

# Tour report

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**2 – 22 November 2015**

**21-day tour with Wrybill Birding Tours, NZ**



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

## **Participants**

Carol and Ray Jeffers, Doug Ormston, Karen and Dave Hargreave,

Adrian and Lee Hayward, Laurence Fenn

This 21-day tour can only be described as epic! We managed to see every gettable endemic species, except for orange-fronted parakeet – a great disappointment at the time – but in retrospect, with that being the only miss, we were incredibly lucky. Weather can play such a big part of a tour, and with such an unusual spring, that has been incredibly changeable, wet and stormy, we were lucky to get away with only two drizzly days – and they could have been a lot worse!

There are a lot of things that culminate to make a great trip, and I think we had all of them on this trip. Most important is a great bunch of people that all got on well, had a lot of fun, and were always laughing and joking. Not only that but we had some great eyes, that were always looking, and it wasn't always the guide who was responsible for finding the birds – this is a good thing! And nice to have help along the way with various things, including the packing of the van in the morning, etc. All in all a great bunch and a lot of fun to travel the country with.

Four kiwi on a trip is always a target, and to have seen all four really well, is a bonus. The views of Northern brown were great – there on that first night – and followed by excellent views of little spotted kiwi on Tiritiri Matangi. At Okarito, Ian Cooper worked his magic yet again, and we had incredible views of 'Joeline' as she walked out of the vegetation right in front of us and walked around Ian, to then strut off down the trail. Heart-stopping stuff! And lastly, our magnificent encounter with Southern brown kiwi on Stewart Island, there on the beach right in front of us feeding for everyone to see. Plus, hearing both male and female great-spotted kiwi was an additional bonus, even in drizzly conditions.

Towards the end of the trip, as we realised we were looking at a fairly large total number of species, there was the fun of chasing a few things to help bump that total up. However, this was always a fun part of the trip, and as always getting good views of the key endemic birds was the focus. That said a tally of 172 species seen is an incredible total, four more than the previous record of 168 species set by both Brent and Sav on different trips during late 2011. This will definitely be a hard total to beat, and it is always worth putting into perspective that the current year record for New Zealand (set by Brent in 2014) is 220 species. So we saw nearly 80% of that yearly total in a whirlwind three weeks!

Our pelagics got off to a rocky (literally) start with the rough trip out into the Hauraki Gulf, but we managed all of the targets, including of course fantastic views of the sensational New Zealand storm-petrel. Then our Whitianga pelagic managed to dodge the weather and come up with a cracker of an afternoon, with excellent sightings of Pycroft's petrels and hundreds of common diving-petrels and white-faced storm-petrels. Don't forget the blue shark as well! A couple of great trips out of Kaikoura to boot, as always turning on some beautiful close sightings of birds, and then that Stewart Island pelagic! Wow, the one nice day between two terrible days, clouds of albatrosses behind the boat over the course of the day, the waves breaking with clouds of sooty shearwaters over Wreck Reef, and then the first sightings of mottled petrels for the season, two species of storm-petrel, and prions! Four species of prion on ANY New Zealand pelagic has never been done, other than those extended trips down into the New Zealand sub-antarctic, so our trip out of Stewart Island was extraordinary to say the least.

Our landbird sightings were on the most part excellent, with nothing really giving us a hard time, except that dratted orange-fronted parakeet. But a big part of that had to be the windy weather that day. Multiple and excellent views of yellowhead, beautiful views of the female falcon on two separate occasions, and relatively little wait time for a rock wren to appear were all bonuses. Excellent kokako close up views, kea in the rain and sunshine, takahe strutting their stuff, and saddleback showing off both in the North and South. The pair of blue ducks with ducklings which we spent almost an hour with in the Eglinton Valley also has to be a major highlight.



Bird of the trip was an interesting one, with a pretty broad cross section of species mentioned. But as can be seen below Okarito kiwi topped the list, followed by wrybill and NZ storm-petrel (tied), then Southern brown kiwi and kokako.

species	laurence	lee	adrian	karen	dave	carol	raymond	doug	score	no.
okarito kiwi		5	5	1	5		5		21	5
wrybill			4	5				2	11	3
nzsp	5			3				3	11	3
southern brown kiwi	4	4							8	2
kokako	3			2	2				7	3
campbell albatross		3				3			6	2
yellowhead		2					3		5	2
little spotted kiwi						5			5	1
northern brown kiwi								5	5	1
brown creeper			3			1			4	2
ni saddleback				4					4	1
hector's dolphin						4			4	1
mottled petrel							4		4	1
black stilt					3		1		4	2
salvin's albatross								4	4	1
blue duck					4				4	1
si saddleback	2				1				3	2
white-capped albatross			2						2	1
morepork						2			2	1
antarctic prion							2		2	1
tui			1						1	1
brown skua		1							1	1
kaka	1								1	1
fiordland crested penguin								1	1	1

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

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

## 2 November 2015 – Day One

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You know it is going to be a great tour when the first things discussed upon meeting in the carpark are “Which Sauvignon Blanc is worth drinking?”, and “When do we get our first pie?”! We loaded the van, rather poorly as happens the first morning of every 21-day tour, and then headed out into the streets of Auckland. Navigating through all the early morning traffic we headed to a forested area in the west of the city, managing to spot copious numbers of spotted doves, and even one being hunted by a half-hearted cat that clearly was too well fed to really put any effort into the attempt.

At the forest area we had excellent views of tui and New Zealand pigeon, before a noisy sulphur-crested cockatoo flew over and then showed off perching in some nearby trees. A calling shining-bronze cuckoo would not oblige us, but good views of grey warbler and tomtit rounded things off. Introduced California quails, Eastern rosellas, and chaffinches also put in an appearance.

We then headed to a nearby Australasian gannet colony, where there was a little drizzle coming in off the sea every now and then. But that didn't dampen the spirits and we had excellent views out over the breeding colony, where clearly many birds had not yet laid their eggs – a little late perhaps this season. The white-fronted terns appeared to be in full swing however, with many birds having small chicks sheltering beside them at the nest.

We then headed into a bakery to attempt our first assault, and it went smoothly. I have to say the group managed very well under a barrage of pies, pastries and cappuccinos, and we made our escape intact. We headed to a nearby pond to have lunch and managed to find a few waterbirds – including New Zealand scaup, New Zealand grebe, little black and little pied cormorants, and some more confiding fantails. Next stop was a sewage ponds – it wouldn't be a birding tour without one – and we managed to find a brown teal, which was rather a surprise. Canada geese and mallards rounded off a few more introduced birds for the day.

We then gradually headed north to Dargaville, making a couple of unsuccessful stops to search for Australian pelican, before getting to breakfast foods at the supermarket and then heading on northwards to our accommodations. We checked in and had a little time to relax before dinner and then out looking for Northern brown kiwi. All was quiet to start with, then morepork started to call and then we heard a few calls from distant kiwi. Then we spotted a female kiwi, and nearby a male called. We hoped for her to respond, but she didn't, however we did have excellent views of her. We carried on search for banded kokupu in a nearby stream, and long-finned eels, plus a bunch of cave wetas. We decided to head back around towards where we had seen the female earlier and were rewarded with excellent prolonged views of her. Fantastic, we are off to a great start!

**Day total** – Seen = 50 + 2 heard (shining-bronze cuckoo, morepork); new for the trip = 50; total for the trip to date = 50













## 3 November 2015 – Day Two

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We were up a little later this morning after our nocturnal activities, and everyone breakfasted and readied themselves for the day. A shining-bronze cuckoo calling nearby stirred everyone up, and running around the accommodations all were alerted to the bird, which stayed put and was seen well by everyone.

We then headed north towards the beautiful Waipoua Forest, where we wound our way between the kauri trees towards Tane Mahuta, 'Lord of the Forest'. We wandered into the cool, mossy forest, along the little boardwalk, and stood in front of this spectacular tree. There was not a lot of bird action around, but there didn't need to be. Standing in awe in front of such a tree was enough. We snapped a few photos, then headed back out, finding some diminutive greenhood orchids in flower, probably the kauri greenhood (*Pterostylis agathicola*). We did hear more shining-bronze cuckoos calling, and spotted a grey warbler, but it was time to head south again.

We headed back through Dargaville and across to a small pond near Waipu. Pulling up we spotted a pair of New Zealand dabchick on the pond, and then in another spot, a nest with two eggs exposed. This was strange for a grebe, but within a very short time, an Australasian little grebe snuck into the nest, covered it with weed and then snuck away again – clearly the bird had been off the nest when we arrived, perhaps just nearby, and our arrival caused enough concern to cover the nest. We had excellent views of the pair of Australasian little grebes coming in to the nest to add extra material, and swimming around, and then departed to let them get back on with incubation.

We grabbed some lunch from a local bakery, again more pie crumbs hitting the floor, before heading to a local spot to look for fairy tern. With binoculars in hand we sat and ate lunch and then as we were nearing the end a fairy tern in breeding plumage flew across in front of us. We had good views but wanted more. We headed out to search, and found some confiding variable oystercatchers, a few distant New Zealand dotterels and a few other bits and pieces, and then the same fairy tern flew right past us and landed nearby! It bathed for a while and then preened nearby, giving fantastic views of this, New Zealand's rarest bird. Just 40 individuals are left of this subspecies. We soaked it all in, before heading away, seeing another bird fly over the neighbouring fields, obviously heading to another waterway. That is 2 birds out of 40! A little way along the road, three cattle egret were a surprise!

We headed south along the coast, making a stop for a very confiding New Zealand dotterel, who allowed a close encounter, and then headed to a local reserve area to see what we could find. Firstly, a family of mum, dad and four duckling brown teal made a nice appearance, and then some nice confiding Paradise shelducks, pukekos, and our first bellbirds of the trip. A single kaka flew high overhead, first one way and then back the other...clearly it couldn't make up its mind! We then chased around a few kingfishers, Eastern rosellas, and found a confiding New Zealand pigeon feeding on leaves.

