

Tour report

10 February – 1 March 2024

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



Aotearoa – Land of the long white cloud. Dustin Huntington.

Led by Brent Stephenson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Mark & Shelley Carson, Carlton Cook, Lillian Fujii & Steve Hayashi, Dustin Huntington, John Mangold and Karen Tadd

Images

Brent Stephenson, Mark & Shelley Carson, Carlton Cook, Dustin Huntington, and John Mangold

This tour had a bit of everything along the way. We had some incredible luck with some species – Okarito kiwi standing in the middle of the track for all to see – as well as gob-smacking views of both spotless and Baillon's crake out in the open and 100s of photos taken. Almost all the hoped for seabirds both in the North and South. And we had some terrible 'luck' with others – orange-fronted parakeet that just didn't make a squeak for nearly two hours. But then sometimes patience really paid off, when all seemed lost. Waiting over 3 ½ hours for a couple of stunning rock wren to show was certainly a test of patience. But that's birding, and it paid off.

We also had weather of all kinds, with our pelagic out of Sandspit being a wet (literally) and wild one, and our Marsden Cove pelagic two days later being almost too calm. Well too calm for the birds, but not too calm for us to get amazing views of the recently described Hoodwinker sunfish! Torrential rain on the West Coast delivering waterfalls in places they don't normally appear, and the next day a stunning bluebird day in Milford Sound. We were overall very lucky with the weather.

We had a trip total of 151 species, none of which were heard only! The bird list for the trip kind of says it all, with 64 endemic breeders, and 25 species of tube-nosed seabirds. Despite the odd miss, we did really well.

Our group of keen birders got on well from day one, with a lot of laughs and good humour along the way. A real pleasure to travel with such a great group, and with keen photographers on the trip, there was sure to be some great documentation of the species seen along the way. I think this trip report shows that, with the hardest part trying to whittle down the photos to be used in this trip report! Some amazing images taken along the way, and a big thanks to the photographers.

A great tour, with a great bunch of people, and some beautiful memories and photos. What more could we ask for?

For further images from the tour, please check out both Dustin and John on Flickr.

Dustin Huntington <https://www.flickr.com/photos/170146945@N07/albums/72177720315859112/>

John Mangold <https://www.flickr.com/photos/johnrmangold/albums/72177720315425617/>

Brent Stephenson (Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ leader)

10 February 2024 – Day One

Having had dinner together the night before we were at the van and ready for action in the morning. Our first stop was a nearby forest reserve, where we spent time scanning beautiful surroundings. Within a few minutes we had spotted a number of sulphur-crested cockatoos, several masked lapwings, and some Eastern Rosella's...this is New Zealand right? We added a close New Zealand pigeon, some silvereye, a grey warbler, and a few others to the list.

We moved on to some sewage ponds where we encountered several beautiful little endemics in the form of a handful of dabchick, as well as pied stilt, some near Pacific black ducks (a bit too much mallard in most) and some grey teal and Australasian shoveler. A pretty ragged scaup also made the list.

On to our first bakery, 7 out of 10, room for improvement, but a good start, with not too much chaos caused. A short drive and we were really in the zone for some good endemics. As people took their first bites of lunch, a buff-banded rail appeared and caused chaos. Sandwiches were dropped to the ground and cameras snapped up. It ended up showing really well and scope views of possibly two birds. Brown teal were next to put on a good show, with a number of birds sitting in the sun and paddling around. We then found some bellbird, tui, and after we started a nice walk a small family group of whitehead. Kaka flying over were distant, but noisy.



A pair of New Zealand pigeon. John Mangold.

During our walk we got lots of nice views of tui and bellbird, and then some great views of several saddleback. The saddleback put on a really nice show, giving great views, calling, and just generally showing off. A few New Zealand pigeon, more bellbird and tui, a bathing buff-banded rail in the sunshine, then another running around flailing wings in the sunshine, before a North Island robin made a brief but good show. As we walked, Dustin suddenly said 'There's a takahe' and damn it there was indeed, a pair in fact. We spent some time watching these birds from quite close, just preening and chilling, with the card-space on the digital cameras starting to groan under the pressure.



North Island robin. John Mangold.



A bathing buff-banded rail. John Mangold.



A takahe looking prehistoric. Dustin Huntington.

Making our way back to the van we caught up with more of the same. A quick stop in a sheltered bay added a large raft of fluttering shearwaters feeding with white-fronted terns and a single little penguin to the list. After checking in to our accommodation, a beautiful dinner, we headed out to look for kiwi. Just after dark several morepork called and then several kiwi. In fact, quite a number called, with males and females duetting. We heard the churring call of two morepork chicks and managed to locate them, getting great views of one of them. And then a sound we really didn't want to hear... a crying child. Within minutes the forest seemed to be inundated with small family parties wielding flashlights and dragging reluctant screaming children. We had just spotted a kiwi, when one such group came right up to us and camped beside us... oh well. We made an effort to get some distance, but in the end the brief encounter that wasn't, was all we had to show, and we decided to call it a night.



A recently fledged morepork looking down at us. John Mangold.

11 February 2024 – Day Two

Up to a blustery morning, the forecast of 20 knots for the whole day didn't induce confidence. We climbed aboard our boat after seeing some pied oystercatchers and a reef egret, and slowly headed out. The Kawau Channel was even a little sloppy, and with the glare from the sun made finding penguins tough. But we found a couple that allowed a bit of an approach and some views.

