

Tour report

26 September – 9 October 2026

14-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



Yellow-eyed Penguin

Led by Matt Jones, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Kenna Sue & Howard Trickey

Images

Matt Jones

SUMMARY

It was a real pleasure to guide Kenna Sue and Howard around New Zealand, from the far north to the deep south. We were overall very lucky with the weather. Early spring can be a bit of gamble weather wise. Our wettest day was day one on Tiritiri Matangi, but we still managed to find all the birds the island had to offer.

Our dips came when we missed Flesh-footed Shearwaters and Black Petrels on the northern pelagic and we were just too early in the season for Long-tailed Cuckoo.

The misses were outnumbered by the highs. We had awesome looks at some great birds, including North Island Kokako, New Zealand Storm-petrels, Fairy Terns, Wrybill, Blue Ducks, Black Stilts and Yellow-eyed Penguins, which can be a challenge to find. We finished up seeing a very tidy 141 species, of which 61 were endemics. Not too shabby!

26 September 2026 – Day One

We left our Auckland City Hotel and headed north. The motorway was surprisingly clear, maybe the damp weather had put folks off from traveling!

Our first day we hit the ground running. We were heading to the offshore predator-free island of Tiritiri Matangi. Before we caught the ferry we birded a small saltmarsh using the car as a hide, and also to keep dry. New birds came thick and fast. The endemic Brown Teal were seen in good numbers along with Buff-banded Rails - at least seven different birds seen! In amongst them were at least four tiny Spotless Crakes running around in the open. This normally shy bird was giving us awesome looks.

Other birds seen were a small flock of snoozing Royal Spoonbills, Australasian Swamphens AKA Pukeko, Pied Stilts, Variable Oystercatchers and Masked Lapwings.

On the ferry crossing we saw our first Red-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns, Fluttering Shearwaters, Australasian Gannets and Pied Shags.

Once on the Island (after the Biosecurity and Safety briefing from the Ranger) we were free to start birding. Being a day trip, we had only a few hours to try and see as many bird species as possible. The weather had turned into constant rain. We walked the trail and slowly but surely we started to gather sightings of the birds. First up, North Island Robin, followed by North Island Saddleback and fantastic looks at the super rare Stitchbird - males looking very dapper in their gold, black and white plumage.



Stitchbird.

Further along the trail, we had an absolute epic encounter with a pair of North Island Kokako. We heard them calling first, then they both appeared, feeding on the fruiting Nikau palms. Pictures were grabbed of this iconic bird!



Kokako

Further up the track, we crossed paths with more North Island Saddleback, Whitehead, New Zealand Fantail, Bellbird, Tui and the large and impressive New Zealand Pigeon. Matt found a pair of roosting Morepork that, like us, were hiding out of the rain.

We took a break from the weather and ate our lunch in the visitor centre. After lunch and a little retail therapy we headed out again. The rain had eased somewhat, and we soon came face to face with a pair of South Island Takahe, another mega rarity. This species can often be a hard find so we were very happy to get these birds on the list.

We took a stroll along some trails heading away from the centre. We got fleeting views of Red-crowned Parakeets, better looks at more North Island Robin, North Island Saddleback, Bellbird, Silvereye, and our first Brown Quail.

Back on the mainland, we stopped in a car park to admire our first New Zealand Dotterel and were greeted by a few Kaka flying and calling above us as we went to check in to our very nice motel.

To get to another predator-free reserve in time, Matt grabbed take away pizzas for dinner and we headed to a land-based reserve to look for our final new bird of the day.

We ate our pizza as the light faded in the car park. Fortunately, the rain and skies had cleared. Within a few 100 meters from where we had parked the car, Matt soon picked up the noises of a pair of North Island Brown Kiwi fighting. We walked along the track to see a pair of male Kiwis appear as they scuffled and snorted and chased each other. At one stage a Brown Teal seemed to get caught up in the Kiwi disturbance.

It was a Saturday night and the start of the school holidays, so the park was rather busy, but we were patient and took our time, we strolled around without any luck. We arrived back at the same spot to find one of the fighting male Kiwis feeding out in the open. We watched as it fed on a tasty looking worm. Boom! Our first day was done. We had started with a hiss and roar. It had been a long wet first day, but we had seen everything that was possible.

27 September 2026 – Day Two

With gear dried and the car packed we headed north for our first pelagic of the tour. Onboard Sumo, skippered by Steve, the strong winds predicted had eased. On the channel out of the harbour, we picked up Bar-tailed Godwits, South Island Pied Oystercatchers, and Barbary Doves. All were new for the trip list. And at a nearby island, we saw our first Pacific Reef Heron of the trip. We steamed out to open water and were soon joined by Fluttering Shearwaters.