However, it was soon time to head to the accommodation, quickly checkin and then head off out for dinner, having worked up a pretty good appetite!

Day total – Seen = 48 + 2 heard (Cook's petrel, greenfinch); new for the trip = 13; total for the trip to date = 63















## 4 November 2015 – Day Three

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Well when you wake up to pouring rain at 0430, that is a guides nightmare, especially the night before a key pelagic trip. Getting up to rain still falling and pretty breezy conditions isn't any better, but we headed off to get lunch and then off to the boat. With most of the rain having stopped, but a stiff breeze still going, we spotted some buff-banded rails on the way to the wharf, and then boarded the boat.

We headed out through the channel and then out past Kawau Island. Not bad conditions in these enclosed waters, and several little penguins showed themselves well. But as we neared the open sea it was pretty clear this was going to be a little lumpy, and breaking out into the open water, a little spray started to fly! We all gathered in the cabin, and headed out to the west of Little Barrier Island, bracing ourselves as the boat bucked and slammed on some of the waves. As we were headed out, you could see the wind suddenly shift, and from a NW it turned suddenly to a SW. And it didn't take long for the chop and swells to shift as well, so the ride got a little more comfortable...only problem was knowing that on the way back in, that swell was again going to be against us.

We started to see lots of white-faced storm-petrels, common diving-petrels, and a few Cook's petrels and Buller's shearwaters. Birds zipped past us in the high winds, but we pressed on, attracting a small pod of common dolphins who surfed in our wake for a little while.

We kept punching along, and finally got to a spot we felt would work in our favour, without putting us too far out from the calm harbour from which we had come. Everyone was putting on a brave face, even in the face of some rather green complexions, and the cameras were out as we set the sea-anchor. Brett our awesome skipper was chumming like mad before long, and streams of birds were coming in. We literally had hundreds of Cook's petrels descend on us, as numbers of flesh-footed and Buller's shearwaters increased, and then a few black-petrels. White-faced storm-petrels were also catching the scent of the chum and were feeding well around the slick, and after perhaps 35 minutes our first NZ storm-petrel came gliding over the waves – yes! The birds kept coming, the the chum kept flying, and everyone was treated to outstanding views of all of the expected species. An Arctic skua even came in and chased a couple of red-billed gulls around quickly, and then several – perhaps at least 5 – white-capped and a single Salvin's albatross came in, with at least three northern giant petrels. A single sooty shearwater capped things off, flying through briefly. Awesome views of everything, and as the wind slowly increased and the waves started to build, we decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and headed for home.

Punching back into the sea, we spotted many of the same birds, and at one point decided to slow so we could get good views of hundreds of common diving-petrels feeding on something near the surface, with hundreds of white-faced storm-petrels.

Getting back into the shelter of Kawau, people started to liven up, and lunches came out as a small pod of bottlenosed dolphins came and bow rode and played around us. We scanned the shoreline for weka, and in one of the sheltered bays spotted three birds which gave great views. By this time there was a little sunshine, and it was pretty darn pleasant to hang out and see what we could spot. We then decided to head back into Sandspit, where we had more excellent views of buff-banded rail, even a pair briefly copulating, before then looking for kookaburra unsuccessfully, and getting back to the Motel nice and early, with an early dinner and an early night!

**Day total** – Seen = 51; new for the trip = 17; total for the trip to date = 80

















## 5 November 2015 – Day Four

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This morning dawned a little calmer and with a little more blue sky than the previous day! We were up, breakfasted and on the road, collecting lunch as we headed back to give the kookaburra site one last attempt. And, boom! There were two birds, one on a post and the other nearby on the ground! Turning the vehicle around we had good looks at this massive kingfisher, before happily heading towards Gulf Harbour.

We did a little touring around the Whangaparaoa Peninsula, checking a few beaches for reef egrets and other bits and bobs, but no luck on the reef egrets. We did have nice views of California quail though, a little consolation. We then arrived at the Gulf Harbour wharf as the ferry arrived, loaded our gear and headed across to Tiritiri Matangi Island. A very quiet crossing, we actually didn't see a single tube-nosed seabird, nor a penguin...oh well!

On Tiritiri Matangi, we disembarked, attended the arrival briefing and then loaded all our gear into the truck, whilst we walked up towards the bunkhouse. Red-crowned parakeet, whitehead, bellbird, tui, Stitchbird, all were seen reasonably quickly. Then robin, pigeon, all the likely suspects were seen pretty easily. We then heard there was a Takahe on the road, just up towards the bunkhouse, so we legged it up there, and managed to spot the bird just as it came out of the vegetation on the side of the road. Great views of this almost prehistoric bird.

We then headed back down and continued along the trail. Lots more birds seen, and then the call of a kokako carried over the air. We waited, searching the nearby trees through a tangle of vegetation...nothing...nothing, and then a bird bounded in towards us, followed shortly after by another bird. We had pretty decent views of the birds, before they then bounded off away from us...let's hope we could find some more to build on the views had.

Carrying on along the trail we had more saddleback, amongst other things, and then unpacked our gear at the bunkhouse, sorted bedding, and then had lunch. After lunch, a quick shopping trip to the gift shop, and then back out onto the trails to find more birds. Again we had excellent views of pretty much everything, including more views of kokako feeding on leaves – this time much better more prolonged views. We also had fantastic views of three spotless crakes on two different ponds, two of them adults, and one a juvenile being chased by an adult. Even managed a few photos, and everyone was happy.

We had a beautiful BBQ dinner back at the bunkhouse, steak, lamb chops, salad and potatoes, and even a little dessert. Of course, more than a little wine! Then it was time to head out and find some nocturnal action. We headed out along the trails, and as it got dark things started to happen. A couple of morepork called, but we couldn't find them, then the kiwi started to call. There seemed to be a lot of calling activity, so a promising start. We heard another morepork, and this time it came right in, fluttered over us and then flew off. We were in the process of looking for it when we realised there was a kiwi on the road right by us. It showed well, but briefly, and not everyone saw it...damn! We kept wandering and finally almost back at the bunkhouse, some more familiar rustling, and this time fantastic views of a male little spotted kiwi. We watched it feed for several minutes before it headed off into thicker vegetation...awesome! So off to bed we headed, with dreams of kiwi all round!

**Day total** – Seen = 50 + 2 heard (Eastern rosella, silvereye); new for the trip = 12; total for the trip to date = 92

























## 6 November 2015 – Day Five

So it seems some sleep more sound than others, and luckily I slept pretty sound. Our shared bunkrooms reverberated a little during the night with what I think was snoring, but luckily most managed a good nights sleep. The dawn chorus started fairly early (outside the bunkrooms) and this prompted a few to get up early and head out to see what they could find.

Breakfast, cleaning of the bunkhouse, and packing and we then all headed out to venture around the trails to see what we could find. A pretty successful morning was had, with stunning views of kokako, as well as views of most of the other excellent birds – saddleback, Stitchbird, robin, bellbird, pigeon, tui, whitehead, etc. What an amazing place! We arrived down at the wharf bang on 10am and with our water taxi waiting, loaded our gear and headed (sadly) back to the mainland.

We repacked the van and then headed south, grabbing lunch on the way before a quick stop to look for shorebirds. The tide was well out, and distant wrybill were spotted, but it was decided to have a little lunch and then bird afterwards. At lunch we looked out over sewage ponds – this is a birding tour after all – and then scanned some of the mudflats, getting distant views of the wrybill and South Island oystercatcher through the scope. We headed on south, with our target being Miranda around the high tide. We quickly checked into our accommodation, and then headed down to the hide at Miranda. There were a good number of other birders around, and we were quickly spotting things through the scopes. Wrybill – check, black-billed gull – check, South Island oystercatcher – check. Great views of everything, and then scanning through all the Arctic waders to look for less common species. The tide was close to high, not a really big



tide, but big enough to push things in relatively close. So there were several thousand bar-tailed godwit and red knot in front of us. Before long we had seen a bunch of Pacific golden plover, ruddy turnstone, and then managed to spot at least 2-3 sharp-tailed sandpiper, two curlew sandpiper, two red-necked stint, and then a pectoral sandpiper flew in and landed right in front of us. Beaut! We chatted with some of the other birders, and it was a great chance to enjoy the sunshine and spend time searching through the waders. Somewhere in there was probably a Hudsonian godwit, and perhaps a marsh sandpiper, but we never did lay eyes on them. Still it was a great few hours in a fantastic spot.

We then headed back to the accommodations to freshen up and then head to dinner.

**Day total** – Seen = 63 + 3 heard (silvereye, fernbird, grey warbler); new for the trip = 14; total for the trip to date = 106











## 7 November 2015 – Day Six

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We were up early and away from the accommodations and heading to a spot to look for Australasian bittern. It was a brisk morning, but with clear blue sky, so as we approached the Whangamarino wetlands area a thick fog hung over the area. We parked up and started scanning, not being able to see very far at all, but within 10 minutes or so the fog slowly eroded away and we had a clear view of the wetland area. There were a lot of birds around – Australasian shoveler, Pacific black duck, grey teal, swamp harriers, etc...but try as we might we just couldn't spot a bittern. We did briefly hear one boom, but after an hour or so, that was the only trace of a bittern we could find. Never mind, we will give it a go at a couple of other sites.

We headed off across to the Coromandel Peninsula, with sun shining and a beautiful day ahead. The scenery heading up and over the Coromandel range was pretty nice as we wound our way through native forest. We had a quick coffee stop at Tairua, and then headed on through to Whitianga, where we grabbed some lunch and checked into the accommodation.

