

Tour report

7-27 February 2026

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



Fun with kea. Sav Saville.

Led by Sav Saville & Neil Robertson, Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ

Participants

Jan Brandin, Kerry Kaufman, Nancy & Steve Cox, Amber & Laura West, John Bruin, Brian Kirshner

Images

Laura West and Sav Saville

A very unusual tour with some big disruptions. A medical treatment meant that Sav was always going to be subbed by Neil for a couple of days in the middle (and that didn't really affect much), but the cancellation of the interisland ferry due to a huge storm had knock-on effects that were "a challenge" to say the least. At one point it looked as if the second half of the tour just wasn't going to happen, and we were very lucky that it didn't work out that way. Away from the storm the weather was far from ideal – lots of rain and often cold.

The attitude of the tour guests was amazing. Even when things looked grim there were positive vibes and optimism. The final tally of species was low, due to missing a couple of days around the top of the South Island – no cross-strait ferry, no Marlborough Sounds and no Kaikoura pelagic. If one is able to look past that it wasn't all bad! All the endemics that we managed to get in range of turned up and we all had amazing views of just about everything.

7 February 2026 – Day One

Warm with little wind. A lovely start at a forested area near Auckland where we had a gentle introduction to NZ birding. Four Kaka competed for noise-making honours with a dozen Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, and other endemics included Grey Gerygone and NZ Pigeon.

From there to an Australasian Gannet colony where the masses of birds are as close as 2m away. The sight sound and smell(!) of the place is wonderful and matches the grand scenery of the northern West coast. A photographer's dream.

Crossing the peninsular we next headed for lunch – first of many meat pies for the team and on to a council-run sanctuary behind a predator-proof fence. This was the Saturday of a 3-day weekend public holiday and the place was absolutely heaving with people and hundreds of cars! Lucky for us almost all of the visitors were on the beach and the forest was fairly quiet. We racked up many of the commoner endemic landbirds – Tui, Bellbird, Whitehead, NZ Fantail etc and had great looks at a perched Kaka and a bonus daytime Morepork at eye level. A Banded Rail in the forest was good, particularly since we couldn't find any in the wetland!

A reasonably early finish and a brief tutorial in preparation for tomorrow's pelagic preceded a great first dinner and bed.



Kaka. Laura West.

8 February 2026 – Day Two

A full-day pelagic today on a calm sea with a very light SW breeze. Great conditions for boating but rubbish for birding! Despite less than ideal conditions most of the expected birds turned up and the light sea made viewing them a pleasure. A few Little Penguins kicked the day off as we motored out, and the same area held several Arctic Skuas (Parasitic Jaegers) of which we tallied at least 10 during the day. Fluttering, Flesh-footed and Buller's Shearwater were in reasonable numbers and we picked out one Short-tailed Shearwater as well.

The main targets here are New Zealand Storm-petrel and Black (Parkinson's) Petrel and both showed really well although we only had one NZSP. Many more White-faced Storm-petrel kept everyone happy, as did 200+ Cook's Petrel with some in view most of the time allowing people to really get to grips with the id features.

Overnight in the same place and another nice dinner.

9 February 2026 – Day Three

First task of today is to find the rarest bird taxon in NZ – Fairy Tern. Only about 35-40 individuals exist of this endemic sub-species so it should be easy enough!! Our first site drew a blank but the second site came up trumps with two birds present including one which gave us a very close fly-by. We also had great looks at NZ (Red-breasted) and Banded Dotterel on the mud. A few Arctic shorebirds present included a group of 20+ Red Knot.

A third site for Fairy Tern produced a couple of nice surprises – a pair of NZ Pipit were strutting about on a lawn, when they were interrupted by 2 Banded Rails chasing each other right out in the open.

Moving further North we added Australasian Little and NZ Grebe to our list as well as a few more waterfowl including NZ Scaup before checking in to our motel for an early dinner and a night-time expedition to look for our first kiwi.

As it got dark we set off, almost immediately hearing a male North Island Brown Kiwi call. This was the first of at least 25 calls heard that evening, which may all have come from different birds. We had some good success seeing them too with three adults and a particularly accommodating juvenile showing. The young bird just carried on feeding right by the trail as we stood not 10 paces away.

