand Dotterels. Thousands of South Island Pied Oystercatchers, a few Variable Oystercatchers, Pied Stilts and Masked Lapwings, and then Matt spied four Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. Wow what an afternoon!

It wasn't all waders. We found Royal Spoonbills roosting in a nearby tree, plus a few Great Cormorants and Grey Teal. Pukeko fed along the edge of the water, and White-faced Herons and Swamp Harriers were also present.

6 February 2026 – Day Seven

This morning we found our first Black-billed Gulls sitting in amongst Red-billed Gulls, so you could see the differences between these two species. We watched a large flock of Wrybill feeding on the rising tide which were joined by Bar-tailed Godwits, a large flock of South Island Pied Oystercatchers, a handful of Banded Dotterels, and plenty of White-fronted Terns and Caspian Terns.

At the main hides we re-found two of the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Pacific Golden Plovers, more Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots, huge numbers of South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Pied Stilts, plus Banded and New Zealand Dotterels. On the way back to the van we found seven Eurasian Whimbrel sitting in front of one of the hides - a nice little bonus!

At a new hide, another bonus bird in the shape of an Eastern Cattle-Egret in full breeding plumage, with its yellow bill and golden wash on its white plumage. It stuck out from the Royal Spoonbills it was associating with. Cattle Egrets overwinter in New Zealand in rather large numbers and I'm never sure why they haven't established themselves here. We also found a couple of Glossy Ibis, that have become a breeding bird in New Zealand, albeit in small numbers. Plenty of Australasian Shovelers, Grey teal, Paradise Shelducks and Pied Stilts on the pools as a male Yellowhammer sang from a low bush.

Time to head south and towards the centre of the North Island. At a large, forested area we saw our first Yellow-crowned Parakeet. Also seen were Tomtit, Kaka, New Zealand Pigeons, Whiteheads, Tuis and

Silvereyes. Matt heard a familiar call - a Long-tailed Cuckoo aka Long-tailed Koel was flying around us and fortunately landed in a tree for a better view. Along the forest trail we got North Island Robins, New Zealand Fantails, Tomtits and Grey Warblers. Kaka and New Zealand Pigeons flew overhead and we heard the call of a juvenile New Zealand Falcon – then found the bird sitting on an exposed tree stump. Falcons can be tricky birds to find so it was a relief to see this bird in the scope and we called it a day, happy with our haul of new birds.

7 February 2026 – Day Eight

An early start today – first stop was a fast-flowing river to search for another endemic bird - Blue Duck. Blue Duck (Whio) is New Zealand's torrent duck and its favoured habitat is fast clean rivers. As the sun began to rise we picked up a pair of Blue Ducks flying fast downstream. We relocated ourselves further down the river and walked up the riverbank to find them feeding in the middle of the river. We watched them for the next forty minutes - an awesome start to the day.

In amongst a large reedbed we found Eurasian Coots, Black Swans, Great Cormorants, Little Pied and Little Black Shags, New Zealand Dabchicks, Black-billed Gulls, New Zealand Scaup, and a Pacific Black Duck aka Grey Duck. Then the plaintive chip call of a New Zealand Fernbird - with a bit of searching and luck we found this cryptic endemic, a relief to those who had not had great looks on Tiri a few days earlier. Moving to get a little height overlooking the reedbed we were lucky once more as an Australasian Bittern took flight over the reeds, which flushed a second bird! We watched as these shy secretive birds flew around and away from us and out of view.

We headed back to the motel for some breakfast, packed the van and headed northeast, around Lake Taupo. A couple hours later, we arrived at our last bit of North Island Forest, which to be honest was a little quiet. We saw Tomtit, Silvereyes, our last North Island Robins and Whiteheads – probably the best sighting was a pair of North Island Kokako with a juvenile – it's not often you get to see them at this location.

Down into the Hawkes Bay town of Napier, we stopped at urban park where some species were a little less shy of humans, providing good photographic opportunities. Royal Spoonbills, Black-billed Gulls, Grey Teal, Australasian Shovelers to name but a few.



Black swan (above) and Royal spoonbill. Matt Jones.

