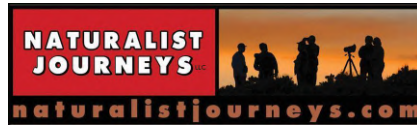


# New Zealand Birding & Nature | Jan. 7-23, 2025 | Trip Report | by Kent Skaggs

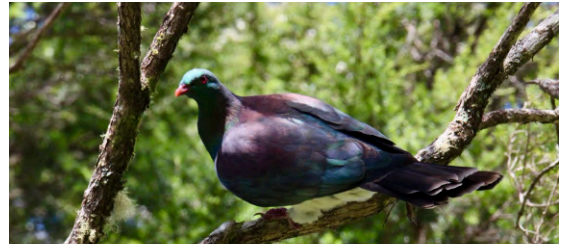


**Guides Michael Burton Smith, Richard Schofield and Kent Skaggs, with 11 participants: Cyndi & Rick, Deb, Gail & Byron, Kathy, Monica & Jim, Nancy, Velma & Brent**



## **Tuesday, Jan 7 - Arrival in Auckland | Gannet Colony & Kauri Park**

Everyone arrived at least a day early to rest up a bit and to explore Auckland a little before the tour started on Tuesday. We had the morning free before we were to meet our guides, Michael Burton Smith and Richard Schofield, at noon in the hotel lobby. After brief introductions, we loaded up into a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter van and headed for the west coast where we would be visiting the Muriwai Australasian Gannet Colony. Upon



arrival, we paused for a picnic lunch, Michael gave a traditional welcome in Maori, and we all re-introduced ourselves to the entire group. We then worked our way down a path that would take us to the gannet colony, but in typical fashion, we were distracted by other birds including our first of many Silvereye that we would see during the tour. We continued on until the path ended at a viewing platform above the southern portion of the colony. Most of the birds were at their nests tending to their young while some were gliding on the wind blowing in off of the Tasman Sea. After taking in the view and taking many photos, we followed the path back to a T intersection where we turned left to check out the northern end of the colony. Then it was on to our next stop.

We backtracked a bit to the east before turning south to the Cascade Kauri Park which is located in the northern part of the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park. Cascade Kauri Park provides access to the largest remaining stand of mature Kauri trees on the North Island, as well as several other native tree species. Once there, we walked down a path to a shoe cleaning station that was there to prevent hikers from inadvertently bringing in a soil-borne pathogen that is killing the Kauri trees. One by one we took our turn cleaning our shoes, then continued on down the trail. We didn't travel far before we were introduced to the New Zealand Pigeon which is one of the largest pigeons in the world. One of these striking birds landed nearby and posed nicely for photos while others were seen flying in and out of the trees. As we paused on a bridge over the Waitakere River, a rather large New Zealand Longfin Eel was spotted in the water below. Based on its size (~4-5 feet long), this fish was several decades old and was a very good find. We traveled a little further down the trail, enjoying the forest around us as we went, before stopping and retracing our steps back to the van.

We loaded up and made our way back to the hotel in Auckland. Once there, we visited our rooms to freshen up a bit and then made a short walk to a French restaurant where we enjoyed a nice meal and began to get to know one another a little more. It was a nice start and we were looking forward to what tomorrow would bring.

## **Wednesday, Jan 8 - Tiritiri Matangi | Shakespear Regional Park**

A relaxed start to this morning with breakfast at our leisure, then we loaded into the van and headed to the Whangaparaoa Peninsula and Gulf Harbor to board the ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island. On the way to the island we saw our first seabirds as a few Fluttering Shearwaters came near the ferry and Michael spotted a larger group much further away which included some Buller's and Flesh-footed Shearwaters.

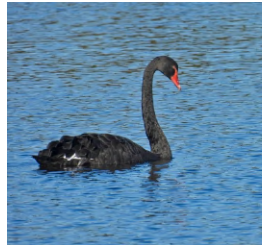
After about 20 minutes we arrived at the wharf and the ferry emptied its passengers. After a brief orientation, our group gathered together away from the rest of the tourists and let them clear out a bit before starting our



exploration of the island. One of many predator-free islands in New Zealand, Tiritiri Matangi is home to several rare native birds where most are thriving in restored habitats in a regenerating native forest. We walked a short distance up a road where we stopped at the Brown Teal Pond, hoping to see a Brown Teal or two. Water levels in the pond were pretty low and the teal were nowhere in sight, but a Spotless Crake emerged from vegetation on the back side of the pond which was a pleasant surprise. As we watched the crake, other native birds began to appear. North Island Saddleback and New Zealand Bellbirds were flying back and forth in the vegetation that surrounded the pond, a Sacred Kingfisher flew overhead and Welcome Swallows glided above the surface of the pond.

The crowds of people had moved on so we continued our hike by turning onto the Wattle Track. As we walked through the forest, we encountered small groups of Whiteheads busily moving about and the sound of the bellbirds seemed to be a constant. Some of the group saw a couple of Brown Quail just off the trail and Michael heard a North Island Kokako calling. The Kokako eventually came close enough to the trail that everyone could hear it, but it remained out of view. Richard did get a brief look as it flew from one side of the trail to the other. We continued on and eventually came to a nectar feeding station where we got our first and only looks at Stitchbirds. A few were seen going back and forth to the feeder, along with several bellbirds. Further up the trail we came to a water trough where we had extended close up views of a Tui getting a drink and a little further yet even closer views of a North Island Robin as it literally hopped right next to us just off of the trail. We finished up our walk at the Tiritiri Matangi Visitor Center where we had a picnic lunch before returning back down the road we had started on. On the way down we came across three Rifleman foraging in the undergrowth near the trail and added a fourth a little later. We also got another look at a Spotless Crake at the Brown Teal Pond. Once at the bottom, we waited for the ferry to return and while doing so got good looks at a Red-crowned Parakeet feeding on some seed stalks of New Zealand Flax.