A pod of Bottlenose Dolphins put in a brief appearance, quickly followed by a small pod of Short-beaked Common Dolphins.

At the first chumming stop we attracted the birds, but strangely not in large numbers. A single Cook's Petrel flew through, a couple of Fairy Prions, one Buller's Shearwater, a few fly-by Common Diving Petrels, and Australasian Gannets.

A few Little Shearwaters put in a good appearance. The unexpected fly through was a juvenile Southern Giant Petrel, before thankfully a couple of New Zealand Storm-petrels graced the slick.

We changed location and found a large trawler that had gathered a good selection of birds. Strangely, they were all a little unexpected birds from the south. 1x Buller's Albatross, 6x White-capped Albatross, 5x Northern Giant Petrels, and presumably the same lone Southern Giant Petrel.

The Trawler moved away taking the Albatross with it, with the exception of the Southern Giant Petrel who seemed to like our company. We stayed put and soon had at least a dozen New Zealand Storm-petrels in the slick. They were joined by a couple of White-faced Storm-petrels and a larger group of Fairy Prion.

With the odd fly-through from a single Buller's Shearwater and Little Shearwater it was very quiet. I have never personally been on a Hauraki pelagic without seeing a single Flesh-footed Shearwater or Black Petrel, this was a first! Thankfully the New Zealand Stormies put on a great display.



Southern Giant Petrel



New Zealand Storm-petrel

Late afternoon as we headed back in we picked out both flavours of Oystercatchers feeding on the mud exposed by the dropping tide. They were joined by Royal Spoonbills and New Zealand Dotterels.

We said our goodbyes to skipper Steve and Wrybill guide Dave Howes who was also onboard, and headed north to a very urban location for our first endemic New Zealand Dabchicks. They were joined by their cousin the Australasian Little Grebe. This little lake in the middle of a modern housing estate is a little gem. Along with both grebe species (which were both present in good numbers) we also saw Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, Australasian Shovelers, Pied Stilts, Masked Lapwings, Welcome Swallows, Pukekos, and a single Brown Teal. Awesome to see how these rare birds are becoming more regularly seen.

28 September 2026 – Day Three

Our first stop of the morning was at a coastal tidal wetland. Unfortunately, the tide was high, but we still gathered some good looks at Variable Oystercatchers, New Zealand Dotterels, Bar-tailed Godwits, Pied Shags, White-faced Herons and a Buff-Banded Rail and Sacred Kingfisher. From the access track we saw California Quails, Eurasian Skylarks sang above us, Greenfinches and Goldfinches were seen.

Our main target was noticeable by its absence - Fairy Tern - arguably New Zealand's rarest bird, with less than 50 individuals it is like searching for a needle in a haystack.

We tried another spot without any joy so when all else fails, go for a coffee, which was exactly what we did.

After a caffeine hit, we drove a little further south and by now the tide was dropping. With a little time and luck we spotted our first two tiny Fairy Terns which hawked and hunted for small fish on the ebbing tide.

Happy with our views we thought we'd try another spot just around the corner and were rewarded with even better and closer views of another pair of Fairy Terns.

Moving on we made a little detour to see if we could find a Laughing Kookaburra. This large Kingfisher strong hold in New Zealand is north of Auckland, but we didn't see or hear one. We did however grab some nice photos of the Tui feeding on flowering Red Hot Poker Flowers.

With New Zealand's biggest city disappearing in the rear-view mirror we left the main highway and were soon into farmland. A brief stop to look at our first introduced Indian Peafowl, with a couple of splendid looking males.



Tui

29 September 2026 – Day Four

Waders! The main target of this morning. Our first stop was a little quiet but we added our first endemic Black-billed Gulls of the tour which were sitting next to Red-billed Gulls, the much larger Kelp Gulls, and New Zealand Dotterels. South Island Pied Oystercatchers outnumbered Variable Oystercatchers, plus New Zealand Dotterels and a few Pied Stilts.

At the main hides our timing was spot on as wave after wave of Bar-tailed Godwits and Red Knots flew into roost. What a spectacle. Probably over 3000 Godwits were just in front of us, and in the next few days their numbers would double and treble as these long-distance migrants arrive from their breeding grounds in Alaska, to over winter in the New Zealand summer. Kenna Sue and Howard had lived in Alaska for many years, so these birds had taken a special place on their budding New Zealand list.

In amongst the Bar-tailed Godwits were a good number of Red Knot. Also, very importantly for Wrybill Birding Tours, we saw a large group of around 100 Wrybill roosting right in front of us, with their salty grey colour to match their breeding grounds on the South Island, and the curved bill.

