

Tour report

16 February – 1 March 2026

14-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Blue duck. Paul Pratt.

Led by Brent Stephenson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

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Images

Paul Pratt and Brent Stephenson

With an unsettled summer, with regards to weather, there is always a little anxiety in the back of ones mind. But this tour managed to pull together some pretty nice weather, and really the only rainy day we had (in Oamaru), it really didn't matter too much. In fact, perhaps it brought out the Baillon's crake!

This tour was a true delight. Some great companions and just a super relaxed and fun tour. From day one it was evident that seeing birds was important, but having a great time along the way was a priority. And this we did. It was certainly helped at the start when we had epic prolonged views of several Northern brown kiwi on the first night, and then almost certainly the best views of little spotted kiwi I have ever had two nights later on Tiritiri Matangi Island. A bird that just fed in the open forest nearby for 20 minutes and completely ignored us! The tuatara, Duvaucel's geckos, weta punga (giant weta), banded kokopu, and short-finned eel also seen that night just capped off one of the best nights Tiritiri Matangi could deliver us. The day wasn't bad either with all the usuals including great takahe, saddleback, kokako, and even a spotless crake.

Our northern pelagic was excellent, getting a beautiful day allowing us to visit the Mokohinau's and see grey noddy, as well as managing to get all the usual suspects of late summer, with Cook's, Pycroft's and black petrels, New Zealand and white-faced storm-petrels, and fluttering, Buller's and flesh-footed shearwaters. A surprise pass by a group of jaegers, with at least one long-tailed amongst them was a nice surprise. But the biggest surprise of the day was an extraordinary pod of long-finned pilot whales. Absolutely stunning views of a pod of animals just gently surfacing past our vessel.

Miranda was great as usual, lots of wrybill starting to gather, and then into the central North Island for all the specialties with a gliding New Zealand falcon, perched and screaming long-tailed koel, and New Zealand pipit, plus New Zealand kaka and yellow-crowned parakeets. Blue duck that afternoon – a pair with fully grown juveniles – and then a showy fernbird and it was time to head south.

The Marlborough Sounds delivered King shag, and excellent orange-fronted parakeet after a bit of work. Even South Island saddleback, often not seen, but it was lucky we did, as although we heard them on Ulva, we didn't see them. Kaikoura great as usual, kea in Arthur's Pass, beautiful adult black stilt in the Mackenzie Basin. And Baillon's crake showed for us, as did yellow-eyed penguins later in the day.

Stewart Island was amazing as always, with incredible Southern brown kiwi and fun interactions. Beautiful yellowhead on Ulva Island, and then a great pelagic with hundreds of albatross, a surprise white-headed petrel, three yellow-eyed penguins, and thankfully a couple of cave dwelling Fiordland crested penguins. A last evening mammal mission gave us the best long-tailed bats ever, and another wonderful kiwi. Nine (!) mottled petrels saved themselves for the final morning as we crossed northwards across the Foveaux Strait on the final morning.

Hard to put a finger on the highlight of the trip, but sharing it with wonderful people, eating way too much good food, and a trip list of 143 species, all seen, was enough for me!

16 February 2026 – Day One

Started with a damp morning in Auckland, but heading north things were looking better. A stop at a park saw some sunshine, and really outstanding views of buff-banded rail. Then we realised another one had snuck in and was right in front of us! Lots of swamphens (pukeko), but a search for takahe was not successful.



Buff-banded rail. Paul Pratt.

We had a nice walk along a section of coast, and then through some lovely forest with massive pohutukawa and puriri trees. Good views of tui, our first bellbird, and then some evasive whitehead, before a saddleback showed itself well enough to get the features. But hoping for some more views of these enigmatic birds. Another buff-banded rail, this time bathing in plain view, plus several brown teal pairs. We decided to head back to the van, checked again for takahe, still no luck, and so after a bakery stop carried on north.

We ate lunch overlooking an estuary as the tide dropped. Bar-tailed godwit, red knot and ruddy turnstone were on the mudflats, as were both variable and South Island oystercatchers. A fairy tern flew in and landed on a distant patch of mud, but scope views allowed the yellow bill with no dark tip and receding, post-breeding black cap to be seen. A rain shower interrupted lunch and the viewing, but was brief, and the tern was still there when we returned. We decided to move to a different location nearby, and as well as a similar assemblage of shorebirds, had another fairy tern fly in and land a lot closer this time. Better views. And our first wrybill!