Heading out further we encountered feeding flocks of fluttering shearwaters and white-fronted terns, and then into open water. The sea didn't look too bad?! Running with it the sea gradually increased as we approached our chumming location, and the wind was definitely the 20 knots forecast. We set about chumming and almost the first bird into the back of the boat was a black petrel – well that was nice! Flesh-footed shearwaters started to come in and there were a lot of Cook's petrels moving around, some coming in to give great views at the back of the boat. And hardly any time later Buller's shearwaters passed in small numbers and then a white-faced storm-petrel followed almost immediately by a New Zealand storm-petrel! In the end in the just under one hour we chummed for we had probably 10 birds come in, with at

least 5 birds seen at once on several occasions. Everything else showed really well, and shortly after a large wave slapped the side of the boat and created a massive wetting ‘splash’ we decided things were not going to get better and the sea was only going to make our way home more bumpy! Thankfully we had seen all of the main targets, and getting bashed around didn’t seem smart.



A New Zealand storm-petrel. Dustin Huntington.



Black-petrel. Dustin Huntington.



White-faced storm-petrel. Dustin Huntington.



Buller's shearwater. John Mangold.



Cook's petrel. John Mangold.

So, we decided to head in and see what it was like, but even closer to land the sea was really making it uncomfortable with wind over tide. So ,we called in to Kawau Island, had a little leg stretch, spotted some peafowl and weka and then made for Sandspit. The tide had dropped, oystercatchers, white-faced herons and bar-tailed godwits were out feeding. We did a little drive around scanning for kookaburra, but after no luck, but better views of Eastern rosella, we headed for a rest at the accommodation.

Another sumptuous dinner and an early night.



Copulating dragonflies. Dustin Huntington.

12 February 2024 – Day Three

We were up and into the van to head north. A relaxed drive north, checking out an estuary from several different angles. With the tides high we were not at the best time for fairy tern activity, but a nice spot to enjoy the sunshine and see what was about. We found a few cormorants, and then a New Zealand pipit made a surprise entry. At another spot we managed to spot a pair of fairy terns across the other side, and although distant, nice to secure this critically endangered species.

We moved on to another location, with stunning views of the beautiful coast. At this spot it was also high tide, and we found a roosting flock of variable oystercatchers, with a couple of South Island pied in amongst them for comparison. A good number of New Zealand dotterel and some banded dotterel as well, so all was well. A bit later several small plovers flew past and although they didn't land the call went up for wrybill! They landed on the other side of the estuary and we had scope views of these iconic beasts!

As the tide dropped the shorebirds moved out to forage on the mud, and we had great views and photo opportunities of oystercatchers and dotterels. Even found the wrybill again and much better closer views, with a New Zealand dotterel taking exception to the wrybill and pinning one of the poor guys to the ground and really attacking it.



A New Zealand dotterel chases a wrybill aggressively. Dustin Huntington.



Pied stilt. John Mangold.



Common copper butterfly. Dustin Huntington.



Fairy tern. Dustin Huntington.

We continued our watch and eventually a fairy tern came in to view and flew towards us, giving reasonable flight views, and then landed on the mud and preened and then bathed. Scope views for everyone!

We decided it was then time to move on, this time to a small lake where we had great views of both New Zealand dabchick and Australasian little grebe. An assortment of ducks, including Australasian shoveler and scaup, and we were happy. Some grebe chicks and birds on nests were a bonus.

We continued northwards, checking in to our motel, having an absolutely stunning dinner, and then off out for what we hoped would be a night with kiwi. On the way we spotted one on the side of the road, getting brief views, and then we had hardly started our walk before the first kiwi was spotted. We got pretty good views of this bird over a near 10-minute watch, before moving on. A speedy little baby kiwi was next, wow they are small! And then a stunning pair that showed incredibly well, the female in view and feeding for 8 minutes or so. Perfect! We headed back to the van, lots of kiwi calls around us, and on the way home spotted another kiwi from the van on the drive. Six kiwi is something to be happy with! And everyone dreamt of kiwi!



Dinner time! Mark & Shelley Carson.



Northern brown kiwi and its shadow. Dustin Huntington.

13 February 2024 – Day Four

Up and away, to make a drive to Marsden Cove for our second pelagic. The weather was looking good... too good!



Ready and willing! Mark & Shelley Carson.

We boarded the boat and slowly headed out with our skipper, catching view of five reef egrets before then heading out into the open ocean. A long lazy swell with almost no wind had us on the lookout. As we steamed we started to see fluttering, Buller's and flesh-footed shearwaters, and then the odd white-faced storm-petrel. We continued. Further out we saw a trawler and cruised slowly to it, with a good flock of flesh-footed shearwaters and black petrels around it, but nothing else. Then as we left it and headed further on we had a white-capped albatross, and then two more over the next few minutes. A bit further on a Cookilaria petrel came in and started paralleling us as we steamed... hang on this could be a Pycroft's! And blow me down, it was, and the bird stayed with us for about 8 minutes flying right beside the boat!



Reef egret. John Mangold.



Whangarei Heads. Brent Stephenson.

We arrived at our first chumming location, a flying fish shortly before. There was almost no wind and lovely sunny conditions. Not ideal birding conditions, but what can you do. We stayed and chummed for a couple of hours, and over that time had all the things we needed to see. A number of NZ storm-petrels came in and fed around us for great views, with side by side comparisons with white-faced storm-petrels. We had probably 10 Cookilaria petrels come past, and almost all of them appeared to be Pycroft's! Nice. Black petrels and flesh-footed, as well as Buller's shears came in and fed. At one stage a ray went past with the wing tips just visible, and then a sunfish showed itself nearby. With time ticking and still not much wind we decided to head into another chumming location, and cruised quietly up on a sunfish. On the bow we all got great views of the fin and as we approached the animal just under the surface, large and dark with pale spots all over it. We decided that evening it was one of the recently described (2017) Hoodwinker sunfish. And as we left the spot we saw another 3-4 of them, one really large. Very cool.