We then headed down to the Marina to climb aboard Sapphire with our skipper Ian. Walking down the marina to the boat we had two short-tail stingrays gliding through the water, a nice find, and then boarding we headed out through the channel towards the open ocean. The wind had dropped to about 5-10 knots and although there was a little residual swell from the last few days it was looking great. Strangely, there were very few birds in the inshore section, with almost no white-fronted terns or penguins. But as we started to get out a little further we encountered schools of kahawai working on the surface, and some of



these had fluttering shearwaters feeding with them, and then we started to pick up good numbers of common diving-petrels. We passed a rock stack, and noticed a New Zealand fur seal, so went around for another look. There were a lot of red-billed gulls getting ready to nest on the rock, and all of a sudden a small dark shorebird got up and flew, calling as it did so – wandering tattler! This species is pretty rare in New Zealand, so we did a couple more circuits, glimpsing the bird in flight a couple more times, but it seemed pretty flighty, so in the end we headed off on our way out to deeper water.

We got into deeper water and found a spot and started chumming. With little wind we slowly started to attract a few birds, including about 6-7 Salvin's albatross, several white-capped albatross, and a small group of flesh-footed shearwaters. A single black petrel came in, and Buller's shearwaters passed close by. Gradually numbers of white-faced storm-petrels grew as they fed over the slick. A couple of 'cookilaria' type petrels flew in relatively close giving good views, and they definite Pycroft's petrels, then a couple more. In all we probably saw about 7-8 'cookilaria' petrels and they all seemed to be Pycrofts! Excellent! We also had about 3-4 Northern giant petrels come in, a single grey-faced petrel made several nice close passes, and then a white-rumped storm-petrel appeared on the slick. We headed down towards it and realised it was Wilson's, clearly on its way south still. So too were a number of sooty shearwaters which passed the boat, and a number of little shearwaters made passes, never coming really close.

We also had a hungry blue shark come in and swim around the boat, eventually taking off with our chum when we weren't watching. A nice distraction though. As the sun started to get low we decided to head in towards home. On the way there were literally thousands of common diving-petrels as we went, and more work ups of fluttering shearwaters, white-fronted terns and gannets, with more white-faced storm-petrels.

We arrived back on dry land, seeing a reef egret fly past as we arrived at the Marina, and then headed for a pizza and pasta dinner in town. Another great day!

**Day total** – Seen = 61 + 2 heard (Shining-bronze cuckoo, grey warbler); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 112











## 8 November 2015– Day Seven

We were up and leaving relatively early, stopping quickly at a bakery to grab some lunch and then on the road. Basically we headed back up and over the Coromandel Range, and then headed south, making a quick stop to look for hobbits in Hobbiton (Matamata), and then on through towards Pureora Forest Park. We made a quick stop to get views of Eurasian coot...not quite bird of the trip, but coots are cool!

We arrived in beautiful sunshine, just on midday, and found a great place to have a bite to eat. Scanning as we munched we glimpsed some fluting yellow-crowned parakeets, and then a flying kaka, as well as the usual suspects like grey warbler, whitehead, etc. A distant falcon made such brief views that nobody else saw it, and then we had great views of a perched yellow-crowned parakeet feeding in a totara tree. We decided to head to another location, and quickly found a couple of pipits which obliged with nice close views and some nice photographs. Ears and eyes were out for falcons or long-tailed cuckoos, but not even a sniff, so we decided to move on. Headed into another patch of forest we heard the familiar call of a long-tailed cuckoo, and the very sharp eyes of Karen managed to spot the bird sitting relatively exposed up in the top of a podocarp tree in the canopy. With the scope on the bird, everyone had excellent extended views of the bird. We then moved a little closer, got some photographs, and then set the scope up again! Rarely does this happen with this species, so excellent to see it so well. Another brief falcon fly through, but again nobody happy to put the bird on the list yet, we need better views!

We then headed in and did a short walk in the beautiful forest, seeing North Island robin, having scope views of perched kaka, and several tomtit. A few squeaks from a rifleman, but no sign of it, so back to the



van and off through the forest. Scanning for falcon or anything else, but nothing showed, but some lovely forest none the less. As we headed through to Turangi we kept our eyes peeled. A quick stop before Turangi had a fernbird in sight, which flew showing well, and then a cry went up “What’s that flying’ and there went a bittern – pretty darn good flight views of this pretty rare New Zealand native! Excellent! We then headed to a couple of places of the Tongariro River to look for blue duck, but no luck...

We checked in quickly at the Motel, another flash through by a falcon raising hell with the local finches, but again BVD (Better Views Desired)! So off to dinner, which was spectacular, not just for the food or the company, but for the fact it was almost raining beautiful Puriri moths on the lawn outside, and a very close and confiding morepork that showed off to everyone. What a way to finish the day!

**Day total** – Seen = 55 + 2 heard (shining bronze-cuckoo, dunnoek); new for the trip = 6; total for the trip to date = 118

















## 9 November 2015 – Day Eight

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We were up and out of the rooms pretty early this morning and headed out to try and track down on of the main targets for the day – blue duck! We headed out to a couple of likely spots, and within about 10 minuets had a bird in the scope. It appeared to be a single bird, possibly a male with a mate somewhere on a nest (hopefully), and we watched it feed for a little bit, then perch on a rock and preen, before it slipped up the river and behind some cover. We decided to carry on and see if we could find more ducks. Heading through a patch of forest we heard the familiar call of a shining-bronze cuckoo not too far away, and with a quick whistle it came flying in and perched really closely. It was clearly revved up, with another bird nearby, and needed very little to excite it. It perched in front of us and called several times, before shifting perches and calling again, an excellent photo opportunity and views.

We then carried on and searched several more patches of the river, but to no avail. We couldn't find any more blue duck, and decided to headed back to the van. We passed the spot where we had found the first bird, and again watched him feeding, this time in some fast water. After about 10 minutes the bird then flew off upstream, leaving some happy birders in his wake.

We then headed back to the Motel, packed the van, grabbed some lunch at a nearby bakery, and then headed north towards Taupo. We stopped at a great spot for fernbird, and had views of at least five different birds, mostly skulking in the undergrowth, but several making flights and perching briefly up in outer branches.

It was then on to Taupo for a twitch...would you believe a rook twitch! A pair of rooks are nesting in Taupo and we managed to locate the nest trees, and there perched in the top of the tree was an adult, with flapping juveniles up in the tree above it...I've seen it all now! A group of British (and one ex-Brit) huddled around the scope looking at a rook! We then raced off to the east, heading towards Napier. We headed to a forested site first, where we ate our lunch and had a brief flyover of another distant falcon, and saw a pair of kokako, which headed off uphill and sang away.

Heading into the forest we found all the usual suspects with great views of tomtit, North Island robin, grey warbler, pigeon, tui and kaka, but struggled to find rifleman. We could hear them in many places, but they just seemed to disappear. Finally we got a couple of half decent views, and then with real persistence, we managed to find a bird at eye level in good light. Nice!

Then off down to Napier, where we met Sav in Taradale for another twitch, this time something a little more exciting in the form of two plumed whistling ducks. A range of other waterfowl was nearby and a breeding colony of little pied cormorants as well.

It was then time to check into the accommodations and we then headed up to Brent's house for a BBQ dinner. Great wine, food, and views, a fitting end to another excellent day!

**Day total** – Seen = 54 + 1 heard (long-tailed cuckoo); new for the trip = 4; total for the trip to date = 122













## 10 November 2015 – Day Nine

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We had a rather relaxed start, with some choosing to head out and around the Ahuriri Estuary to see what they could find. We then headed out and around a couple of spots to look for waders and other things, and a quick drive through downtown Napier to view some of the Art Deco architecture.

At a nearby wetland area we searched for bittern, and apart from ducks all seemed clear. However, a bittern was spotted in long grass, and for the next 10 minutes the call 'He's up', "He's down", "He's up", "He's down" rang out! The bird stayed in the long grass, but gave relatively good views as it moved and poked its head and neck up out of the cover. We then headed to find two wader species, and managed that pretty easily, with lovely views of black-fronted dotterel, and then very close views of banded dotterel, and several others, one a female with a small fluffy chick. The photographers practiced their skills, with much banter and egging-on.

We then headed out to several other wetland areas, seeing cormorants, ducks and other bits and bobs, but still hadn't found our quarry – the elusive Barbary dove! We checked a little further, and there they were – magnificent specimens, perched on the power lines! Apparently a lifer for some – it really is hard to find good birders these days!

We then headed to a small pond with grey teal, brown teal, and a small nesting group of little pied cormorants. We spent some time there, watching and photographing, and enjoying the sunshine, before slowly making our way south. We crossed through the flat river floodplains of Hawkes Bay, and had our lunch near the Ruahine Ranges, before succumbing to the temptation of ice-cream just before crossing through to the west coast.

We checked into our accommodation, had a little relax time, and then headed to the Manawatu Estuary. The tide was pretty far out, but we managed to see a small number of wrybill, a red-necked stint, and quite a few bar-tailed godwit and red knot. Several Royal spoonbills gave great views as they fed out over the mudflats, and a tern gave us something to look at thinking it may have been a common tern. But we just couldn't convince ourselves as it just didn't have all the features of this species versus white-fronted tern.

We then headed back to the Motel for another cracking BBQ with handmade burgers, salad and chips! Of course there was chocolate cake and cream to follow!

**Day total** – Seen = 55; new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 124







## 11 November 2015 – Day Ten

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Apparently it rained last night...but I slept so soundly I didn't hear a thing! Waking and looking out the window showed the day to be as forecasted...cloudy, cool, and a good chance of rain. We packed the van and then headed out to the Manawatu Estuary for another look, this time with the tide coming in the views of the birds should be much better. On the way we stopped quickly at a small pond where there were New Zealand scaup with ducklings, grey teal and shoveler, and then a few dabchick, including a pair with a chick riding on one of the adults back. A nice start to the day.

