

# Tour report

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4 - 24 February 2023

21-day tour with WINGS and Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



A New Zealand wandering albatross comes in over a wave at Kaikoura. Jim Livaudais.

**Led by Brent Stephenson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**

## **Participants**

Ann Kohlhaas, Ann Esmas, Jim Livaudais, Pierre Perret-Gentil, Alfred Adamo, Sylvia Ahn

## **Images**

Ann Kohlhaas, Jim Livaudais, and Brent Stephenson

This tour could easily be described as... Mega! Of course, the focus of our 21-day tours is always the endemic and native birds of New Zealand. But when you clean up pretty much all of them, with great views of most, and then get some incredible rarities along the way, you can't help but have a fantastic tour. Wedge-tailed shearwater, black-tailed native hen, Antarctic fulmar, Oriental plover, and erect-crested penguin are all reportable rarities in the places we saw them. That's pretty impressive!

We had a great group of birders, unfortunately one couple having to cancel last minute with illness. So, with just the six clients, there was plenty of room in the van. There was always plenty of chatter and laughing, always a good sign, and there was no chance of anyone not knowing what the weather forecast was going to be ;) Speaking of weather, despite having a few rainy days, and some cancellations with regards to pelagics, we were incredibly lucky. Being literally a day ahead of Cyclone Gabrielle was a true miracle. The Cyclone caused massive damage to roads, houses, and a number of people lost their lives in the North Island. The Cook Strait Ferry was chaos for weeks following the Cyclone, and we were on the last crossing before it was shut down during the Cyclone. We were incredibly lucky.

That said we missed our opportunity at our Marlborough Sounds boat trip, which meant we missed orange-fronted parakeet, but luckily had really great views of King shag from the ferry. Adjusting the itinerary to allow the trip to see the black-tailed native hen was a consolation. And then having our Kaikoura day heavily impacted with no opportunity to get out on a boat meant only one thing... a lot more driving, but a chance to do it on the last day. And we did!

There were many standout birds of the 159 species we saw along the way. We had 64 endemic breeding birds in that tally, and as previously mentioned excellent views of most. Kokako at a few feet calling softly to each other and drinking, stitchbird zipping around and calling, takahe up close, multiple day time roosting morepork, excellent views of four kiwi species (with the anticipation and military tactics only making the sighting more special), amazing views of both saddleback, multiple perched falcon, the stunning yellowhead, and a cracking pair of black stilt with juveniles. We did really well!

We missed on rock wren, a species now incredibly hard to see due to the closure of the area we used to get them at. Not hearing great-spotted kiwi despite a clear night was a bit of a surprise, and not seeing a definitive Pycroft's petrel was a shame. But with those really being the only things we missed, we were pretty happy.

There were a lot of laughs along the way, some nice photographic opportunities (as can be seen from the beautiful images in this report) and photographic discussions, and a fun time. What a great tour! Thanks for being a great bunch!

**Brent Stephenson** (leader and co-owner of Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ)

PS. I should just mention that all exaggerations, bad jokes, and artistically licensed information contained within the tour report below is solely and whole-heartedly mine!

## 4 February 2023 – Day One

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We started out from the Hotel and headed north out of the city. Our first stop was an Australasian gannet colony and there were hundreds of birds, but the number of chicks seemed low. The rough weather this summer may be having an effect on the ability of the adults to forage. We spotted a few red-billed gulls, variable oystercatchers, and enjoyed the stunning scenery, and then off to a nearby wetland.



Beautiful coastal scenery near the gannets. Ann Kohlhaas.



The group looking bright and fresh on the first morning. Brent Stephenson.



An Australasian gannet with its fluffy chick. Ann Kohlhaas.

At the wetland we had little black and pied cormorants, black swan, a surprise in the form of a couple of brown teal and a Pacific black duck. We also heard a skulky fernbird that flitted between rushes briefly. Then on to a forested area, where we had an inflight sulphur-crested cockatoo on the drive. On the way to our next stop we managed to find three perched sulphur-crested cockatoos, so that was a nice addition, before grabbing some lunch and enjoying it in a park, where a sacred kingfisher sat quietly.

Our afternoon stopped proved very fruitful, with very good views of several buff-banded rail, and over thirty more brown teal. A couple of Caspian terns, several pied stilts, and then some Paradise shelducks were all good to see, along with hundreds of purple swamphens.

On the way to some forest we had a male common pheasant and a gaggle of brown quail. And in the forest we had a lot of bellbird – with lots of juveniles – tui, whitehead, several New Zealand pigeon, more brown teal, another bathing buff-banded rail, and several singing but not gracious North Island robin. A begging shining bronze cuckoo was glimpsed, and then the star was a roosting morepork found by Ann K.