8 February 2026 – Day Nine

At a local wetland reserve not too far from our accommodation, there were Royal Spoonbills feeding and Pukeko calling. We were hoping to see a Spotless Crake as only a few of the group had seen them briefly on Tiri a week ago. As we were about to leave Matt heard a call from behind us. A tiny little blue and brown crake with bubblegum-coloured legs, and bright red eye-ring darted in-between the mud and reeds – and everyone got on to this tiny bird.

Moving to some tidal mudflats, waders were back in our focus. Scanning with scopes we saw Pied Stilts, Variable and a few South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Masked Lapwings, New Zealand and Banded Dotterels. Bar-tailed Godwits flew in, bringing at least three Pacific Golden Plovers, with them. A lone Wrybill was found, a single Black-fronted Dotterel and then a new tiny bird was spotted ... a Red-necked Stint was feeding on the scrapes.

It wasn't all waders. Also present were Canada Geese, Black Swans, Grey Teal in large numbers as were Australasian Shovelers, and Royal Spoonbills were always in view. We spent an enjoyable couple of hours before heading back to the van. On the way we watched Monarch Butterflies feeding on the flowers alongside the path.

Once back in the van we headed southwest, passing through a lot of farmland before sitting down at a great little cafe for lunch, where Dan tried his first fry up! Bellies full, we continued our journey to another tidal estuary. Timing was perfect as the rising tide pushed the birds towards us. We counted 15 Wrybill, 7 Pacific Golden Plover, 24 Banded Dotterels, 100 Bar-tailed Godwits, 12 Red Knots, 31 Pied Stilts, all three of New Zealand's gull species - Kelp, Red-billed and Black-billed – plus White-fronted and Caspian Terns, and both flavours of Oystercatcher.

9 February 2026 – Day Ten

Today was all about catching the ferry to the South Island so our last bit of North Island birding was at a small sewage pond, where we found large numbers of Paradise Shelducks. Black Swan, Grey Teal, New Zealand Scaup, Australasian Shovelers, a pair of New Zealand Dabchicks, Pied Stilts with young, but no hoped for Black-fronted Dotterels.

The new smart motorway took us into New Zealand's capital city, Wellington where we'd board our ferry south. The open sea section of the crossing can be the most rewarding, as it was on this occasion, seeing our first Albatross of the trip.

Two Northern Royal Albatross, 8 White-capped Albatross, 6 Salvins Albatross, 3 White-chinned Petrels, 1 Westland Petrel, 2 Flesh-footed Shearwaters, 1 Buller's Shearwater, 3 Sooty Shearwaters, 6 Hutton's Shearwaters, 22 Fluttering Shearwaters, and 1 Arctic Skua. Not too shabby for a ferry ride. Let's not forget the huge pod of Short-beaked Common Dolphins that crossed the wake as we left the Wellington Harbour.

Once into Queen Charlotte Sound the birdlife changed a little. There were still Fluttering Shearwaters and Australasian Gannets, but we saw our first Spotted Shags and a single New Zealand King Shag, plus Little

Pied and Pied Shags. The ferry docked into Picton Harbour, and we headed straight for an early evening meal.

10 February 2026 – Day Eleven

We boarded our charter vessel at 7:30am and headed into the Sound in search of some new birds for the South Island. We encountered a small party of New Zealand King Shags, aka Rough-faced Shag. We had briefly seen one yesterday from the ferry - this is the most northern of the Subantarctic shags and only breed in this location – it has a small population of around 500-600 birds.

From seeing a rare shag, we soon found a rare dolphin – Hector's Dolphins are a very rare endemic Dolphin. The world's smallest oceanic dolphin with an obvious Mickey mouse shaped dorsal fin. We saw at least twenty animals busily feeding in a small bay and a larger roosting group of King Shags (40+) plus a couple of snoozing New Zealand Fur Seals.



Hector's dolphin. Matt Jones.

The vessel dropped us off at an island for our only chance to see Orange-fronted Parakeet aka Malherbe's Parakeet. First, attention was distracted by seeing our first Weka! This endemic flightless rail is not very shy and almost demand to be watched and photographed. But back onto the search for a small green parrot hiding amongst green trees!