Black petrel. John Mangold.



White-faced storm-petrel. John Mangold.



Australasian gannet with a big meal! John Mangold.



Hoodwinker sunfish. Dustin Huntington.

At our next location there was a bit more wind, and we chummed for an hour. Pretty much the same assemblage of birds, but no NZ stormies this time, and of the couple of distant *Cookilaria* sp, they seemed to be Cook's.

We started to head in, with lovely views of the Chickens, and spotted some workups of kahawai and gulls. One or two fluttering shearwaters, and then we had singles of little shearwater pass. Never great views as these birds are prone to do, but at one stage we slowed the boat for a bottlenosed dolphin that came in close, and a little shearwater flew across the bow.

We headed for home, docking and thanking our skipper Darren, and then to the accommodation and dinner. A lovely dinner outside on the Quay.

14 February 2024 – Day Five

Happy Valentines day! We were up and away early and tracking south to get to Gulf Harbour. Arriving we got ourselves situated and then boarded the ferry, hearing about a probable lesser frigatebird that had been seen just around the corner an hour before. No sign of the bird as we headed to Tiritiri Matangi Island on calm seas. An Arctic skua flew past, and a couple of Buller's shearwaters, but otherwise very quiet.

After the briefing we bolted up the hill, and within a few minutes had some red-crowned parakeets. A short while later we had bellbird in great numbers around a feeder, and then several male and female stitchbird. Plus, a nearby giant weta was a super treat! Carrying on a quiet walk, until a kokako appeared, and we could hear its mate calling gently down the hill. A saddleback, some whitehead, and then we made it to the top of the island. A quick break in the gift shop was postponed after finding a pair of takahe with their chick from last year and this year in tow! Super! And then lunch, a little retail therapy, and then off across the island. We walked and found a pair of brown quail with about 6 half grown juveniles, already able to fly. And then another pair of kokako on the ground and then bounding through the trees. More saddleback, whitehead, and then a stunning tuatara. Great views of this ancient beast.



Giant weta. John Mangold.



Tuatara. John Mangold.



A tui. John Mangold.



North Island kokako. John Mangold.



North Island saddleback. Carlton Cook.



A male stitchbird with ear-tufts flared. Dustin Huntington.

On our way back a few more stitchbird, robin, and whilst quietly standing by a pond we had stunning views of an adult feeding a fledgling red-crowned parakeet, and at least two, maybe three spotless crakes. Really stunning views of the one bird right out in the open.



Spotless crane. Carlton Cook.

We carried on down to the wharf, boarded the ferry and headed back to Gulf Harbour, with several distant rafts of little penguins. Not much else, and still no frigate! We jumped in the van and headed south. On the way swapping out for one that had working shock-absorbers! And then on to Miranda. Into the accommodation and then to dinner for another great meal!

15 February 2024 – Day Six

A later start with the midday high tide. We headed out and checked out a spot, but no wrybill, although the huge tide today was already starting to come in. We visited Keith Woodley at the Miranda Naturalist's Trust Centre, and then back to the same spot. With the tide a bit further in a flock of pied oystercatchers was gathering, and we had good views of them, a couple of black-billed gull, and several Caspian terns.

We then headed to another location and found a large flock of several thousand bar-tailed godwit, with some males already showing a lot of colour. Distant Royal spoonbills and a lot of pied stilts. A short walk and we had a good flock of about 500 wrybill, and some Pacific golden plover, with a small flock of red knot. Banded dotterel were also present, and a leucistic South Island pied oystercatcher was very cool.



Pied stilts. John Mangold.



Leucistic South Island pied oystercatcher. John Mangold.

The godwit were wheeling around and flying from one spot to the next as the tide came in. And a major surprise came in the form of stoat that ran out a couple of times from the low vegetation, but thankfully didn't attempt to grab any shorebirds whilst we were there. Hopefully it has a flattening experience in the next day or so!

We then headed to another location, this time with hundreds of pied stilts, some more pied oycs and a few godwit. We quickly spotted two glossy ibis, birds that have been present for a while. And then an Australian tern, one of three that has been around for some time. A short time later a second bird. A harrier came to close to the flock and they all got up, and as they did a distinctive call from four whimbrel that unfortunately flew and didn't come back to land as everything else did. We also found one, and then a second sharp-tailed sandpiper. Some more wrybill, Pacific golden plover, and Royal spoonbill. So, a pretty good haul.

Then it was lunchtime, eating on the run and driving south towards Taupo. Near to Taupo a short forest walk, with a stunning waterfall. We had tui, bellbird and some fantail. But nothing out of the ordinary. A stunning Thai meal was all we needed before bed!

16 February 2024 – Day Seven

Leaving Taupo, we grabbed lunch and headed for the hills. We headed to a forested area, where we hoped to find a bunch of targets, and luck was with us.

At our first stop we had great views of tomtit, silvereye, kaka flying over as well as several flyover yellow-crowned parakeets. A fernbird taunted us from a nearby blackberry patch but showed no commitment in showing itself. However, a long-tailed cuckoo showed really well in several fly overs and at one stage perched in the open for brief but excellent views.



Long-tailed cuckoo in flight. Dustin Huntington.

We decided to head off and do a forest walk, with stunning podocarp trees and beautiful ferns and mosses. Begging calls from above proved to be a grey warbler pair with young, not shining a cuckoo, but we managed to track down good views of North Island robin (with a lot singing) and a really great kaka that posed for some time in the scope. Whitehead, bellbird, and more grey warbler showed well.



North Island kaka. John Mangold.