The tide was well in with all the bar-tailed godwit and red knot in a small flock on the edge of the water. We scanned for anything different, and then went to spend time with the five wrybill that were just along the beach. A juvenile red-necked stint was with them as they fed closely along the tideline. With the tide still coming in it was a perfect opportunity to have the tide push the birds towards us. And they really put on a show, at some points coming within just a few metres of us. They showed their feeding technique off, twisting their head to the side and opening the bill on the surface of the mud, clearly feeding on a lot of small invertebrates in the top layer of the mud. There was a lot of clicking of shutters, and several thousand photos taken between the photographers...there should be at least one in focus!

We headed back and scanned the godwit flock, and checked out a few terns, but there was nothing out of the ordinary, so we decided to make our way south. We did a spot of clothes shopping in Otaki and grabbed some lunch, then made a quick stop at a sewage ponds where there were several more black-fronted dotterel, as well as other waterfowl. Further south we made our lunch spot beside a small pond, where we had nice views of cormorants and other bits and pieces.

Then it was time to head on to the ferry terminal. As we drove we had steadily increasing rain, and things were clearly cooling down a little also. At the ferry terminal we got into line and waited for loading, and a little penguin was spotted. We then loaded onto the ferry and then headed up on to one of the open decks. It was not to pleasant with foggy, drizzly conditions, and a pretty strong wind, but luckily not much of a sea running. As we headed out Wellington Harbour we spotted a couple of spotted shags, and then once in the open water a few sooty shearwaters and Westland petrels flew past giving good views, then white-capped and Salvin's albatross, fairy prion, and even a couple of Cape petrels put in an appearance. As we entered the Marlborough Sounds, good numbers of fairy prions showed, and a lot of fluttering shearwaters, with white-fronted terns and red-billed gulls.

**Day total** – Seen = 61 + 1 heard (grey warbler); new for the trip = 4; total for the trip to date = 128















## 12 November 2015 – Day Eleven

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It was a cold, windy and wet night, and when we woke it didn't look a hell of a lot better! The wind had died down a bit, and it wasn't raining, but it was obvious it wasn't going to be a day at the beach! We headed down to the marina and checked in, then jumped onto our boat to head out on to Queen Charlotte Sound.

As we headed out, the sea conditions were pretty good in the sound, but there was a fair bit of wind. We encountered a few small rafts of post-feeding fluttering shearwaters, and there were a few spotted shags, kelp gulls, and gannets around also. We continued off out further and spotted a pod of dusky dolphins feeding, with a few shearwaters, gulls and gannets also in attendance. The dolphins were pretty intent on feeding, but showed a little interest in us, with a few individuals breaking away and coming alongside briefly. We headed in to a point where we could clearly see some shags roosting, and sure enough there were about 20 King shags roosting on a point. We got excellent views of these birds, mainly adults, with one or two younger birds amongst them. The shutters were clicking and everyone was happy, with just around 830 of these birds, completely confined to the Marlborough Sounds, this is an excellent bird to see.

We then headed off, and as we did so found some more fluttering shearwaters, and then another pod of dusky dolphins, but this one had at least one Hector's dolphin that seemed to be hanging around on the edge of the feeding pod of dusky dolphins. We went in to investigate and got lovely views of the tiny little Hector's right beside the boat.

We left them all to get on with feeding and carried on out towards Blumine Island. We found another nine or so roosting King shags and then headed in to a landing where we went ashore. The target bird was orange-fronted parakeet, that was released onto the island a few years ago, and seem to be breeding reasonably well. We headed to a spot where we have seen them before, and waited. The wind was pretty gusty, and certainly wasn't helping matters. We kept our ears and eyes peeled, spotting tomtits, weka, tui and bellbird, but not a sound from a parakeet. We gave it as much time as we could, before we had to admit defeat and get back on the boat, damn! Ah well, we gave it a good shot.

We headed straight back towards Picton, seeing a couple more King shags in the water feeding on the way, and docked back in Picton just after midday. We then grabbed some lunch and headed on out to Renwick to munch our lunch and look for the long staying black kite. It was raining off and on, but as it cleared, the bird soared out from a ridge, spotted by the keen eyes of Carol, and everyone got on to it. With several swamp harriers around the difference between the two species was clearly evident.

We then headed on to the Blenheim sewage ponds, where we jumped out of the vehicle and straight away spotted a cirl bunting. We had brief but good views of it, and then saw it fly off and disappear. We scanned the spoonbills, and then managed to find a glossy ibis amongst them – excellent! On the way back to the van we heard a male cirl bunting singing, but it flew off before we could get on to it.

We then made a quick stop at Ohau Point to check out the pup NZ fur seals playing in the stream. There were several right at the start of the track, so we watched and photographed them playing in the freshwater. What great little critters! We then also stopped and checked out a few spots with nesting spotted shags. At one spot there were deserted nests with eggs, but at another there were quite a number of nests with large chicks. We also spotted a few giant petrels flying just off shore.

It was then time to head in to Kaikoura to the accommodation. We had an awesome meal of fish and chips at the Motel, and then went looking for little owl, even though rain and hail were coming down! We managed to spot two different birds, but not everyone saw them. They certainly are a little skittery, but nice to at least get a glimpse. With more rain on the roof we fell into our beds.

**Day total** – Seen = 49 + 1 heard (peafowl); new for the trip = 4; total for the trip to date = 132



















## 13 November 2015 – Day Twelve

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We were up and out the door, and headed out to the end of the Peninsula to check out the seal colony. The weather had improved a little and it was possible to see a fair bit of snow on the mountains, although the tops were still hidden in cloud. The air temperature was pretty cold, and there was still a pretty good breeze, and looking out to sea...well it was best to look at the mountains!

We spotted a few things from the seal colony, a couple of turnstone, variable oystercatcher, and of course plenty of seals. We then headed up and across to South Bay, and headed for the boat. Boarding, we were all treated to a slightly novel (well for most of us) deployment technique, of getting on the boat while it was still on a trailer, and then being reversed down the boat ramp into the water. And we were off! The wind had dropped a little and the seas were not actually too bad, so we headed out towards the sea mount off the coast. We soon had birds following us, but kept going, momentarily slowing to see the Hutton's shearwaters that were streaming past. Good views of them before heading on out. We ended up chumming at two locations off the coast, with a similar assemblage of birds coming in, and excellent views of all of them. We had five species of albatross, with Northern Royal making a brief pass, several very young Southern Royals, and then about 10 or so NZ wandering albatross coming in and feeding at various times. There were also plenty of Salvin's and a few white-capped. There were lots of Northern giant petrels squabbling over the chum, as usual these guys put on a great show, and of course the dainty little Cape petrels fed around the edges, being wary to not get too close to the snapping bills of the giant petrels. There was a fairly steady stream of short-tailed and sooty shearwaters passing by, with a few short-tailed shearwaters coming in for a look at the chum, and diving down to get scraps. Nice to see the clear size difference between these birds together and up close. Rather surprisingly Hutton's shearwaters kept going past us, and the odd one even did several circuits around the chum, although never landed to feed. A single grey-faced petrel also made several very nice passes, and there were lots of Westland petrels too look at, with several white-chinned petrels for direct comparison, sometimes sitting side by side.

Before too long, it was time to head back in to shore, but we had had an excellent sampling of the Kaikoura birds, and more to do in the afternoon. Gary skilfully drove the boat back up onto the trailer and the trip came to an end. We jumped back in the van and headed back to the Encounter Kaikoura base, where we checked in for our various activities for the afternoon. Four of us planned to head back out on the Albatross trip in the afternoon, and three decided dolphin swimming was for them, it was going to be a busy afternoon!

The three swimmers quickly scoffed their lunch and then headed through to get changed etc, whilst the rest of us went and grabbed some lunch. We ate our lunch in the sunshine, trying to avoid the cold wind, and scanned local patches for cirl buntings, to no avail. Then it was time to head back down to South Bay where we met Gary and the rest of the group heading out for the afternoon. The conditions had definitely eased, with less swell and chop, and the wind had dropped away. So conditions were actually quite nice, with beautiful sunshine. As usual, before we were hardly out of the harbour we were being followed by giant and Cape petrels, and then passed a few Hutton's shearwaters on the way.

We headed out to roughly where we had been in the morning, and again had excellent numbers of birds around us. We again got five species of albatross, as in the morning, giving excellent up close views, and despite big numbers of Northern giant petrels, we didn't see a Southern. It was great to be photographing things in different light, with the sun shining, and so the shutters were clicking. One of the highlights,

although non-avian, was a mating pod of dusky dolphins that came past, rolling around the boat and doing their mating leaps high in the air, a real sight to see. Again, time seems to fly on the water and it was time to head back in. Meanwhile the dolphin swimmers were having an awesome time in the water with lots of playful dusky dolphins, and despite their apprehension about the cold water, with wetsuits on they hardly noticed it once in the water – there was far too much to look at!

So an excellent day all around, topped off with a superb dinner at Tuti's, and then a spot of owling with excellent views of a little owl, which even called for us.

**Day total** – Seen = 41; new for the trip = 7; total for the trip to date = 139





















## 14 November 2015 – Day Thirteen

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We were up and packing the van after a great nights sleep, no doubt induced by our active day on the water yesterday. With van packed we grabbed some lunch and then headed off south, scanning for falcon as we went. The scenic route along the coast gave great views out over the sea, which had dropped away to a pretty flat calm piece of water. I suspect a lot fewer birds flying around out there today, so despite yesterdays swelly conditions, we probably had the better of the days to be on the water to see birds.