Matt picked out a lone Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and a pair of Banded Dotterels, plus South Island Pied and Variable Oystercatchers, Pied Stilts and Masked Lapwings.

It wasn't all waders. Our first Grey Teals were seen plus Black Swans, Australasian Shovelers, Caspian Terns, White-faced Herons, Canada Geese, Paradise Shelducks, Mallards and Pukeko.

The next hide was just as rewarding. We saw around 10 Pacific Golden Plovers roosting in amongst the grass. These would be the only sighting of this species all trip.

After a little retail therapy at the Visitor centre we headed to another part of the large reserve and added another few species to our morning's birding: a couple of Glossy Ibis, along with a flock of 36 Eastern Cattle Egret (some heading into their golden plumage), our first Black Shags AKA Great Cormorants, plus good numbers of Pied Stilts, Bar-tailed Godwits, and several Swamp Harriers spooked the roosting waders and wildfowl.

After grabbing some coffee and lunch we headed inland putting a few kilometres on the car. Huntly is not known as a New Zealand birding hotspot but for the last couple of weeks three Plumed Whistling Ducks were calling the town's park lake home. With a little searching we found them roosting in amongst some sunken trees at the edge of the lake. They eventually woke up and swam around showing off large fancy plumes on their flanks. Other birds seen were Grey Teal, Australasian Shovelers, Mallards, Little Pied Shag, Little Black Shag, and the larger Pied Shag, plus Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, House Sparrows, Goldfinches, Greenfinches and the brightly coloured Eastern Rosella.

With the twitching done, we headed further south to a large native piece of forest for our first Yellow-crowned Parakeets and our first Tomtit. Other birds seen were Bellbird, Grey Warblers, New Zealand Fantails, Silvereyes, Chaffinch, and the colourful Yellowhammer.



Plumed Whistling Ducks

As we were leaving the forest we spied a pair of New Zealand Pipits feeding in amongst some dead logs and sticks. New Zealand Pipits seem to be found at any location throughout the country, from beaches, mountain tops, forest tracks, or farmland. We were very happy to get good looks at this bird using the car as a hide as they just went about their business.

Leaving the Pipits behind we drove through lush farmland and after a long, big day, arrived at our very nice motel for the night.

30 September 2026 – Day Five

This morning we left in the dark as the lights of Taupo faded into the distance. We were up early because we had a date with a couple of special birds and mornings were by far the best time of day to try and find them.

First stop was a fast-flowing clean river. With a little scanning, we soon spotted a pair of endemic Blue Duck. We changed our position and were rewarded with stonking views of this rare duck. Their Māori name is Whio which comes from their whistling call. The pair fed right in front of us and then copulated. Wow! All done in the fast-flowing river! While watching the Blue Ducks we heard and saw our first Dunnock of the trip - maybe not quite as exciting!

On the walk back to the car we heard another new bird for the trip - Kenna Sue picked out our first Shining Bronze Cuckoo. These migrants had only just started to arrive back in New Zealand, always looking smart in their metallic green and stripey plumage.

We dropped Howard round to a local fly-fishing guide's house - Howard who's a keen fly fisherman would spend the day fishing, and almost certainly get to see more Blue Ducks.

Kenna Sue and Matt headed towards a large wetland and were greeted by a large selection of water birds and wildfowl. Black Swans, a very large number of New Zealand Grebes/ Dabchicks, New Zealand Scaup, Canada Geese, Pied Stilts, Pukeko, Masked Lapwings, Little Pied Shag, Little Black Shag, Great Cormorant, Black-billed and Kelp Gulls.

The bushes held a great selection of small passerines: Grey Warblers, New Zealand Fantails, Silvereyes, Chaffinches and Redpolls.

We then heard our main target at this location - the unmistakable booming of an Australasian Bittern. Sometimes you get lucky and see one of these shy secretive birds sitting out in the open, but mainly you just hear them.

Our attention was soon caught by a call of another skulking bird, a Spotless Crake. It called and ran between gaps in the low-lying reeds. Fortunately, we had had great looks at this small bird a few days earlier out in the open.

Another call from another shy cryptic skulker of a bird, the New Zealand Fernbird. Bingo - it popped up right in front of us giving awesome looks and calling which set off another close by Fernbird. That's when an Australasian Bittern flew across the reedbed right in front of us!



Fernbird

All this action and we hadn't moved more than 10 metres - and it wasn't even 9am! We grabbed a few shots of flying Bitterns and Fernbirds, and then a large flock of Royal Spoonbills flew over, quickly followed by another Bittern.