10 February 2026 – Day Four

Pelagic #2. Another day where the weather was really too nice for good seabirds, but we still had a great time. Since the sea was more-or-less calm we headed straight out to a set of islands where Grey Ternlet (Noddy) come at this time of year to moult. Sure enough there were 36 birds present and the long trek out

there was deemed well worthwhile by all aboard. We stopped at a couple of spots to chum (put bits of fish into the water) on the return journey and attracted the usual suspects for the area. Eight or more Black Petrel at one time is a good number, and there were plenty of the previously seen pelagic species too, including at least five New Zealand Storm-petrel to keep smiles on all faces. The real prize on this pelagic is Pycroft's Petrel, an almost cryptic species looking very much like Cook's Petrel. We had seven or eight birds which gave everyone a chance to get a decent look at a bird we occasionally miss.

After last night's kiwi and a full day on the water it was an early night for all.

11 February 2026 – Day Five

One of the undoubted highlights of any NZ tour is Tiritiri Matangi Island and that was our destination today. The short ferry ride was uneventful and after a short intro from the ranger we were into it. Rare endemics abound on the island, and we were soon knee-deep in North Island Saddleback, Stitchbird, Whitehead (all representatives of endemic families) and other goodies. A total of six NI Kokako were seen including one extremely showy individual, and we found 2 Riflemen – tiny nuthatch-like creatures and the 6th and final endemic family knocked off!

The weather was hot and humid, and we returned to the bunkhouse relatively early to prepare for the evening looking for another kiwi species. This worked out well since one of our other targets had eluded us up till now. One of the other bunkhouse occupants alerted us to Takahe and sure enough there were four plodding about near the ranger's house – excellent!



Takahe. Laura West.

We kicked off the evening with brief looks at a Spotless Crake at a small pond, and then great views of a couple of Tuatara – ancient lizard-like reptiles in their own Order and a complete joy to see. The previous day's exertions and the hot humid weather of today took their toll and many folks stopped looking for Little Spotted Kiwi and made their way back to the bunkhouse. The few that stayed out were rewarded with a nice little male kiwi at close range and all the others actually saw one run across the bunkhouse lawn as they got there. Another cool day on the wonderful island of Tiri.

12 February 2026 – Day Six

Off Tiri by water taxi this morning after everyone had a wander about at the top of the island. More Kokako, and more Riflemen were the top birds as well as better, longer looks at Spotless Crake and Brown Teal for some.

Leaving the water taxi at Gulf Harbour we motored across Auckland to the airport where Neil Robertson was waiting. Neil looked after the tour for the next 48 hours while Sav went to get his medical treatment.



Wrybill. Laura West.

Having waved goodbye to Sav, we headed south out of Auckland, and after a lunch stop made it to our destination for the afternoon on the Firth of Thames. Arriving at the ideal time, about an hour or so before high tide, we started our search for shorebirds. Sadly, since the tide was not high enough to cover the mud in front of the main hide we had to be satisfied with fairly distant views along the shell banks, but were able to make out distant Wrybill, Royal Spoonbills, Caspian and White-fronted Terns and Black-billed Gulls. Turning our attention to another location allowed us to obtain much closer views of our main target, Wrybill, which were present in good numbers along with large flocks of Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwits and smaller numbers of Pacific Golden Plovers. Early evening, before dinner we spent an interesting half hour along the coast honing our ID skills studying a small mixed group of Red-billed and Black-billed gulls of various ages.

13 February 2026 – Day Seven

The next day started fine and an early start allowed us to visit another part of the Firth of Thames coast, but the falling tide meant close views of shorebirds was always going to be a challenge. The weather forecast for later in the day looked ominous, so we decided to head south early to give ourselves a chance of some dry-weather birding before the heavy rain started. After a brief stop to check out some ponds for waterfowl and shags we picked up lunch and continued to our destination, Pureora, one of the largest areas of native forest in the central North Island. We were entertained with good views of a NZ Pipit on the gravel road leading in to the forest. Sadly, our arrival coincided with the start of the rain, which alternated between torrential and heavy, with just the odd spell of lighter rain which enabled us to do some birding away from the van. Despite the miserable conditions we were able to gain good views of a very confident North Island Tomtit, numerous North Island Robins, NZ Pigeons and Whiteheads and a Sacred Kingfisher. We had to satisfy ourselves with occasional flight views of Kaka and Yellow-crowned Parakeets. After a short walk in the shelter of the forest, it soon became clear that there was going to be no respite, so we decided to head for our overnight location. On our journey to Turangi we experienced some of the heaviest rain many of us had ever seen and we were fortunate to avoid the flooding and slips that caused road closures in many parts of the region.