Wrybill. Paul Pratt.

Moving northwards through stunning coastal scenery, we made another estuary stop, finding a big flock of white-fronted terns and a distant Australasian gannet on the water. An even more distant fairy tern hovering over the channel was spotted. Another stop at a freshwater lake had both Australasian little grebe and New Zealand dabchick, the former with a small stripey chick still being fed by the adults. Really nice views and great to be able to compare them side by side.

Arriving at our accommodation we had a rest, then an outstanding dinner, and then out to find our first kiwi. As the darkness approached we heard a morepork call, and then shortly after a male kiwi, then another, then another. We started our search as it got steadily dark. After a bit of searching we thought we had one, until a hedgehog popped out in front of us. A bit later grunting from the grass, and then a female showed really well. For great extended views, showing off from every angle. Not a huge female, but a good size and nice curve to the bill. Amazing. We decided to carry on a little, and then turned around to head back. Not far from the first female we had a second, this one a big female, with a really big curved bill. We watched her feed, she seemed completely unperturbed, for 10+ minutes. At one stage she approached to within just a few metres, wow.

Almost back at the van another female showed briefly, but right in the open. We drove home very happy, our first kiwi a distinct highlight!

17 February 2026 – Day Two

Up and heading south, wow, the kiwi were real last night! We boarded our boat in Marsden Cove and headed out with fairly light winds and calm seas. We checked out a small island finding at least four Pacific reef egrets, with a couple of them looking like juveniles, and then headed out into the blue yonder.

We passed between the scenic Hen and Chicken Islands, a few fluttering, Buller's and flesh-footed shearwaters coming past. Our plan to head straight towards the Mokohinau Islands was thwarted by a bird that landed as we steamed, we turned and had what looked like our first Pycroft's petrel lift of the water and circle. Then, not long after a group of long-finned pilot whales were spotted! At least 20+ animals with several large males, females with smaller calves and they just slowly cruised along the surface coming incredibly close. And what's more a flock of around 30 black petrels were with them. Amazing. Then we passed a large hammerhead on the surface, and put up a couple of flying fish.



Long-finned pilot whales. Paul Pratt.

We continued on to the Mokohinau Islands, getting stunning views as we passed between these islands. At Maori Rocks we estimated 56 grey noddy, both feeding over a school of fish nearby and roosting on the rocks. Very cool. We headed back towards to Hen and Chicks and chummed in several places, with New Zealand storm-petrel, black petrel, lots of flesh-footed shearwaters, Buller's shearwaters, a couple of sooty shearwaters and a few dozen Cook's petrels plus at least two Pycroft's petrels. Four jaegers passed by in the distance, with at least one of them being long-tailed! Just a little too far to tell by eye, but photos taken showed a very pale immature bird, with possibly up to three Parasitic jaegers. Pretty nice views of most things, and a very happy crew headed back in to shore.



Maori Rocks. Brent Stephenson.



Pelagicing. Brent Stephenson.



New Zealand storm petrel. Paul Pratt.

18 February 2026 – Day Three

Up early and heading south, we made a quick stop to look for bittern. No luck, but a couple of nice skulky Pacific black ducks were a bonus. We arrived into Gulf Harbour with plenty of time, and got ready for the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island. A smooth crossing and a couple of fluttering shearwaters and little penguins on the way across were nice.

Walking up towards the lighthouse we almost instantly had great saddleback views, both male and female stitchbird, whitehead, rifleman, and of course the more common things. At the lighthouse we looked for takahe to no avail, had lunch and then found a beautiful pair of kokako to enjoy. We checked in to the bunkhouse, got set up, and then took a break, before again looking for the takahe, again no luck. But some nice red-crowned parakeets feeding in muehlenbeckia were very photogenic.