Blue duck. Dustin Huntington.

We then headed to have lunch and scan the skies, but nothing new, except really nice views of a yellow-crowned parakeet. A short walk and a look from a tower achieved more nice views of yellow-crowned parakeet and another long-tailed cuckoo and some robin.

We decided we had achieved most of what we could expect, so headed towards Turangi. A first stop on a river found some Pacific black ducks, but no blue duck. However, our second stop it was the sharp eyes of Dustin that again caught the target, and we had a blue duck in the distance foraging in a fast flowing section of water, disappearing for quite some time each dive. We got closer and had awesome views as the bird stood up on a rock and preened for us all to enjoy!

We then decided it was time to head to the accommodation, and another great dinner.



Layers of forest. Dustin Huntington.

17 February 2024 – Day Eight

Up early and out to see what we could find. Looking out over a swampy area we hoped to see a bittern, but our luck was not in. We did have a very very showy fernbird as a consolation though, making it easy for the photographers to get some lovely images, and everyone else to ooh and aah.



Fernbird. John Mangold.

A few black swan and Canada geese on the lake, scaup, and dabchick, as well as some coot. One coot had several half-grown chicks in tow, so nice to watch them.

We then headed to a section of river, and spent some time searching. Some redpoll were a good addition, along with silvereyes, our first proper chaffinch (!), and then we managed to find a pair of blue duck. More good views of this iconic New Zealand species. And we spotted a single bird asleep on a rock off in the distance down river.



Dabchick. John Mangold.



A pair of blue duck. John Mangold.

It was then time to leave for Napier and following the lake northwards we had lovely views. Another stunning day. We have been lucky. Our next stop was a forest patch, where we first had lunch, getting great views of a juvenile male rifleman. Walking into the forest we had a lovely walk, with robins singing, tomtits squeaking off in the scrub, and whitehead calling from above. At one point we paused, and a couple of bellbird seemed not to be happy about something. And then a shape gliding over was spotted. Steve had it perched in his binoculars and we quickly had it in the scope! Bingo, a juvenile falcon, probably very recently fledged. We watched it for about 15 minutes as it sat quietly in the canopy. It glided off to another perch, and then off and out of sight. Stunning!



Juvenile New Zealand falcon. John Mangold.

Carrying on, we found some more rifleman, some lovely forest, and then back to the van. Heading onwards we arrived into Napier and made a quick stop for a large colony of Royal spoonbill, as well as some little pied cormorants with nests, and some nice views of little black cormorants. Next was a wetland area, and we quickly found one of the main targets, black-fronted dotterel. This native species that self-introduced from Australia is always a crowd pleaser, with its stunning red legs and eye ring, and black bib. But it didn't take long and we had a pectoral sandpiper, three sharp-tailed sandpipers and three marsh sandpipers! Very cool and great to have these three species side by side. A Pacific golden plover was nice to see, and a lot of grey teal and Australasian shoveler.

It was then time to head to accommodation, and a really amazing Indian meal at Namaskar in Havelock North.



Poised! Brent Stephenson.



Black-fronted dotterel. John Mangold.



Royal spoonbill. John Mangold.

18 February 2024 – Day Nine

Up and to a wetland area. We were on the lookout for bittern again, but again no luck. Lots of waterfowl around, and a nice walk. We then headed for a viewpoint, and there were a lot of people around enjoying the sunshine and early Sunday morning. We managed to find a couple of pipits and get really great views and photo opportunities, so everyone was happy.

Next on the agenda was coffee and a garden ramble, at Brent's parents place. We enjoyed the sunshine, wandered the gardens and even got to try some Timtams! For some of us, our 'HoneyDo list' grew larger... Then on to another wetland where the water levels were a little high, but we still walked quietly to see if we could spot a crake. No luck on the crake front, but dabchick, scaup, coot and a few other things.

We then did a bit of a drive and found a feral population of peafowl, and then up and over the central ranges to a location for lunch. This was a spot where falcon had been spotted before. And sure enough a falcon flew overhead at top speed and disappeared. Several people saw it, but not the leader who was in the bathroom!

We then headed on further and checked out a large estuary. The tide was slowly coming in, and we could see bar-tailed godwit and red knot (some starting to get really colourful) as well as a couple of Pacific golden plover and wrybill. We walked closer and in the end had wrybill quite close for nice viewing and photos. A flock of white-fronted terns held an Eastern common tern, a relatively rare bird in New Zealand, but a fairly regular find here.

With a good day under the belt, we headed for the accommodation, checked in and rested up for our sumptuous BBQ dinner. A few drinks, a few stories and then bed!



Juvenile black-billed gull begging an adult. Carlton Cook.



Wrybill in flight. Dustin Huntington.



Wrybill. John Mangold.

19 February 2024 – Day Ten

A little later start and we headed south, making a stop at a small estuary. The wind was already strong, and we did a circuit around some ponds, finding a good selection of waterfowl. Grey teal, scaup, black swan, and shoveler, as well as a couple of ducks trying to look like Pacific black ducks, but not quite pulling it off! We also had dabchick, perhaps our last, and then two brown teal, as well as a selection of cormorants, inc some really close little black cormorants. The stars of the show however were a family of greenfinches! We had seen birds in flight, but Day Ten and we still hadn't had a good look!

We carried on to Wellington, arriving to check in to the ferry with plenty of time. We had lunch as we waited, and finally boarded, before departing just around 1300. And the wind was really pumping with willy-waws and spray flying in the Wellington Harbour.



Little black cormorant. John Mangold.



New Zealand scaup. John Mangold.