At a different location but looking over the same reedbed, we added another new bird for the tour - Eurasian Coot - better looks at New Zealand Scaup and New Zealand Grebe. A couple of Swamp Harriers flew low over the reeds, giving us hope of another Bittern. The surrounding bushes seemed to be filled with small birds. The highlight being a very showy pair of Whiteheads. These endemic gems of birds are always a pleasure to see. They were joined by New Zealand Fantails, Silvereyes, Song Thrushes, Blackbirds, House Sparrows, Chaffinches Greenfinches and Redpolls.

After an incredible morning's birding we headed back to the forest that we visited the previous day and ate lunch with New Zealand Kaka flying around. We grabbed good looks at North Island Robins, Yellow-crowned Parakeets and couple more Whiteheads and New Zealand Fantails. We were just about to leave when a male New Zealand Falcon exploded from nearby trees, calling as it circled above us. They can be a difficult bird to connect with (never a guarantee on any tour). This often-shy bird is New Zealand's only endemic raptor.

We walked off lunch with a stroll around this fantastic piece of North Island native forest, we saw more North Island Robins, Yellow crowned Parakeets and Kaka.



New Zealand Dabchick



Whitehead



Grey Warbler (Gerygone)



North Island Robin



Yellow-crowned Parakeet

We tried a couple of different locations for a Long-tailed Cuckoo, but without any sight or sound of this migrant species, I think still being late September early October, it was just a little early for this species. We did see Sacred Kingfishers being chased by Tuis in the forest which was a little bit strange.

We saw a single New Zealand Pipit and an Swamp Harrier as we left the forest. Once back at the motel we met back up with Howard who had had a great day fly fishing, catching and releasing 15 different trout, and of course having seen several more Blue Ducks.

1 October 2026 – Day Six

A bit of a travel day lay ahead. We were on the road early as we had a ferry to catch. After a coffee and brief stop to scope a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo that Matt had seen sitting in the top of a large tree.

You can't be on a birding tour, without stopping at sewage ponds. We grabbed another all be it brief look at another new bird for the trip - a tiny Black-fronted Dotterel played hide and seek with us. Other cooperative birds included Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal, Mallard, Paradise Shelducks, Black Swans, Canada Geese, New Zealand Scaup and a single New Zealand Grebe. Welcome Swallows hawked over the ponds, as Pied Stilts constantly yapped away.

Early afternoon the ropes were let go, as we sailed away from Wellington and the North Island. Although the weather was warm and dry, it was a strong wind that greeted us as we crossed the Cook Strait towards the South Island.

Birds seen on the crossing included at least x8 White-capped Albatross, x1 Salvin's Albatross, x2 White-chinned Petrels, x5 Westland Petrels, plus plenty of Fluttering Shearwaters, Fairy Prions, and Australasian Gannets.

Once we entered Queen Charlotte Sound, the wind dropped and we saw Red-billed and Kelp Gulls, a couple of Caspian Terns, plenty of White-fronted Terns, Pied Shags and our first Spotted Shags, along with more Fluttering Shearwaters and small pod of Dusky Dolphins.

We arrived at Picton, checked into our central motel and headed out for an awesome meal.

2 October 2026 – Day Seven

A new morning and after a briefing and introduction at our charter boat's office we headed out into Queen Charlotte Sound. A few target birds lay ahead of us this morning.

The morning light was just perfect for our first stop to grab awesome images of Spotted Shags – a stunning looking bird.

A very approachable King Shag was swimming around at the rear of the vessel. They are normally wary but this bird allowed us to get good looks. Next to arrive was a pod of Dusky Dolphins that were hunting and playing with a large raft of Fluttering Shearwaters.

Other birds seen included Red-billed Gulls, Kelp Gulls, a lone Black-billed Gull, Caspian and White-fronted Terns, and Australasian Gannets. Plus, our first Little Blue Penguins which kept a safe distance between us and the boat. A bit further on we found another group of five King Shags roosting on a rocky headland.

Leaving the vessel for a short time to explore an island which we had to ourselves, we were soon greeted by the local Weka. This was our first looks at this large endemic flightless rail, which strutted around grunting and sat in the morning sun preening. Above us, the chattering call of not one but three Orange-fronted Parakeets (often known as Malherbe's Parakeet).

We searched a little further along the track, trying to overlook the large snoozing New Zealand Pigeon! A pair of New Zealand Tomtits flicked around the bushes hunting small insects, often joined by groups of Silvereyes.

Matt spotted a little movement in the bushes above the track. Boom! Not one but a pair of Orange-fronted Parakeets were feeding quietly, right next to us. We all got onto them as they fed crawling through the foliage. They moved out into the open before melting away into the dense bush. This super rare endemic little parakeet was now on our list, and a mega lifer for Kenna Sue and Howard.