14 February 2026 – Day Eight

Thankfully the rain eased overnight and we headed out in the light drizzle before dawn in search of new targets along the southern shore of Lake Taupo. NZ grebes were on the lake and small groups of Royal Spoonbills were seen, but despite an extensive search Australasian Bittern proved to be elusive. Having heard a few Fernbirds without any satisfactory views we decided to try a different location and we were immediately rewarded with great views of a Spotless Crake perched up on some broken reeds. Very soon we also heard two Fernbirds very close and after some persistence managed to obtain good unobstructed views.

The next target was Blue Duck which had not been present on the usual stretch of river during our brief check in the rain on the previous evening. We tried a number of locations without success before heading

to a bridge a few kilometers upstream. Thankfully, here, we had prolonged views of a pair performing nicely on the river about 30 metres downstream.

Time was pressing, the rain was strengthening again, and conscious that Neil had a plane to catch and a rendez-vous with Sav, we grabbed some lunch, and headed to the east coast, making time for a potential (but unsuccessful) long-tailed cuckoo stop in the rain along the way.

Sav was waiting for the team at Napier airport from where Neil was to fly home. It was a truly miserable afternoon with more-or-less constant rain. Nevertheless we managed to find a few decent birds at a couple of sites –more NZ and Banded Dotterel plus a couple of bonus Red-necked Stints and a real surprise, a juvenile Black-fronted Tern. Quite unheard-of in February on the North Island.

Great, close looks at Royal Spoonbills and waterfowl at a local park rounded off the day before having dinner at Sav's house.

15 February 2026 – Day Nine

This is where it started to go wrong! A message arrived overnight to say that our ferry (midday of Day 10) was going to be cancelled. A delayed start ensued while Sav tried to re-book the ferry – no dice! Eventually we decided to make our way to Foxton where we had accommodation booked that night. The weather which was the cause of the ferry cancellation was already atrocious – very windy and lots of rain.

Most of the day was spent trying to fix our predicament. There was no chance of a ferry for at least 2 weeks, and there appeared to be no way to hire a suitable vehicle in the South Island even if we flew down. Then we found a van – but only for a couple of days. It seemed the best bet, so flights were booked to Christchurch.

The small amount of birding that we managed wasn't very productive, partly due to the weather, but we did find a flock of 100+ Little Black Shags which was a tiny consolation.

16 February 2026 – Day Ten

Flights cancelled due to the storm!! Plan D (or E?). The saviour of the tour was Neil – he found a van that we could borrow and agreed to drive it 8 hours to Christchurch Airport. So all we had to do was find somewhere that we could fly from. The obvious answer was to drive back to Auckland, leave the van where we had originally picked it up, and fly from there.

That would have been more straightforward if the storm hadn't caused a power cut, and hadn't blocked the main road with fallen trees! A wild ride up a secondary road at the height of the storm ensued. It all worked out though, and by the time we had reached Turangi the weather was improving a little – enough for us to get cool looks at Blue Duck anyway.

Night in Taupo.



A stormy drive. Laura West.

17 February 2026 – Day Eleven

Our flights to Christchurch are booked for tomorrow, giving Neil time to organise collection of the van and transit up the country. This gave us a full day to get to Auckland so it was decided to try for one of the previously missed species – Long-tailed Cuckoo.

Arriving at a favourite spot it didn't take long before the target showed up and gave good views for all. Other neat birds in the vicinity included Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Kaka, North Is Robin and Whitehead. An adult NZ Falcon called and showed while a juvenile was also heard calling.

An attempt to claw back Australasian Bittern was not so productive but at least it was worth a go. Night in Auckland near to the airport and a good Indian meal.



Long-tailed cuckoo. Laura West.

18 February 2026 – Day Twelve

A mid-morning flight gave us some time to kill and the tides were right for shorebirds near the airport. A few hundred each of Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit showed well, as did 20-odd Wrybill. Five New Zealand Grebe and a few Black-billed Gulls rounded off the scene, but none of the hoped-for unusual or rare shorebirds.

Arriving in Christchurch, we met with Neil, transferred to the new vehicle and set off to a couple of sites just north of Christchurch. The first was a stake-out for a vagrant Maned Duck (from Australia or perhaps more likely from a relatively new colony further north in the South Island). The duck wasn't hard to find, and there were 40+ Black-billed Gulls present as well. Our final stop for the day was at an estuary where Black-fronted Tern is a regular. We only found one distant bird and a handful of shorebirds but a bonus for us was a single Spotted Shag – a species that we had leap-frogged by flying South.