Despite the wind it was a fairly quiet crossing bird wise, with lots of fluttering shearwaters in patches, a Salvin's albatross and several white-capped, and then a few scattered Buller's shearwaters and a flesh-footed. We did have some brief short-beaked common dolphins as we exited Wellington Harbour though. Once in the Sounds we had some groups of red-billed gulls, a few white-fronted terns and the odd gannet. As we arrived into Picton we had a couple of spotted shags on some rocks.

Once in Picton we headed for our accommodation and then another delicious dinner.

20 February 2024 – Day Eleven

As we ate breakfast the wind had dropped, but was still present. We walked down to the Marina and met with our boat and skipper. As we headed out it was clear the wind was pretty strong, but luckily the Sounds make it possible in all but the foulest of weather.

We hugged the eastern side of Queen Charlotte Sound as we headed out. It certainly wasn't going to be a day to spot penguins! We basically headed for our first location to look for King shags, and luckily there were 19 of them roosting. Great views and everyone was happy. Now for the next target.



King shags. John Mangold.

We landed on a small beach and headed up into the forest. Our target was the orange-fronted parakeet, but of course there were other species to entertain us as we waited. We had a weka come in to curiously peer at us, giving great photo opportunities as usual. Then a beaut little black morph New Zealand fantail just really showed off right in front of us. And then a male tomtit, with its little sulphur-tinged breast, sat in front of us. But no parakeets – not even a whiff!



Black morph New Zealand fantail. John Mangold.



Weka. Dustin Huntington.



Male South Island tomtit. Dustin Huntington.

We checked out a couple of other spots, nothing, but a South Island saddleback was found, and we managed to get everyone a good look. Still no parakeet.

In the end with time running out, we had to concede. Damn! Back on the boat we made a B-line for Picton. We thought we might have spotted a Hector's dolphin, but couldn't relocate. We did have two fishing King shags in the water on the way back though.

Back in Picton we stopped at the awesome Dutch Bakery, and then on to a spot near Blenheim to eat it and look for cirl buntings. No luck, but we did have a black-fronted dotterel, got great views of dunnock and yellowhammer. Further south at a lake we had amazing views of Baillon's crake feeding out in the open, simply stunning little things, and more than a few photos taken! Although there were lots of waterfowl, no hoary-headed grebes seen, although a dabchick was spotted.

On the coast we stopped for some fur seal viewing, and had several Northern giant petrels flying along the coast, with hundreds of Hutton's shearwaters flying way out to sea. A little owl perched in a tree was a nice addition before our dinner and comfortable night's sleep!



Baillon's crake strutting its stuff! John Mangold.



New Zealand fur seals. John Mangold.



Little owl. John Mangold.

21 February 2024 – Day Twelve

A relaxed start with a little coastal viewing, and driving around Kaikoura. A beautiful morning with the sun shining, light winds, and the Seaward Kaikoura mountains exposed for all to see. The sea looked pretty good, so expectations were high. We headed to a spot to try for gull bunting, and although we heard a very distant bird singing, no luck seeing one. A lovely viewpoint out over the coast was next, and then to South Bay to head out.

We boarded our boat with Albatross Encounter, and Tracy was our skipper today. We headed out to just not too far off where Tracy had seen hundreds of white-capped albatross this morning, and as we steamed along we passed through what must have been – around 500 albatross, mostly white-capped with some Salvin's in amongst them. Neither Tracy, nor I had seen anything like it. We made a stop and started chumming, and despite the wind being favourable almost none of those birds came in. However, we had several New Zealand wandering albatross, a bunch of Cape petrels, and some Northern giant petrels come straight in. Several Southern Royal albatross joined the party, and we had great views of everything, with some white-chinned petrels also coming in. A couple of young black-fronted terns also showed up feeding in the slick. We spent some time, then moved to a second, and then a third location, heading out deeper each time. A similar assemblage of birds at each stop, with a few Buller's shearwaters coming past, as well as the odd Hutton's. And then we suddenly had a grey-backed storm-petrel whiz past the boat and into the slick for several minutes. Really nice views of this great little bird.



Brent with Skipper Tracy. Mark & Shelley Carson.



Southern Royal albatross. Dustin Huntington.



A New Zealand wandering albatross squabbling with Northern giant petrels. Dustin Huntington.



Sperm whale. Dustin Huntington.



White-chinned petrel. John Mangold.

We then headed to another chumming spot, again the same birds around the boat. Everyone was happy with excellent views and lots of photos being taken. We swung by a fishing boat and watched the birds chomping on a few tiddlers that had been caught, before heading in and getting a nice raft of Hutton's shearwaters on the way. Very good views of this Kaikoura 'endemic'. A little penguin was the last bird to be added to the list, before getting back to South Bay.

We grabbed lunch, ate in the sunshine, and then dropped some off to head out to find whales, and a couple of us to head out on the afternoon Albatross trip. The whalers got great views of four Sperm whales which logged on the surface and slept. Whilst the birders added a couple of new birds to the list including Southern giant petrel and Westland petrel.

A smashing dinner of blue cod and chips, followed by Hokey Pokey ice cream picnic style was a great end to the day!

22 February 2024 – Day Thirteen

Heading south along the coast, the sun was shining, and the sea looked beautiful. As we got further south we started to see Dusky dolphins frolicking and we pulled over a couple of times to watch them leaping and moving along the coast.

We then headed inland and south, and then made a stop back out on the coast. The tide was low and we wandered along the edge of an estuary, finding the long-staying black stilt, and then the little egret that has been around for a while. Some banded dotterel, a wrybill or two and some black-fronted terns were all spotted along the way.