Spotted Shag



New Zealand King Shag



What a fantastic first morning's birding on the South Island! Once ashore we grabbed some lunch and a coffee and hit the road south. The next stop was for another vagrant; a Plumed Egret had been seen feeding in a flooded paddock. We found the bird quickly, feeding alongside an Eastern Cattle Egret, with its noticeable breast plumes, and larger size compared to the Cattle Egret. It was a nice addition to the trip - and was a New Zealand tick for Matt! Also in the paddock was a large flock of Black-billed Gulls, White-faced Heron, Australasian Magpie, Eurasian Skylarks and Swamp Harrier.

At a roadside lake after much perseverance, we were rewarded with good looks at Australasian Great Crested Grebes, and a single Hoary-Headed Grebe (this lake being the best place to see this species in New Zealand). The wind was so strong it made viewing difficult, but after a little wait one of the Hoary-Grebes appeared right in front of us. Other birds seen were Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal, New Zealand Scaup, Eurasian Coot, Pukeko, and Black Swans.

Our next stop just north of Kaikoura we spent a little time with New Zealand Fur Seals, always super cute to witness but there were also some nesting Spotted Shags, Red-billed Gulls plus White-fronted Terns.

Searching around the farmland in outskirts of the town we came up trumps finding a roosting Little Owl. It took flight and disappeared into a tangle of branches in a large tree. This ended our first full day on the South Island, and what a day it had been.



New Zealand Fur Seal

3 October 2026 – Day Eight

We were up early the next morning, at the nearby headland to check out a few New Zealand Fur Seals, some close looks at Banded Dotterels, and a large stream of Hutton's Shearwaters flying offshore.

At 9am our boat left the harbour and headed out to open water, with Gary AKA Gazza at the helm. We were in Kaikoura for only one thing and that was seabirds! Here are the results:

x2 Northern Royal Albatross, x6 Wandering Albatross (Gibson's) x5 White-capped Albatross, x9 Salvin's Albatross, x5 Northern Giant Petrel, x16 Cape Petrels, x2 Westland Petrels, x50+ Fairy Prions, x1 Sooty Shearwater x4 Hutton's Shearwater, Kelp and Red-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns, some NZ Fur Seals and Dusky Dolphins. The bonus bird was a lone tiny Grey-backed Storm-petrel (it's not often you see these birds this far north).



Southern Royal Albatross

An awesome morning was capped off with a nice sit-down lunch back in town and a little retail therapy. Kenna Sue and Matt were booked on the afternoon pelagic and Howard was sitting this one out to go for a walk and a little more shopping.

The results of the afternoon pelagic are as follows:

x2 Northern Royal Albatross, x1 Wandering Albatross (Gibson's) x2 Southern Royal Albatross, x4 White-capped Albatross, x7 Salvin's Albatross, x3 Northern Giant Petrels, x14 Cape Petrels, x38 Fairy Prions, x7 Westland Petrels, x30 Sooty Shearwaters, x1 Hutton's Shearwater. Plus, Red-billed and Kelp Gulls, Spotted Shag and Little Pied Shag.

4 October 2026 – Day Nine

By 7:45am we had seen another new endemic bird, the small Pipipi AKA Brown Creeper. All the colours were on show at this site where native bush met farmland: Blackbird, Grey Warbler, Redpoll, Greenfinch, Yellowhammer (plus NZ Fantails and Skylarks).

The Brown Creeper is not in any way related to the American Brown Creeper (it always reminds me of a Chickadee) but it is related to Whitehead which we had encountered a week or so earlier at Tiritiri Matangi; and related to Yellowhead which we would hopefully see in a few days' time at Ulva Island.

Just north of Christchurch (New Zealand's largest city on the South Island) our timing wasn't great as the tide was super high, but we still saw a few Black-billed Gulls, Caspian Terns, Black Swans, great looks at

nesting Pied and Little Pied Shags, plus a bonus Mute Swan. This north part of Canterbury seems to be their stronghold.

Heading inland we were rewarded with good looks at our first Black-fronted Terns, plus Banded Dotterels, Paradise Shelducks and displaying Swamp Harrier's.

We lunched at the world-famous Sheffield Pie Shop (which didn't disappoint) then headed inland towards the spine of the South Island - the Southern Alps. We drove through the stunning scenery, slowly gaining altitude to our next stop at an awesome native forest surrounded by snow-capped peaks. Within moments of parking the car we had seen our first South Island Robin which showed incredibly well. We walked off lunch strolling through the bush seeing Bellbirds, Grey Warblers, Australasian Magpies. In the village that sits in between the mountains we saw our first Kea of the journey. It was a bittersweet moment - it was our first Kea but it was completely surrounded by a large number of tourists. This very rare endemic parrot lives in the snow-capped mountains of New Zealand's Southern Alps. It's known as one of the most intelligent birds in the avian world, which inevitably gets it into trouble, plus introduced predators take their young and chicks.

