

Tour report

8 – 28 February 2025

21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ



A fernbird shows itself for a moment. Jim Betz.

Led by Brent Stephenson & Bradley Shields, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Loretta & Jim Betz, Todd Deininger, Andrew Self, Caroline & Jason Miles, and Steve West

Images

Jim Betz, Todd Deininger, Bradley Shields, and Brent Stephenson

Tour report written by Bradley Shields

8 February 2025 – Day One

The trip kicked off with us all meeting in Auckland and heading to our first stop, a forested area nearby, where we picked up our first endemics of the trip, including kaka, tui, New Zealand pigeon and fantail. We also had a good range of introduced species such as California quail, Australian magpie, and Eastern rosella. A pair of close and vocal Sulphur-crested cockatoo was also nice to get on the list.

We then moved on to some nearby coastal cliffs which gave us great views of an Australasian gannet colony, including some well-developed chicks.



Australasian gannets. Brent Stephenson.

After some lunch and getting stuck in the Saturday traffic we headed to a wildlife sanctuary where we had some brief views of a buff-banded rail beside the road. We also got good looks at Brown teal, whitehead, a roosting morepork and a brief saddleback. We got a tipoff that there was a takahe pair with a juvenile at the top of the hill. We pushed on through the hot summers day and were rewarded with excellent views of the family right up close. A huge highlight for all on day 1!



Takahe. Todd Deininger.

9 February 2025 – Day Two

Morning of day two we were up and ready for our first pelagic of the trip. After a quick catch up with a banded rail parent and chick we hopped on our boat and headed towards our chum spot in the Hauraki Gulf. Regular little penguins on the way out were a welcome lifer for many, giving us great close views.

We arrived at our chum spot where we quickly picked up flesh footed and Buller's shearwater, along with a few black petrel and good numbers of Cook's petrel and white-faced storm-petrel. After a bit of waiting some New Zealand storm-petrels joined our chum slick, posing especially well for the cameras today.

A brief Pycroft's petrel flew past at a distance and a sooty shearwater came nice and close to the boat. A stunning black-winged petrel made a brief, but close fly by and was seen by all on board. Just before departing we picked up a Salvin's albatross, an unusual bird here for February.

On the way back in we had a great marine mammal encounter with a pod of dolphins containing mainly common dolphins but also a couple of bottle-nosed and most spectacular of all, two very showy Bryde's whales!



White-faced storm-petrel. Bradley Shields.



Black-winged petrel. Bradley Shields.



New Zealand storm-petrel bouncing. Todd Deininger.

10 February 2025 – Day Three

We departed our accommodation and drove north stopping at a few local estuaries on the way. Our main target being fairy tern. While waiting for the tide to go out and create some foraging habitat we checked a high tide roost for the terns.

Whilst we didn't have any luck with the terns at this location we did find a few New Zealand pipits and brown quail. Along with a group of variable oystercatchers and New Zealand dotterels we found a wrybill, very surprising as it is not a usual spot for this unique wader. And we had a lovely walk on a beautiful beach!

After the tide dropped a bit more we moved to another couple of estuaries finding a fairy tern at both!

After dinner that evening we set off to look for our first kiwi of the trip, the Northern brown kiwi. Within a few minutes of arriving at our location we had already found one and everyone got to see it exceptionally well. We continued walking along the track finding five more kiwi including a chick!



Looking for terns! Bradley Shields.



Variable oystercatchers on a stunning beach. Todd Deininger.



Time for lunch, shame about the view. Brent Stephenson.

11 February 2025 – Day Four

After an action packed night, we packed up and headed south to meet our boat for the day. After boarding we steamed straight out to a distant island group where we picked up at least 40 grey noddys and had a few flyover red crowned parakeets closer to the main islands.

At our main chum spot in the afternoon we picked up a couple of cooperative Pycroft's petrels which allowed everyone great views as well as some New Zealand storm-petrels and all the other usual suspects. We then headed back to the mainland (picking up a few reef egrets on the way) to prepare for the next day.



Pycroft's petrel. Bradley Shields.

12 February 2025 – Day Five

We were packed up early and ready to head to our next location, a predator free island in the Hauraki Gulf. After a bit of carpark birding we hopped on the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island, noting the usual seabirds plus good numbers of juvenile Australasian gannets. On the island we quickly picked up some of our main targets, including stitchbird and better views of saddleback, whitehead, bellbird, tui and New Zealand pigeon. Kokako were heard well but didn't want to show themselves.



