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**New Zealand  
Sampler**

**Nov. 1-18, 2010**

***Peg Abbott, local  
guides and 10  
participants***

We arrived in Auckland after our 12 1/2 hour flight from the USA in mixed condition, as some had slept while others had not. Still we were smiling to start this grand adventure, and while waiting for the Rotorua flight connection, we passed the time meeting our in-bound company host, sampling fresh donuts (for a few, healthier sandwiches) and coffee, until the short flight was called.

Since planning the trip Peg had read about Kiwi Encounter, a captive breeding facility for the North Island Brown Kiwi that is open to visitors. We had just time enough to put our things down in our rooms, and rush off via taxi to catch the final, 3 pm tour of the day. Our guide had a thick Kiwi



accent which we delighted in hearing as we learned more of kiwis. We saw eggs being incubated, thick shelled, large heavy eggs - eggs that are a full 15-20% of the female's weight. The male incubates while she builds her reserves, and with good nutrition she can amazingly lay a

second. In today's world, with introduced mammalian predators, the survival rates for these highly precocial young is only 5%, for after hatching they are fully on their own with no parental care. We found out that they sing and answer calls through the egg shell, and that getting out of that shell can take four or five days of an effort that completely exhausts the chick. We saw two FAT chicks in their incubator and agreed they were off the top of the "adorable chart" without question. Later, at our evening activity the next day, we'd see an adult running about, poking its queer beak into the soil. We enjoyed all encounters with this "honorary" mammal and held great hope we would see them in the wild. Several of our group left adorned with kiwi earrings, shopping had begun...



Three of our crew arriving a day early had spotted a Thai restaurant, that our taxi driver confirmed was good, and we found that the *Amazing Thai* restaurant lived up to its name and it was a good place to celebrate Jerry's birthday. Jerry was a great member of our crew, always ready for whatever the day would hold. Bud and Gingy treated the group to a nice New Zealand Chardonnay in the modern lobby of our hotel in honor of the occasion. It was good to keep busy as we sought to stay awake, and get our rhythm onto that of New Zealand.



## **Tues., Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>      Rotorua / Thermals, Lakes & local Maori Culture**

We woke to bright sun and were eager to get on our way. Jerry, Judy



and Maggie had arrived the day before, and gave us tales of seeing a grand array of species along the shore, including four Shining Cuckoos



gathered in a tree. We asked Sonny Corbett, our local Maori guide and driver, to steer us to this location for starts, and while we did not find the cuckoos, we had superlative photo ops and good looks at two species of cormorants (Little and Little Black), New Zealand Scaups, and

Black Swans in good number.

Maori history and culture was the theme for our morning. We first visited a Maori meeting house or *wharenui*, a beautifully carved and crafted building held sacred to Sonny, as the focal point for group life among his tribe of the Maori. He serves on the board, and honors the rich symbolic tradition the architecture conveys. He told us how visitors were



historically greeted and led into a discussion of how Maori cope with modern life today. Maggie tried the traditional touching noses greeting, first to say that we are friends, and

then to say that all our relatives are friends as well.

Luckily this spot was close to our hotel as between the birds and the length of our discussions we missed seeing the adjacent historic



church. We did see vents and steam holes in a water channel running into the picturesque bay, and spotted a Song Thrush feeding on the lawn.

Geology was also a strong theme of the day, here in New Zealand's

geothermal wonderland. Lake Rotorua, and the village of the same name, lies in a large caldera, one still active today. We drove to the top of a small mountain near town to take in the views, and saw some of our first exotic species: rabbits, red deer, chaffinch, mynas, starling, and house sparrow among them. We could see pockets of thermal activity, steaming columns rising through the forest.

We drove about a half hour farther to reach Waiotapu Thermal Reserve for a hike



there amid the features. First on the list was a scheduled blow of Lady Knox Geyser, the *scheduled* part of this plan should have tipped off our suspicion. We arrived to the sight of a park's guide standing ON the geyser cone, with foamy eruption just starting to play behind him. It

turns out that for some 50 years the geyser has been soaped, erupting



for the convenience of visitors from around the world. It was a lovely geyser, reminiscent of the thin high blow of Yellowstone's beehive, but for Yellowstone purists, soaping was a horror.



Yellowstone's Grand Prismatic. Colors are mineral derived: antimony creates orange; sulphur creates yellow; while manganese creates purple. It was lovely to be out and walking, in natural conditions.