At a new spot we were blessed with better looks at this charismatic bird in more natural surroundings and four birds played and searched for food in amongst the rocks and bushes.



Kea



We then checked into our very nice village motel for the night and were soon joined by a Kea, who oversaw our car being unpacked. Kenna Sue cooked a very nice meal and she and Matt headed out in the hope of finding or hearing a Great Spotted Kiwi. The night was cold and clear without too much wind, but alas came back empty handed. Not even hearing a bird close or far, just a distant Morepork, but that didn't damper another great day.

5 October 2026 – Day Ten

Always a pleasure to wake up in the mountains with cold crisp air. A pair of Kea greeted us in the car park as we headed along a bush trail to search for New Zealand smallest bird. We found at least three Rifleman, this tiny bird gave us a bit of a runaround. Other birds seen on this pleasant morning walk included South Island Robins, Tomtits, Grey Warblers, Bellbirds, plus a few introduced Song Thrushes, Chaffinches, Redpolls, Blackbirds and a pair of Dunnock back at the car park.

The next few hours were spent driving through arguably some of New Zealand's best scenery, rolling sheep filled fields backing up to snow-capped mountains, and small farming towns and villages.

The afternoon was spent looking for the world's rarest wader. The Black Stilt is an elegant looking wader, all black in plumage, with bubble gum pinkish long legs, a black thin bill and a red eye. Its Māori name is Kakī. Endemic to New Zealand, its population is less than 200 birds in the wild. They are helped with a captive breeding programme. They have problems breeding in the wild due to introduced pests, and can also hybridize with the more common Pied Stilt.

The way to find this mega rare bird is to look at every site you have seen them before and every site that looks like a good piece of habitat for a Black Stilt. So that's what Matt did. We eventually found four adult birds feeding on a quiet pond that was teeming with birds.

The Black Stilts fed in each other's company along with Pied Stilts, Banded Dotterels, Masked Lapwings, a single South Island Pied Oystercatcher, Black-billed Gulls, Black-fronted Terns, and Kelp Gulls. The wildfowl included heaps of Black Swans, Canada Geese, Paradise Shelducks, Australasian Shovelers, New Zealand Scaup, Grey Teal, and Mallards.

We enjoyed eating lunch while watching one of the world's rare birds and with Merino sheep for company. After lunch and stilts we looked for a Baillon's Crake without any luck, before driving up a mountain lookout in the hope of seeing an introduced Chukar, no joy. It seemed we had used all our luck on the Stilts, which is a good deal! The view from the top was stunning.

At Mount Cook / Aoraki all 3725 meters were on show. So often she has her head in the clouds, but not today.

Before we checked into our comfy motel for the night, Matt showed Kenna Sue and Howard the site of the captive breeding programme for the Black Stilts – and of course, one final bit of birding at a nearby salmon farm. Plenty of New Zealand Scaup, Eurasian Coots, Australasian Crested Grebes, Black-billed Gulls, Little Pied Shags, Great Cormorants, and Welcome Swallows hawked insects on the wing.

Another fine day was finished with a fine meal at a local restaurant.

6 October 2026 – Day Eleven

We packed up the car and by 7:30am the wheels were rolling south/east towards the coast. But first we had to find a duck.

There was a bit of a gap on our trip list, we were missing Grey Duck sometimes known as Pacific Black Duck. Matt knew of a spot where he had seen some candidates in the past, one of the main issues with this species in New Zealand is that they hybridize with Mallards.

We saw Black-billed Gulls and a few Black-fronted Terns, then further along spied some ducks – Mallards - then New Zealand Scaup. Then bingo, two birds, Mallard size and shape, a strong head pattern, a dark bill, dark feet and legs, and a bright green speculum. First tick of the day!

We stopped at fantastic little café in Kurow, drank coffee and watched local village life go about its business. Back on the road we drove towards the coastal town of Oamaru and were soon watching our second new bird of the day - the Otago Shag. Once lumped in as a Stewart Island Shag over ten years ago they were separated and split, giving us two species; the Foveaux Shag found only on Stewart Island, and the Otago Shag found on the mainland of the South Island. But a couple of years back, along came eBird and lumped them back together. So, on an eBird list it's a Stewart Island Shag. Here in New Zealand and Wrybill we still see them as separate species. So, we watched the Otago Shags making large nests, but some had young already and were busy feeding them.