A lovely dinner and then to bed early...pelagic in the morning!



A New Zealand pigeon feeds on cabbage tree fruits. Ann Kohlhaas.



A buff-banded rail struts through the mangroves. Ann Kohlhaas.

## 5 February 2023 – Day Two

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Sandspit saw a nice group of South Island oystercatchers waiting for us, with a couple of New Zealand dotterel. Then on to the boat, and headed out slowly. Nice views of a little penguin on the way and then a little chop at the entrance to Kawau Channel, before settling in to a rhythm as we headed out to our first chumming location. A steady stream of fluttering shearwaters first, then a few Buller's, and then Cook's petrels and flesh-footed shearwaters as we steamed.

We got to our first chumming location with about 0.5m swell, and a nice 5-10 knot northerly, and before long there was a steady stream of flesh-footed shearwaters and Cook's petrels. Literally two minutes later and the first NZ storm-petrel turned up, even before a white-faced! But they weren't far behind. We then had a couple of black petrels, several gannets, a few non-interested Buller's shearwaters and more and more NZ storm-petrels. Really nice photographic opportunities as they came right in to the boat, and nice light. A single fairy prion came right in for a good showing.



A New Zealand storm-petrel glides past the back of the boat. Jim Livaudais.



New Zealand storm-petrels and flesh-footed shearwaters at the back of the boat. Brent Stephenson.

After almost a couple of hours we decided to head out a bit further to a second location, about 45 minutes away. We set out the chum again, and again it was just a minute or two before a cloud of Cook's had gathered and the first NZ storm-petrel showed. More of the same as the previous stop, with again great close views of everything. And then something looked different and a yell of 'WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER' went up. Rather unbelievably the bird circled five or six times, landed at one stage and fought over chum with the flesh-footeds, giving crippling views! And then it was gone. But about half an hour later, another yell, this time 'BLACK-WINGED PETREL' which also showed unbelievably well, coming straight at the boat and circling three or four times. Awesome!



A 'surprise' wedge-tailed shearwater slides past the boat giving great views. Jim Livaudais.

We waited a bit longer, getting sick of the 20+ NZ storm-petrels that were right at the back of the boat, but nothing new came in, and with two hours to steam home, headed for port. A pretty incredible day!

## 6 February 2023 – Day Three

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A little drizzly this morning, but as we arrived at our first location the drizzle eased. We were looking for fairy tern, and with around 35 birds left in NZ we were keen to try and spot one. We spent a lot of time scanning an estuary, seeing good numbers of variable oystercatchers, pied cormorants, New Zealand dotterel, and then a reef egret. But no fairy tern. We waited, and waited.

We then headed off, grabbed lunch, and came back to wait again, as the tide dropped surely we would get lucky. A distant bird made us move to a different spot, but no luck there, so we headed back to the original



location. And shortly after spotted not one but two pairs! We had good views of one bird hovering and feeding over the estuary, and then several times the closer pair settled on the exposed mud for scope views. Excellent. After great views we headed off, having finished our lunch.

A bit of driving, and then a stop at a small wetland where we saw at least 4 pairs of Australasian little grebe, one pair of New Zealand grebe, some New Zealand scaup, and a collection of other ducks.

Heading further north we checked in to our accommodation to have a bit of a break for an hour or two before dinner, and then off to look for Northern brown kiwi.

## 7 February 2023 – Day Four

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We grabbed lunch in Kerikeri and then headed for Marsden Cove Marina. A bit of a drive, but stunning morning with mist and fog in places and beautiful sunshine. Collared dove, spotted dove, and a few other ferals on the way.

We got onboard the boat and slowly made our way out of the Marina. First stop a small island with FIVE reef egrets on it! Very cool. Then a little penguin, and then a few fluttering shearwaters. The seas were calm, the sun shining and light winds, perhaps too light. We headed to our first chumming location, seeing several bottlenose dolphins and having them bow-ride for a little bit. We stopped a bit north of the Hen and Chicken Islands, and set things up. A very light breeze brought in a few flesh-footed shearwaters, then some white-faced storm-petrels, and the odd Cook's petrel passed. We then had a couple of New Zealand storm-petrels, before a few Buller's shearwaters, and several black petrels. The white-faced storm-petrels in particular were right by the boat in stunning light!

With the winds so light we decided to head for the Mokohinau Islands, and on the way very calm conditions. We passed through the islands and then to a stop where we had around 90 grey ternlets. Very cool to see these birds roosting here, and a fairly high tally. The gannets here seemed to have finished breeding with just a few adults and the last juveniles about to fledge. We started to head back, and startled several large flying fish from the water.