We did a little damage at the gift store, helping the cause of eliminating introduced Brush-tailed Possums by buying woolen goods made of their luxuriant fur. From here we ventured on to two lakes (named Blue and Green) to take in the beauty. There we found Black Swans, ducks, Mallard and Grey, our



The rest of the park was decidedly wilder, and we enjoyed exploring on

boardwalk trails amid the features. The two most memorable were Artist's and Champagne pools, certainly one of the most beautiful in the world, rivaling



first New Zealand Dabchicks and Australasian Coots. The views were



tremendous, including far views of Mt. Tarawera of the Taupo Volcanic Field, which erupted most recently in 1886. Its crest is still tan with ash; Sonny said last winter it held light snow. En route back to town, he told us the story of a duo of lovers, beloved by the Maori people.



We had a couple of hours free, and we scattered as we wished, some to the museum, some to the spa, some to a leisurely lunch, and others to rest. At 4:00 we reconvened to learn more of Maori life and culture at Te Puia, a center they created for education. It was a lovely evening, not overly touristic, just a nice

sharing of what they hold dear. There was an excellent interactive gallery that displayed the history, a striking black and white photo gallery which was traveling exhibit on today's landscapes. It was quite something to see a replica of the seafaring canoes and to imagine how they traveled the seas at a time other civilizations were just forming. We learned about weaving techniques using natural





reeds, and watched local carvers. We saw another Kiwi, the Little Brown from the North Island, about the size of a bittern and infinitely adorable. We took a tram ride around Whakarewarewa, another thermal area, seeing geysers and pools, and then on to a facility with galleries, a photography exhibit, a gifts store, a greeting ceremony, and dinner prepared in thermal steam. A distinct flavor from this



unique cooking method permeated all courses of the meal from soup to meats, certainly nothing any of us had eaten before. We still felt jetlag, and as we'd enjoy the singing and dancing of the greeting on arrival, Peg found us a ride home, and we retired early to be ready for the next day.

### **Wed., Nov. 3 Maungatatauri Ecological Island / Miranda Shorebird Reserve / Auckland**

Seeing birds and their native habitat were tops on the agenda today. Before leaving for the two ecological reserves we'd visit today, some of our group had a brisk walk to the church we ran shy on time to see the day previous. We then met our driver, Wayne at 8:30 am, driving north through gentle hills to reach our destination, passing through the Mamaku Mountains to reach Maungatatauri Ecological Island Reserve.

After this hour's drive north we met reserve volunteer, an excellent, enthusiastic guide named Sue Reid, one of the key people who look after Maungatatauri. This was an extraordinary place that could have taken us several days to explore in detail. The entire area has been ring fenced to protect native species from predators, particularly critical for native Kiwi. The fence was intricately designed, 47 km in length, dug into the ground, and curled over at the top. It seemed formidable. The dedication of New Zealanders to protect their wildlife would continue to amaze us throughout this journey. We learned that guides are on a call system, for if a tree falls on the fence or this vital protection is breeched in some way – they must respond quickly.



Sue paused at the double-door, protected entrance long enough for us to meet Mark, one of the paid employees of the reserve, who had arrived with his Kiwi-tracking dog, Bella.



Bella was a sweet herding dog (muzzle on only as required for policy) and she greeted us all. She answered Mark's soft verbal commands immediately and seemed

eager to get to work. Bella is essential to the Kiwi Recovery Project, her keen nose the perfect tool to finding this cryptic, nocturnal bird that rests in heavy cover of vegetation during the day. We headed off to walk the track, after spotting our first Eastern Rosellas, an Australian Harrier and a singing male Yellowhammer in the open fields.

We stepped into the forest and immediately entered a realm of tree ferns, understory ferns and other plants of the forest floor, and large Podcarpus and other trees. We were hoping to find native birds and that we did - our first North Island Tomtits, New Zealand Pigeons, Grey Warblers and others. Sue was fascinating





to follow through this forest, as she seemed to know every plant and every song radiating around us. The Tuis, brash and bold members of the honeyeater family, were courting and especially vocal. The trail



ranged up and down a small mountain that the fence entwined, allowing us to roam through a variety of habitats, wet and dry.

Our turnaround spot was a sturdy canopy tower, from which we had fine views down on trees and tree ferns. As we approached we heard raucous calling and with a thrill found several North Island Kaka, large endemic parrots restored here that are now breeding. They were loud and active, and we watched one pair go in and out of a natural nest cavity. Another pair

nested not too far away in a large nest box outfitted with a webcam, televised on a small screen at the aviary. Here, on a small TV, we could watch "Helen" the Kaka incubate her eggs.