We did find a pair of South-Island Saddlebacks which are a lot rarer than their northern cousin. In 1963 there were only 36 individual South-Island Saddlebacks left in the World and they were only found on a small island off of Stewart Island called Big Cape. We also found New Zealand Pigeons, Bellbirds, Tomtits, Silvereyes, and Tuis.

A shout went out. Parakeet! The Orange-fronted Parakeet landed in amongst the foliage and gave itself up briefly before disappearing again. Back onboard the vessel we headed over to another bay for better looks at a group of showy Spotted Shags and NZ Fur Seals and were escorted back into the harbour by Fluttering Shearwaters.



Spotted shag. Matt Jones.

While waiting in a traffic jam heading south, we spied our first Black-fronted Tern as we sat on a bridge crossing a river - there would be better looks in the future! A brief stop at sewage ponds for Glossy Ibis didn't pay off, luckily, we had seen a couple of birds early on.

At a large lake, we saw another new bird for our trip, Hoary-headed Grebe. This recently self-introduced bird from Australia is now breeding in New Zealand and this lake was a stronghold. We counted at least four birds. We also saw another two grebe species - a pair of endemic New Zealand Dabchicks and a larger Australasian Great Crested Grebe - looking like a Great Crested Grebe that you would find in Europe but these birds never go into winter plumage. A future tick down the line? Let's hope so! We also saw Australasian Shovelers, New Zealand Scaup, Black Swans, Eurasian Coots, and a pair of Royal Spoonbills.

Just north of Kaikoura we stopped to admire the antics of a large New Zealand Fur Seal colony. Most of the larger males had left so we watched young pups learning to swim in tidal rock pools, all while the females slept making rocks and boulders look comfortable.

A final bit of birding before checking into our accommodation. We drove some back roads crossing through farmland, and were soon watching an introduced Little Owl. The bird had been found on a previous Wrybill trip, so with a little bit of luck and searching, we had re found the bird.

11 February 2026 – Day Twelve

At 6:30am we left the marina and headed out into the open ocean. If you're a birder and you're in Kaikoura, it must be pelagic time! I must have been on countless pelagics out of Kaikoura over the years but today we were doing two back-to-back pelagics, before lunch. Awesome stuff!

The result of both pelagics –

Pelagic Number 1: Arctic Skua x1, Northern Royal Albatross x2, Southern Royal Albatross x1, Wandering Albatross (Gibson's) x6, White-capped Albatross x2, Salvin's Albatross x2, Black-browed Albatross x1, Northern Giant Petrel x6, Southern Giant Petrel x1, Cape Petrel x17, White-chinned Petrel x2, Westland Petrel x1, Flesh-footed Shearwater x1, Buller's Shearwater x2, Short-tailed Shearwater x2, Hutton's Shearwater x5, Black-fronted Tern x1, Australasian Gannet x1. The bonus bird on this pelagic was the juvenile Southern Giant Petrel. A reasonably common winter visitor to New Zealand, but a nice addition in February. We also got better looks at a lone Black-fronted Tern.

Pelagic number 2: After our first successful pelagic we grabbed a coffee at a nearby café, and boarded the vessel again at 9:30, with Kevin at the helm. Caspian Tern x4, Southern Royal Albatross x2, Wandering Albatross (Gibson's) x7, White-capped Albatross x4, Salvin's Albatross x5, Black-browed Albatross x1, White-faced Storm-Petrel x1, Northern Giant Petrel x6, Cape Petrel x8, White-chinned Petrel x4, Westland Petrel x1, Flesh-footed Shearwater x2, Buller's Shearwater x2, Short-tailed Shearwater x2, Hutton's Shearwater x4, Australasian Gannet x1. The Black-browed would have been the same bird as the first pelagic and not everyone got onto the flyby White-faced stormie.

Very happy with our morning's birding we headed back into the town of Kaikoura for a slap-up sit-down brunch. We had been on the road nearly two weeks so we had a free afternoon for retail therapy, snoozing, answering emails etc and met later for a fine evening meal and toasted the seabirds of Kaikoura.