Also at the site were Spotted Shags, Little Pied Shags, Red-billed Gulls and Kelp Gulls, White-fronted Terns, Variable Oystercatchers, a single Caspian Tern plus a few sleeping New Zealand Fur Seals. The surrounding bushes held New Zealand Fantails, Greenfinches, Goldfinches, House Sparrows and Redpolls.

We picked up some lunch in this nice-looking Victorian town and headed south. We stopped at the roadside where a small pond was surrounded by Otago farmland. We scanned the water and small islands that were hosting a lot of birdlife. Paradise Shelducks, Canada Geese, Australian Shovelers, Mallard, New Zealand Scaup. It wasn't all wildfowl, there were Pukeko, White-faced Herons, Pied Stilts and South Island Pied Oystercatchers.

We were looking for a rare vagrant duck that had been in this location for the past few weeks. We looked at sleeping ducks trying to turn them into our prize, maybe a change of angle, but still no luck. But then Matt moved slightly further left, what's this, Yes No... Yes, the drake Chestnut Teal awoke from his slumber and started to swim around in the open. A green sheen to his head a darker reddish colour to his body with an obvious white patch at the base of rear flank and a black tail, and red eye, similar in size to the few more common Grey Teal, that were also present.

This was our third rarity from Australia in a short space of time, the three Plumed Whistling Ducks we had seen on the North Island over a week ago, the Plumed Egret that we had seen a few days ago, and now this Chestnut Teal. They had all made landfall in a short space of time from each other. We watched as the Teal swam around, chasing a female Teal, before they both disappeared behind a small Island.

Our next stop was not too far along, the bird we were looking for here was another rarity. Unlike the Chestnut Teal, this was an endemic, and the World's rarest penguin. Yellow-eyed Penguins are in such decline on the mainland, it's estimated within less than twenty years they will be extinct on the mainland. They do have a strong hold on New Zealand's Subantarctic Islands, but this charismatic penguin is having a rough time of it. With a global population estimated at 3500-5000 individuals, with only 115 pairs on the mainland including Stewart Island.

The decline is driven by respiratory and diphtheritic diseases, starvation (linked to dietary shifts toward less digestible fish like blue cod), set-net fishing bycatch, and introduced mammalian predators.

We waited and waited with a large group of noisy Red-billed Gulls for company, watching the occasional Otago and Spotted Shag fly past the beach. Then we spotted a Yellow-eyed running from the cover of the bush to the beach and sea and was gone. Luckily Kenna Sue had grabbed a quick image.

Within 10 minutes, a second bird arrived from the sea on the beach right in front of us and spent the next 15 to 20 minutes preening right in front of us. I should say at this point we were behind the fence keeping a safe distance so as not to disturb or stress the bird. We were treated to a fantastic look at this magical bird. Their Māori name is Hoiho which translates as noise shouter.

We filled our bins, scope, and camera cards before the bird moved away from us and climbed into the bush and out of sight.



Yellow-eyed Penguin

Happy with our day, we drove to our motel, and then out for another nice meal at a local bar and restaurant.



7 October 2026 – Day Twelve

We were back on the road south via Dunedin (one of New Zealand's oldest cities) and on the Southern Scenic route through the Catlins.

We stretched our legs at a wind-swept empty beach with heaps of Red-billed Gulls nesting on a nearby cliff face. Other birds seen were Kelp Gulls, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers. Then something emerged from the breaking waves and walked up the beach. A young male New Zealand Sea lion, about 100 meters ahead of us, played with some kelp and relaxed before heading back to sea and foam and

disappearing. Happy to witness this rare endemic animal, which is making a comeback from almost extinction.

We enjoyed a sit-down lunch at the tiny town of Owaka before heading on through some amazing scenery on our way to the Southland port town of Bluff, where we would catch the ferry across to Stewart Island/Rakiura, New Zealand's third island, and home to Matt.

The ferry crossing is an hour long, but we saw a few birds on the crossing of the Foveaux Strait. White-capped Albatross, Cape Petrel, Sooty Shearwaters, Common Diving Petrels, and a few Foveaux Shags as we approached Oban itself.

Kenna Sue and Howard checked into their motel for the next couple of nights, while Matt went home. After a nice meal at the local Pub, we headed out in the dark to find a Southern Brown Kiwi.

Matt when not guiding for Wrybill Birding Tours, is a Kiwi guide here on the Island. We headed out to a private site and were soon watching a male Kiwi feeding, he put a little distance between himself and us, so we let him be. Almost opposite him was a larger female which we watched feeding on the edge of the bush line. While the red torchlight was off she walked closer to us, before heading across to the male – a great way to see the size difference as females are quite a bit larger – before they melted away into the bush.