The walk back through the forest passed through a section rich with palms. Excellent signage complimented what we learned from Sue. All too soon we were back on the bus, heading north towards lunch and our next highlight today, the Miranda Shorebird Reserve, an Internationally- recognized Ramsar site, an hour or so to the north. Wayne, our North Island coach driver, told us a lot about agriculture of the region as we passed through the terrain.



For lunch, we stopped in the small town of Matamata, now known as "Hobbit Town" for an area near it holds the major film site for Peter

Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* and is slated for future filming of the



*Hobbit*. We had time to browse the cafes and pick up sandwiches, meat pies, homemade corn fritters and baked goods. Brian Jackson met us out at the car park of the Firth of Thames, Miranda Shorebird Centre, which gave us access to an extensive shell beach, and what a thrill was ahead for us.

Over 5000 Bar-tailed Godwits were on the mud and shell flats, with numerous Lesser (Red) Knots amongst them. As we walked out to the flats, we had views of several feeding White-faced Herons and in a small pond we passed by hundreds of Pied Stilts. The sky seemed full of song, aerial bursts of joy from courting male Skylarks. It was wonderful walking the path to the beach under dozens of these vociferous dynamos.

Our attentions at the beach were soon grabbed by the



announcement "Wrybills are here." Indeed, several dozen roosting on a little rise, visible well in the spotting scope. Peg spotted a larger, orange breasted one among them which proved to be a rare New Zealand Dotterel, one coming into breeding plumage. Its mate was there but still wore starker attire. They were joined by a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, which

lined up cooperatively between the plovers and a couple of Red-necked



Stints. We then combed through the hordes of birds farther out on the flats, finding both Pied and Variable oystercatchers, Royal Spoonbills, and one lone Curlew Sandpiper. At the very end there were two or three Caspian Terns amid more abundant White-fronted Terns. One of the shags kept trying to swallow an eel, putting on quite a show.

A couple of times the godwit flock blew up to circle in the sky, but all at once the entire flock blew up. Keen-eyed Jerry picked out a skua, which we were able to get on it and determined was an Arctic (Parasitic Jaeger). It was stunning to see this many birds in the sky, swirling and calling in profusion. We



decided this was the grand finale to our day's bird show, and with the good excuse of a needed toilet stop, we did some fine power shopping to benefit the reserve at their small Visitor's Center. Peg found more books to increase her load, while others found great souvenirs and T-shirts.



Back in Auckland, several of the group had dinner at a nearby Japanese restaurant that Bud and Gingy had spotted on their early arrival. Here the yudon noodle soup was a hit, as was the tempura. Toby Appel joined us for dinner, as she was scheduled to join our merry group for the main journey and had come in a night early.

#### **Thurs., Nov. 4     Ancient Kauri Forest / Muriwai Beach Gannet Colony**

This was to be a free morning between our extension and the main journey but, being birders, we elected to add on a side trip to an Australian Gannet rookery about an hour's drive west of Auckland. It proved to be well

worth the diversion.

Local guide Stanley, of Bush and Beach Excursions, picked us up at the hotel and we were really pleased that he knew his birds and the general ecology of the region. He talked with ease, and once on quiet streets, stopped on a dime for us to get some great looks and photos of a New Zealand Pigeon which seemed to be posing on a wire. Peg had read of a mature Kauri forest that we could visit en route to this large gannet colony, an unusual one that occurs on cliffs of the mainland. We walked about a mile and half through lovely woods, enamored with the epiphyte-laden giants that were well represented here. Stan had reviewed the conifer evolution and radiation of the various species from Gondwana, now a subject of debate as geologists confer that much of New Zealand was under water during much of the Oligocene, about 37 million years ago. The giants we saw today likely stem from relict forests restricted to the tops of the few islands that remained from that time. Several of the trees were at least a 1000 years in age and it was humbling to realize they stood above species now extinct.



Perhaps because they have lost so much, New Zealanders seem energetic and devoted to the idea of saving what remains, and the forest we visited today held Bellbirds, North Island Robins, Grey Warblers, Tuis and other species thanks to their efforts to control



predators and set aside land. A colorful Eastern Rosella fed atop trees as we boarded our bus. We washed our boots at a special station as we left the forest, a precaution for possible spreading a type of fungus that can affect the ancient Kauri trees.