Northern giant petrel. Matt Jones.



New Zealand wandering albatross (Gibson's subspecies). Matt Jones.



Southern Royal albatross. Matt Jones.



Juvenile New Zealand wandering albatross. Matt Jones.

12 February 2026 – Day Thirteen

We left the town of Kaikoura, with a brief stop to admire a large pod of Dusky Dolphins that were offshore. Heading inland we stopped at a small piece of forest to look for a Pipipi aka Brown Creeper. This was our first opportunity to find this endemic little bird which is restricted to the South Island. It's in the Mohouidae family and related to the Whitehead we had seen on the North Island - and the Yellowhead that we would hope to encounter further south. They fill the niche of New Zealand warblers. We were lucky as a single bird showed up, calling and hopping around our heads. We also saw and heard our first Redpoll fly over, along with Silvereyes, Grey Gerygone and New Zealand Fantails.

Heading south a couple of hours later we arrived at a large estuary which held a lot of birds. Black Swans, Canada Geese, Paradise Shelducks, Australasian Shovelers and Grey Teal. Waders were represented by Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Banded Dotterels, Bar-tailed Godwits and Pied Stilts. Three species of gull: Kelp, Red-billed and Black-billed. Three species of tern: Caspian, White-fronted and Black-fronted. Spotted Shags and Pied Shags. Royal Spoonbills. A White-faced Heron and a Sacred Kingfisher fed in front of us.

On a small river we saw our first Great Egret aka White Heron, and an introduced Mute Swan. We then went on little twitch and dipped - we failed to find the Maned Duck (or if you're old-school like me, Australian Wood Duck!). She had been reported around a local golf course, but we couldn't find the birdie!!



Great egret. Matt Jones.

We bypassed Christchurch and headed inland to the spine of the South Island, the Southern Alps. We joined a queue for lunch at the world-famous Sheffield Pie shop before driving west and into the mountains. We stopped at a forest in a valley at the base of some impressive peaks. A forest trail led us to a family of South Island Robins, two adults and two juveniles, which hopped around our feet. An awesome encounter! We also saw Tomtits and Bellbirds.



The team. Matt Jones.

Into the village of Arthur's Pass we were joined by at least three Kea at the store/café! Kea is the only Alpine Parrot in the world and endemic to New Zealand's South Island. They can be carnivores and have been known to attack and kill other bird species. They are incredibly intelligent, which gets them in trouble. These three birds hanging around the store were hoping to steal some snacks – we had some ice cream and watched their antics. At another more natural looking location we hoped to see Kea, but they were not present.

Arthur's Pass village was super busy - our timing wasn't great because once a year there is a multi-event race called the Coast to Coast, which crosses from the west coast to the east coast of the South Island. Competitors run, kayak and cycle through the southern Alps and this weekend was race weekend. Everything and everywhere was super busy.



Keeping kea safe. Matt Jones.

That evening we tried to at least hear a Great-spotted Kiwi, but heard nothing. This is by far the most difficult Kiwi to see in New Zealand - the terrain is tough and you need time and a lot of luck. As we got back to the van Matt heard rustling in the forest nearby. The culprit was a Brush-tailed Possum! Not quite the hoped-for result!

13 February 2026 – Day Fourteen

Today was race day for the Coast to Coast and we heard this could mean delays and road closures so we left our accommodation earlier than planned. It was a very wet day with constant rain falling, so we left the Village and headed west. The rain was driving right into the oncoming racers and we didn't envy the leading group of cyclists as they rode up through the mountains. The van's wiper blades had a good work out and we had to take a detour through some amazing scenery - and found a pair of Weka feeding in a soggy field. At some sewage ponds where there were Black Swans, Grey duck aka Pacific Black Duck, Mallard and New Zealand Scaup.

Our next stop was to meet Ian Cooper “Coops” who would be our Kiwi guide this evening, after our briefing. We then went for a walk, finding South Island Robins, Tui, Bellbirds, Tomtits, Silvereye, Grey Gerygone and New Zealand Fantail. Back near the carpark we found Redpolls and a pair of New Zealand Fernbirds that tried to play hide and seek. And as we left, we saw another Great Egret standing near a tidal creek.