A bit later in the very calm waters we had a large pod of short-beaked common dolphins, which came in to the boat and then started feeding. Out of nowhere flesh-footed shearwaters and Australasian gannets started feeding, the latter plunge diving from 30+m. The flesh-footed shearwaters were fighting over dead yellowtail that floated to the surface. What a spectacle!

Carrying on, our Skipper Steve spotted the tips of a Manta rays wings, and deftly manoeuvred the boat so we had awesome views of this 3m wide beast cruising through the really clear water. At our second chumming spot we had a second that passed nearby. We had a grey ternlet buzz past us at our chumming location, and then a similar assemblage of birds. No definite Pycroft's but some excellent views of storm-petrels etc again.

We headed back in to the Marina, a great day, and with the tide lower there was a good assemblage of shorebirds on the mudflats, including both oystercatchers, NZ dotterel, and bar-tailed godwit and red knot. A nice dinner and a good night's sleep!



A flesh-footed shearwater with wings raised. Ann Kohlhaas.



Cruising through the Mokohinau Islands. Brent Stephenson.



A white-faced storm-petrel gracefully bounces over the water. Jim Livaudais.

## 8 February 2023 – Day Five

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Away early this morning, and heading south to Gulf Harbour. We boarded the ferry and scanned for birds on the way, but very quiet, basically nothing of note. Arriving at Tiritiri Matangi Island we had a quick briefing and then headed up towards the Bunkhouse. We quickly had a North Island robin up close, then a really nice saddleback, before loads of bellbirds, tui, etc.

We heard the distinctive calls of a kokako and got on to a pair that were quietly moving through the low canopy. They ended up both coming in to drink at a water feeder, and we had stunning views of these iconic birds. They quietly called to each other and moved slowly through the trees, bounding from branch to branch. We also had a female stitchbird, but no males.

Carrying on we had several more excellent saddleback, whitehead, and heard a few red-crowned parakeet. At the Bunkhouse the takahe pair were feeding on the grass with their fully grown chick from this season. Lovely to see these up close, and not skulking in the undergrowth!

We had lunch, a bit of a rest and then ventured out for the afternoon. Great views of a number of male stitchbird coming in to a sugar water feeder, and then another walk had great views of red-crowned parakeet. A fernbird evaded us several times, calling quietly and hopping round inside a vine tangle, but not really showing itself.



Watching a kokako. Brent Stephenson.



A North Island kokako shows itself spectacularly. Ann Kohlhaas.



An ancient looking takahe. Ann Kohlhaas.



The Tiritiri Matangi Lighthouse with a takahe on the lawn. Ann Kohlhaas.



A male stitchbird poses. Ann Kohlhaas.

We had a great BBQ dinner, and then headed out as dark approached. Barely 10 minutes into the walk we had several male little spotted kiwi call, and then a female walk across the path in front of us! A bit more walking, several morepork calling, and finally a tuatara and several moulting little penguins. Most headed to bed, but we continued looking for kiwi, only to be all but back at the Bunkhouse, when we heard one rustling in the leaves off the side of the track, and had stunning views of a male about 3ft away. It wandered around, sniffed the air, and then made its way off through the forest! A stunning end!

## 9 February 2023 – Day Six

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We had breakfast, packed up and cleaned the Bunkhouse, and then slowly made our way down to the wharf. Good views of some of the same subjects from the day before.

Our water taxi ride across to Gulf Harbour was a little sloppy, with a stiff southerly, but we reloaded the van, grabbed lunch at a bakery and then got on the road south to Miranda.

Nothing special on the way south, and checked in to the accommodation quickly and then to the Stilt Ponds. A small group of Pacific golden plovers was nice on the way in. The tide was slowly going down, and we watched as flocks of wrybill flew in and out, feeding on the mud in front of us. The bar-tailed godwit and red knot flock steadily decreased as birds got up and flew off out to feed. Some of the males of

both species really starting to colour up in preparation for their upcoming breeding season in the Arctic, imagine that!

We scanned and found good numbers of black-billed gulls in the distance, a few floating past us, as well as lots of pied stilts and South Island pied oystercatchers. A single hybrid black X pied stilt was also present. Several Royal spoonbill flew over, and a scan of the mudflats found a Far-eastern curlew roosting away on its own in the distance. It mostly slept hiding its bill, but every now and then woke up and showed the huge downcurved apparatus. A great egret on the way back to the van was a nice addition.

We headed back to the accommodation for a little rest, and then to dinner. An early night and a great sleep!

## 10 February 2023 – Day Seven

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We grabbed some lunch in Matamata (aka Hobbiton), and then onwards to Pureora Forest Park. Our first stop was a small lake where we found Eurasian coot, grey teal, Caspian tern, and a heap of Paradise shelducks. Then on to the Forest Park and a stunning walk amongst huge totara, kahikatea, and rimu trees. Stunning mosses, ferns, and a good array of birds, with a lot of singing North Island robin, great views of kaka, and a juvenile shining-bronze cuckoo being fed by grey warblers. Rifleman called but evaded view, and a tomtit in the tree tops proved tricky!