We made a quick stop at a small lake to look for Cape Barren geese, but nothing seen. There were good numbers of grey teal, scaup, and paradise shelducks, but no geese to be seen. We headed on south and called in to a small estuary, where we wandered along the river and down towards the sea. It wasn't long and the first black-fronted terns were spotted, looking like young birds, perhaps first year birds that had come back to near the breeding site. Several of them fed over the river, giving lovely views of them hovering and then dipping down to grab small fish or invertebrates from the water. We carried on, scanning the lower parts of the river and the estuary. There was a large flock of white-fronted terns and we scanned them, but unfortunately they were out in the middle of the river and difficult to get close to, so we made do with scanning from a distance. A small number of godwit were also feeding out over the river, and we continued on scanning further around into the estuary proper. Several wrybill, obviously non-breeders were present, and a very distant red-necked stint fed with them.

We headed to a spot with a more extensive view over another piece of the estuary and could see a really large group of perhaps 100+ spotted shags roosting on a sand flat. There were both pied and little pied,



and even a little black shag also on the estuary, and more godwit. We scanned the godwit carefully knowing that a whimbrel had been seen recently. But it was a bird with a longer curved bill that was spotted first – a Far Eastern curlew. It was pretty distant, but such a distinctive bird that we were all happy with the views. Not too long after, the whimbrel was spotted, luckily much closer. Not too bad. We kept scanning for anything else unusual, and then returned to scan the white-fronted terns again. This time a probable common tern showed itself, but then promptly went to sleep tucking its head in. It woke after a few minutes just as the whole flock took off, and was lost amongst the several hundred birds. We decided to carry on back to the van and keep heading up towards Arthur's Pass.

We made a quick lunch stop on the way, enjoying the warmth, knowing that as we headed inland and higher, things were going to get a little cooler. I had unfortunately made a terrible error in the planning of the day, and had forgotten the World Famous Sheffield Pie Shop when we grabbed our lunch in Kaikoura! So having only just eaten our lunch, we stopped at the pie shop and bought dessert pies for later that evening...you just can't stop some pie-eaters!

Carrying on the weather gradually cooled, and the dripping from the sky started. We stopped and looked out over the Hawdon Valley, having checked for falcon as we climbed into the mountain areas. The Hawdon River was pretty low, but the cloud and drizzle looked like it was pretty low through the valleys – not the best for adventures. We headed on through to a spot near Arthur's Pass and went for a walk in the drizzle. We managed to get great views of South Island tomtit and fantail, a grey warbler flitted around and there were a good number of bellbird. Heading back to the van, we carried on into Arthur's Pass village and stopped to grab a coffee, where we of course ran into a few kea in their natural habitat – the carpark. It was nice to get some good views of these critters, even if they were wet and bedraggled, and being fed chips by some illiterate person that couldn't read the tens of signs say 'Don't feed the kea' all around them. We then carried on to another spot where we found a slightly more 'wild' looking kea, and then checked a few river spots for blue duck, but the rain was pretty steady, and the wind was damn cold, so we headed back to the accommodation.

We had a great dinner with pretty nice views out of the mountains and rivers, before readying ourselves for an attempt at great spotted kiwi. We headed to a nearby spot, and luckily the rain had eased a little. We spaced ourselves out and listened...and listened...and listened. It was pretty cold and the rain came and went, but not a squeak from a kiwi. So we walked a track, but still nothing, not even any morepork were calling. We decided to move to another spot, where we sat in the van. About three minutes in to the wait a kiwi started calling. Getting out of the van we heard a male calling, then a female respond, the male then called again, and the female again followed. We decided to head towards where we had heard the calling, it was drizzling again, but scanning with the torch we decided the birds must have been on the other side of the river...too bad. On the way back to the van lovely close views of a morepork chuckling away to itself was a small consolation. And it was off home to bed.

**Day total** – Seen = 54 + 2 heard (great spotted kiwi, shining cuckoo); new for the trip = 5; total for the trip to date = 144

















## 15 November 2015 – Day Fourteen

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We awoke to another rather drizzly start, not enough to dampen our spirits though! We stopped quickly for a coffee in Arthur's Pass and then headed on up and over the Pass. We stopped at a few spots to scan the river to check for blue duck, but to no avail. They are there, you just have to be lucky! As we headed out towards the West Coast the weather seemed to brighten a little, although showers passed through periodically. There were lots of NZ pigeons as we drove, with 5+ in quite a few trees, and in one at least 15+. Amazing to see.

We started to also see weka on the side of the road and in the fields, and we even had one little dare-devil run out in front of us, luckily he lived to tell the tale. We carried on through to Hokitika, stopping at the Hokitika sewage ponds on the way. There were lots of waterfowl on the ponds, with grey duck, scaup, and shoveler, but no sign of the long-staying escapee Cape Barren geese. In Hokitika we grabbed some breakfast stores, some lunch, and then headed on through to a lake to have our lunch. The sun almost came out, and we couldn't work out whether to take our jacket off or leave it on, funny old weather! After lunch we went for a walk and had an adult weka with four almost fully grown young ones come and investigate us. They are such comical and inquisitive beasts, and just so much fun to watch all the antics and family dynamics. Everyone managed some nice images and so we carried on into the forest to look for other forest birds. We had several nice close views of small groups of brown creeper, with some coming right in to investigate us. They too are stunning little things and really have to be seen to do them justice. Several male tomtits were also evident, as were grey warblers.

We then carried on south, keeping a sharp eye out for falcon. So far these birds have been elusive, but with everyone on the lookout one has to pop into view at some stage...we hope! Lots more pigeons, a good number of swamp harriers, and several magpies, but no falcon. We made a few short stops along the way, and then headed out to Okarito to take a look at the lagoon. We saw several very distant great egrets, and a few other bits and pieces, scanned for falcon, and then carried on to Franz Josef. On the way we made a stop for fernbird, getting quite nice views of a bird skulking in the shrubbery, as well as a stonking little black fantail.

In Franz Josef, we checked in to our accommodation, had a quick unpack, and then headed into town for a fantastic Asian dinner at King Tiger – superb food and highly recommended! And then back to the accommodation to do the checklist and then out to Okarito for our rendezvous with Ian Cooper from Okarito Kiwi Tours. We arrived a little early, with rain still drizzling, hoping like heck it was going to stop.



As Ian arrived the drizzle seemed to ease and we set about getting our gear ready and being briefed on what was going to happen. We then headed deep into the forested area along some logging tracks to get into position for the evening. Our first position was near the male of a pair whose territory was closest to the road. It seemed like he may have already been stirring when we arrived, and as it got darker, he gradually moved further away from us up the hill. The drizzle was still holding off, so Ian headed off down the trail to try and locate a second pair and see if they were in a better position.

A short while later, the radio sparked into life and Ian called us all towards him. We quickly, and as quietly as possible headed off down the dark trail towards him, and after a steady walk for 10-15 minutes we managed to catch up with him. He had Joeline, the female of the next pair, not too far off from the track, and knowing this bird, he knew she would want to cross that the trail we had just come in on. So we got into position and waited. Every now and then we could hear movement in the dense vegetation, and Ian kept moving us along the trail in the direction of her parallel movement. Then a glimpse of her feeding in a less dense area, before she moved off into denser brush. And then the drizzle started again, first just a few drops, then a little heavier, until it was not quite rain, but light drizzle. We kept moving along the trail with her, and then with us all in position, she walked out of the forest and stood for a moment right in front of us. Sniffing the air, and then slowly walking along looking for food, completely unperturbed, she walked right past us giving incredible views. She ran a little along the trail in front of us, and then disappeared into the thick bush on the other side of the trail. In all viewing for about 20 seconds, and as usual Joeline gave beautiful relaxed views. Wow! What a fantastic experience, Ian had worked his magic again!

Having all had super views we moved ff down the trail away from Joeline to leave her to her nights foraging, as we did the rain eased a little and then stopped. We gathered up and excitedly discussed what had just happened, before then heading off back to the van. What a fantastic night! We said our good-byes and thanks to Ian and then headed back to the accommodation, spotting a couple of possums on the way...home and in bed before midnight! Luxury!

**Day total** – Seen = 48 + 1 heard (morepork); new for the trip = 4; total for the trip to date = 148

















## 16 November 2015 – Day Fifteen

Well this morning dawned better than we have seen in a while. Cool and crisp, but with a promise of blue skies to come. We headed up towards the Franz Josef Glacier and walked up to the viewpoint. On the way we spotted a few orchids – both greenhood and spider – and enjoyed the views from the lookout. They will soon have to change the name to Franz Josef Valley lookout, as the glacier has receded spectacularly in the last ten years, to the point where there is just a corner of it left visible. A pretty telling indicator of climate change.

We spotted a few birds along the way, with lots of tomtits heard singing away, and a kea made a quick flight overhead calling as it went. We then headed off to the south, winding our way through some spectacular scenery. We headed to a lake site, where we grabbed a coffee and enjoyed the views, and some caught a falcon flying across a field and into the forest...others were grabbing a coffee at the time (hmmm, even the leader!) and so missed it. We stuck around for a bit, as a small rain shower came over, but no sign of the bird again. So we carried on our way, grabbing lunch shortly after.

We scanned as we drove, passing through really prime falcon habitat. It was getting to the point that we really needed to see a falcon! We made a lunch stop, and bingo, we had just finished lunch and were about to start a walk to a beach, when a bird called and flew over, circling round and giving us great views. From appearances it looked like a female, and we all had great views before she headed off out of sight.

We did our walk through beautiful forest, mosses, lichens and liverworts all over the place, and lots of tomtits and bellbirds. As we arrived on the beach a pair of variable oystercatchers moved off, and we stood

and watched the surf, hoping for a little figure to appear. And it did! At the end of the beach we had several penguins come out of the water over the time we watched. It was fun to watch them as they struggled in through the surf, almost made it to the beach, only to be sucked out by a receding wave, then retry their beaching attempt. We had pretty good views of the birds, both with bins and scopes, and then decided to leave them to it and head back to the van. Still a ways to go.