Further up the road we took another forest trail walk. Climbing to a nice lookout we found a family of Brown Creepers, also New Zealand Pigeons, Tuis and Tomtits. By now the rain was easing and we could even make out a little bit of blue through the clouds.

After our evening meal, we headed back out to meet Coops for kiwi spotting into the thick West coast bush. We were sitting 1 out of 3 for our Kiwis, missing Little and Greater Spotted and seeing Northern Brown. Kiwi just don't want to be seen. They are shy and secretive and prefer to feed undercover. Throw in that they have an incredible sense of smell and hearing, so they know where you are, and they are nocturnal.

Tonight we were trying to find the world's rarest kiwi the Okarito Kiwi or Rowi. So as the sun set, Coops ran through some scenarios of what might happen over the next couple of hours. We positioned ourselves along the path and got ready. Matt who was at the far end of the group got close to the forest and stuck his head into a gap in the bushes.

When Matt is not leading Wrybill tours, he's a Kiwi guide at Stewart Island ... within moments of sticking his head in the forest gap, he heard a Kiwi walking straight towards us. He signalled to Coops that a bird was coming towards him. Coops quickly called the rest of the group to come to him ... quickly! We all got into position and held our breath. Rico the female kiwi walked out of the forest into plain view, across the path along a creek and was gone. She wouldn't walk back until the early hours of the morning.

Wow and phew! It was almost still light! We skipped and floated back to the van, not only having seen the world's rarest kiwi, but in a record time to boot! Once back at the van, we could breathe and smile. Coops himself was super stoked as he and Matt have previously spent many a long night waiting and waiting for a kiwi to show itself. We headed back to the motel, for an early night, and to dream of Kiwi.

14 February 2026 – Day Fifteen

The weather as we left Franz Josef was a lot more settled this morning and our first stop was at the next town, Fox Glacier. We got our caffeine craving fixed at a nice but busy café, and the van also got a well-earned drink - there's not too many petrol stations on the remote West Coast. The scenery on this section of the trip is arguably the most stunning, with lush green forest, peppered with farmland, sandwiched between the Tasman Sea and the snowcapped mountains of the Southern Alps. We stopped at a bay, hoping to see Hector's Dolphins, but no luck.

At a mature piece of forest, within moments of stepping out of the van we heard the call of a New Zealand Falcon and caught site of it flying away from us. It landed in a distant tree, but got flushed by a Tui, which had taken exception to the falcon's presence. We waited with the hope that it would return. We weren't alone as New Zealand Pigeons, Bellbirds, Grey Gerygones, and Tomtits kept us amused.



The rugged West Coast. Matt Jones.

We caught a brief sight and call of a close by falcon, and tried to relocate the bird by moving closer, but no luck. Bill and Rob saw a falcon briefly close to where they were. We checked out various locations and almost gave up. Matt thought he would have a final look, and just like the Kiwi previous night, stuck his head in a gap in-between the low bushes, and was surprised to lock eyes with a juvenile Falcon. We all had awesome looks at this rare endemic bird as she sat scratching and looked very relaxed. We say she, as she was quite a large looking raptor, and the females tend to be larger than the males.

Very happy with our encounter, we continued on our way towards Wanaka to find our first Yellowhead of the tour. This unfortunately we drew a blank but we did get better looks at Rifleman, New Zealand's smallest bird, and a Brown Creeper aka Pipipi (the Yellowhead's cousin) but no prize.



A juvenile New Zealand falcon really shows off! Matt Jones.

15 February 2026 – Day Sixteen

Another early start the next morning, driving through a stunning mountain pass and then into farmland to arrive a couple of hours later at a private address, near Te Anau.

We overlooked a small lake that held New Zealand Scaup, Mallard and Paradise Shelducks. Our target was a little smaller, and we instantly caught sight of a bird flying in and out of sight. Eventually an adult Baillon's Crake aka Marsh Crake walked around the front of some dry rushes and was joined by a juvenile. The juvenile was a little sandy coloured in comparison to the bluey grey of the adult. The juvenile was exploring its surroundings by climbing through dead flax bushes, all while the adult stood in front of us preening and occasionally looking for food. We had all seen Baillon's Crake before, but we all agreed it was by far one of the best sightings we had ever had. Thanks Ian!