We went for a bit of a walk then had an excellent BBQ dinner. After dinner we headed out and found the takahe family, the pair with last years chick and this years chick, quietly feeding and had beautiful views. We then walked a few trails, checked out a pond hoping for a spotless crane (hiding also), and then as it was getting dark found a Duvaucel's gecko hiding in its daytime hideaway. Walking a few more trails it started to get dark, and we quickly found some really large tuatara. Excellent. Very nice views of them, before we then found another, another... and all up something like fifteen tuatara for the evening. Several brown teal were along the shoreline, and then in a small stream we had short-finned eel and then a bunch of banded kokopu. Very cool to see these rather primitive looking fish.



North Island kokako. Paul Pratt.



Takahe. Paul Pratt.



Red-crowned parakeet. Paul Pratt.

Just a short way along the trail we spotted a weta punga (giant weta), and then our first little spotted kiwi, but it moved into denser vegetation before everyone got a good look. A bit later a second bird showed, this time a female with pretty reasonable views of her by everyone. A male called shortly after not far away, and we paused hoping she would respond, but no luck. But our luck was in when a male little spotted kiwi sprang from right beside us, and then started feeding just a few feet away. It settled down and we watched him feeding with his really short bill for more than ten minutes. The views were just spectacular, and the best I have ever had. Everyone just soaked it in and watched this kiwi go about its business, amazing.

Carrying on up the hill, we found another weta punga, and then heard a young morepork calling, but neither that nor several other morepork showed themselves as we headed back to the bunkhouse. But, almost back at the bunkhouse we had beautiful views of a morepork perched in cabbage tree, and then three more Duvaucel's geckos! What an end to an amazing night on Tiritiri Matangi!

19 February 2026 – Day Four

Up after dreaming of kiwi, and following breakfast and a tidy of the bunkhouse we packed our gear and wandered a few more trails after seeing the takahe family again. Some nice rifleman sightings, and then finally our target brown quail, a small family sitting in the sun. A short sit beside a pond was more productive this time with a spotless crane wandering the edge, bathing and then preening for us to enjoy.

We boarded our water taxi and had a little bumpy ride back to Gulf Harbour. Driving south to Miranda we made a quick stop along the shore and then visited the Stilt Pond. There was a slowly diminishing flock of several thousand shorebirds, with bar-tailed godwit, red knot, and South Island oystercatchers constantly flying over to head out to feed. We quickly found a sharp-tailed sandpiper and several hundred wrybill, and a couple of distant Pacific golden plover. But the wrybill were awesome and we eventually had a flock of several hundred fly right over our heads.



South Island oystercatchers. Paul Pratt.

We checked out a couple of other spots, getting views of our first black-billed gulls, and then drove to a different location. Hundreds of nice close pied stilts, and a lot of grey teal, along with a few Royal spoonbill.

It was time to check in to our accommodations, have a break and then another lovely dinner before an early night.

20 February 2026 – Day Five

We headed south straight away, making a couple of stops and pulling into Pureora Forest Park mid-morning. A few spots of rain looked ominous, but they disappeared and we spent some time in a couple of locations. Tomtit called but were a no-show, but kaka and yellow-crowned parakeets showed well in flight. We made a short move, and watched the sky again. Nothing for a while, and then bingo, a male New Zealand falcon came out of the forest, soared slowly over us and then disappeared. Magic! We decided to do a drive, and headed to another spot, where we very quickly found a New Zealand pipit and had nice views. Back into the forest and a lovely short walk into the forest with towering Podocarps and spectacular ferns and mosses. Such amazing forest, and a tomtit on the forest edge was a nice bonus.

We then headed to a different spot for lunch, and waited for sight or sound of long-tailed koel. They had been surprisingly quiet. But we eventually heard one, and then possibly a second. Waiting patiently was the order of the day, and with one spluttering nearby we walked towards the forest edge and boom! There was the bird right in front of us, almost out in the open under the canopy and less than 10m away! It sat there, calling several times in anger, and after about a full minute vanished into the forest. Wow!

Deciding it wasn't going to get better than that, we hit the road. We made our way to a river side stop, and almost instantly had a pair of blue duck with two large fully grown juveniles. They fed along the edge of the river, diving and disappearing into the river-side vegetation. Excellent views and so glad to see a family at this stage at the end of the season.



Blue duck. Paul Pratt.