Peering into the bushes. Bradley Shields.



North Island saddleback. Todd Deininger.

In the afternoon we finally managed to spot a pair of kokako in a Puriri tree just before we got back to the bunk house.

After a bit of a chill out and a beautiful BBQ dinner we headed out on dusk to try our luck with kiwi and tuatara. We managed to get onto a little spotted kiwi reasonably early in the night which gave great extended views and meant a few people could get to bed at a reasonable hour. A few intrepid souls stayed out a bit longer and were rewarded with a couple of little blue penguin chicks in a burrow, an amazing close kiwi encounter and eight tuatara sightings!



The Tiritiri Matangi lighthouse. Brent Stephenson.

13 February 2025 – Day Six

Before departing the island in the morning we caught the end of the dawn chorus with a distant but spectacular song from a couple of kokako and a nice close encounter with the local takahe family. After packing up everyone finally got a good look at a rifleman on the way down to the wharf.

A quick water taxi ride and we were back on the mainland where our next stop was a park in South Auckland where we hoped to get onto a white-winged tern that had been seen there recently. Within five

minutes of arriving we found the tern sitting with a flock of black-billed gulls (another new bird) and red-billed gulls.

After lunch we headed to a nearby bird roost to build our wader list for the trip. We had a good look at a big flock of around 1000 wrybill and lots of red knot and bar-tailed godwits. A nice bonus was a reef egret hunting among the rocks. We relocated to the other side of the estuary and got onto a sharp-tailed and a pectoral sandpiper, both reported recently and in amongst a huge group of feeding red knot and bar-tailed godwit. We then headed to our accommodation for the night.



Looking for shorebirds. Bradley Shields.

14 February 2025 – Day Seven

We kicked off the day with a visit to another estuary/wader roost for the early morning high tide. We were greeted by thousands of shorebirds. Including mainly bar tailed godwit, South Island oystercatcher, pied stilt and red knot. We managed to pick out a few rarer species including 5 sharp-tailed sandpiper, 54 golden plover, 6 whimbrel and 1 red necked stint. The morning light was stunning and we had a spectacular show when a swamp harrier came through and put all the birds up in the air and had them circling around over our heads for a couple minutes. We picked out the leucistic bar tailed godwit that had been hanging around the area.

On our way south we made a quick stop and added eastern cattle egret to the list as well as Australian tern.

After a bit of a drive, our next stop was a patch of beautiful native forest, where we added yellow-crowned parakeet, and long tailed cuckoo to the list whilst also getting our best views of kaka so far. We then drove to the central North Island and called it a day.

15 February 2025 – Day Eight

We were up early to do some birding at a local wetland where we added spotless crane and fernbird to the list and also a flyby Australasian bittern!

We then called into a large, clear fast flowing river on the way out of town and added a pair of blue duck and 3 juveniles to the list.

After a bit of driving we reached our next stop. Here we had lunch and did a loop track seeing lots of North Island Robin and our first and only views of North Island tomtit.

We headed through to the coastline from here and had a walk around another estuary. Here we saw some great waders including pacific golden plover, sharp-tailed sandpiper and two new species for the trip which were marsh sandpiper (6!), and black fronted dotterel.



A young variable oystercatcher and adult. Jim Betz.

16 February 2025 – Day Nine

We left early in the morning and drove to a nearby hilltop where we had great views of the region, as well as a few New Zealand pipit. We continued to a wetland to try for Baillon's (marsh) crane, unfortunately to no avail, but good views of spotless crane and New Zealand dabchick was a nice consolation.

We then headed straight across to the opposite side of the North Island and visited another estuary. Here we had our best views yet of pacific golden plover and wrybill, we also saw a couple of sharp-tailed sandpipers for the 4th day in a row!

After checking into accommodation early and having a successful trip to the estuary, we decided to head up the coast and try our luck at finding a nankeen night heron. Within 2 minutes of parking up at the spot, we had a mint condition adult right out in the open preening, giving everyone incredible extended views of this stunning bird.



Watching a nankeen night heron. Bradley Shields.

We finished up the night with a BBQ dinner where we had a Rook fly over us. Notably further south than their usual range, and a welcome addition to the list.