We then had lunch overlooking the forest edge and had more kaka, flyover yellow-crowned parakeets, and then some jumping around in the canopy, as well as other bits and pieces. We drove to another spot and found a long-tailed cuckoo which jumped around in the bushes giving brief views, and then flew out and over the top of us and away. Only to return and fly overhead a few minutes later! Excellent – a two cuckoo day!

A second forest walk was not as productive bird wise, but still stunning. We decided to head off and nearing Turangi, had fernbird skulking in the shrubbery again, a bittern leap out of the raupo rushes in front of us and fly off, and lots of waterfowl including dabchick on the lake. We headed to a few different spots to look for blue duck, but after scanning the river at the fourth spot we decided maybe it was beer o'clock... one last spot! And there was a pair of blue duck, one perched and one feeding in shallow water on the rivers edge! Awesome!

It was definitely beer o'clock, dinner and then bed!



The coveted blue duck. Jim Livaudais.

## 11 February 2023 – Day Eight

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We checked out the Tongariro River again early, and found a single blue duck feeding. We watched it diving into the fast-moving water repeatedly, and saw how easily it disappeared into the riverbank at one stage.

We then headed north, stopping for fernbird, and getting really nice close views of fernbird in a bush. Everyone was happy, finally being able to see this bird well after several glimpses previously. A redpoll landing in the road gave a good enough view to add this bird to the list.

Carrying on we headed to a forested area, making a few brief stops on the way and passing through some scenic countryside. We did a walk through the forest, enjoying the bird song, a number of North Island robin, whitehead, tui, and then spotted a perched male falcon! Excellent views of this beautiful little raptor sitting in the tree tops preening!

Carrying on we tried to find tomtit that squeaked nearby, but alas. Beautiful big trees were a powerful sight and then a couple of roosting morepork a few feet apart were a great find. While we watched them Pierre exclaimed 'Kokako!' and we rushed after two kokako high in the canopy. Brief views of their large shapes in the tops of trees, and wonderful song for several minutes. Amazing! A couple of flyover kaka before lunch.





The team poses with a kiwi sign. Brent Stephenson.



Beautiful temperate rainforest. Ann Kohlhaas.

We then redid a bit of the forest walk, keeping an ear out for rifleman and tomtit, but hard to hear over the noise of the cicadas. We headed down to the coast and stopped at a wetland area, where we found our first Australasian shoveler, lots of grey teal, pied stilts, and banded dotterel. We ventured to another spot, this time finding some Pacific golden plover, more banded dotterel and pied stilts, and many more shoveler. A black-fronted dotterel put in an appearance, and quickly won hearts!

Two more wetland areas, one with a large number of nesting Royal spoonbill, and then another estuary where we found some black-billed gulls roosting, and a little tern amongst them.

Off to an amazing Indian restaurant for dinner!

## 12 February 2023 – Day Nine

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A slightly later start this morning saw us getting lovely views, and then our first New Zealand pipit at just a few feet.



Views out over Hawkes Bay. Brent Stephenson.

We then headed to a wetland area, this time with crakes in mind, and before long we had a scuttling Baillon's crake that ended up giving pretty nice views, and then some murmurs from a spotless crake. One bird showed itself briefly. A bit further along and we ended up getting really nice views of a spotless crake, along with a few other waterbirds, and some long-finned eels.

We headed south, passing up and over the Tararua Ranges to the western side of the island. Arriving at an estuary, the tide was in pretty high, and we had a few wrybill, another Pacific golden plover, as well as some bar-tailed godwit and red knot. Some of the males of both species were really starting to colour up. At a slightly different location we had a small flock of white-fronted terns, and our attention kept being drawn to a bird that was similar but not the same. After a while we decided it was a common tern, so another nice addition to the list.

We had a bit of a rest in the late afternoon, and then a BBQ dinner, before an early night.



A wrybill at rest. Jim Livaudais.

## 13 February 2023 – Day Ten

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Heading south, our last day on the North Island. We made a couple of brief stops at a large lake with hundreds of black swans, and a nice group of little black cormorants, amongst other things. And then a sewage works, with loads of Paradise shelducks, grey teal and Australasian shoveler. We then stopped at an estuary where we found a large white-fronted tern colony, still with a lot of chicks ranging from a week old through to almost fledged. And a pair of New Zealand dotterel with very small fluffy chicks were a lovely sight. Amongst a small flock of roosting white-fronted terns we found another common tern. This one was very much more obvious with the dark carpal bar, dark primaries and overall smaller size.