We then headed inland, and grabbed lunch at the World Famous Sheffield Pie shop. It was an 8 out of 9 score for pies today, this group is really embracing this kiwi puff-pastry delight! We stopped at a nearby picnic spot and had lunch and then it was onward. In the foothills a falcon was spotted by Mark's keen eyes, but by the time we turned around it had flown. We made a scenic stop, and then into Arthur's Pass where we found kea in their usual habitat, the cafeteria! And then a short walk with some stunning forest and although quiet we managed to locate a couple of rifleman families.



Near Arthurs Pass. Brent Stephenson.



Kea. John Mangold.



Male rifleman. John Mangold.

It was then another scenic stop and we had two kea fly overhead giving views of their brilliant underwing. Off to the West Coast, the sun was still shining, and all was well. We made a quick sewage pond stop, nothing out of the ordinary amongst the scaup and Paradise shelduck.

A great dinner and bed after a long day!

23 February 2024 – Day Fourteen

Beautiful sunshine to start the morning as we headed south from Hokitika. We started at a small lake, finding a lot of weka had invaded the nearby campground due to it being busy with tourists. One tourist even decided pants were optional as they walked across the carpark... that was new!

We did a nice forest walk and although fairly quiet there was a lot of beautiful forest to look at. And we did find a tomtit, and then a few other things around the lake, including a distant flying great egret. We spent some time enjoying the sun and just chilling, before heading to another lake for a walk through different, but equally beautiful forest. Again, fairly quiet, but nice fantail, some pigeon and a few tui and bellbird. Another stunning view over a lake and time to sit in the sunshine.

We then headed south, through stunning Podocarp forest, keeping an eye out as we drove. A lunch spot was selected with views out over the mountains, and we then continued south to meet with Ian Cooper from Okarito Kiwi Tours. We spent some time with him going over the plan for the evening, and then got some views of the local fernbird that live in his garden. A great egret in the estuary as we left was nice.

Then we did another short walk, this time getting nice views of a South Island robin which had a fledged juvenile still begging for food. Some tomtit, a nice black morph fantail and more bellbird, but not the target brown creeper (Pipipi). A bright blue mushroom, called a werewere-kōkako (*Entoloma hochstetteri*) was a very cool find, the fungus so called in Maori because the blue resembles the bright blue of the North Island kokako wattle, and is also featured on the New Zealand \$50 note. We also had another fernbird towards the end of the walk.



Werewere- kokako. Mark & Shelley Carson.



South Island robin adult and juvenile. John Mangold.



New Zealand fantail. John Mangold.

Our last walk was to look over the now rather sad looking Franz Josef Glacier. A nice walk though and still worth a look. A short rest, then out for a delicious dinner, and then off to the forest.

We met Ian, and then walked into the forest for our training on what to expect and how to maximise our chances with this elusive species, the Okarito kiwi. With just 600 birds, this is the rarest of the kiwi, and a challenge to see. As it got dark, hopes were high and as morepork started to call we knew the kiwi were on the move. A couple of kea called and one landed nearby, but we did our best to focus and ignore it.

After what seemed like a fairly short time we had rustling nearby, and moments later a bird showed on the edge of the fern. As it fed, it worked back into the forest and away from us, but we could still hear it. Only a few minutes later, after having been moved a little by Ian, the bird showed again, this time in the middle of the trail, and we had amazing views for several minutes. The bird gradually moved back into the fern, and we moved off quietly to leave the forest in peace! An incredible evening, and Ian Cooper the magician had worked his magic again!

24 February 2024 – Day Fifteen

With the threat of a rainy day we left and headed south along the coast. We made a quick stop for coffee and spent some time looking out over beautiful forest. As we continued south, the rain started, gentle at first, and then pretty heavy in places. A short stop at a beach to scan for Hector's dolphins, but no luck.

We did another short stop, but the rain was coming down hard, and we decided against the forest walk. We continued and did a short walk to a beach where we had a flock of around 100 white-fronted terns, a few gulls, and at least 10 Arctic skua. They were really giving the white-fronted terns a hard time and putting on a great show for us.

We continued southwards, and decided to head to another beach to scan for Hector's whilst we had lunch. Within a minute of pulling up we had probably 8 animals in the waves out at moderate distance. Not the easiest of conditions for viewing, with the rain coming down, but good to spot these little guys.

We then headed inland, with rain absolutely bucketing down and waterfalls flowing like crazy down the mountainsides. Even flowing out on to the road in parts, from the bluffs above. Really spectacular. It was still raining hard at our planned forest walk, so we continued and made a couple of scenic stops before heading into Wanaka. We had great views of great-crested grebe, an adult with an almost fully grown juvenile, as well as a couple of birds on nests still.

And then another spectacular Indian meal, this time at Ashraf's, a real tour favourite!



Lake Hawea. Mark & Shelley Carson.



Adult Great-crested grebe feeding a juvenile. Dustin Huntington.

25 February 2024 – Day Sixteen

We were rolling out of Wanaka before sun-up. Over the Crown Range with stunning light, and a fuel and coffee stop near Queenstown. Then pressing on we made for a place to grab lunch and then in towards Milford Sound.

The weather was stunning, with hardly a cloud in the sky, and almost no wind. Glassy lakes as we passed. We made straight for our main target, rock wren. Heading into the site, we were hopeful, and we started to scan. Within a minute Mark spotted something and called it, and several of us got on to a rock wren on top of rocks about 250m away. It disappeared.... And didn't show for some time. We spread out, enjoyed the sunshine, and had lunch.... We heard a bird and gathered to look expectantly, but nothing. Then another half hour later heard another, and still no sign! Dang! After 3.5 hours we were about to give up, heading back down a little, when we heard a bird again, and this time it showed. It bounced around from rock to rock about 20m away, giving pretty good views before it disappeared a couple of minutes later. Very very happy with great views, we continued down and not 50m later another bird called and then appeared right in front of us, flying basically to point blank range and really showing off. This was a juvenile and it really was looking pretty smart and just completely showed off.