Then it was back on the ferry and back to the mainland. Once loaded up, we headed for the Shakespear Regional Park where we again were hoping to find some Brown Teal. We walked along the perimeter of some predator-free fencing checking out some shallow water for the teal, but none were there. We then walked back along a road bordered by marshy habitat where we had a very cooperative White-faced Heron perched on a branch on one side of the road and Pied Stilts and Masked Lapwings on the other. As we neared the end of the road, Michael heard a Buff-banded Rail call up ahead of us and it wasn't long before it ventured out on the road and crossed quickly to the other side. The road ended at the Okoromai Bay where over 50 Black Swans were present.



We returned to the hotel and everyone was on their own for the evening. It had been an enjoyable day, but there was the anticipation of something new awaiting us in the morning as we would say goodbye to Auckland and set out to explore more of the North Island.

### **Thursday, Jan 9 - Puketutu Canal | Miranda Shorebird Center**

Breakfast at our leisure again, with departure planned for 8:00 AM. We didn't travel too far as our first stop was to check out the Puketutu Canal and the adjacent tidal flats. As soon as we pulled up to the canal you could see quite a few birds. Canada Goose, Black Swan, Paradise Shelduck, Australasian Shoveler, Mallard, Gray Teal and New Zealand Scaup were on the water and Pied Stilt and Masked Lapwing were along the shoreline. After scanning the canal thoroughly, we looked to the other side of the road at the exposed tidal flat. At first glance it didn't look like there was much there, but after closer inspection with the scopes we could see quite a bit. Wrybill were present in good numbers closer and further out were quite a few Bar-tailed Godwit and Red Knot. As we continued to scan both sides of the road, Richard found a couple of Marsh Sandpipers fairly close on the tidal flat. These were not expected and definitely a bonus bird for the trip. We moved a little further up the road where the canal made a right hand turn under the road, draining into a retaining area/pond. There were a lot more Paradise Shelducks here, plus our first New Zealand Grebes.

After a quick pitstop, we drove for about an hour to the Taramaire Creek mouth where it dumps into the Firth of Thames. We hopped out to scan the beach/shoreline and found South Island Oystercatchers, Wrybill and Bar-tailed Godwits at rest. While we were scanning the shorebirds, Eurasian Skylarks were singing in the grassland areas behind us, with a couple perching close enough for decent views in the scope. It was after twelve now, so we continued down the road a short distance to the Miranda Shorebird Center where we would be having our picnic lunch. After eating, the group perused the gift shop with a few finding something to take back home. We then filled our water bottles and started to drive to the Robert Findlay Wildlife Reserve about a mile down the road where there was a trail that led to some blinds (or hides as they are called in New Zealand) where you could view the waterbirds that were using the surrounding wetlands.

We made it about a half mile down the road, before we could see large numbers of shorebirds at rest in a wetland between the road and a ridge that parallels the estuary shoreline, so we stopped to scan with the scopes. Most of what was in front of us were South Island Oystercatchers, Wrybill and Bar-tailed Godwits, but we found our first Pacific Golden-Plovers, Double-banded Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones and a Red-necked Stint. After about 20 minutes, we continued on to the wildlife reserve and headed to one of the hides where we could see more of the wetland. Scattered about in front of us were over 80 White-faced Herons looking for a meal and in the distance on an elevated spit of land were over 50 Royal Spoonbills taking a siesta. We moved on to



another hide where we had closer views of the birds we had seen from the road. As we scanned the birds a second time we came up with a couple of other species including a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and a Curlew Sandpiper, the latter being new for the trip.

It was getting late in the afternoon and we still had a couple of hours to Rotorua where we would be staying for the night, so we said so long to the birds at Miranda and settled in and took in more of the countryside of the North Island. Upon arriving at our hotel in Rotorua, we got our keys, grabbed our bags and freshened up a bit before gathering again for dinner. It had been another beautiful day with new birds and new landscapes, but the best part was that it was only Day 3 of the trip.

## **Friday, Jan 10 - Waiootapu Geothermal Area | Pureora Forest Park**

We only had one night in Rotorua, so we ate breakfast, packed up our things and continued our exploration of the country. Our first stop was at the Waiootapu Geothermal Area Mud Pool about 15 minutes southeast of Rotorua. This was a quick stop to learn about the geology of the area and is where Michael began our history lesson on the great Maori tribal leader Te Rauparaha. Then we returned to Rotorua where we had a driving tour of the Government Gardens before stopping briefly at Sulphur Point along the shore of Lake Rotorua. From there we traveled to the southwest for about 45 minutes where we made a brief stop at the Whakamaru Dam. Several species of waterbirds already seen on the trip were present, plus our first Eurasian Coot. Then we headed towards the Pureora Forest Park which was still a little over an hour and a half away.

Upon arrival, we had our picnic lunch and relaxed a bit before taking a walk into the forest. One of the last native forests to be opened up to logging, the park is home to the last remaining native podocarp forests that used to cover the central part of the North Island. From the parking/picnic area on the edge of the forest, the surrounding land to the north had been cleared and was now farm ground, but once you stepped inside you were transported back in time to what the farm ground used to be - a lush rainforest. Ground ferns covered the forest floor in places and tree ferns, various shrubs and young trees filled the understory. The mature trees were a mixture of Totara, Kahikatea, Matai and Rimu. Many of the trees were covered with moss and lichens, making the forest appear extraordinarily green. As we walked the Totara Loop trail, we encountered several of the avian residents of the park including New Zealand Pigeon, New Zealand Kaka, Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Rifleman, Gray Gerygone, Whitehead, New Zealand Fantail and the very vocal and inquisitive North Island Robin.

We finished up our walk and loaded up to travel to Tokaanu Wharf at the south end of Lake Taupo, which was a couple hours away. When we arrived we checked out the birds on the lake first where there were several species of waterfowl, including 900+ Black Swans as estimated by Richard. We also saw our first Pacific Black



Ducks on the water, before walking back on the road we came in on in hopes of seeing an Australasian Bittern in the wetlands on either side of the road. No bittern revealed itself, but Michael heard a Shining Bronze-Cuckoo calling near the road up ahead so we set out to see if we could get a glimpse of it. As we got closer to the calling bird, Michael finally located it towards the top of a tree. It was very cooperative and allowed us extended looks before we needed to get back in the van and head down the road.