We encountered a very friendly pigeon along the way, and then just as we came into the carpark the female falcon called loudly overhead again and then landed and we got her in the scope. Excellent! So back in the van and then off through beautiful scenery, passing briefly through Haast, and then on up towards Haast Pass. We wound our way through the valleys and arriving at a location in the forest we jumped out of the van. We were just about to head off when Brent heard the staccato call of yellowhead, and not 50m from the van we found a small group of yellowhead feeding in the trees above. We had excellent views of these stunning birds, with yellow heads that almost glow. They fed and clung to the trunks of the mossy beech trees, kicking with their big powerful legs, and sending moss and debris raining down from the canopy. We spent some time watching them before they moved off a little and we did a short walk, seeing brown creeper and several rifleman.

Back at the van we loaded up again for our final drive through to Wanaka. More beautiful scenery with a quick photo stop, before we passed into the dry country in the rain shadow that surrounds Wanaka. It was a lot warmer in Wanaka and we checked in to the accommodation, then headed for dinner. Another great meal, checklist, and then bed...an early start in the morning!

**Day total** – Seen = 44; new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 151















## 17 November 2015 – Day Sixteen

Up early and off towards Queenstown, as the forecast for Milford Sound was not looking the best. We headed through some stunning scenery making a couple of toilet stops along the way, then grabbed some lunch in Te Anau, and headed on through towards Homer Tunnel. The weather was lovely in Wanaka, but as we headed towards Te Anau it was looking a little iffy...

We carried on through the Eglinton Valley, pie crumbs being shed all over the place as everyone ate their 'Miles Better Pies' at 10:30am...it was supposed to be lunch, but oh well! The Eglinton has little skiffs of rain up in the tops, with some cloud hanging about, but it wasn't looking too bad. And the scenery was stunning as usual. We stopped quickly to look for blue duck at one main spot, and being unsuccessful kept going up to Homer Tunnel. As we pulled in to the carpark the kea were there to greet us!

We donned our warm gear and rugged up, but actually it wasn't too bad. And as we headed to the alpine trail from the carpark, there was almost no wind and even a little sun trying to shine through. We gathered and discussed a plan of attack and then spread ourselves out. Within minutes Brent had heard a rock wren, but it failed to show. We peered intently near the spot and scanned over the huge area of rock where wrens could possibly expose themselves...but nothing yet. Then about 25 minutes later a wren suddenly appeared on top of a rock and started bobbing up and down. A female, she flitted from rock to rock, standing and bobbing for a few brief seconds each time. Everyone was on to her and had pretty nice views of her as she gradually moved off and away, and then disappeared. Success!

With the sun shining, and no wind we decided to stick it out for another hour and a half and see if we could get another view. We spread out again and ate our lunch, sat in the sun and scanned the alpine area. What a stunning place, and a great little bird.

As the time approached we all gathered again, and were just about to head to the van, when boom, a male rock wren flew right out in front of us, landing on a nearby rock. It had a small piece of grass in its bill, clearly nest building, and bobbed up and down. We all had stunning views, before it flew past us, and then disappeared the same way that the female had appeared from. Clearly they have a nest nearby, so a great find. Pretty chuffed with ourselves we headed down to the van, and drove through towards Milford Sound. We stopped at 'The Chasm' and took in the views of the area, and then headed on down to Milford Sound to see the view across the Fiord. The wind was blowing pretty strong, and little white caps dotted the water.

Heading back up to the Homer Tunnel, we passed through and then headed back towards Te Anau, making a couple of quick stops to look for blue duck again. No success, but as we drove the road, we suddenly spotted a pair on mossy rocks in the stream. Parking quickly we could see the male and female with two small ducklings – fantastic! We watched and photographed them for probably close to an hour. Several times a kea flew overhead and the male and female became very anxious sending the ducklings straight into the water. I am not sure if kea predation has been recorded for this species, but it seems the ducks were worried about this. Otherwise, when no kea were around they were entirely relaxed and swam and fed just literally metres from us – what an awesome experience! Amazing to watch how confident and able the ducklings were in the water, able to dive and stay down feeding for a surprisingly long time before bobbing back to the surface. Another few camera cards filled, we reluctantly left and headed on towards Te Anau, stopping to do a short forest walk. We searched for rifleman, and saw one way up in the tree tops, and had a great confiding South Island robin come in to investigate the forest floor around us.

Back in the van we headed to our accommodation in Te Anau, and then had an excellent dinner in town, a fitting end to another great day!

**Day total** – Seen = 38 + 3 heard (Grey warbler, fantail, tomtit); new for the trip = 1; total for the trip to date = 152









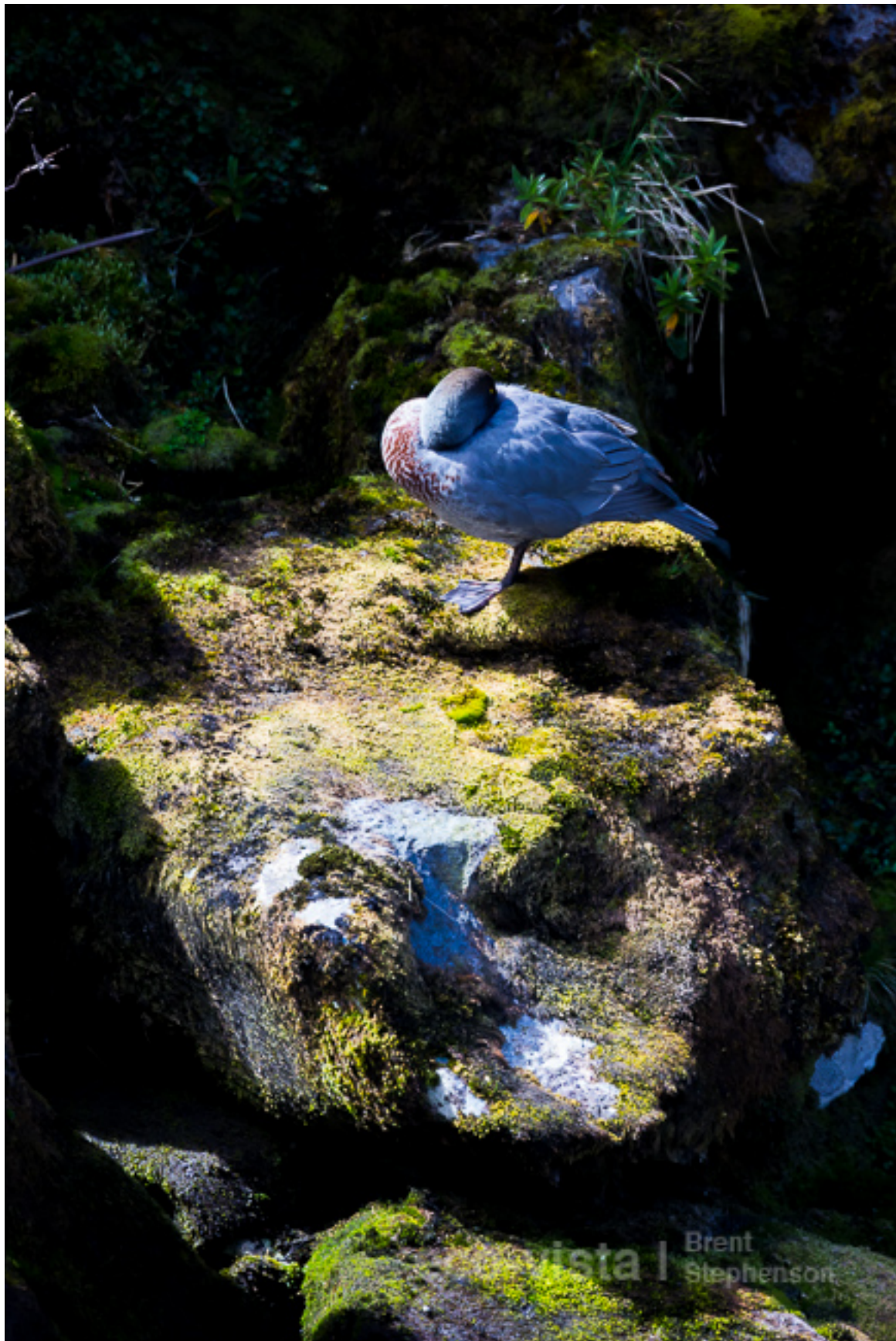


























## 18 November 2015 – Day Seventeen

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Up early again this morning, and out the door, but some leaders just can't get enough pies, and it was too good an opportunity to grab a quick breakfast pie – Apple and blueberry – from Miles Better Pies. So damn good... Then we headed towards Bluff, basically just making a B-line straight there, with a quick stop at the most musical toilets in the land in Winton.

We arrived into Bluff with pretty overcast and cold conditions. Although it wasn't blowing a lot, it clearly had been as big swells were smashing on the coast and it was looking really rough in the entrance to the harbour, with some tide and current adding to the situation. We stopped to look at a small flock of white-fronted terns roosting on some rocks, and then looked out a bit further to more birds feeding just offshore. It is always worth checking birds in this area, and it paid off again as an Arctic tern came into view. Clearly smaller, more buoyant, and with a smaller black bill, and the birds darker plumage, all combined to make the bird stand out well from the white-fronteds. We watched it feeding, dipping down to the water every now and then, and managed a few photos, but unfortunately the bird was against the light, so not the best.