From there we headed into the mountains of Milford Sound, driving through some jaw dropping scenery. Yet again the place was crazy busy. Matt eventually found a parking spot and we had lunch in the company of Weka, and saw a Great Egret.

We walked a loop trail overlooking Mitre Peak and the Sound itself. On the mud banks were Red-billed and Black-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns and Variable Oystercatchers.

On the return we tried to find a Blue Duck (without any luck) and only saw one Kea that was entertaining a large crowd on the top of a parked car. We tried another location for Kea and Kaka, but yet again came away empty handed. Then into a huge forest, where we found a family of Rifleman that showed very well - not as well as the South Island Robin that fed at our feet. New Zealand Fantails flicked all around us and Matt heard a familiar call. A Yellow-crowned Parakeet. After a little searching we found it perched on a high branch.

Our final birding stop of the day was down near a river. A bit late in the season but we found one adult and one juvenile Black-fronted Tern hawking up and down the stream. We had witnessed Black fronts already at the coast so we were lucky to see these last couple of birds still hanging around their breeding grounds. While watching the Terns a New Zealand Pipit landed at the back of the van. We hadn't seen one since day one of the tour, and some folks hadn't seen that bird too well, so this was a smart little bonus to end the day on.

16 February 2026 – Day Seventeen

From Te Anau we headed southeast passing through farmland. In the fields that held cattle and sheep we saw Swamp Harriers, Australian Magpies, plus a few Black-billed Gulls and Black-fronted Terns. This is very much the agricultural landscape of Southland. We passed through Invercargill (the largest city in the south) and made for the southern harbour town of Bluff for the one-hour ferry ride to Stewart Island / Rakiura.

Rakiura is New Zealand's third largest island with a population of 400 permanent residents, of which Matt is one. The crossing itself is rewarding from a birding perspective, and this proved to be so. New for the trip

list were at least 4 Foveaux Shags, 2 Buller's Albatross, 1 Common Diving Petrel and a Southern Brown Skua sitting on a rock outside the harbour. Plus, White-capped Albatross, Cape Petrel, and Sooty Shearwaters.

We arrived at Oban, the only village on the island and checked into our hotel for the next couple of nights. Birding-wise Stewart Island is very important to a 21-day birding tour. It holds the key to a few new species, some of which we'd just seen on the ferry crossing.

After lunch, we jumped onto a water taxi and headed to Ulva Island, where we would spend the afternoon birding. Along the way we stopped at a small bay and saw five Fiordland Crested Penguins. They were looking miserable as they were halfway through their catastrophic moult. They are early breeders, so this time of year they are not looking their best. But nevertheless, they were a new bird for us. We cruised past a sandy beach, that held a snoozing male New Zealand Sealion.

Once ashore at Ulva Island, we only really needed one target species, but this little jewel of Rakiura National Park, is home to some of New Zealand's rare endemics, much like Tiritiri Matangi in the north. It shows what an island without predators can produce.

First to meet and greet us was the friendly Stewart Island Robin, a Subspecies of the South Island Robin. They sit by the footpath almost demanding attention. A couple of Red-crowned Parakeets flicked through bushes. Further along, Matt heard the familiar rattling call of the Yellowhead aka Mohua. A large family flock were feeding overhead and we stuck with them - they came a lot lower and closer, giving great looks at this magic little bird. Not only was our target in the bag, but we had gathered an endemic family. The Mohouidae family, Whitehead, Pipipi, Yellowhead.

Happy with the haul we continued along the trail, finding Kaka, New Zealand Pigeon, another flock of Yellowhead that had a small party of Pipipi aka Brown Creeper feeding with them. A Grey Gerygone and New Zealand Fantail flicked through; Bellbirds and Tuis flew past. Down at the beach we watched as a Stewart Island Weka (yet again another Subspecies (smaller and richer rusty in colour) feed her two chicks, and Variable Oystercatchers shared the beach.