Deciding we had better capitalise on our luck while it lasted we headed to a last spot and as we opened the van doors heard a fernbird. It showed distantly so we walked a little, hearing a few more distant birds, before heading back to the van and finding another bird really close. Amazing views of it crawling through the shrubs like a little mouse.

All that there was left to do for the day was to have a lovely dinner and get to bed!

21 February 2026 – Day Six

Up early and we first headed to a spot to look for bittern. After twenty minutes or so, in lovely light as the sun came up, we hadn't seen anything. And with a lot of roadworks on the highways south, as well as cleanups after the recent storm, we departed and headed southwards. Beautiful views of the volcanic plateau and mountains as we passed them, clear blue skies and a crisp morning.

We made a few stops along the way, and checked out a sewage ponds, and lots of ducks, including our first Australasian shoveler. We arrived at the Ferry Terminal in good time and had our lunch as we waited. Boarding the ferry we departed Wellington and saw a few fluttering shearwaters and white-fronted terns in the harbour. In the open ocean there was a good breeze, but not a lot of birds close. The horizon seemed to show a few albatross and other birds, but it wasn't until we got halfway across we started to see a few more birds. We had a few Hutton's shearwaters pass, then quite a few flesh-footed shearwaters, before our first white-capped albatross swung by. Probably five of these albatrosses made an appearance in all. A handful of sooty shearwaters, and then a few common diving petrels, with one or two quite close, and a Cook's petrel. So a few new birds for the list, plus a New Zealand fur seal.

As we entered the Tory Channel we saw a few more fluttering shearwaters, some gannets and a few spotted shags, but not much else. Into Picton, another great dinner, and another early night.



On the ferry. Brent Stephenson.

22 February 2026 – Day Seven

We headed out on to Queen Charlotte Sound for a lovely morning on the water. We quickly found a Parasitic jaeger, and then a bit later some fluttering shearwaters. We hugged the bays and coves on the look out for little penguins, but alas none. However, we were also on the lookout for Hector's dolphins, and we managed to find a small group of them in some sheltered water. One put on a really great show, leaping repeatedly from the water. A short while later it did it again, and we had fantastic views of these very small dolphins.



Hector's dolphin. Paul Pratt.

We carried on, managing to see a few more fluttering shearwaters, and then found a group of roosting King shags, one of our targets. There were 48 birds, mostly adults, that gave great views and allowed close inspection of their blue eye ring and yellow caruncles. The nearby fur seals didn't care a bit.

We then landed on an island and headed ashore with one key target in mind – orange-fronted parakeet. We quickly had a male tomtit (South Island subsp.) and then two charging weka chasing each other through the undergrowth. Next up a pair of South Island saddleback gave excellent views. Where were the parakeets? A little chattering, but still no sign. But eventually they gave themselves up, and we had amazing views of a pair and then a third showed up. Great to see them well and fairly close.



New Zealand king shag. Paul Pratt.



Orange-fronted (Malherbe's) parakeet. Paul Pratt.

We stuck around a bit, and enjoyed watching them, before getting back on the boat and heading back towards Picton. On the way we stopped at a spotted shag colony, with nice views of birds in a range of plumages, some showing a little colour in the feet, and spotted plumage. Eyes were peeled for little penguins on the way back in, but they were still not showing themselves.

In Picton we grabbed lunch, and then headed to a nearby spot to eat it. New Zealand dabchick, coot, and a few cormorants were seen. An accident on the road forced us to take a bit of a detour, but through beautiful rolling countryside. We checked out a few spots for gull bunting, with a juvenile bunting coming in for a look at us. Carrying on to a lake we had a great crested grebe and then several hoary-headed grebes. On the coast a lot of fur seals including small pups romped around, and a Northern giant petrel sat on the water offshore, whilst dusky dolphins frolicked further out.

Just before getting to the accommodation we drove a few back roads and managed to find a little owl out sunning itself in the afternoon sun.

A lovely dinner and an early night in Kaikoura.



Little owl. Paul Pratt.

23 February 2026 – Day Eight

The sun was shining and the mountains peeking out from atmospheric foggy cloud. We headed to a spot to see if we could rustle up some forest birds. Within a few minutes we had great views of a small family group of brown creeper (pipipi), as well as grey gerygone and fantails. We headed to another nearby spot and found a singing male cirl bunting. At first it was hidden, but a little perseverance and the bird showed really well.