We headed down to Stirling Point to take a look at the sea, and it didn't look too bad, with some horrible waves in the entrance, but it looked better once you were out. So we headed to the ferry terminal and checked in, loading our gear into the crates, and then waited. We boarded the ferry shortly after, and sat outside on the back deck as we headed out. At the entrance it was a little lively, with waves breaking over the bow of the ferry, and jolting the little boat...some were looking a little tentative. We got out through the rough stuff, and although not calm was a little better. Not a lot of birds around, which was surprising considering the conditions and the past southerly blow. We had a few white-capped albatross, a few sooty shearwaters, and then a lot of common diving-petrels as we got closer to Stewart Island. As we go into the shelter of Stewart we saw a brown skua on one of the rocks on the way in, and a few Stewart Island and spotted shags. We checked the boulder shoreline of Stewart to look for penguins, but nothing, but it was nice to be in calmer waters.

We docked and headed ashore, grabbing our gear, and then headed up to the accommodation. We checked in, and then had our lunch in the sunshine outside of the South Sea Hotel. We met Matt Jones, one of the other Wrybill leaders, who will be coming on the pelagic tomorrow, and chatted with him about recent sightings and events. It was then time to head up and over the hill to Golden Bay to meet our water taxi for Ulva Island...a nice calm ride across this time.

We arrived onto Ulva and headed into the forest. It wasn't long and there were birds around, first tui and bellbird, then a robin (of course). There were lots of spider orchids in flower, and as we admired them we heard yellowhead calling and moved off down the track in search of them. Brief views of a couple of them before they disappeared, but we had nice views of brown creeper as well. We carried on a little way and found a pair of South Island saddleback, our main target for the afternoon, so nice to get that under the belt. Carrying on we headed to a spot where Matt had told us about a roosting morepork...and there it was! Not the best view as it was pretty well obscured up in a tree, but nice to see it in daylight anyway.

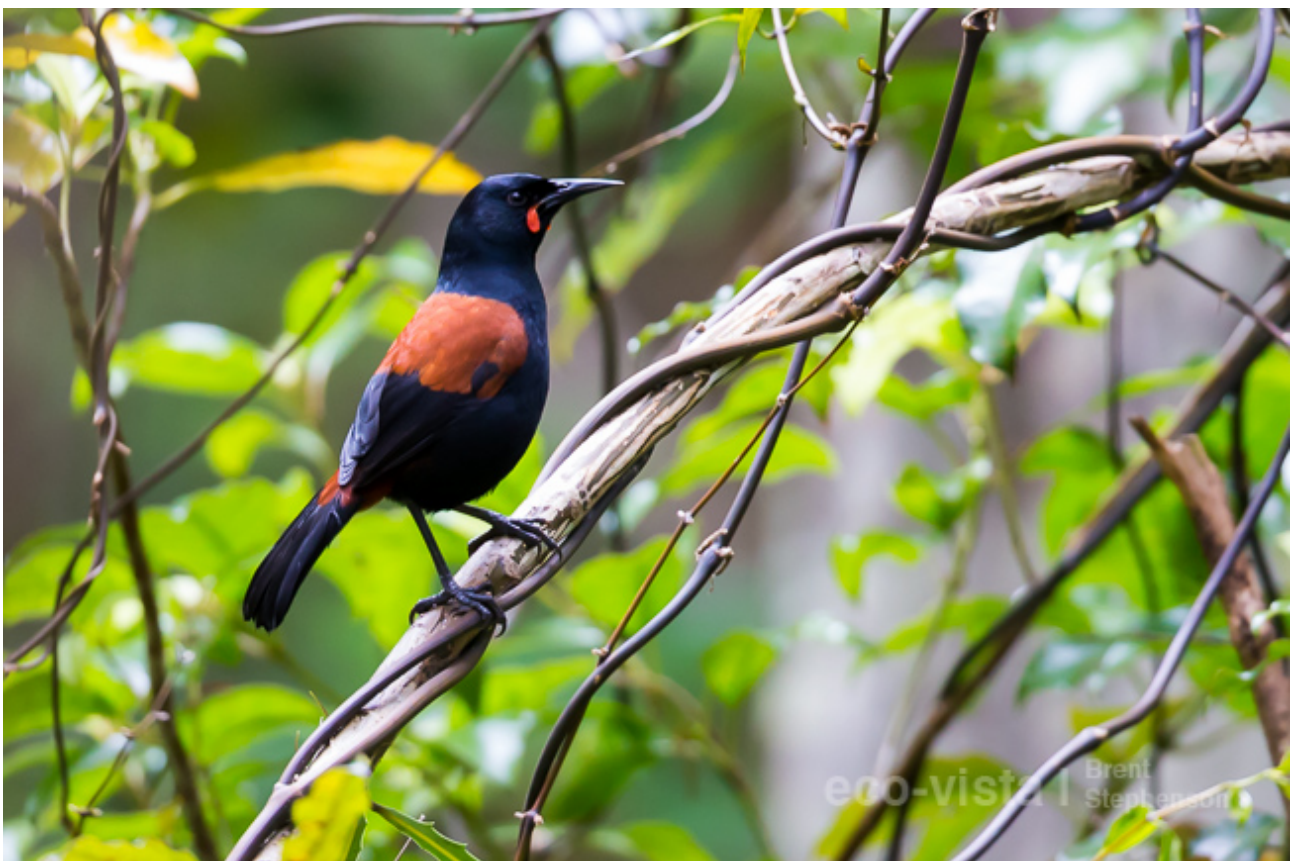
We headed to Boulder Beach, seeing a few kaka and several red-crowned parakeet, as well as more robins and brown creeper. Saddleback were a little hard to come by, but we heard a few off in the forest. At boulder beach the tide was right out, and we had a pair of variable oystercatchers and some friendly weka, and a little penguin was spotted from the beach also. Heading back into the forest we saw much the same on the return journey, but got onto a couple more saddleback, including an immature jackbird – showing

the overall rusty plumage without a distinct saddle. We also had a couple more weka, and then more variable oystercatchers once we got onto the beach.

Before long it was time to catch our water taxi back to Golden Bay, and we had a nice easy run back, and then walked back up and over to Oban. Dinner was another great meal, with beautiful views over the bay, and then it was off to look for kiwi.

We headed out into the bay and across the entrance to Paterson Inlet. On the way we saw a few little penguins and a few Stewart Island cormorants, plus some distant Fiordland crested penguins. It was a lovely evening as we headed across, with the sun setting behind us. We arrived at a small jetty and Phillip gave us some information on the Southern brown kiwi, and then Greg and Matt took us up and over, through some forest to Ocean Beach. We walked off to the northern end of the beach, and well before reaching the end of the beach we found a female kiwi out on the sand feeding on sandhoppers. Matt used his torch to dimly light the bird, and we all had excellent views of the bird for almost 15 minutes, as it busily fed, probing its long beak into the sand and every now and then puffing up a plume of sand as it blew sand out of its nostrils. Fantastic! Gradually the bird fed back towards the forest and then disappeared. It was clear we had not had any effect on the bird, but the lack of kelp on the beach probably meant not as much food for it as usual, and so it preferred to forage in the forest. But we had had an excellent view, and happily we all headed back to the start of the forest track. There was no more sign of any kiwi, so we headed back towards the boat, seeing a morepork on the way – a great end to another excellent day!

**Day total** – Seen = 55 + 1 heard (tomtit); new for the trip = 5; total for the trip to date = 157





















## 19 November 2015 – Day Eighteen

I'm sure we all did the same thing this morning...got out of bed and quickly looked out the window! Today was a pelagic with a lot of potential, so close to the Southern Ocean that almost anything could turn up, yet so close to the Southern Ocean that it might be the stomachs turning. But we were in luck, the weather looked perfect, with a northerly forecast to be moderate, and a sea state that would provide a feeling of being at sea, rather than being in a washing machine.

We had breakfast and headed down to the boat, Aurora Charters, skippered by Ty, and with Matt Jones onboard as well. We went through safety stuff quickly, and then cast off and made our way out into the bay. Our first stop was for Fiordland crested penguins, which we had already seen, but could do with better views. And that is exactly what we got. To start with there were four birds poking out of a crack just above the water line, but in short order we had at least six birds, including a juvenile that was pretty close to fledging. It was obvious to see with dark face and overall pale blue grey colour, and much smaller less defined crest. The youngster was bullied into the sea by one of the adults, but made its way back out onto the rocks and into the crack again. Clearly there was quite some cave in there to hold all those penguins!

We spent a little time with them, as several birds hauled out onto a rock closer to us, and Ty got the boat right in nice and close for awesome views. Then we decided to carry on, heading to the Muttonbird Islands and having a look there. But on the way Matt started to throw some of the blue cod frames used as chum overboard, and before long a cloud of 30+ albatross had gathered and were following us, something that

was to be with us almost the whole day. Most were white-capped albatross, but we also had a few Southern Royals start to appear, and a smattering of Salvin's albatross.

We searched for yellow-eyed penguins around the islands, but weren't able to find any. There were lots of New Zealand fur seals around, and plenty else to watch, including a pair of brown skua that came in to the boat for a look. We then carried on our way out, aiming for Wreck Reef, and with the sea being pretty nice, and the wind being perfect we were hoping for good things. The number of albatross slowly increased as we got closer, with more Southern Royals, and then as we got to the reef the number of sooty shearwaters wheeling and feeding around the reef was impressive. So too were the big swells crashing onto and breaking over the reef itself.

We started to chum, and pretty soon a large group of albatross had gathered, and other bits and pieces started to come in. There were lots of common diving-petrels flying past, but several Northern giant petrels made an appearance, and then the first of probably 5+ Campbell albatross made an appearance, a stonking adult with bright honey-coloured eye and orange bill. It came in pretty close and wheeled around a few times and then settled for a little while, but several of the birds later in the day were voracious, snatching chum from other birds and really being a lot more aggressive than their smaller size should allow.