From here it was a short drive over



to the coast, and a short walk into an entirely different realm, that of steep cliffs, strong winds, offshore islets and waves. Australasian Gannets were vocal and busy everywhere, flying or courting, a few turning eggs in their scrapes which were lined with greens. Several males were gathering greenery, hopeful of mating upon presentation of such a gift to their mates. This colony is growing, indicating that the small fish resources are productive adjacent to this coast. We had fun watching them fly with marvelous agility, then land with an embarrassing inability. Pairs seem to have attention only for each other; we watched elaborate bouts of mutual preening and several greeting ceremonies. Strange gannets were not welcome to areas of mated pairs and were briskly escorted away.



There was human-watching as well for hordes of school children were here on field trips. Nancy, a retired teacher in our group, smiled and said how glad she was they were not in her care this day! It was great to see this next generation of conservation-minded Kiwis learning to treasure their heritage.

We had a quick turnaround before our previously-planned afternoon visit to the Auckland Museum, a drive by Auckland's Winter Rose Gardens, and up to Mt. Eden with a fine view of the city all around. Delicious fresh salmon was the most popular of our choices at tonight's welcome dinner. At dinner, Peg outlined our next day's trip to Tiritiri Matanga Island and described its conservation success story.



## **Fri., Nov. 5    Tiritiri Matanga Island / Auckland**

It was a short walk from our hotel down to the pier where we boarded the boat for Tiritiri Matanga Island, a pioneering location where many of the techniques now common to saving species in New Zealand were first tested. Since 1985 over 300,000 native trees have been planted on what was open farmland. Extensive predator control now makes this a safe haven where native species thrive. A few pockets of mature



forest remain on the island, and these were the areas we headed to with our local guide, Donald. He gave us a great deal of information about the island, the original involvement in the project by the World Wildlife Fund and Sir David Attenborough and the story of how rare Takahes were brought to breed, successfully.



There was a lot of song in the woods, it being early spring, and Donald helped us to sort out sounds of the various species. We were thrilled to see North Island Saddlebacks, a species nearly lost to extinction, the individuals we saw today obviously unaware of this grace. They are robust, highly vocal, birds to watch.

Over the course of several hours we saw several pair. We also saw energetic families of Whiteheads, busy birds reminiscent of kinglets. They kept up a constant chatter, broken by flute-like tones of Bellbirds, which proved to be numerous and quite tolerant of our photographic intentions. Most of the birds were banded, the dynamics of their



population recovery studied by biologists and volunteers in detail. Ronald knew where our best places to find the various species were, which proved fortuitous at one of the rest stops where, at eye-level, we found a nesting pair of Rifleman. We were thrilled to see North Island Rifleman as they are extremely rare, another species climbing back after a close call with extinction.



Free of predators, many of these species appear to be bounding back. We saw Pukako (Purple Swampphen) with tiny, dark chicks, and at lunch we visited *Greg*, an old bachelor Takahe that sired several broods before being passed over, at 18, for a more robust male by his six-year old mate, *Bella*. *Greg* had two years with low production and with numbers so few for the species, a new pairing was called for. *Greg* is perhaps short for gregarious, and in



place of a mate, he now seems totally charmed by shoes, packs, and people around picnic tables at the tea area. The biologists keep taking him to remote parts of the island for a peaceful retirement and he returns. It was rather a bizarre way to see one of the world's rarest species milling quite happily around a picnic site. At such close range we note that his legs were thick like rebar; his bill could take off your hand. This is the world's largest rail, a species discovered forty years after it was

thought to be extinct.

Hot tea was a welcome treat here near the historic lighthouse, and several of us did some serious damage in the shop. It turns out that we lingered a bit too long in this comfort zone, for only the first of our party to head down the trail to the boat dock saw Donald, who was there hoping to show us the North Island Kakako pair he had encountered. It turns



out there is a pair known to frequent the area between two water troughs on this trail. We heard them call and two of our party caught a glimpse of them feeding on the ground. We also had a few moments to study another conservation-dependent species, the Brown Teal, in a small pond by the wharf.

Soon, we were under sail en route back to Auckland. It's about an hour's trip and we found a few seabirds: Buller's Shearwaters (several), one Black Petrel (confirmed by Donald) and Black-winged Petrel, a smaller species with a distinctive underwing pattern.