19 February 2026 – Day Thirteen

Now we were back on track, so off we went across the Canterbury plains and up into the Southern Alps. The main attraction up there is the Alpine, carnivorous parrot – Kea, but before we got to Kea habitat we stopped to pick up South Island Robin for our list, duly adding that at “close range” – that’s about 6 inches!! A couple of Tomtits of the South Is sub-species with their yellow bibs were also present.



South Island robin. Laura West.

The weather once again was less than helpful – drizzle and very cold, but Kea don’t mind and a couple of birds performed on a café table, on cars and eventually on our van. Their preferred natural habitat.

A forest walk produced great views of Rifleman, but no Brown Creeper (Pipipi), which was a disappointment that needs to be remedied later.

After descending down to the West Coast where we were to spend the night, we had time to visit a lovely lake where a Great Egret was seen –they only breed in small numbers at one site in NZ, just a little further South.



Kea. Laura West.

20 February 2026 – Day Fourteen

Not much seen through the morning in pouring rain as we proceeded South. On arrival at Okarito the weather had perked up a bit but birds were still thin on the ground with no Fernbird and no Brown Creeper (again!). A few SI Robins, Tomtits and Fantails were all that we could muster.

We had a briefing with the legendary Ian Cooper to save us some time for tonight's Okarito Kiwi hunt, and then took the walk at Franz Josef Glacier where a black phase NZ Fantail was seen.

The Okarito Kiwi experience is different every time, though normally successful as it was tonight. We started in the territory of one pair that just didn't materialise at all – no calls and no sign. Off to another territory and we soon heard a male calling. In a small clearing we stumbled upon a small, one-year-old male kiwi which eventually gave everyone a decent look. Walking back to the van there was a set of calls from the female and at the vehicle another, different, male also called. So three different birds heard and one seen – not a bad result.

21 February 2026 – Day Fifteen

No rain today, what a bargain! First stop this morning was at a bay to look for Hector's Dolphin but none were showing, so we continued Southbound. Next was a stakeout for NZ Falcon which we know had bred nearby. After some time we found first one then a second juvenile NZ Falcon which ended up perched reasonably low down and reasonably close – at least allowing full frame scope views.

Further South still we walked in a beautiful forest where we finally tracked down Brown Creeper (Pipipi) and had more good looks at Rifleman, Tomtit and heard (but didn't see) a NZ Falcon.

Finally down to the lakeside in Wanaka where Great Crested Grebe and NZ Scaup breed on artificial platforms allowing close and extended views.

Traditional fish and chips for dinner at our motel.

22 February 2026 – Day Sixteen

A relatively long drive today but through some spectacular scenery which makes it seem that much better.

A friend of Wrybill has developed a wetland on his land where we are able to visit and have a really good chance of seeing Baillon's Crake, which breed there. Today gave us views of at least 3 individuals of this species that is widespread in the world but often very difficult to find.

In much improved weather we went all the way through to Milford Sound and its unmatched views with several really cool birds en route. Both Kea and Kaka showed well, as did SI Robin, Brown Creeper, Tomtit, and NZ Pipit. A Weka in the road was good, and there was another wandering around the carpark at Milford.

Back to Te Anau for the night and preparation for the journey to Stewart Island.

23 February 2026 – Day Seventeen

We made a reasonably early start to get to Bluff and the Stewart Island ferry on time, and had just enough spare to make a quick visit to the very end of State Highway 1 at Stirling Point. Just prior to that we stopped to look at a group of terns which were mostly White-fronted but included about 30 Black-fronted Terns.

The ferry ride was pretty smooth with not much wind and allowed us to catch up on a couple of seabirds that we needed. Our first albatrosses were (predictably) White-capped and we had 4 on the crossing. Other additions to the list were Fairy Prion, Common Diving Petrel, a brief Mottled Petrel and 50 or so Sooty Shearwater.

The endemic shag of the area - Foveaux Shag (currently lumped as Stewart Is Shag) was also present.

After a quick lunch we got in a water taxi for a mini-pelagic for half an hour to look for Fiordland Crested Penguin. That all worked well and five penguins were sitting about in a small cove. A bonus bird on that little excursion was a Buller's Albatross which came and landed right by the water taxi. The destination for the water taxi was Ulva Island, a predator free place with a multitude of rare endemic birds. High on everyone's wish-list was Yellowhead and although there were plenty of them they all stayed rather high in the canopy and none gave really good views. We had lots of South Is Robins, lots of Red-crowned Parakeets, Kaka, Weka, and a bunch more Brown Creepers. Amber and Laura also saw a South Is Saddleback but the rest of us did not and none were heard calling.