A Royal spoonbill feeding up close. Ann Kohlhaas.

We then continued south, checking in for the ferry, and then driving on. We found a covered spot with good visibility and as we sailed out into Wellington Harbour had fluttering shearwaters, white-fronted terns, and three Parasitic jaegers. Out in the open ocean we started seeing more fluttering shearwaters, but also a good number of Hutton's as well, in fact more than fluttering. Our first albatross was spotted by Jim with a Salvin's, then a Buller's albatross and then several white-capped. A few flesh-footed and sooty shearwaters, and a couple of Cook's petrels added to the tally.

In the Sounds we had good numbers of gulls, a couple of Parasitic jaegers, and then three King shags – all on the water, and one of them really quite close to the ferry! Very nice...as with the approaching cyclone it was very clear we were not going to get out on the water tomorrow...

We docked in Picton, and headed to our Motel and then dinner... A few spots of rain as we headed to bed and the wind started to rise.

## 14 February 2023 – Day Eleven

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Awaking to very strong winds and rain, the already cancelled Queen Charlotte trip was certainly the right move. With the identification of a black-tailed native hen recently in Murchison, we decided to head for that. As we left and headed inland, the wind dropped and the rain stopped. A sign we were going the right way?!

We arrived at the Kiwi Park Motels and Holiday Park, met the owners, and headed to the chicken yard where this bird has been frequenting. And sure enough, there it was, nervous at first and skulking around the edges. It then got a little courage together and came closer, what a little stunner! Awesome views of this often skulky and hard to see bird! A real mega for New Zealand.



A black-tailed native hen, a very rare vagrant in New Zealand. Brent Stephenson.

We headed further south, deciding to take the inland route to Kaikoura, and as we got closer to Lewis Pass the skies looked ominous. We had a quick lunch in lovely beech forest, and then headed up and over the pass, where the rain started. It fell steadily all the way to Kaikoura, although we did see our first black-fronted terns on a river on the way.

In Kaikoura we had a look at the sea from the end of the Peninsula, and although there was almost no wind, there was a huge storm surge hitting the coast from the north-east. We watched the waves, red-billed gulls, and the odd fur seal, before heading to our accommodation. The rain was really coming in, but a lovely dinner and early night, let's see what tomorrow brings.



Peering into the chicken yard. Brent Stephenson.

## 15 February 2023 – Day Twelve

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Raining, but still not a lot of wind. But the storm surge hitting the beach was significant. So, Cyclone Gabrielle was still impacting this coast, and our pelagics were cancelled. We headed north along the coast, making a quick stop at a lookout spot on the rocky coast. Lots of New Zealand fur seals, including smaller pups from this year.

We carried on, and got to a lake, where we immediately had a grebe chick. Looking for the adults, we realised the chick was a hoary-headed grebe, spotting another and both adults. Great views of this pretty rare grebe, with just a few pairs at this site in New Zealand. There was a scattering of shoveler, grey teal, and a coot. And then we spotted a New Zealand grebe, and an almost fully grown crested grebe. Rather unbelievably we heard a Baillon's crake nearby, and then managed to get pretty good views of it scampering through the reeds.

We headed back to Kaikoura, had a delicious lunch as the southerly wind hit, and brought in the rain. A little exploration had yellowhammer, but no cirl bunting.

A relaxed afternoon. Some chose to visit the Kaikoura Museum, others caught up on images, laundry, etc. A delicious fish and chip dinner, and then a look around the neighbourhood for little owl. We managed to hear one calling, and finally got good views of a pair sitting side by side on a branch – in the howling southerly and rain!

## 16 February 2023 – Day Thirteen

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Heading south with the southerly still howling, and rain falling, we stopped on the coast. There were albatross flying, a lot of Hutton's shearwaters, and Northern giant petrels. And a Northern Royal albatross made a distant appearance.

Carrying on we made a quick stop at a small lake, with a few different waterfowl species. And then visited an estuary where we managed to find a good number of species including black-fronted terns, wrybill, and bar-tailed godwit. We spent a good amount of time just enjoying the location and scanning, before having lunch. A quick check of another area had a mute swan with two cygnets.



Finally some sunshine on the coast. Ann Kohlhaas.

We then headed inland and up towards Arthur's Pass. A bit of road works had us waiting patiently, and then a stop for distant kea, and then a short walk in beautiful beech forest. We managed to get great views of rifleman, adults feeding newly fledged young, and then a couple more a bit further on. Canopy views of tomtit, still not showing well, and then heard a robin, but no joy in finding it.



The mighty Southern Alps near Arthurs Pass. Ann Kohlhaas.



A juvenile rifleman gives great views after giving us the run-around. Jim Livaudais.