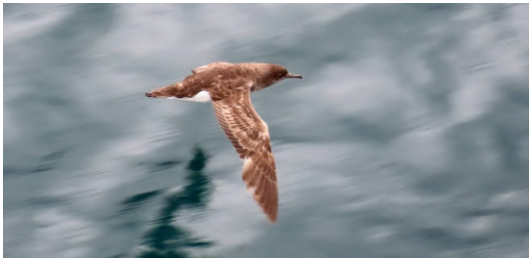
We continued south and about a half hour later we were at a location along the Tongariro River where we were hoping to find Blue Ducks. No ducks. We tried a couple of other locations on our way to Whakapapa Village where we would be staying the night, with the same results, no ducks. We arrived at our hotel, grabbed our bags and got the keys to our rooms, then returned back to the hotel's restaurant for dinner. After dinner, some of the group went out on a kiwi/owl search. Since the sun had set, the hope was to hear either a kiwi or owl or both. We were successful with the owl, called a Morepork, as at least two different individuals were heard calling.

The group returned to the hotel to get some rest as we would have an early departure in the morning. It had been a day full of travel but very enjoyable as well as we learned about some of the North Island's geology, visited a very cool rainforest, saw three active volcanoes (Mt. Ruapehu, Mt. Ngauruhoe and Mt. Tongariro) and experienced more of the North Island's beautiful landscape along the way.

## **Saturday, Jan 11 - Otaki Sewage Ponds | Cook Strait**

The plan this morning was to get going around 6:00 AM and stop for breakfast a couple of hours down the road, which we did at the Flat Hills Cafe & Tourist Park. From there it was about an hour and a half to Otaki where we stopped to see what was hanging out at the Otaki Sewage Ponds. There were a lot of the usual suspects including around 500 Paradise Shelducks, but nothing new so we kept on heading toward Wellington where we would be catching a ferry to the South Island. When we arrived at the capital city, we took a brief detour to see some of Michael's old (more recent than old) stomping grounds while attending university, and some government offices downtown including the Parliament Building and the Prime Minister's Residence. Then it was to the harbor to board the ferry to Picton and the South Island.

Once on board, we grabbed what we needed from the van and proceeded to one of the passenger levels. There we were given our bagged lunches and were free to disperse. After eating, most of the group headed topside to look for seabirds as we crossed the Cook Strait. It was a bit breezy to start which made for better conditions for seabirding and Michael was busy calling out birds near and far and Richard was busy recording them on eBird. There was good variety including our first albatrosses of the trip in Northern Royal, White-capped and Salvin's,

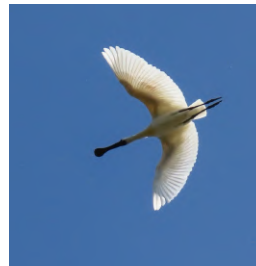


Fairy Prions, Cook's and Westland Petrels, Flesh-footed, Buller's, Sooty, Hutton's and Fluttering Shearwaters, a Parasitic Jaeger and a Northern Giant-Petrel. Not too bad for a makeshift pelagic outing. We eventually made our way to Picton, drove off the ferry and were at our hotel in short order. We got our keys, bags and got settled in a bit before gathering for dinner. The restaurant was relatively close to the hotel so most of the group chose to stretch their legs a bit and walk while Richard transported the rest in the van. We had said "see you later" to the North Island and were now anxious to start exploring the South Island, which would begin come morning.

## **Sunday, Jan 12 - Queen Charlotte Sound | South to Kaikoura**

A leisurely start to the day with breakfast at the hotel before packing our gear in the van and then walking down to the marina. We were scheduled for a boat tour of the Queen Charlotte Sound, during which we would spend some time on Blumine Island. We set out into the sound where our first stop was a small colony of Spotted Shags. They seemed unconcerned with us as we approached, obviously having experienced many visitors by boat before. We then moved over to see if anything of interest was hanging around a nearby salmon farm. There were a few gulls flying about and a lone New Zealand Fur Seal that was lounging on one of the floating platforms, so we continued on to see what else we could find. We didn't make it too far before coming across some Fluttering Shearwaters that were resting on the water. They were fairly close to the boat so we took a good look and took some photos before moving on. Our next stop was at a New Zealand King Shag colony. This was pretty special as they are only found in the Marlborough Sounds and Queen Charlotte Sound, so this would be our only opportunity to see them. As with the Spotted Shag, they seemed pretty used to the attention, so after taking lots of photos we slowly departed and let the shags continue on with their day.

Next was a visit to Blumine Island, which is a predator-free island and home to several native New Zealand birds. As we approached the island we could see a Weka walking along the shoreline. We disembarked, used the facilities nearby and then gathered on a trail not far away to look and listen for the Malherbe's (or Orange-fronted) Parakeet. Other birds could be heard nearby, but no parakeets. We backtracked to the area where we had come ashore and got good looks at a male Tomtit perched on a branch preening and a Gray Gerygone doing the same. The lone Weka turned into three as there were a couple of younger birds that were foraging under the woody vegetation near the shore. We then headed in the opposite direction along a footpath that paralleled the shoreline and increased in elevation. As we walked, a South Island Saddleback was heard calling from the vegetation just off of the path but it stayed hidden for the most part, with some in our party getting fleeting glimpses of the bird. It was about this time when a parakeet was spotted flying overhead going in the opposite direction, so we turned around and went back to the first location we had checked. When we got back to the spot, there were a couple of the Malherbe's Parakeets sitting toward the top of some shrubs. The vegetation



was pretty dense so the birds blended in quite well making them difficult to see. They took flight again and one could be seen flying further up the hillside. Our ride had now returned, so we said so long and returned to Picton.

It had been a very pleasant morning, but it was time to move on down the road. We drove about a half hour to Blenheim where we had our picnic lunch in Harling Park and then proceeded to the Blenheim Wastewater Treatment Wetlands where we saw our first Black-fronted Dotterels, got good looks at Royal Spoonbills including several flyovers, and had a very cooperative male Yellowhammer sitting on a fence post at close range. From here we continued south for about a half hour before stopping at Lake Elterwater. It was quite breezy here as the surrounding countryside was mostly treeless and there was nothing to impede the wind blowing in from the ocean, so most of the birds we saw were in more protected areas. One of those areas was right next to the parking lot and a viewing platform. There was a good mixture of waterfowl with Australasian Shoveler, Mallard, Gray Teal and New Zealand Scaup, a New Zealand Grebe with young, and two Hoary-headed Grebes which were new for the trip.