Buller's albatross. Sav Saville.

Another night, another kiwi species. This time it is Southern Brown Kiwi with a commercial operator that has access to some flat grassy land where the birds come out to feed. So, unlike the forested habitat of Okarito, these birds are particularly easy to see in the open. We had excellent views of two birds – a young male and a nearly full-grown female, plus one other brief male.



Southern brown kiwi. Laura West.

24 February 2026 – Day Eighteen

One of the highlights of this whole tour is the Stewart Is pelagic. It is almost guaranteed to bring big numbers of birds and one never knows quite what might show up.

Today was an average sort of day with almost all of the expected, regular suspects though nothing out of the ordinary. That is to say the tour participants were mostly excited for most of the day!

We kicked off with a return visit to yesterday's Fiordland Crested Penguins – there were seven today. Then to some islands where we were lucky enough to get good views of a Yellow-eyed Penguin – a species that is in dire straits on mainland NZ and on Stewart Island. A showy Brown Skua came and accepted some fish scraps.

Moving out towards the reef which was our main location we encountered Cook's and Mottled Petrel, Fairy Prion, a single Cape Petrel, a White-faced Storm-petrel and 1000+ Sooty Shearwaters, but as always, it was the albatrosses that stole the show. At times there were nearly 200 assorted alberts around the boat – up to eight Southern Royals, the biggest wingspan (up to 3.6m) of any bird, a couple each of Salvin's and Buller's and the rest – over 150 – being White-capped. That's more than half a ton of albatross!!



Yellow-eyed penguin. Laura West.



Albatross stew. Sav Saville.

All in all a great day on the water, which ended at a breeding colony of Foveaux Shags with well over 100 birds present.

25 February 2026 – Day Nineteen

Off Stewart Island on the early morning ferry – calm and warm for a change. Nothing much from the ferry but a couple more White-capped Albatross to add to the tally. The same mob of Black-fronted Terns were still in Bluff harbour, but we didn't stay long since we had a long drive to make –and it was made longer since we had decided to go to Taiaroa Head to see Northern Royal Albatross.

The long, windy road out to the albatross colony was all worthwhile once we got there. It was very windy, but that meant the birds were flying and we got very close flight views of about 10 individuals from the cliff-top.

Having had our fill of these giants, it was off Northwards to look for Yellow-eyed Penguin near the town of Oamaru. Thank goodness we had already seen one yesterday since there were none to be found today!

A sure-fire bet was lined up for the last stop of the day though – Otago Shag (the other taxon in the Stewart Is Shag lump). About 500 Otago and 500 Spotted Shags were present today.

26 February 2026 – Day Twenty

The last real day of birding on the tour and it is all about one very special bird – Black Stilt. Probably the least numerous shorebird in the World, with a population of about 100 pairs. They breed and stay in a relatively small, incredibly picturesque part of central South Island. It is quite high and one site has a backdrop of the tallest mountain in NZ – Aoraki Mt Cook. That's all well and good, but once again the weather had other ideas! It was wet, raining and cold. Nonetheless we managed to find nine adult Black Stilts at three different locations and ended up with tremendous close views.

Surprisingly few other birds were seen – a handful of Banded Dotterel, a single Black-fronted Tern and a couple of Caspian Terns and extreme close-up looks at NZ Scaup being the only noteworthy things.

Happy with the Black Stilts we returned to our motel for a debrief before dinner.



Black stilt. Laura West.

27 February 2026 – Day Twenty-One

This morning we dropped John off in Lake Tekapo to meet up with his wife, and then continued on towards Christchurch Airport and away.

One final birding, and mammal, stop was made. We pulled up at a Lagoon, where Mute Swans (I know!) breed in big numbers. Also present were a couple of Black-fronted Terns, not the White-winged Tern that I was hoping for, but more importantly it is a good spot for Hector's Dolphin in the sea, and the little beauties did not disappoint. Two dolphins with their round black dorsal fins looking for all the world like Mickey Mouse's ears were mooching about just offshore. So the last good bird of the tour wasn't a bird at all!!

My thanks to all tour participants for their unfailing good humour in the face of adversity, and for their birding ability, helping me find many of the target species. I thoroughly enjoyed your company.