BBQ time! Todd Deiningner.

17 February 2025 – Day Ten

We made our way south and into the Wellington Region, where we made a few brief estuary stops, which didn't reveal any new species for the trip. However, we did get some great views of several spoonbill pairs and begging juveniles.

We made it into Wellington City and onto the Interislander Ferry, which would take us to Picton in the South Island. The crossing between the islands revealed few seabirds, but included our first white-capped albatross and King shags of the trip.

18 February 2025 – Day Eleven

In the morning we hopped on a boat and headed off towards another predator free island, stopping at several spots along the way to get some nice close views of both King and spotted shags. We landed on the Island and quickly got onto a New Zealand falcon circling overhead. This was immediately followed by some close, extended views of our main target, the orange-fronted parakeet. While waiting for our boat pickup we had close views of South Island tomtit and weka.

Before heading back to shore we had an excellent encounter with several Hector's dolphins, with 5-6 sets of mothers and their calves, very close to the boat.



Watching Hector's dolphins. Bradley Shields.

We then made our way down the east coast of the South Island making a few stops along the way, adding black-fronted tern and hoary-headed grebe to the list.

19 February 2025 – Day Twelve

Our morning saw us getting on another boat, for our 3rd pelagic of the trip, a beautiful morning on the water of Kaikoura, with our first close albatross of the trip which included, Salvin's, white-capped, New Zealand (Gibson's), Northern and Southern royal albatross. All of which were right in close by the boat allowing everyone to take in the sheer size of these impressive birds.

We also saw a few new petrel species including, Cape, Westland and white-chinned petrels, as well as the alpine nesting Hutton's shearwater.

The afternoon was mostly at leisure, although some of us ventured back out on the water for more albatross fun.

20 February 2025 – Day Thirteen

On our way south in the morning we checked a spot for girl bunting, and to our delight found one on the powerlines within 5 minutes.

We then hit the road and drove south to another estuary in search of a couple of rare birds that had been in the area. Upon arrival we quickly added mute swan to the list, then went to the wader roost where we eventually got onto the long staying terek sandpiper, a rare vagrant to New Zealand. We switched our attention to the tern flock and scoured it in search of a common tern (uncommon vagrant to New Zealand). After looking and not finding it, it all of a sudden flew in and landed right in front of the flock giving us great comparative views with the rest of the white fronted terns.

We grabbed lunch and had a good but brief look at a New Zealand falcon in a hedge nearby.

We pushed on into the Southern Alps of the South Island, where we had great encounters with the cheeky and charismatic Kea one of which was trying to hop in the minivan! We also had great views of another new bird, brown creeper.



A cheeky kea. Jim Betz.

In the evening we went to try hear a great spotted kiwi. Unfortunately, only a very distant bird was heard by 1 person.

21 February 2025 – Day Fourteen

We left and descended down onto the West Coast. On the way, a quick pullover beside a river revealed a pair of blue duck.

We did a couple stops around the coastline adding great egret and redpoll to the list as well as tracking down a really good local rarity in the form of a sharp tailed sandpiper. A quick walk around a forested lake margin gave us good views of weka and tomtit.



The eye of the weka. Jim Betz.

On the way south to our destination for the night we checked out a river mouth in search of an out of range sooty tern unfortunately to no avail, then headed to our accommodation and had dinner.

As the sun went down we headed out and mission Ōkārito kiwi began. After our target pair of kiwi went straight into the deep bush after waking up for the night, we split up along the track to maximize our chance of seeing a bird. After 30 min of nothing happening we all of a sudden had Ian Cooper move us into place quickly, only to have an Ōkārito kiwi out in the open crossing the creek. An absolutely amazing bird and incredible experience for all!

22 February 2025 – Day Fifteen

We left our accommodation and went to a nearby forest walk where we added South Island Robin, South Island fernbird, black morph New Zealand fantail and more fantastic looks at South Island tomtit. At the top of the track we were rewarded with spectacular views of the Southern Alps including the 1st and second highest peaks in the country – Aoraki Mount Cook and Mount Tasman.



Stunning mountain views. Bradley Shields.



A very tame South Island robin. Jim Betz.



South Island tomtit peeking out. Jim Betz.

We drove a bit further south making a couple of stops along the way and having a great encounter with a New Zealand falcon juvenile and adult.