We continued down the road towards Kaikoura, which is where we would be spending the next two nights. Just north of Kaikoura we stopped at Ohau Point where there was a New Zealand Fur Seal colony. The winds were blowing pretty good now and combined with the swells of the ocean, some pretty sizable waves were crashing onto the shore. Then it was on to the hotel where we got our keys, grabbed our bags, and deposited them in our rooms before heading back out to go to dinner. After a good meal, some of the group decided to walk back to the hotel while Richard drove the rest. As sundown approached, the wind was beginning to subside a bit but the swells weren't. We were scheduled for a pelagic trip in the morning which was billed as one of the highlights of the trip. Would the waves decrease enough to let us go on the ocean? Our answer would come in the morning.

## Monday, Jan 13 - Kaikoura

We received our answer shortly after breakfast that our pelagic trip had been postponed until the following morning and a whale watching tour that afternoon had been cancelled due to high seas. So with the change of plans, we made the best of the morning by checking out a few places on the outskirts of Kaikoura. Our first stop was at Point Kean on the Kaikoura Peninsula. The tide was out so we walked out on the exposed rock and few ventured out further to get closer to the crashing waves that were coming in. While there, several albatross were seen flying close to shore along with lots of Hutton's Shearwaters. Back on land a couple of Double-banded Plovers were seen foraging and White-fronted terns were seen perched and flying about.





From there we went north of town to the Kaikoura Wastewater Treatment Ponds to look for waterfowl. Paradise Shelduck, Australasian Shoveler, Mallard, Gray Teal and New Zealand Scaup were all present plus a couple of Masked Lapwings. We then went looking for Little Owl in the surrounding farmland. No owls were seen, but it had turned into a beautiful morning and it was nice just to be out looking. Then it was back to the Kaikoura Peninsula, but this time to South Bay which was on the opposite side of Point Kean. Here we had close up views of Silver Gulls and distant views of more albatross and Hutton's Shearwaters. We then proceeded to the Kaikoura Lookout which gave us a 360° view of the peninsula and a great view of Kaikoura and the coastline.

We returned to the hotel where Michael and Richard filled us in on the plan for the following morning, then turned the group loose for the rest of day. After folks grabbed some lunch next door, we were free to explore the area at our leisure. Some ventured into town to check out the shops, others did a walkabout around the peninsula, and all took the opportunity to just relax and enjoy a beautiful day near the ocean.

## **Tuesday, Jan 14 - Kaikoura Seabird Cruise | Canterbury Plains**

The original plan for the pelagic tour was for the entire group to go together on a larger boat, but with the postponement the larger boat wasn't available, so a smaller boat was used to accommodate our group. Our revised plan for this morning was for half of the group to gather with Michael at the cafe next door at 6:00 AM where we would be picked up by the operator of the pelagic tour who was also the Captain of the boat. The rest of the group could get a little extra shuteye, eat breakfast and pack their things while they waited for the first group to return. When the first group returned they would eat breakfast and get packed up while the second would have their time on the water.

Overnight, the winds had decreased quite a bit but the swells had not, so as the first group set out on the water it was still pretty rough. As the boat got further from shore a few seabirds started to follow as they were familiar with the boat and what reward awaited them if they stayed close. We eventually stopped for a bit, the Captain put out a chum basket, and we waited to see what would show up. Northern Giant-Petrels and Pintado Petrels had followed us out so they were the first to come up close, followed by Southern Royal and Salvin's Albatross. There were a few White-chinned Petrels circling the boat as well, but the Captain wanted to move a little further out in order to increase our chances of seeing other species. We didn't travel far before stopping again and turning off the engine. The birds that had already found the chum basket returned and were soon joined by others. An Antipodean Albatross arrived and quickly moved in toward the boat and the chum basket where it took on all comers for the easy meal. More Southern Royal Albatross came in and landed nearby while a few Northern Royal Albatross circled repeatedly keeping their distance. White-capped Albatross and Buller's and



Sooty Shearwaters were also seen circling, with several coming fairly close. Eventually it was time for the first group to go back in and the second group to take their turn. A lot of the same species (and individual birds) were seen on the second outing, including a few new ones in Flesh-footed and Short-tailed Shearwater and an unexpected Black-bellied Storm-Petrel. Unfortunately the second group had their tour cut short due to increasing winds, but in the time they were out they saw even more species than the first group.

With our first pelagic tour in the books, we set out for Arthur's Pass Wilderness Lodge which is where we would be staying the next two nights. We stopped for a picnic lunch near Rangiora at the Waikuku Beach-Ashley River Park where we had a view of the Ashley Estuary. While there we saw our first Black-fronted Terns and Michael found a Little Egret that we were able to get in the scopes for people to see as it was at a distance. We got back on the road and in a couple of hours we had arrived at the lodge. We grabbed our bags and went inside to get our keys, got settled into our rooms and gathered again for dinner. Right after dinner, most of the group got back in the van to go to a camping area not far away in hopes of hearing a Great Spotted Kiwi. Upon arriving at the Hawdon Shelter, we got out of the van and positioned ourselves on the edge of some trees where we waited and listened. It wasn't long before we heard a bird, not a kiwi, but a Morepork calling and it was close. There were multiple birds calling and the calls kept coming from different locations so we watched for movement, eventually seeing one in flight. Then we saw one perch on a branch and start calling, where it was eventually joined by another. Apparently, we were looking at a family group with a juvenile begging for its parents to feed it. The owls moved further away and the kiwi kept quiet, so we decided to load up and head back to the lodge as it had been a long day, but a good one.