After a while we seemed to stop seeing new birds, and so decided to head out a little further. We steamed on, chumming as we went to keep our albatross horde. We basically steamed, then chummed, steamed then chummed right out into deeper water, getting a good distance off the island. Each time we did so, we seemed to pick up something new. Our next stop we got a broad-billed prion, which showed really well, and then several minutes later another prion, that ostensibly looked like a broad-billed and behaved more like it than a fairy, but the bill was too small. I called it as something different and everybody got onto the bird as it circled just off the boat for at least 2-3 minutes, giving great views. It had a prominent collar, flew strongly and swiftly, and had a slightly narrower black tail band, with a well patterned face, having a dark stripe through the eye and broad bold supercilium. At the time we thought it could well be an Antarctic prion and subsequent reviews of images show what has to be an Antarctic prion – an absolutely spectacular bird for the main part of New Zealand! What a cracking bird. The next prion came in ten minutes later or so, being much paler and more buoyant in flight, at the time we called fairy, but on subsequent review of those images they show something that just can't be a fairy prion, and surely show a fulmar prion! Another spectacular bird – but we need to do some more research on this one before being conclusive.

We picked up several more Campbell albatross, then several white-chinned petrels showed up. A single black-browed albatross came a little later, and then a smattering of fairy prions and a few more broad-billed. As we got out further the call went up for mottled petrel, and we had our first of probably 15+ birds, the first showing reasonably well, with some of the later birds showing really well, and some actually circling the boat. Then we had the first of at least 4-5 grey-backed storm-petrels, at times feeding very close to the boat, although often out in the sun, and lastly a single black-bellied storm-petrel whipped past the boat, giving a single flyby that most managed to get on to.

We carried on chumming, till about 4:30pm, as every time we thought we might move something good would appear, but finally it was time to start heading back. We chummed as we went, seeing another 5+ mottled petrels in the first bit, and then at least one more very showy broad-billed prion, that followed us and came right into the back of the boat as we steamed! The sea had flattened off a little and we eventually got back into the islands, having another search for yellow-eyed penguin, but unsuccessful. So it was time to head in for port, slowing and having a look at the shags on a rock just in the bay, and then coming alongside. What an incredible pelagic! We had seen everything we hoped for and more!



We headed ashore, having dinner and then going for a walk and spotting several long-tailed bats, and hearing a male kiwi call. A superb end to another fantastic day!

**Day total** – Seen = 46; new for the trip = 7; total for the trip to date = 164















Broad-billed prion



Antarctic prion



Antarctic prion





Antarctic prion



Fulmar prion



Fulmar prion



Fulmar prion





Fairy prion









Broad-billed prion





## 20 November 2015 – Day Nineteen

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Many of us were woken this morning at about 0500 with torrential rain and wind...and the wind was honking along by the time we headed down to the ferry at 0730. It all helped to bring home how truly lucky we were with the weather yesterday, as this Spring has been a little more unsettled than usual.

We boarded the ferry and as we headed out of the bay the wind was ripping across the surface of the sea and whipping up spray in all directions...this was going to be exciting. We spotted four Fiordland penguins on rocks, and then it was out into the open water. The swells picked up, but still in the lee of the island it wasn't too bad. As we got out a little further the swells got larger and the spray and wind increased. Most of us were on the back deck, and despite the spray, it was worth it. The swells were never huge, perhaps just over 2m high, but the spray and winds were impressive. But even better was the fact we got distant, but identifiable views of at least two Buller's albatross, new for the trip. A single broad-billed prion also showed briefly, and small numbers of common diving-petrels, white-capped albatross, and sooty shearwaters were seen during the trip.

We arrived into Bluff and grabbed our gear, loaded the van, and then fought the winds, which must have been in excess of 40 knots, as we headed to a nearby estuary area. However, the tide was incredibly high, and the wind was forcing the water right in to where we might have expected to have seen some waders, so there was nothing evident.

We continued on northwards, grabbing some lunch along the way, and then eating a beach site. We went for a walk along the beach after we had finished eating, and saw five Hooker's sea lions resting in various places along the beach. There were two rather large males, what looked like two large females and a small sub-adult. All looked healthy and happy, enjoying the sunshine, despite the wind. We took a few photos and then headed back along the beach, enjoying the chance to stretch our legs.

It was then back into the van, and further north. Late in the afternoon we made a stop at a beach to look for yellow-eyed penguins. As we walked out to the viewing spot, an adult yellow-eyed penguin came up out of the surf and waddled up the beach. It paused several times and we had great scope views of it standing on the beach, preening, and then gradually heading up to where it must have had a nest in the coastal forest. We thought that was a great start, but after almost an hour and a half, not another single penguin had shown its face! We did have excellent views of both pied and bronze morph Stewart Island shags flying past, a perhaps soon to be split species.

We then headed to the accommodation, checked in, and then headed in to town to dinner. Another excellent dinner, a few wines to celebrate new grand children and the reaching of 4000 species (Southern brown kiwi as your 4000<sup>th</sup> bird can't be bad!), and then off to bed.

**Day total** – Seen = 49; new for the trip = 2; total for the trip to date = 166







## 21 November 2015 – Day Twenty

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I don't know what it is about Oamaru, but it always seems to look like it is going to rain in the morning when we are there?! Anyway, loading the van, and starting the drive inland, it was clear we were in for a pretty decent day weatherwise in the dry Mackenzie Basin.

We spotted a few black-fronted terns in the fields as we drove, as well as a few South Island oystercatchers. After a bit of driving we then made a quick stop to search a couple of small lakes. We found lots of scaup, some with ducklings, and several crested grebes which gave beautiful views. There were a lot of coot around, and we scanned the edges for any skulking rails, but no luck.

We then grabbed some lunch at a bakery, and headed to our first black stilt site. As we arrived we scanned and checked the edges of the lake, nothing, nothing, nothing...bingo! There was a black stilt on the edge of the lake, albeit standing next to a pied stilt, but a full adult plumaged bird. We spent some time watching the bird, and the photographers had a bit of fun getting closer to take some images. We then went a little further and found a second adult bird, which we again got reasonably close to and got some nice images. They really are stunning birds, just such as shame the issues facing them are so huge!

We spent time scanning for other birds, seeing a few banded dotterel and black-fronted terns, and then decided to carry on to another spot. On the way we drove slowly hoping for a stripy chicken...and blow me down if there weren't two of them. A male was standing looking around, whilst the female was enjoying a good old fashioned dust bath! We pulled up in the van, got good views, and then everyone got out and

viewed the birds unobstructed. They were pretty calm, and so in the end the photographers moved in and managed to get surprisingly close and get some nice shots.

We then headed off to our initial target, a small lake, where we pulled up and enjoyed our lunch in the sunshine overlooking the lake. The wind was a bit blustery, but a nice sunny spot out of the wind was found by all. There were no black stilt, so we tried for some Baillon's crakes, with perhaps a glimpse of a bird... We then headed on down to another small lake, and found another adult and two juvenile black stilts. There were several pied stilts present also, but we focussed on the 'all blacks' and enjoyed more excellent views. The photographers decided to have another go, and got reasonably close ;) (see photo). The funny thing was they just stood there and the stilts came to them!

We enjoyed the spot for a little longer, and then headed back to a spot with a fantastic view out over the surround lakes and scenery. We managed to find a few butterflies on the top – the targets were the common tussock, and we managed to find a few of them despite a fairly hefty wind. A rather relaxed and confiding New Zealand pipit was also nice to see again. We then headed off to our last spot of the day, a local lakeside area where we hoped to find Baillon's crake. This bird can be pretty difficult, and although being found in many parts of the World, many people have not seen it. New Zealand also has an endemic subspecies...

So we headed to the spot, and decided to all spread out and survey various parts of the wetland. It wasn't too long and a call went up...and the sharp eyes of Karen had struck again. She had spotted a crake moving in and out of the vegetation on the edge of some water. We all got into position and had pretty good views moments later of a crake moving around underneath the vegetation, feeding in shallow water. It then moved off out of site, and we waited for another view, but to no avail. We decided to spread out a bit in the hope of spotting it again, but again nothing. Even a little playing of calls elicited no response. So we decided we had been pretty lucky to have all seen it, and headed to our accommodation.

We checked in, had a little time to relax and repack things for the journey home, and then headed out for dinner. A beautiful slap up dinner, with some really nice food at a local winery. A nice way to end an incredible trip!

**Day total** – Seen = 42; new for the trip = 3; total for the trip to date = 169 (except Fulmar prion now accepted so, 170 sp seen, plus great-spotted kiwi heard).











## 22 November 2015 – Day Twenty-one

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With bags packed for the last time we headed off towards Christchurch. But it wasn't over yet! We had a mission to complete, to really nail home that defeat, and get one more bird for the list. Sure it is not all about the numbers, but hey, we had done so well, why not strive a little further, going a few minutes out of our way for a....a.....mute swan!

On the way we stopped and grabbed some lunch and some grabbed got their hands on what is possibly New Zealand's best pie...a big call, but heck who would have thought a Salmon and Bacon pie would work so well together! The Fairlie Bakehouse really know their stuff and it was described as some in the back of the bus as 'Orgasmic!'. I'll leave it there it think!

As we got closer to the coast we entered the Canterbury Plains, the low flat arable land that surrounds Christchurch and the other coastal cities. Crossing several large braided rivers we could easily see the extent of the weed problem with most of these rivers choked with introduced lupins and other weeds. The Ashburton River however did have a large black-billed gull breeding colony which was great to see, and hopefully they are successful in rearing their chicks to fledging this season. We then turned further to the coast as we neared Christchurch, and there in front of us, in all their splendour, were about 20 mute swans!

We then headed in to Christchurch city, seeing the extent of the repairs still being undertaken in the city from the earthquake in 2011. We dropped Laurence off at his Hotel in down town, and bid him farewell, then headed out to the Airport for everyone else. After 21-days on the road we said our good-byes to new friends, hard to believe it was all over.

**Day total** – Seen = 31; new for the trip = 1; total for the trip to date = 172 (inc heard great-spotted kiwi – this is a new record).