Common copper. Dustin Huntington.



Black mountain ringlet. Dustin Huntington.



Adult rock wren. Carlton Cook.



Juvenile rock wren. Dustin Huntington.



A happy team. Brent Stephenson.

Nine very happy birders, and two others that had happened upon us, headed back to the vehicle! We headed on towards Milford, and in stunning sunshine enjoyed views of Mitre Peak and the Fiord. We then headed back towards Te Anau, making a very quick forest stop. We had a couple of South Island robins and a family of rifleman really close and within a few feet of the ground. And then heard some distant brown creeper, but couldn't get a view.

We headed for Te Anau, checked in to the accommodation and then a lovely dinner. What a great day!

26 February 2024 – Day Seventeen

Another early start as we headed towards Bluff. It was still dark and the skies gradually lightened as the sun came up. We made a couple of quick stops and then to the Ferry Terminal in Bluff. The crossing was a little swelly to start and then dropped off to pretty good seas, and despite a little wind there were very few birds. Small numbers of sooty shearwaters, a couple of white-capped albatross and a single common diving petrel. As we got closer to Oban a bunch of Foveaux shags on a rock, and then three Fiordland crested penguins surprisingly standing out on some rocks. Brief and distant, but a few photos taken.

We docked, grabbed our bags and headed to our accommodation. A quick regather and then headed to Golden Bay for our water taxi to Ulva Island. Once on Ulva we were almost straight on to a large family group of yellowhead. Standing on the trail we basically had the group pass right over us, giving amazing views of adults and juveniles, the former feeding the latter as they went. Really stunning views. Robins sang their hearts out and jumped around our feet as if to say 'Look at me!!'. Several red-crowned parakeets fed nearby. We walked the trails enjoying the forest, finding another group of yellowhead, and then headed out to a beach to see what we could find. On the way we had a couple of kaka and finally some brown creeper. Hard to believe we had seen yellowhead several times before we finally found this species. But it was an awesome sighting with a pair feeding two tiny little fluffball fledglings! At the beach we had a saddleback calling, but couldn't locate it, and then headed back, finding more parakeets.



Yellowhead. John Mangold.



Just fledged brown creeper. Carlton Cook.

We took a walk out to a beach and part way along a Hooker's sealion came up out of the water and approached us. A young rambunctious male it was playing games and testing the water, so 'chased' us off its beach, before then going back into the water and heading off. We headed along the beach, with another young male sea lion also coming to test us, but we made it along the beach and then into the forest. We almost immediately had a couple of red-crowned parakeets feeding low presenting nice photo opportunities, and then a juvenile saddleback (jackbird) came in and started to bath in a small puddle, then another jackbird, and then the two adults! We had the whole family right in front of us bathing and really showing off. Then a yellow-crowned parakeet and another red-crowned. Spectacular.



Two 'jackbirds' – juvenile South Island saddleback. Dustin Huntington.



Bathing red-crowned parakeet. Dustin Huntington.

We then headed to the wharf and waited for our water taxi, heading back for a break, dinner and then a rest before heading out to find some kiwi. It was dark and off we went and shortly into our walk we had a small male kiwi in the light. It fed right in front of us for a good ten minutes, then wandered around a bit, and then sniffing the air came right up to us. It slowly walked past us within a foot or so, sniffing the air as it slowly went, and then continued feeding right beside us. What a great experience. We watched it for a bit longer, then moved on, and found another bird, this time a slightly larger female. We watched her for some time, feeding away, and then walked for a bit more, before watching both of these same birds a bit more, and then lastly a larger female which we watched for a little bit from further off.



Southern brown kiwi. Dustin Huntington.

Another great night of kiwi watching.



Southern brown kiwi and kiwi-watchers. John Mangold.

27 February 2024 – Day Eighteen

A bit of rain on the roof this morning, and it was looking a bit drizzly as we headed down to catch the boat. We boarded just after 0800 and off we went. Our first stop was to find some Fiordland crested penguins, which we duly did. A couple of birds showed themselves on the boulders on the shore.



Heading out. Brent Stephenson.

We checked out a couple of other parts of the coast, and then headed out to some of the Muttonbird Islands. A scan for yellow-eyed penguin came up blank, but we did find a brown skua which came and entertained us. From there it was off out to Wreck Reef, with a few albatross trailing us by the time we got out there. Just before we stopped we spotted a Buller's albatross. A few black-fronted terns and some white-capped albatross were the first birds in as we started to chum, and before long we had probably 10+ black-fronted terns feeding over the slick, near constant companions for the next few hours.

Over the course of our chumming stop we had approximately 100+ white-capped albatross, 6-8 Southern Royal albatross, 5-10 Salvin's and at least 2-3 Buller's albatross. A couple of Northern giant petrels came in at various stages, as did a handful of Cape petrels. Sooty shearwaters come past in small numbers, but probably numbered 500 over the course of the day. With fairly light winds and calm seas it was a little quieter than we hoped, but the albatross kept us entertained. A single Hutton's shearwater passed us by at distance, and around 10 Cook's petrels passed, some coming in nice and close.



A gaggle of white-capped albatross. Dustin Huntington.



Buller's albatross. John Mangold.

We decided to head in, making another pass for yellow-eyed penguin. No luck, but we found a few rafts of around 30 little penguins which was nice. A swing by a Foveaux shag breeding colony gave nice views, before heading back in to Halfmoon Bay where it was constant rain. I think we had the best of it out on the water!