## **Wednesday, Jan 15 - Arthur's Pass Wilderness Lodge**

A leisurely start to the day with breakfast at the lodge before most of the group headed out on a quest for a little bird, the endemic South Island Wren. The quest would take place in the Otira Valley of Arthur's Pass National Park, not too far away. We arrived at the parking area for the trail and grabbed our gear, making sure our water bottles were full. As we set out, the surrounding mountains were partially obscured by low clouds, making for a feeling of walking into the unknown. The trail was rocky and uphill but the incline was gradual enough to not be too difficult. As we slowly made our way into the valley, the clouds began to break up and big patches of blue sky began to show and the mountain ridges were revealed. The vegetation around us was a combination of tussock grass and subalpine shrubs, colored green to greenish yellow with some hints or reddish brown. A few birds could be seen and heard as well, including a Eurasian Blackbird that was still quite a distance away but its song was easily heard. A New Zealand Falcon was also seen flying along a ridge to our left, perching briefly before continuing on.



After an hour and a half, we arrived at our destination, which was a bridge that crossed the Otira River. On the other side of the bridge was a scree field with some boulders varying in size from small to large. This was the home of the South Island Wren (or Rock Wren). Our task now was to look and listen for any sign of the bird. Michael had gone across the bridge to see if he could locate one, so while we waited we rehydrated and took in the fabulous scenery around us. After about 30 minutes and no sign of any wrens, we started our way back down the trail to the van. Going this direction gave us a view of the mountains and valleys that were behind us and gave us a better sense of the vastness of the area. Once at the bottom of the trail, we loaded up and drove a little further up the highway to the Otira Viaduct Lookout, hoping to find a Kea or two as they often perch on transmission towers for transmission lines. No Kea, but the view was quite nice. On the way back through Arthur's Pass Village, we finally found the Kea. A couple were hanging out near a crowd of people that were dining outdoors, with one perched on the hood of a car. They are known to be quite curious and often can do damage to the soft parts of a vehicle, so that vehicle was probably in peril.

We continued back to the lodge where we had lunch and afterwards Michael gave a presentation on the geology of New Zealand that was quite informative. We were then free for the afternoon to explore the grounds of the lodge on our own or just kick our feet up and relax. Late afternoon, some of the group attended a demonstration on sheep shearing. We gathered later for dinner and afterwards, part of the group went back to the Hawdon Shelter to listen for Great Spotted Kiwi again. No kiwi, but we did hear a Morepork once again.

## **Thursday, Jan 16 - Castle Hill Rocks | Lake Tekapo**

Another leisurely start to the day with breakfast, then grabbing our bags and loading into the van. Our first stop this morning was only about a half hour away, the Castle Hill Conservation Area (a.k.a. - Kura Tawhiti). The conservation area is characterized by rolling, grass covered hills with enormous limestone rock outcroppings. There is a path that leads from the parking area to and through the outcrops, so we set out to explore this unique geological site. On the way there, a New Zealand Falcon was seen perched on top of a large rock not far off the path. The bird was very cooperative as our group stopped to look and take photos and acted as if we weren't even there. We spent about an hour walking around the site and heard the falcon calling before continuing on to Peel Forest Park, which was a couple of hours away.

Driving through the Canterbury Plains and musing about the trimmed hedgerows that lined and divided fields along the way, we arrived at Peel Forest around 1:00 PM. We had our picnic lunch and then went on the Big Tree Walk which takes you through a section of the forest that has some pretty impressive trees. Large Matai,



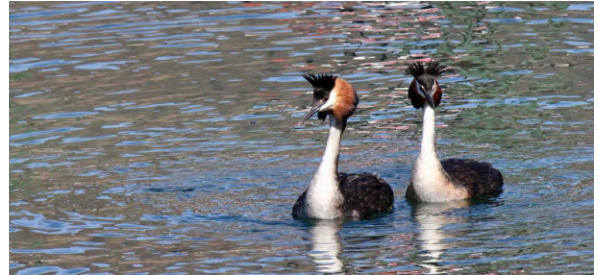
Kahikatea and Totara trees were seen on this walk, with us taking a group photo standing in front of the largest. We spent about an hour here before getting back on the road and heading for Lake Tekapo to look for another special bird, the Black Stilt. It took a couple of hours to get there, so the first order of business was a bathroom break. In the meantime, Michael was sent on a special mission by Richard to find the stilt. With the group all back in the van we proceeded to a corner of the lake where Michael had indeed found not one, but three Black Stilts. We set up scopes for better looks and checked out the rest of the birds as well. There were Pied Stilts here too and a couple of hybrids as well. The usual waterfowl were present and some Great Crested Grebes.

It was getting late in the afternoon and we still had 45 minutes drive time to Twizel so we got back on the road. On the way, we made a quick stop at Lake Pukaki for a photo op of Mt. Cook, which we would see much closer on the following day. We arrived at our hotel in Twizel, grabbed our bags and keys and headed to our rooms before gathering again for dinner. It had been another enjoyable day with lots of great landscapes seen and experienced with a lot more yet to come.

## **Friday, Jan 17 - Tasman River Delta | Mt. Cook National Park**

Breakfast at our leisure and ready to head towards Mt. Cook National Park by 8:30 AM. On our way there we stopped at the upper end of Lake Pukaki to scan the Tasman River Delta for Black Stilts. We were in luck again as at least 10 were spotted, along with several other familiar species. From there it was a short drive to the park and in no time we were there. It was simply a gorgeous day, the scenery all around us was spectacular and Mt. Cook was right in front of us. We then set out on the Hooker Valley Track (trail) where we took our time hiking to the Mueller Lake Lookout and then went a little further, turning around at a suspension bridge that crossed the Hooker River. What a beautiful location. We backtracked to the parking area and had our picnic lunch in a public shelter, before taking one last look around this wonderful place. Then we headed back to Twizel to take a little siesta before going on another bird quest.

Our objective in the afternoon was to find a place to get good views of Great Crested Grebe (or Puteketeke). We tried a couple of ponds just south of town where we did see some, albeit a little distant, but still good looks in the scopes. From there, we turned on a road that paralleled a canal that feeds the Ohau hydro stations. As we drove along the canal we saw another pair of Great Crested Grebes swimming close to the road as we went past. We continued along the canal eventually turning perpendicular to it to access a wetland where we were hoping to find a bird we hadn't seen yet, a Baillon's Rail. Richard admitted it was probably a longshot, but it was late enough in the day and the wetland was far enough away from roads or other disturbance that it was worth checking. We quietly moved around the wetland scanning the water's edge looking for movement, but all was



quiet. We even used playback briefly to see if we could get a response, but again, nothing. We decided it was time to head back to Twizel so we backtracked the way we came. As we drove along the canal we encountered the grebe pair again and discovered that they had three young with them. We stopped and looked through the van's windows at first, then opened the door in order to get some photos. The birds didn't seem to mind so those with cameras got out of the van to get a better vantage point. The little grebes were adorable and a nice way to finish the afternoon.