A bit further on we had a robin skulking in some bushes, but a good enough view for a start. And then we stopped again at another spot and had really great views of a number of kea. Normal comical antics, flying around, and calling. Such amazing birds.

We headed back to our accommodation, and had a lovely dinner, before then heading out to a spot to listen for great spotted kiwi. Relatively clear night, a bit of a breeze but nothing major. Nice stars above, and some distant morepork, but we heard no kiwi. A good night's sleep!

## 17 February 2023 – Day Fourteen

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We headed off down the road. A random change in schedule for the roadworks and bridge crossings had us waiting longer than expected. But just as well with excellent views of at least three tomtits. Including two males that seemed to be having a territorial dispute.

Carrying on, we stopped in for more kea antics. Just so much fun watching these incredible birds. Then some scenic stops and our first weka along the side of the road. We made a quick stop at some sewage ponds, but nothing out of the ordinary. Into Hokitika to grab some lunch and then a lakeside stop. We had a lovely walk in the forest, with more weka, tomtit, and bellbird. Lunch in the sunshine, and a couple of great egret were nice, moulting out of breeding plumage and acquiring their yellow bills (they are black during breeding here in NZ). We then had nice views of a couple of brown creeper (pipipi) in nearby bushes.



Beautiful capture of a kea on the wing. Jim Livaudais.



The team peer into the shrubbery getting views of brown creeper. Brent Stephenson.

Heading further south in stunning sunshine we enjoyed the scenery and spectacular Podocarp forest. We checked in with Ian Cooper from Okarito Kiwi Tours, got a briefing and timing for the evening, and then did a little forest walk. Tomtit, fantail, and more tomtits, and then finally a very nice male South Island robin sat and preened until it got bored of us taking thousands of photos of it.

We carried on in to our accommodation, had a rest for an hour or so and then to dinner. After dinner we drove back out to Okarito. We managed to track down fernbird, with several birds showing really well. We then met with Ian, got geared up and then headed to our location. On the way we spotted a male New Zealand falcon which perched nicely just a few metres away, giving great views. Then a very friendly South Island robin tried to break up the training, before we got down to business. As it got dark morepork started to call and at the same time we became aware that the kiwi were on the move. We had a male called White eyes within a few metres of us, hearing it stomping through the dry leaves, and a few minutes later it showed to everyone, before turning and walking back into the thick forest. We spent some more time out, and eventually were rewarded with him calling loudly nearby, and at that point we decided to head home, getting great views of a morepork on the way.

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## 18 February 2023 – Day Fifteen

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We headed to a glacier view point, with the receding glacier hiding up the valley. Nice botany and flowering bamboo orchids were a treat.

We then headed further south, making a quick stop with distant Hector's dolphins in the calm seas. Then another stop where we knew there had been a pair of falcons that had raised chicks. Within a few minutes we spotted one of the juveniles, and getting the scope on it, watched it sitting in the sun for almost an hour. We had lunch, and eventually the bird must have thought it was lunch time as well, because it flew off out of sight.

We carried on south, another stop for sea watching, and this time hit the jackpot with at least 20 Hector's dolphins in the surf zone. There was really no actual surf, but they were pretty close in, in small groups scattered over the area we were watching. Very cool! We also had a feeding flock of shearwaters and terns, with a good number of the birds being recognisable as Buller's shearwaters.

It was time to carry on and then head inland, this time making our way in to Mt Aspiring National Park, and the stunning scenery that is this part of the World! We made a stop in some beautiful beech forest, which also showed itself to be very dry at the moment, rather than the temperate rainforest that it is normally described as. The forest was fairly quiet, but in the end we had great tomtits, rifleman, and several yellowhead gave good but brief views before disappearing and calling quietly further into the forest. Despite giving it a good go, we just couldn't get on to them again.

Carrying on we checked in to Wanaka, where the temperature was at least 8 deg C warmer! It really did feel like summer! A beautiful Indian meal and then an early night!

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## 19 February 2023 – Day Sixteen

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Away early and south towards Te Anau. Few quick stops on the way and then grabbed lunch in Te Anau and through towards Milford Sound. As we got closer the drizzle started, and as we got to the Homer Tunnel it was pretty steady rain.

We had a quick drive through to Milford Sound in the rain, stunning waterfalls falling down all of the mountainsides. There really is no such thing as bad weather in this part of the World. At Milford Sound a quick look out over the fiord and then back off towards the tunnel. At the tunnel we had a kea on the road.

On through we managed to find a juvenile blue duck feeding in a stream, and had great views which was really nice. Great to see this species down here.