28 February 2024 – Day Nineteen

Up and on to the ferry. The crossing was calm but with a bit of wind, and thankfully enough to at least give things a bit to fly on. As we left the bay we spotted a distant Fiordland crested penguin, and then started to see a few sooty shearwaters. A slow trickle of sooty's was visible as we crossed, a couple of white-capped albatross, and a few scattered and distant common diving petrels. Then suddenly John nudged me and off to the side of the ferry was a single fairy prion that kept with us for a bit before turning away, giving everyone decent views before it disappeared. Hard to believe the first prion of the trip!

Coming in to Bluff we had another distant Fiordland crested penguin in a cave on the mainland, a few feeding black-fronted and white-fronted terns in the channel, before the ferry docked. We loaded up and headed through Invercargill and north. Making a bee-line straight for a spot to scope Taiaroa Head and see if we could spot some Northern Royal albatrosses. The weather was a bit variable on the way with some showers and poor visibility as we came through Dunedin. But thankfully clear conditions once we got to our spot and there were several albatrosses flying around the colony and a bunch of others scattered over the headland. Several large fluffy chicks were visible, still being guarded by adults, so definitely worth a stop.

We then continued northwards, and in mid-afternoon got to our main spot for the day. We walked out to a spot and started our yellow-eyed penguin vigil. A couple of Otago cormorants flew past, a little penguin was spotted offshore, and a white-capped albatross and Northern giant petrel flew past. But no sign of a penguin, not even a peep from the coastal vegetation. We waited, a few tourists came and went, and it was getting dangerously close to the time we were going to need to leave. A few of our group started back towards the van, and we decided it was time. Not quite ready to give up Brent walked back to a spot to make one last scan, just as a yellow-eyed surfed in and stood up. "PENGUIN!" was yelled and tourists seemed to run from everywhere. We all managed to get to a spot where the penguin was visible, and had it in the scope. Everyone still present was able to get nice views through the scope, and before long a few of the tourists were checking out the bird through the scope. Good views, some reasonable photos, and it really was time to leave. Phew!

We headed off and towards our accommodation, and then dinner. A long day of travel, but with some seabird highlights.



Yellow-eyed penguin. Dustin Huntington.

29 February 2024 – Day Twenty

We headed to our first stop, a spot where there was a sizeable colony of Otago cormorants. Nice views of adults and large almost ready to fledge chicks. Some spotted shags, white-fronted terns, and fur seals were spotted nearby, and then we were directed to a couple of little penguins that had clearly come ashore to moult. Nice views of them, even if in a rather strange place!

Onwards, we headed north and then inland. Our first stop was to secure lunch, and this was done successfully at the amazing Fairlie Bakehouse. A pretty smooth operation, and a number of salmon and bacon pies secured! This group hardly needed encouragement! We then carried on into black stilt country, with our first stop on the edge of a lake not finding any stilts, but a few ducks and other bits and pieces. We carried on, and our second stop was a bit more like it – a beautiful black stilt pair feeding quietly in a secluded spot. Approaching quietly, we got a stunning view of these beauties in the blue sky sunshine that was our day. We had the scope on them and suddenly spotted a Baillon's crane preening in the sunshine on the edge of some reeds! Amazing views of this through the scope for about 10 minutes before it quietly

crept away. Shelley spotted another crake as we quietly watched the stilts and the shutters clicked. And then another crake, maybe one of the same, flew across a gap in the reeds and landed, rushing out of sight. Very cool. But it wasn't over yet, with Carlton spotting another crake a bit further along! We spent a bit more time with the stilts, then suddenly a stoat ran towards us, and realising its mistake turned and ran the other way. Damn – that's the second of the trip, and both times right by endangered shorebirds!



Black stilt. John Mangold.



Crake watchers. Brent Stephenson.

We carried on to another spot, no stilts but a couple of black-fronted terns and bunch of waterfowl. We ate lunch in the sunshine, and then carried on for a scenic view. On the way Mark spotted something from the back, so we stopped and had a walk, and suddenly there was a juvenile falcon. We watched it sitting on top of a rock and then a bush, moving short distances between. A rabbit ran from near us, and the young falcon give it a half-hearted chase, but then flew off away from us. Nice to get another falcon! We had a walk and enjoyed the view from the top, and then on the way down spotted a covey of around 12 chukar. They were right beside the road, and pulling up near them we had great views of these introduced gamebirds.

We carried on, taking in some more scenery, with Aoraki – Mt Cook showing itself fully in the sunshine, and looking glorious. Another couple of quick stops, finding a second pair of adult black stilts, and then time to head to the accommodation. A last lovely dinner and it was hard to believe our last night of the tour.



Stilts! Mark & Shelley Carson.

1 March 2024 – Day Twenty-One

On the road, sun shining again today, and still stunning views of Aoraki – Mt Cook. We headed towards a spot to take one last look, finding the same pair of black stilts as yesterday. Then, another stop at the Fairlie Bakehouse, before getting fairly close to Christchurch. With a bit of time up our sleeves we headed to a couple of spots. First, we found some mute swans, an addition to the trip list, but obviously not a critical one. We also looked at a few spots around Lake Ellesmere, but didn't manage to find anything different, but at least got to have a quick look around this part of the country.

As we rolled in to Christchurch just after midday we headed to the Airport to drop off Lillian and Steve and John, then to some nearby hotels to drop Karen, then Carlton and Dustin, and then Mark and Shelley. Hard to believe our three weeks together was over! A lot of laughs, some great birds, and a great group! A really super trip!



Aoraki- Mount Cook. Dustin Huntington.