After having dinner at a restaurant downtown, some of the group went to look for Little Owl on the outskirts of Twizel. We looked and listened, but no owl. It had been a great day nonetheless with spectacular views and wonderful weather. In the morning we would be on the move again to explore more of the South Island and beyond.

## **Saturday, Jan 18 - Central Otago | Ferry to Stewart Island**

Breakfast at our leisure again and then back on the road. We didn't drive very far however as Michael and Richard had received a tip from another New Zealand birder about a Little Owl south of Twizel. We pulled off the road at the specified location and got out to look and listen. The area we were checking was a rectangular pasture surrounded by a treeline/hedge on all sides. Richard tried playback and there was an immediate response from the far treeline. We scanned and scanned but could not find the bird. Michael heard the owl call a second time just as we were getting ready to load up, but again it remained unseen.

We had a ways to go today, so we continued down the road making a brief pit stop at the small farming village of Tarras. Tarras gained international fame when a local merino sheep referred to as Shrek, who had evaded capture and shearing for six years, was finally apprehended. Then it was on to Wanaka and the Wanaka Marina to check out a breeding site for Great Crested Grebes. In the marina between some boat docks and the shore were multiple floating nesting platforms built specifically for the grebes. They were tethered to the bottom so they would stay in place and they could move up and down as the water levels fluctuated. This project was obviously a success as every platform was occupied.

From here we continued south making a brief stop at the Crown Range Lookout where we could see Queenstown far off in the distance. As we headed west towards Queenstown, we turned left and headed south along Lake Wakatipu where we would be stopping to have our picnic lunch. We had a couple of hours yet to Invercargill, so we settled in and enjoyed the scenery along the way. By the time we arrived in Invercargill the skies had become overcast and it had started to sprinkle. We made a quick stop at Queens Park for a bathroom break and then on to where we would be boarding a ferry to Stewart Island. As we set out the skies had



lightened up a bit and the sprinkles ended allowing a few of the group to hang out on the back of the ferry to look for seabirds as we crossed the Foveaux Strait, while the rest viewed from the comfort of inside the cabin. It was a bit windy making conditions good for seabirding and several species were seen including our first looks at Common Diving-Petrel, but there weren't large swells which made for a relatively smooth crossing.

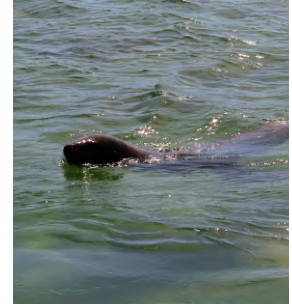
We arrived at the Stewart Island Visitor Terminal, grabbed our bags and received instructions as to where we would be staying and when and where to meet for dinner. After dinner we all retired to our accommodations, with a few heading back out to look for a kiwi or two that were rumored to be in the neighborhood. No kiwi were spotted but a nice White-tailed buck made an appearance in their place.

## **Sunday, Jan 19 - Seabird Cruise | Ulva Island | Kiwi Excursion**

A very leisurely start to this morning as most of the group had breakfast in their studio unit, before gathering back at the dock at 9:30 AM to take a seabird cruise out to Bench Island. It was a very pleasant morning with partly cloudy skies and relatively light winds. All on board, we started out slow as we left Halfmoon Bay to look for penguins that might be in coves. None were spotted so we continued on towards Bench Island. It wasn't long before we had albatross and a few other seabirds following the boat as they knew what was in store for them. The crew started chumming and the birds moved in. White-capped Albatross were the most numerous (~50), but there were Northern Royal, Southern Royal, Buller's and Salvin's present as well. A couple of Northern Giant-Petrels and several Pintado Petrels hung on the periphery grabbing what leftovers they could. A Brown Skua joined the fray at one point, circling the boat repeatedly and catching fish scraps in midair.

As we circled around Bench Island we came across some New Zealand Fur Seals hanging out on shore and a few frolicing in the water. We eventually moved on to Whero Rock to check out a colony of Stewart Island Shags. As we approached a Little Penguin was spotted floating on the surface on the port side of the boat, staying long enough for good looks and a few photos. As we got closer to the rock the shags came into better view, but the penguin had disappeared. We then headed towards Golden Bay as the seabird cruise was coming to an end. On the way there however we saw a couple of New Zealand Sea Lions basking on a spit of sand so we stopped for a closer look. One of the sea lions decided to check us out too and came over to the back of the boat before the Captain decided it was best to move on. We got off of the boat at the Golden Bay Wharf, where we had our picnic lunch and waited for a water taxi to take us on our next adventure at Ulva Island.

After a short boat ride we were at Post Office Bay/Wharf on Ulva Island. On the beach near the wharf was a New Zealand Sea Lion applying sunscreen in the form of sand to keep from overheating. As soon as we stepped into the forest a South Island Robin greeted us, seeming just as confident and curious with our presence as all of the



other robins we had encountered during our time in New Zealand. We proceeded at a birding pace as we made our way through the forest. Stopping to look and listen before moving forward. There was a species of bird, the Yellowhead, on the island that we were unlikely to find at any of the remaining locations on the tour and this was our best opportunity to see it, so we scrutinized any movement hoping to see one. Fortunately, much like chickadees in North America, they tend to announce their presence making them much easier to locate. It wasn't long before we came across some foraging in the understory. Another similarity to chickadees is you can often find other species foraging with them which we found to be the case. Pipipi, which are in the same family as the Yellowhead, were present as well as New Zealand Fantail. We encountered several other species during our walk including New Zealand Kaka, Red-crowned Parakeet, Rifleman, Tui, New Zealand Bellbird and South Island Saddleback.