It was then time to head to South Bay, where we boarded our boat, launched and headed out. It was a little bumpy as we headed out, but once out a bit the swells were more regular and not too bad. Our first stop we had Salvin's, white-capped, and New Zealand wandering albatross (Gibson's subsp), as well as a Westland petrel, several white-chinned and a bunch of Cape petrels. The latter were clucking away like little sea chickens. We had several Buller's shearwaters pass by, a couple of sooty shearwaters, and roughly 40 Hutton's shearwaters, some giving quite nice closer views. We shifted locations several times, and at one stage found a Southern Royal sitting on the water, and then at our last stop had several black-fronted and white-fronted terns. A distant sperm whale could be seen with blows on the surface.



White-capped albatross. Paul Pratt.



White-chinned petrel. Paul Pratt.



Cape petrel, Southern Royal, NZ wandering, white-capped and Salvin's albatross feeding frenzy. Paul Pratt.

All in all a very enjoyable morning on the water. Paul and I headed back out in the afternoon, whilst Karen and Leia decided to explore town. With a little more wind on the water, we had more birds, but no major new species, just a Parasitic jaeger for the list. A Southern Royal albatross came in though, and was good to see on the wing. Amazing.

A delicious fish and chip picnic for dinner, with the backdrop of beautiful mountains.

24 February 2026 – Day Nine

Driving down the beautiful Kaikoura coastline, with the sun shining and almost no wind, suddenly gave way to a roaring wind that came in off the sea as we watched the white-caps whipped up. We then headed inland and towards an estuary. On the way we found a Cape Barren goose in a field, and then two mute swans on the side of a waterway. The tide was in at the estuary, so we checked it out with scopes and saw a few black-fronted terns, bar-tailed godwit, and even a hybrid pied/black stilt. Nothing too close and so we decided to head to another spot to look for a vagrant maned duck. A good look around where the bird had been recently seen revealed no sign of it.

We then headed to a section of braided river, but with large machinery working we were only able to look from afar. Several more black-fronted terns passed, some close enough to see the still orange bills of the adults.

It was then time for the Sheffield Pie shop... luck was in with a relatively full pie cabinet. The brisket, cheese and jalapeno was stunning! Lunch in the sunshine and then onwards towards the mountains. The views and sunshine were amazing, and as we approached Arthur's Pass Village we had high expectations. Slowly driving through the town, we spied tourists with cameras and phones pointed at something. It could be only one thing! It was actually two, with a pair of kea putting on a show.



Kea. Paul Pratt.

After getting good looks at these curious creatures we headed on to the pass, and made another stop. Beautiful scenery, but no kea. We did manage to find a distant buck chamois up on the alpine slopes, and got it in the scope for a closer look. Stunning animals, just a shame they are in the wrong place and cause so much damage to the native vegetation.

Heading back down, we made a quick stop and found another kea, still in a carpark, but looking a little more wild. Another stop, we did a lovely loop walk through beech forest, finding rifleman, tomtit, and South Island robin. Excellent views of all of them.

It was time to head to our accommodation, where we checked in, and then headed for dinner, with incredible burgers, done the proper New Zealand way! With egg, beets, and even pineapple! Amazing!



South Island robin. Paul Pratt.



New Zealand fantail. Paul Pratt.

25 February 2026 – Day Ten

Heading further south, we had an important date with a pie shop – the famous Fairlie Bakehouse. Getting there mid-morning, things were quieter than normal, and we caused hardly a stir. We carried on into the arid Mackenzie Basin, and stopped at our first potential spot. Lake Tekapo's water level had dropped about 1m in about three weeks, and this afforded a few more wading spots for the stilts.

Our first spot was a no, not a stilt to be seen. Our second however was a resounding yes. We looked upon a small lake, initially nothing, but with a slightly different angle, we had four birds. Two late stage immatures with just a hint of pale around the face, and two adults. Nice! We stood in the sunshine, hardly any wind and just watched these stunning birds, the rarest shorebird on the planet. Hard to believe there are so few, despite all the years of management and hard work.