While walking back to the van we came across a third bird, another male who was feeding out in the open, we watched him for a while, before leaving him to carry on feeding. What a nice way to finish up our day, and our first night on Stewart Island.

8 October 2026 – Day Thirteen

Today was our final day full day of birding. We had a big day in front of us, first up a Water Taxi to Ulva Island, enroute hopefully seeing Fiordland Crested Penguins and then an afternoon pelagic.

We picked up some lunch and while waiting for our water taxi we got a visit from Matt who owns the company, to say that due to the strong easterly wind coming straight into the wharf, they couldn't pick us up to look for Fiordland Cresteds. Bugger!

So, we headed to a more sheltered wharf to get across to Ulva Island. We tried a place where there had been Fiordland Crested Penguins but came away empty handed.

Ulva Island is a predator-free island just off Stewart Island. The island holds a lot of rare species including the chance of a couple new species for us.

We walked around this magical little island, first up some very cooperative, Red-crowned Parakeets. Matt heard a familiar call - a small group of Yellowheads AKA Mohua. This gem of a bird was one our hoped for birds and there was a pair of them feeding right in front of us. What a great start!

Further along the track we crossed paths with a large mixed flock, Red and Yellow-Crowned Parakeets, more Yellowheads, South Island Robins, NZ Fantails and yes, our second new bird - a pair of South Island Saddleback. These birds only had a population of 36 birds back in 1963 and they were all on an island just

off the southern tip of Stewart Island. There is whole population now living on predator-free islands. On Ulva Island there's around 100 pairs.

Soon the feeding flock had moved on so we carried on, stopping to get great looks at a pair of Kaka, one feeding on the forest floor in front of us, while another fed above us, stripping bark from a large Rimu tree.

We did the whole loop of the island, where we got more views of everything multiple times, plus we encountered a flock of Pipipi/Brown Creeper and some very inquisitive Weka. Soon our mega morning on Ulva Island was up.

The afternoon was spent on a large catamaran skippered by Ian. We ate lunch as we headed out to a nearby island to search for Yellow-eyed Penguins, but without any joy. Then around to another island where the local Southern Brown Skua showed very well.

By this time, we had a large group of Albatross around the vessel. They followed us as we headed south. Once at a natural reef, we stopped and the birds came in thick and fast. Over the next few hours, with occasional relocation, we saw: x10 Southern Royal Albatross, x1 Wandering Albatross (Gibson's), x40+ White-capped Albatross, x8 Buller's Albatross, x7 Salvin's Albatross, x1 Northern Giant Petrel, x11 Cape Petrels, x40+Fairy Prions, plus large numbers of Sooty Shearwaters, and Common Diving Petrels.

Our bonus bird was a brief appearance of a single Grey-faced Petrel that put in a few fly throughs before disappearing. A nice little addition to the trip.



South Island Saddleback



Red-crowned parakeet



Buller's albatross



Cape Petrel (Pintado)

We headed back into Oban, failing to find Yellow-eyed Penguins but the large colony of Foveaux Shags were a bit more of a certainty.

Then came our final chance to search for Fiordland Crested Penguin. We checked out a site that over the past few years has been a stronghold for a few pairs.

This is a migratory bird that arrives back into New Zealand's South/West to breed around late August early September having spent the winter months at sea. Stewart Island has always been a good spot to see them, but not today.

We tried a couple more spots without any luck and had almost come the point where maybe this bird had got away from us. We gave it one more pass and then yes, with a bit of luck, we spied a pair of Fiordland Crested Penguins, looking almost into the sun. Those bright yellow crests on the side of their heads were visible. Boom! We enjoyed views of our final new bird of the tour.

That evening we ate our final meal together and toasted an awesome final full day's birding. Stewart Island is always a great way to finish up a tour.

9 October 2026 – Day Fourteen

On our final morning we were greeted by a blanket of fog that was covering Foveaux Strait. Our ferry left the wharf at Halfmoon Bay just gone 7:30am and Oban and Stewart Island disappeared into the foggy distance. The normal one hour crossing took a little longer due to the foggy conditions.

A few birds were seen, mainly Common Diving Petrels, plus three Little Blue Penguins, Spotted and Foveaux Shags.

Back on the mainland we packed the car up at Bluff Harbour and headed north towards Invercargill.

Matt dropped Kenna Sue and Howard at Invercargill Airport where they were catching a flight north to Auckland, before heading to Queensland, Australia the following morning. We said our goodbyes, with fond memories of a country seen, plus a lot of fantastic birds.