We emerged from the forest onto Boulder Beach on the opposite side of the island where we were greeted by a couple of Variable Oystercatchers and another New Zealand Sea Lion. Needing to get back to meet our water taxi, we retraced our steps back to the wharf and caught our ride back to Stewart Island at Golden Bay. From here we walked back to our accommodations, took a little break and then gathered again for dinner at the South Sea Hotel. After dinner, we had a little break before most of the group gathered again downtown to go on a night walk for the Southern Brown Kiwi. While we were receiving an orientation from the guides that would be leading the walk, we heard our first kiwi call fairly close by. Then another responded further away. Ready, we loaded up into a couple of vans with a few other people who had signed up for the outing and headed to the Ryans Creek Aerodrome. Upon arrival, we followed the guides down the tarmac where each guide scanned the grassy area along the side of the runway with a red torch (flashlight) searching for foraging kiwi. We walked for about a half mile before we finally came across a young male on the left. We watched it forage for a few minutes before continuing down the runway. We hadn't walked far before another kiwi was located on the right side, this time an adult female.

We watched the female for a while before turning around and heading back towards the vehicles, taking another look at the young male as we passed by. While at the aerodrome, we also took advantage of a clear sky to admire the Milky Way which was easily seen. We finished up and the guides returned us to our lodging, bringing an end to a very enjoyable day.



## Monday, Jan 20 - Ferry to South Island | Drive to Lake Te Anau

A little earlier start to the day as we had an 8:00 AM departure on the ferry back to the South Island. It was a beautiful morning with clear skies and light winds. On our way back across the Foveaux Strait, the water had hardly a ripple to it and seabirds were scarce until we came across a resting flock of Sooty Shearwaters. As the ferry approached, the flock took flight and flew next to us for quite a while. They eventually crossed to our port side, moving further away out of sight. We did see more Common Diving-Petrels along the way as well and with much better light to view them. Back at the ferry terminal, we grabbed our things and waited for Richard to come around with the van.

All loaded up, we drove a short distance to the Tip Lagoon on the southwest side of Invercargill. Once there, we got on a boardwalk that took us to an earthen dike that separated the lagoon from Pleasure Bay to the west. There were lots of birds here so we set up the scopes and scanned the area. There were lots of Black Swans, including some with cygnets close by, lots of Gray Teal, some Australasian Shovelers, lots of Mallards and some Canada Geese rounding out the waterfowl. There were at least 100 Pied Stilts roaming the mudflats and shorelines, many of which were very close, and lots of Silver Gulls resting or flying about. We backtracked to where we came into the wetland and as we exited the boardwalk, Michael had located a New Zealand Fernbird in some shrubs just off of the trail. It seemed curious about these strange two-legged animals that were staring at it. Very much a skulker, this bird showed enough of itself that everyone was able to see it. We then headed into town, picked up our lunch and took it to Queens Park to eat it.

All fueled up, we hit the road for Te Anau where we would be staying the next two nights. We made a few stops along the way, the first being a birding stop along the Oreti River where we found three Black-fronted Dotterel. The next was along the coast at McCracken's Rest which overlooked the Te Waewae Bay, followed by a quick stop at the Clifden Suspension Bridge which spans the Waiau River. Then we drove about an hour to the Te Anau Bird Sanctuary, where we could see several New Zealand bird species in captivity that are difficult to see in the wild, with the star attraction being the South Island Takahe. There was Brown Teal at the sanctuary, but the Blue Duck enclosure was empty, still leaving us wanting. From there it was on to our hotel in town where we got settled before gathering again for dinner, then it was off to bed as we would have an early start in the morning.





## **Tuesday, Jan 21 - Milford Sound Cruise | Fiordland National Park**

Early breakfast this morning and on the road by 7:00 AM as we were headed to Milford Sound for a cruise. On the way we had time to stop at Mirror Lakes in Fiordland National Park to take in the view and see what birdlife was there. It was another beautiful morning so the views were superb. The birds were pretty good too as we had New Zealand Scaup with ducklings on the water, and a Little Pied Cormorant on a nest with one hatchling and at least one more egg to hatch in a tree right next to the viewing platform we were standing on. We still had a ways to go so we got back in the van and continued on to Milford Sound.

When we arrived, we headed into the Milford Sound Visitor Terminal where we received our tickets. Michael and Richard then led us to our boat and said adieu as they would be staying behind while the group went on the cruise. We hadn't even left the dock area yet and the views were already spectacular. As we got out into the sound the views only got better. As we made our way out of the sound towards the Tasman Sea, a cruise ship was ahead of us providing some scale to the slopes that bordered it. Staying on the left side of the sound, we passed by Mitre Peak which is one of the most photographed peaks in Fiordland National Park, before rounding a bend that opened up into the Tasman Sea. We didn't venture out too far before turning around and returning along the other side of the sound. Immediately after making the turn we could see how Milford Sound acquired the nickname 'land of shadows' as each slope that came down to the water produced a layered effect that grew more indistinct the further away it was.

As we came back into the sound we passed Seal Rock where New Zealand Fur Seals haul themselves out of the water to bask in the sun and several were there doing just that. A little further in we came to Stirling Falls, which is one of two permanent (year round) waterfalls and arguably the most scenic. As we passed, there were a couple of kayaks on the water at the base of the falls providing scale which made the falls that much more impressive. We continued on, soaking up the beauty of our surroundings, when the Captain drew our attention to a fur seal pup sitting on a rock. It looked vulnerable as it was sitting there all alone, but he assured us that mom had been taking good care of her newborn. As we pulled back into the dock, Michael and Richard were waiting to greet us. We grabbed our belongings and joined them just outside of the visitor center where we had our picnic lunch. We finished lunch and took a last look at Milford Sound before we got back in the van and started to backtrack on the road we came in on, stopping at a couple of locations to look for Blue Ducks.