Black Stilt. Paul Pratt.

We had a several black-fronted terns wheeling over the pond feeding, and enjoyed good views of them, before they suddenly disappeared. We watched the stilts some more and then decided to head on to another spot. On another lake edge we found a variety of waterfowl, including great crested grebes, and the water level looked great for Baillon's crake. We watched and waited, walking the edge slowly and scanning. But after nearly an hour we gave up.

We then headed up to a viewpoint, with stunning scenery and still fairly calm conditions. There was hardly a cloud in the sky, and no chukar to be seen either. A good search, but as the wind started to pickup we headed towards Twizel. We made a couple of scenic stops along the way, with the beautiful Aoraki – Mt Cook well visible at the end of Lake Pukaki. A search at another pond, but no more stilts, before an hour or so rest and then a stunning dinner.

26 February 2026 – Day Eleven

A quick stop for New Zealand scaup and great crested grebe, was followed by a little owl on a stump beside the road, spotted by Paul with his eagle eyes! A strange place for a little owl, but lovely view in the open. A short while later we had to spin the car around for another sighting by Paul, this time a great egret on a riverbed! Bonus.

We called in to a small wetland area, and were on the prowl for Baillon's crake, when all of a sudden one appeared. It stood up on some reeds for everyone to see really well, and then as quickly as it appeared it completely vanished.

It was a bit on the rainy side as we approached Oamaru, so we made a quick coffee stop and then decided to check out a few local spots. We found a huge number of spotted shags and the Otago form of the Stewart Island shag. Really nice views and a massive number of birds present. We then headed south and had a café lunch with soup and chowder being the pick for a cool rainy day. The café even had an open fire roaring!



Otago (Stewart Island) shags. Paul Pratt.

The rain had eased, although a cool and strong southerly wasn't a lot of fun, but we decided to brave it and headed out to look for yellow-eyed penguins. We had only just arrived at the spot, and there was a penguin standing out in the open in a clearing amongst the coastal shrubs. We quickly got the scope on it, before it walked back into the bushes out of view. About 15 minutes later a penguin, possibly the same, appeared down on the rocks at the top of the beach. We got the scope on it and enjoyed really nice views, before it walked down the beach and out of sight. We waited a bit longer, but nothing reappeared, so we decided to call it a day as the rain started to come in again.

We headed back north, and decided to do a bit of a coastal walk. We found a little penguin finishing its moult in a small cavity, lots of dunnocks and chaffinch, and then the rain started again.

An early check in to the accommodation, and then off to dinner, another beautiful meal!



Yellow-eyed penguin. Paul Pratt.



27 February 2026 – Day Twelve

Heading south the weather looked to be improving. We had a fair drive ahead of us, and so we got some miles under our belt. Looking for a coffee stop proved more difficult than it should have been. In the end a Garden Centre Café saved the day.

We then made a stop to look at Northern Royal albatrosses on the nest. We could see several nests with chicks, and adults standing over them. A bird was also flying over the colony, and we enjoyed watching another bird, probably an immature bird, displaying with wings open and head towards the sky calling as the bird flew over it. A young Hooker's (New Zealand) sealion walked out onto the beach and into the water as we left.



Hooker's sealion. Paul Pratt.

We carried on south, grabbing some lunch and then made a stop at a wetland area. Lovely restored wetland, with abundant fernbird that gave great views, as well as a stoat as we left after lunch in the sunshine. We headed to Invercargill, made another stop to look at waterfowl and wading birds, and then to the end of SH1 to look across the Foveaux Strait. It looked windy, but not too rough, and we found several nice flocks of terns, with a lot of black-fronted and white-fronted terns.

We boarded the ferry, which was a little late leaving, but no drama. The crossing was windy, with a handful of white-capped albatross, quite a few sooty shearwaters, and a few Cook's petrel. Probably the biggest surprise was a brown skua on the Bluff side of the Strait. We arrived into Oban, checked in and then had dinner, and then went and watched little penguins coming ashore. So cute!



Little penguins. Paul Pratt.