Another forest walk in the afternoon, in beautiful mossy beech forest, gave good looks of rifleman, but not much else. Into Wanaka for a lovely Indian dinner.

23 February 2025 – Day Sixteen

In the morning we made a quick stop to add great-crested grebe to the list. We then drove through to our main destination which was a high alpine boulder field. This specific habitat being home to one of the more challenging to find endemics, the South Island (rock) wren. After not too long, we spotted a male hopping around which gave us great extended views, bathing, preening, and just showing off. After our success we visited the world famous Milford Sound, where among the amazing scenery we found a couple of close weka and a brief sighting of another blue duck. On the way to our accommodation we did a quick forest walk, glimpsing a couple rifleman and yellow-crowned parakeets.



Mitre Peak and Milford Sound. Brent Stephenson.

24 February 2025 – Day Seventeen

We left our accommodation and headed straight to Bluff, at the bottom of the South Island, where we would board our ferry to Stewart Island. Once on the Island we were picked up by a small water taxi and taken to a location where we saw some moulting Fiordland crested penguins. After admiring the penguins we headed to Ulva Island, where we hoped to see yellowhead and South Island saddleback. It didn't take long to find a noisy flock of yellowhead feeding all around us giving incredible close views. We spent some more time walking around the island enjoying the other birdlife such as kaka, red-crowned parakeet, brown creeper, South Island robin, rifleman, tomtit and weka. We eventually got onto a couple of families of South Island saddleback getting great views of both adults and juveniles (jackbirds).



Ulva Island delivering the goods. Bradley Shields.

Once we were back at our accommodation and had finished dinner we headed out to look for our last kiwi the Southern brown kiwi. before we even got to our destination for kiwi spotting we had to pull over for an adult female kiwi feeding right beside the road! After watching her for a while we continued on and managed to find two more that night.

25 February 2025 – Day Eighteen

We boarded our boat for the day and headed out towards our chum spot for our final pelagic of the trip. On the way we had more Fiordland crested penguins. Once out in deeper water we had a pretty good lineup of pelagic species. This included Hutton's and sooty shearwater. Salvin's, white-capped, Buller's, and Southern royal albatrosses. White-chinned, Cape, Cook's, and a single mottled petrel as well as common diving petrel, fairy prion, and white-faced storm-petrel.



White-capped albatross. Jim Betz.



Looking at islands. Bradley Shields.



Albatross galore. Bradley Shields.

The biggest surprise was a single Pomarine skua and two long-tailed skua both very rare species in this part of the World. The sheer number of seabirds on this trip was incredible. with over 6000 sooty shearwaters seen through the day and 250 white-capped albatross many of which flew right over our heads as we headed back to shore.

26 February 2025 – Day Nineteen

We left Stewart Island in the morning on the ferry, seeing a few Cook's and mottled petrels on the way. Arriving back in Bluff, we hopped in the van and drove to a coastal location near Dunedin. Here we looked for the exceedingly rare yellow-eyed penguin. After waiting for an hour and a half, a yellow eyed penguin finally popped out giving us great scope views. Just before checking in for the night we visited a wharf with good numbers of spotted and Otago shags.

27 February 2025 – Day Twenty

We headed to inland Canterbury for our last target endemic, the Black stilt, a critically endangered shorebird. We managed to find a couple of stilts at various locations getting some good views of 18 individuals across 4 sites. That's around 10% of the population!

While the introduced chukar eluded us on a couple of attempts in their habitat, we were more than happy for a consolation Baillon's (marsh) crane feeding around the edge of some reeds.

28 February 2025 – Day Twenty-One

We packed up and drove back towards Christchurch Airport, where the trip would come to a close. Along the way we had a quick look at the lake edge finding another black stilt. We made a well anticipated pie stop at the famous Fairlie Bakehouse, before continuing through the Canterbury plains, watching the odd black fronted tern hawking over the paddocks.

We had travelled a grand total of 5,155 kilometres together (3,203 miles), covered all three main islands of New Zealand, and some of the 'lesser' isles, and eaten approximately 467 pies and 123 lamb shanks. Some of these statistics are correct, others completely fictitious. We totalled 161 species for the trip, with effectively no endemic targets missed, a pretty excellent trip! Along the way, a lot of laughing, fun and memories made.



Happy Birders! Brent Stephenson.