As we reached the Homer Tunnel, we stopped briefly to take in the view and take a few pictures before continuing through to the other side. Not far after exiting the tunnel, we parked the van and hiked back up the road where we crossed a grassy meadow just below a boulder field. This was our second attempt to locate a



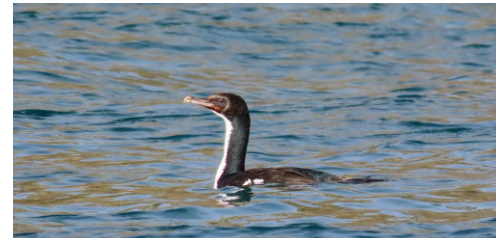
South Island Wren and this time we were successful. We had been there less than 10 minutes before one appeared close by providing us with great looks. It moved a little further away and disappeared behind some rocks. We waited around for a little while hoping it would make another appearance, but it apparently had other places to visit.

As we continued down the road we made a couple of stops looking for Blue Ducks to no avail, before making our way to Lake Gunn and taking a stroll on the Lake Gunn Nature Walk. The trail makes a loop through a Red Beech forest and briefly goes along the shore of Lake Gunn. With clear skies and the forest not having a dense canopy, the understory was well lit. Moss seemed to cover almost everything in the lower levels giving the tree trunks and branches a velvety appearance. As we walked, it seemed we were being escorted by a band of Tomtits and South Island Robins and at least one New Zealand Kaka kept an eye on us from the canopy. From here we drove a little further down the road, stopping to take some photos of the Eglinton Valley just south of Mirror Lakes. Then it was back to Te Anau, where we went out to eat at a local restaurant, wrapping up a fantastic day.

## **Wednesday, Jan 22 - Dunedin | Otago Harbor Cruise**

We had breakfast, grabbed our bags and prepared to say goodbye to Te Anau, but before leaving the area we visited the Te Anau Wastewater Treatment Ponds and Lake Te Anau near the Upukerora River mouth. From here we traveled southeast to the Wilderness Scientific Reserve to see a unique plant - the Bog Pine. Endemic to New Zealand and found on all of the large islands (North, South and Stewart), the reserve protects the best surviving Bog Pine forest in the country. Then it was back in the van where we settled in for the two hour drive to the town of Gore, where we would be having our picnic lunch.

After eating lunch next to a statue of a Brown Trout, we hopped back in the van and continued on to Dunedin. When we arrived we continued onto the Otago Peninsula where we were scheduled for a cruise out to the Taiaaroa Head to view the only mainland albatross colony (Northern Royal Albatross) on the planet. We set out, staying close to the northern coastline of the peninsula looking for seabirds and sea mammals. New Zealand Fur Seals and Stewart Island Shags were seen on the rocks and lower slope of the head, while up above a Northern Royal Albatross was gliding on the winds blowing in off of the Pacific Ocean. As we reached the end of the peninsula, we continued out into the ocean a little ways to look for other seabirds. A Southern Royal Albatross was floating on the water and allowed us to approach fairly close while a Northern Royal Albatross further out was less cooperative. As we turned around and headed back towards land, the Taiaaroa Head Lighthouse was in full view. As we re-entered the harbor we stayed a little further out from shore allowing us to see further up the slope. We could now see some of the albatross that were on the ground, partially hidden by grassy vegetation.



We returned to the dock and headed back towards Dunedin, taking a detour along the way. There had been a recent Little Owl sighting in the area so we checked to see if it still might be around. Unfortunately, we didn't find the owl, but it had been a very enjoyable day nonetheless. We returned to our hotel and gathered for our last dinner as a group in New Zealand, sharing our favorite birds and experiences from the past 16 days.

### Thursday, Jan 23 - Departures

Folks had breakfast at their leisure and then we had some free time with some visiting the Dunedin Botanic Gardens across the street from the hotel. Michael said so long to us at the hotel and Richard took most of the group to the airport, as some were spending more time in Dunedin. Richard provided us with our last picnic lunch and we said so long to him as well. It had been a great trip with spectacular landscapes, wonderful vistas and unique birds. Here's hoping our paths cross again on another adventure with Naturalist Journeys.

**A BIG THANK YOU TO MICHAEL AND RICHARD FOR PUTTING US ON SOME GREAT BIRDS AND AN ADDITIONAL THANK YOU TO RICHARD FOR GETTING US TO ALL OF OUR DESTINATIONS SAFELY!!**

#### Favorite bird/s

Brent - Little Penguin  
Byron - South Island Robin  
Cyndi - Great Crested Grebe  
Deb - Silvereye  
Gail - Morepork  
Jim - Buller's Albatross  
Kathy - South Island Wren  
Monica - North/South Island Robin  
Nancy - South Island Robin  
Rick - Red-crowned Parakeet  
Velma - Eastern Rosella

Photos: Group (Kent Skaggs - KS), New Zealand King Shag (KS), Buller's Albatross (KS), Red-crowned Parakeet (Debbie Ervine - DE), Australasian Gannet and chick (Brent Mann - BM), New Zealand Pigeon (BM), View from Muriwai Regional Park (KS), Cascade Kauri Park (KS), Variable Oystercatcher (DE), Tui (BM), Eastern Rosella (BM), Sacred Kingfisher (DE), Common Myna (DE), African Collared-Dove (BM), Black Swan (DE), North Island Robin (DE), Salvin's Albatross (BM), Cook Strait Ferry (KS), Hutton's Shearwater (KS), Queen Charlotte

Sound (KS), View of Queen Charlotte Sound from Blumine Island (KS), Weka (KS), Royal Spoonbill (KS), New Zealand Fur Seal (KS), Silver Gulls (DE), Southern Royal Albatross (KS), Pintado Petre (KS), Double-banded Plover (DE), Otira Valley (KS), Silveryeye (BM), Kea (DE), SHEEP (VELMA MANN - VM), Shearing sheep with scissors (DE), Kura Tawhiti/Castle Hill Conservation Area (KS), European Greenfinch (DE), Mt Cook National Park (KS), Eurasian Blackbird (KS), Great Crested Grebes (BM), Wanaka Marina (KS), Albatross scrum (KS), Little (blue) Penguin (BM), New Zealand Sea Lion (KS), South Island Robin (BM, Tip Lagoon (KS), Little Pied Cormorant (BM), Milford Sound (KS), Antipodes Parakeet (BM), New Zealand Fur Seal pup (DE), Upukerora River Mouth (KS), Taiaroa Head Lighthouse (KS), Stewart Island Shag (Otago) (KS), Skylark (BM)