A short time later we did a forest walk, and had a good number of rifleman, getting nice views. Hearing robin taunting us was frustrating, but of course we finally managed a robin down to about 1ft as it came right in to investigate. Always a crowd pleaser! Our fifth daytime roosting morepork was a bit of a surprise, with really nice views of it up in a beech tree.

We carried on back towards Te Anau. The rain stopped and the sun even came out. We looked for and finally found a good number of scaup, and then the target crested grebe with three large chicks. The chicks were following the adult as it swam under water, begging the whole time and giving away the adult's location. Very nice.

Superb dinner and then an early night.

## 20 February 2023 – Day Seventeen

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Another early morning, leaving before sunrise to head to Bluff. We grabbed some pies on the way as a stunning sunrise was unfolding, and rolled into Bluff in good time. We checked in to the ferry, and waited then boarded.



Sunrise on the way to Bluff. Ann Kohlhaas.

The sky was blue, the winds light, and the seas pretty flat with just a little swell in the open part of the Foveaux Strait. Wasn't long and we had our first sooty shearwaters, and then white-capped albatross. We had a few more white-cappeds, a good number of sooty shearwaters, and a single common diving petrel that didn't show well, but zipped along over the waves. Coming in to Halfmoon Bay we saw a big work up of white-fronted terns, red-billed gulls and sooty shearwaters, and a good number of Foveaux shags

roosting on a rock. A single Fiordland crested penguin bounded across the rocks but was not seen by the group...

We docked in Oban, checked in to our accommodation, grabbed lunch and enjoyed it in the sunshine. We then caught our water taxi to Ulva Island and headed into the forest. Well tried too, a saddleback called as soon as we arrived on the wharf, and that was that! Nice, a couple more saddleback before we were even another 100 metres.... And not much further and we had at least five yellowhead giving great views after a bit of bathing. We wandered the trails around the island, getting all of the expected birds including great views of both parakeets, rifleman, more saddleback and yellowhead, and of course South Island robin. Weka were pretty awesome as well, and a few kaka and bits and pieces. We spotted three sea lions frolicking in the water off one of the beaches, and then arrived back at the wharf for a snack and drink, before heading off on another little trek. More of the same with some really nice yellowhead, saddleback and red-crowned parakeets.



A lovely day for the beach, Ulva Island. Ann Kohlhaas.

The water taxi ride back to Oban was nice in the sunshine, and especially nice finding four Fiordland crested penguins on the way. Great to see these birds so late in the season. A rest before dinner, and then another rest before heading out to look for Southern brown kiwi.

We hadn't even started the tour, and had a kiwi feeding on a lawn in town! Ten minutes of watching the bird at point blank range made us wonder if we even needed to go on tour... Of course we did! We had great views of several more kiwi, what an amazing evening!



Ann E and Brent concerned they are about to be attacked by a marauding weka. Jim Livaudais.



A red-crowned parakeet forages on the forest floor. Ann Kohlhaas.

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## 21 February 2023 – Day Eighteen

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Heading out on the Aurora we stopped in to look for the same Fiordland crested penguins we had seen the afternoon before, but only a brief view of a different bird in a different spot. We did get some nice views of Foveaux shags though, before then heading out further. Scanning for yellow-eyed penguins we managed to see a lot of NZ fur seals, but no penguins. The albatross had started to mill around and our first Buller's and Salvin's albatross showed up amongst the white-cappeds. Lots of sooty shearwaters feeding in patches with white-fronted terns.

We carried on to another spot, and managed to spot a couple of brown skua, which when they saw us came flying out to say hello and get a few scraps. Great views of these super intelligent birds as they came back repeatedly for breakfast.

We then decided it was time to head out for the main event, heading out to our chumming location. There was a pretty big swell running, but just a little chop and a stiff breeze. Big 4m southern ocean swells rolled through, but they were far enough apart that it was comfortable. With the chum out, the birds started to come in. Lots of white-capped albatross were at the back of the boat, a wandering albatross made a quick pass – strange for this part of the World. We had a few Buller's albatross come in, and then suddenly a Salvin's was amongst the flock. Over the course of the next few hours we had several white-chinned petrels, Buller's shearwaters, and a number of Cook's petrels, before the first of around nine mottled petrels passed by, some really quite close. Storm-petrels came on in with white-faced, and then at least two grey-backed, and towards the end a Wilson's storm-petrel was in the slick. A tantalising single pass by an Antarctic fulmar was very brief.

We also had several different New Zealand wandering albatross – rare for this part of the World – and at least four Southern Royal albatross which came right in and squabbled. A single Northern giant petrel showed a couple of times – presumably the same bird. And a steady stream of fairy prions – the first we saw looked a little different – and was likely an Antarctic prion.