Australasian Gannets were common and we saw a feeding frenzy of several dozen as we entered the Auckland Harbor. Bud and Gingy gave us another tip and led us to another great restaurant to top off



the evening. *Soul's* on the Viaduct Wharf proved to be a delightful Bistro in the trendy harbor area, fun!

**Sat., Nov. 6 Flight to  
Christchurch / Drive to  
Arthur's Pass Wilderness  
Lodge / Mountain Valley**

Everything went smoothly for breakfast and our transfer to the

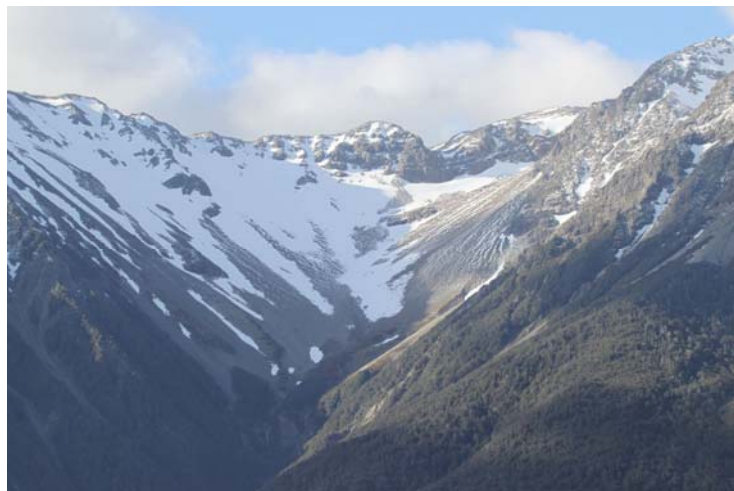
airport. We checked in as a group, and Scotty, our driver for the entire time we would be on the South Island, met us at baggage claim.



Wanting to make the most of our time in the mountains, we pushed through lush agricultural lands of the Canterbury Plains on toward Potter's Pass, catching views of fresh snow on the mountains all around. To our surprise we found Keas at this lower elevation pass, likely pressed down by the snow. These large parrots were feeding on shrubs near the roadside but were easily distracted by our bus stopping. As we clutched our 400 mm camera lenses they walked nearly up to our feet. One young bird livened things up by calling loudly as it attempted to land on the roof of the bus. They gave up when we offered no food, but we had splendid looks at them in flight as well as perched. We also found a group of Dunnock, an introduced species but our first for the journey.



From this pass we continued on through pastures of sheep, all with new fresh lambs. The scenery was drop-dead GORGEOUS with fresh snow outlining every crevice and peak of the landscape. Massive braided rivers came into view, on which we spotted our first endemic Black-fronted Terns at one of the crossings. We all had lunch on our minds, yet the elegant lunch awaiting us at Arthur's Pass Wilderness



Lodge was more than we could imagine. Huge picture windows surround the dining area with a view insured from every seat. We had a lovely pea soup, and a choice of quiche or frittata, homemade bread, as well as delightful hosts to answer our questions on everything from trails to (yeah!) free Internet. We had

time to wander a bit, settle into our rooms, which each have the same splendid view of Mt. Rolleston and surrounding peaks.



At 5:00 pm we met Gerry, owner of the farm and lodge, and a New Zealand conservationist of wide renown. He was an enthusiastic, walking encyclopedia who opened for us a fascination of plants.

Through his work many species were now just returning to the farm upon his efforts to fence sheep out of a mountain valley. We were watching Tess, his faithful sheep dog, start to work the flock, when above us we heard "kack, kack, kack" - all eyes were up to see a New Zealand Falcon. These have gotten rarer and rarer with passing time and we were lucky to watch this one fly the length of the field, and then turn back towards some cliffs perhaps in use for current nesting.



Gerry, a PhD botanist showed us several native mistletoe plants that volunteers have helped graft onto the trees. The native beech trees were in bloom, something that happens only every fourth or fifth year at this elevation. He showed us cushion daisies, plants adapted

to cope with grazing moa, the world's smallest geranium, and endemic stonefly larvae and adults in the stream. It was a blustery day with a cold wind that precluded us seeing black butterflies and a type of alpine skink. We huddled when he talked, and shortly our focus on ecology and battles to return the land to native beech forest (from Douglas Fir and other exotics encroaching) shifted to one on warmth and wine.