We heard a South Island Saddleback call, and with a little hunting we found an adult and a juvenile bird. While watching them, Rob spotted a Rifleman. Heading back towards the wharf we spotted Tomtits, more Red-Crowned Parakeets and Kaka - and of course more Robins. At another beach we spotted White-fronted Terns, a lone Black-fronted Tern, Spotted Shags, Red-billed and Kelp Gulls.

We caught the water taxi back to Stewart Island and walked over the hill to our hotel. That evening, after a fine meal we had one final bird to look for. The Stewart Island Brown Kiwi, a Subspecies of the Southern Brown Kiwi. Matt guided us around a private location where we had terrific looks at four different birds, including this season's tiny chick. Another big day was complete, we headed to bed to dream of Kiwi.

17 February 2026 – Day Eighteen

The final day on Stewart Island and our final pelagic lay ahead of us. Our chartered vessel left the wharf at 8:15am with Ian at the helm. We stopped at the same location as yesterday to look at the same scruffy Fiordland Crested Penguins, and as we headed out of the harbour we found a raft of Little Blue Penguins. White-capped Albatross started to follow the vessel. We checked an island that is home to a small group of

Yellow-eyed Penguins, but left empty handed. Then around to a rock were a family of Southern Brown Skuas breed - two birds put on a great show, better looks than yesterday's sighting. Then we headed south towards a natural reef where we would hope to attract some birds. It takes around forty minutes sailing and enroute we saw plenty of birds: Buller's Albatross, Common Diving Petrel, Fairy Prions, Sooty Shearwaters, and Northern Giant Petrel.

Once at the reef, we started to chum and spent the next several hours changing location to keep the birds interested and hopefully bring in some new species. Here's what we saw over the next few hours:

11x Southern Royal Albatross, 78x White-Capped Albatross, 9x Salvins Albatross, 4x Buller's Albatross, *1x Campbell Albatross, 2x Northern Giant Petrel, 10x Cape Petrel, 17x Cook's Petrel, 6x White-chinned Petrel, *10x Mottled Petrel, *1x White-headed Petrel, 40x Fairy Prion, *1x Wilsons Storm Petrel 2x White-faced Storm Petrel, 3x Common Diving Petrel, 1x Short-tailed Shearwater, x200+ Sooty Shearwater.

* Were new birds for the trip.

The Campbell Albatross flew past the vessel showing its almost complete dark underwing, and Matt seeing its pale eye, fortunately everyone got onto this bird. The Mottled Petrel is a hoped-for bird on a Stewart Island pelagic, a bulky looking Pterodroma, with a dark underwing pattern, and striking dark belly, we had several good looks at these birds.

The Wilson's Storm Petrel is not a common bird on Stewart Island pelagics, but a common ocean worldwide bird, which stayed around for a while and showed well.



White-chinned petrel. Matt Jones.



Wilson's storm-petrel. Matt Jones.

The White-headed Petrel was one out of the box. Matt has probably recorded only four other sightings of this visitor from the Sub-Antarctic Islands from Stewart Island pelagics. A heavy looking bird with an all-white head, panda eyes, and a striking black underwing, this individual flew through fast on its show and go.

We returned to look again for Yellow-eyed Penguins, and again struck out. The Foveaux Shags were a little easier to find, and we headed back into Halfmoon Bay for an evening meal and toasted an awesome final pelagic out of Stewart Island.

18 February 2026 – Day Nineteen

At 8am our ferry departed Stewart Island across Foveaux Strait for Bluff. Stewart Island had given our trip list a boost. We had seen 11 new species - on the crossing itself we saw a few birds including Southern Royal Albatross, White-capped Albatross, Sooty Shearwater, and Fairy Prion. And once in Bluff Harbour White-fronted and Black-fronted Terns and a lone Caspian Tern.

We checked out Stirling Point (the end of State Highway 1) before heading north into Invercargill, where we grabbed some lunch before the long drive north on SH1. Leaving the farmland of Southland we drove through the Otago city of Dunedin. We arrived early afternoon at a location with the hope of seeing Yellow-eyed Penguin. We waited and waited, without any luck, only the occasional Otago shag and Spotted Shag flying by, and snoozing New Zealand Fur Seal before calling it a day.