After about three hours the wind dropped right off and it seemed like a good time to head back in and see if we could spot a penguin. We headed back and passed some of the islands, checking all the likely spots, but nothing. Further in we had great views of four erect-crested penguins again and then carried on in to the dock. What a great day, time for dinner and an early night.



A beaut Southern Royal albatross amongst white-capped alberts. Brent Stephenson.

## 22 February 2023 – Day Nineteen

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We headed out on the first ferry back to Bluff. It was calm and not much wind, so we spotted a few things including a Southern Royal albatross on the water, but a few white-capped and Buller's in flight. A Buller's shearwater, a single fairy prion and a lot of sooty shearwaters, plus some black-fronted and white-fronted terns.

We loaded the van, and headed off to grab lunch, and then to a spot where we had a tip on a moulting erect-crested penguin. Not thinking the bird would still be there we were surprised when it was, moulting in the dunes, and giving great views. Awesome, a pretty rare penguin for the New Zealand mainland! We carried on towards the north, and spotted a field with a bunch of black-fronted terns, black-billed and kelp gulls. We stopped to have a look and take some photos of the terns, and a plover a bit larger than a banded dotterel walked into view...holy #\$@#! What is that... well turned out to be probably New Zealand's 20<sup>th</sup> record of Oriental plover! Moulting into breeding plumage perhaps, where the heck that had come from goodness only knows! What an awesome bird, and ANOTHER New Zealand mega!

We carried on and put some miles behind us. Next stop a spot for yellow-eyed penguins. Walking out to the coastal lookout we arrived and some people were already looking at one resting under a bush. We spotted another a bit further away lying on the ground, so had two in pretty quick order. We waited and scanned for a bit, but no signs of anything else, so we headed off and into Oamaru. We stopped and checked out some Otago shags at a colony, with spotted shags nearby, and then to another nearby spot to



look for a different erect-crested penguin that had been reported recently. And there it was also! Almost finishing moult, the bird was standing out looking pretty close to heading back to the sea.

We checked in to the accommodation, and then had another beaut dinner.

## 23 February 2023 – Day Twenty

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On the road early again. A quick stop at a coastal lagoon had a lot of waterfowl, and a single Cape Barren goose. We then headed inland and stopping at the World Famous Fairlie Bakehouse loaded the van with pies! Heading further inland, our first stop revealed the necessary shorebird – black stilt! Two adult birds and four juveniles were at the spot, and we had awesome views of them feeding. We watched them for a while, and then a brief scan had a covey of about 6 chukar on top of a ridgeline. Turning the scope 180 degrees we were able to watch these often difficult to spot birds.

We carried on and checked out a few other spots, but nothing further, and the rain started. So, with a lot of driving ahead we decided to have another look at the stilts and then head off.

We drove in off-and-on rain right through to Kaikoura. We did make one quick stop to successfully look for cattle egret – finding two that had been seen earlier just off the main route we were taking. We made good time based on our luck of finding the stilts early, and arrived to check in to the accommodation. We had another great Indian meal and then an early night.

## 24 February 2023 – Day Twenty-One

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With Cyclone Gabrielle impacting our planned pelagic and activities in Kaikoura a week and a half ago, we had decided we would head back to Kaikoura, and try our luck at getting out on the water. It didn't look great for a start, with an early call from Gazza the skipper delaying things for a little, until the sun was up and conditions could be adequately assessed. It certainly wasn't calm out there and a chance to make sure it was safe in daylight necessary. Just before 0700 we got the call that it was a go, and we headed to South Bay to meet Gazza and get on board. It was definitely a bit sloppy, but we headed out and soon had a few albatrosses following.

After about 20 minutes of bumping into waves we slowed and put the chum out. Before long we had New Zealand wandering albatross, Northern giant petrels, and Salvin's and white-capped albatrosses coming in. In quick succession we then had the target Westland petrels come in, then several Cape petrels. Perfect! For the next hour we had birds at the back of the boat, with numbers steadily increasing. Several Hutton's flew past giving pretty good views, and a Buller's shearwater, several Sooty shearwaters, and then two Southern Royal albatross and a Northern Royal came in close, but never landed.



A New Zealand wandering albatross comes in over a wave at Kaikoura. Jim Livaudais.

The chum ran out, the sloppy sea started to take its toll, and so we turned and headed back in to South Bay. Very nice to finally get out on the water here in Kaikoura and pick up some of its specialties!

We then decided to head for a quick look to see if we could find a girl bunting, and as luck would have it quickly had a pair. The male was looking a little ragged, but gave a few little song notes to try and impress us. We grabbed some lunch and then headed south towards Christchurch.

There was a bit of rain on the way, but we arrived in to the Airport in good time, dropping off half the team, and then to the Hotel to drop off the rest. It was the end of the trip, but we had finished on a high note with a very successful pelagic out of Kaikoura!