It was then time to head out in search of Southern brown kiwi, and what an evening we had with them! We had four birds in all, with a pair of young adults that interacted and ran around, including coming up to sniff us, and a large adult female that flopped over on to the ground and put her feet in the air! So bizarre. Last was a youngster that had hatched in around October, so was still quite small. A morepork called a few times, and we headed to bed with dreams of more kiwi...



Southern brown kiwi. Paul Pratt.

28 February 2026 – Day Thirteen

The night was way too short, but we had a busy day planned! We headed up and across to Golden Bay, boarded our water taxi and headed to Ulva Island. It was a cool morning, and a little quiet when we arrived, but things started to wake up as we explored. Within a few minutes we had a robin, of course, and not long after had views of yellowhead in the canopy. Not long after we had birds down lower and were able to get great looks at these and their close relatives the brown creeper (pipipi). We had views of red-crowned parakeet, kaka, grey gerygone, rifleman and tomtit. Saddleback called several times, but try as we might we couldn't get eyes on one. No worry, we had seen them really well earlier in the tour.



Yellowhead. Paul Pratt.



Kaka. Paul Pratt.



We left the island, and then boarded our boat for the afternoons pelagic. Heading out the wind had picked up considerably from the flat calm in the morning. We checked out a first spot for Fiordland crested penguin, but no luck. Passing a large rock we had great views of the Foveaux subspecies of Stewart Island shag. A pair of paradise shelducks and their five youngsters didn't seem to realise they could have been munching grass on the mainland. I guess the rock had sweeter grass with all that shag guano?!

We then checked out a few possible spots for yellow-eyed penguins, but nothing so headed out to find a brown skua, which we did. The melee attracted a bunch of white-capped albatross, a Salvin's and then a Southern Royal came in. We had also attracted a very lonely single bottlenosed dolphin, and it continued with us as we headed out to deeper water.

At our chumming spot we set about attracting a lot of white-capped albatross. Southern Royals came in, with three over the hour and a half, and just one Salvin's albatross. We had a handful of Buller's albatross though, and they showed really well. Sooty shearwaters passed us by in abundance, the odd one coming in to feed, but none seeming to qualify as a short-tailed shearwater. A few Cook's petrels came past, and all of a sudden a stunning white-headed petrel came zooming in to the slick. It did a couple of circuits of the boat, giving excellent views to everyone, before then disappearing. Three white-faced storm-petrels and a single white-chinned petrel showed, as did several Northern giant petrels.



Brown skua. Paul Pratt.



Southern Royal albatross. Paul Pratt.



Buller's albatross. Paul Pratt.

It was time to head back in, no mottled petrel, damn.... We checked out the same spots for yellow-eyed penguin, this time finding one bird on a beach, and two a bit later tucked up in under the scrub. Excellent! The search for Fiordland crested penguin continued, and thankfully we found two adults fully moulted and looking fresh in a cave. What a great way to end the pelagic!

We had a beautiful dinner and then decided, despite the cloudy skies and cool temps, to head out to look for long-tailed bats. We got to our spot and it was rather blustery, not looking good for bats! But just before dusk Karen spotted the first and we had two in the end wheeling around the forest edge and feeding right over our heads! Amazing, so cool to see this very uncommon species so well. As we were enjoying the last of that as the light faded, a large shape came running along the forest edge – a female kiwi!! We watched her in the end for 25+ minutes, as she quietly fed and scurried around the place. Three times she dropped to the ground and lay there with feet in the air, as if she had an itch she couldn't scratch! Wow, what a way to spend our last evening!



White-headed petrel. Paul Pratt.

1 March 2026 – Day Fourteen

We were up and on to the ferry early. The wind was pretty strong from the SW and the ferry raced along as it headed back up to Bluff. We stayed on the back deck, and although there was a little chop and swell, the conditions were perfect for birds. Surprisingly the two first albatross were Salvin's and then a few white-capped. But the surprise was a few Cook's petrels whipping past, and then we had nine mottled petrels pass the boat, mostly distant, but a couple relatively closely! Having missed them yesterday this was a major win. We had more Cook's petrels, a single Northern giant petrel, and a lot of sooty shearwaters. Fantastic.

We arrived into Bluff, loaded up the vehicle and headed to the Airport, where we ended the tour. It had been an incredible two weeks together, a lot of fun, laughs and some great birds.