19 February 2026 – Day Twenty

The last's days birding is normally all about trying to find our last endemic bird, the mega rare Black Stilt. But this morning was different, we would try to find the world's rarest penguin and then find the world's rarest wader. What could go wrong!?

We left our accommodation before sunrise and drove out to a cliff overlooking a beach. As the light improved we waited and scanned with bins and scopes. At the far end of the beach we had plenty of Spotted Shags and a peppering of NZ Fur Seals.

Finally, an adult Yellow-eyed Penguin appeared from the edge of the forest. It stopped and then ran for the sea. A few moments later a second bird appeared at the same spot and followed its comrade into the water. The gamble had paid off! We had all just seen the world's rarest penguin on the final throw of the dice. With only 150 pairs left on mainland and declining, this unfortunately is always going to be a challenging bird to locate. The Māori name is Hoiho, which means noise shouter.

Happy with our luck, we headed to a large Otago Shag breeding colony. They were split from the Stewart Island Shag but have recently been lumped back together again by eBird – they show as separate subspecies on the Wrybill checklist, but don't count as an extra species for the tally unfortunately, although it's always good to have an extra shag!

We then hit the road northwest driving through some stunning scenery on the way to Mackenzie country. The trick to finding the world's rarest wader is look everywhere you have seen one before, so that's what Matt did. We scanned every puddle, pool, ditch, pond and field. Nothing. We tried another site down a farm track to a small lake. Just like magic, two birds appeared, first spotted by Lynne.

We ate our lunch and watched Black Stilts, enjoying the next hour in the company of the world's rarest wader. It was a great way to see our final bird. Māori name Kaki, the Black Stilt has less than 200 birds left in the wild. These birds are endemic to New Zealand and only breed on the South Island. They struggle with introduced predators and pests and hybridize with the more common Pied Stilt.

After lunch, we spotted another two distant Black Stilts feeding on a large mud pan with a group of Banded Dotterels. The views were great through the scope, but a few of us walked a little closer and were rewarded with crippling views of this dainty all black wader with its pink legs and red eye, what a stunner. We also had good looks at a juvenile Swamp Harrier. We were tempted to try and find an introduced Chukar, but the huge line of cars waiting to access the same road put us off.

We drove to a different potential Black Stilt spot and enroute stopped at a busy car park which usually has a view of Aoraki-Mount Cook, the largest mountain in New Zealand. Standing at 3725 meters high she had her head buried in the clouds so we bought some ice cream and continued on our way.

Our final birding location of the tour was where mountain streams meet a large lake. The water level was very high. We scanned and didn't find anymore Black Stilts, but did see some more Banded Dotterels, Grey Teal, Australasian Shovelers, Paradise Shelducks. The surprise birds this far into the mountains were three Caspian Terns and 10 Royal Spoonbills.

At another fine meal that evening we toasted an epic day in field. We had clawed back Yellow-eyed Penguin and spent an amazing afternoon in the company of Black Stilts surrounded by stunning vistas.

20 February 2026 – Day Twenty-One

The bags are always a little heavier on the last day of the tour as scopes, tripods and cameras are packed away. We left the sleepy town of Twizel behind us and headed northeast past the large snowcapped mountains of the Southern Alps and clear blue lakes towards Christchurch. Unfortunately, Aoraki-Mount Cook was still hiding under low cloud. The rugged landscape changed into farmland with its green rolling hills and stock. Our final Paradise Shelducks, Australian Magpies were seen, along with our last Swamp Harrier, a bird we had almost seen on every day of the tour.

We had a brief comfort break in Geraldine; the scenery changed again from rural to an urban feel. The traffic built up as we got closer to the South Island's largest city and we arrived at Christchurch International Airport. Lynne, Ron and Bill were on a flight back to the UK. Rob was also back to the UK but on a later flight. Therese, Dan and Ken were heading home to the USA. We said our goodbyes to new friends, and many lifers and memories made.