Time for happy hour, followed by a stunning dinner with choices of salmon (raised locally) or tenderloin, each prepared with care. Ahead of the meal they served homemade bread with babaganoush or a pumpkin cheese spread and dessert was a light, luscious crème brule. Clouds came in to preclude the evening stargazing, but as we'd started early, we were content to listen to the calls of Morepork, and head to bed. Little did we know we'd have trouble finding this owl later on in the trip, or we would have tried harder to see it here!



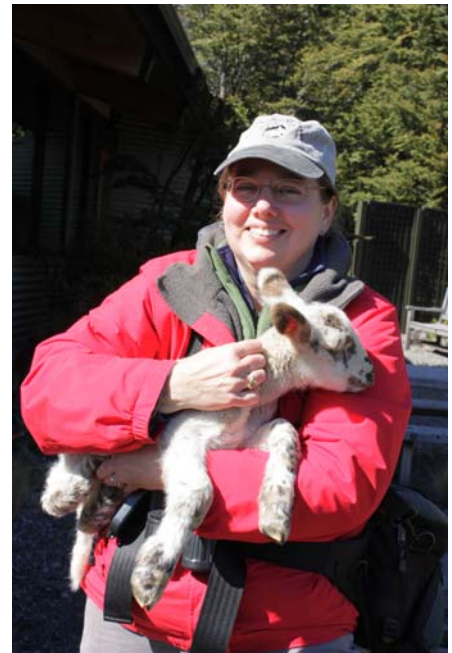
### **Sun., Nov. 7 Arthur's Pass and Walks from the Wilderness Lodge**

Gerry had us up early for a bird walk, on which we found busy flocks of Brown Creepers, very tame and photogenic South Island Tomtits, Grey Warblers and a quick flash

overhead of Yellow-crowned Parakeets. We had a trio of Keas fly by, and one member of our group had a glimpse of a likely Long-tailed Cuckoo which slipped into the woods and kept calling. We learned more about plants of the beech forest, lower plants like moss and liverworts which were numerous,

and the alpine tussock grass.

Some of the group split off to return on a longer loop at a quicker pace, and they spotted a Yellowhammer on the way. Breakfast was a delight after our brisk walk, one on which frost lined



the meadows. One of the treats was corn pancakes served with lemon



curd - yum!



Several of us cuddled a tiny bum lamb which they brought to breakfast. Today, some of the group walked from the lodge, seeing Banded Dotterels, Yellowhammers, Black-fronted Terns and Tomtits. Judy got in a run, many did laundry and several enjoyed time to just relax by the lodge.

Six of the group headed out with Gerry, for a day of natural history from stony beds of the braided rivers on up to the alpine realm at Arthur's Pass. Our first stop was down river where we watched Black-

fronted Terns at close range as they hawked insects



above a jade and turquoise-colored portion of the stream. One pair was courting, perhaps re-nesting after a recent flood. We also looked in several pastures, finding chicks of Spur-winged Plover and South Island Pied Oystercatchers grazing with their parents in the flocks of sheep and herds of cows. We enjoyed a great walk through lush beech forest to a viewpoint along a river

where we enjoyed lunch. Gerry pointed out many of the plants, some quite old in spite of their size. In a wet area we found sundews.

He was disappointed to find Keas begging right outside the



Department of Conservation office (a practice they strongly discourage) but as they were there, several of us clicked away and got some good close-up photos. Walking the nature trail at Arthur's Pass



was a treat, a loop path amid tussock grass and a grand array of shrubs. We had a great picnic lunch by a rushing waterfall. There were many clusters of the world's largest buttercup, commonly called Mt. Cook Lilies, though not a lily at all.

A new employee of the lodge, Tim, was along to help us and, as he

circled back to get the van, Peg said, "call out if you find a Weka!" When we saw him gesturing by the lower car park we picked up our

pace and were happy to find a Western Weka, obviously not bothered by humans, poking about a streamside. It had either had a run in with a stoat or a car, for part of its bill was broken, but it seemed no worse for wear and would in time heal. We'd packed a lot into the day, and there was still the sheep farm demonstration to go, so we ended



or exploring here, having absorbed as much as we could into our brains for the day.



The sheep demonstration was a hands-on affair, with opportunities to hold and feed bum lambs, try shearing and to watch the working dogs perform their trade. Merino wool is the ranch specialty. Neil, the farmer, had a regular working dog and a second type called a hunt-

away, a dog that would bark and move the sheep out when needed. In the big shed, he described grading of wool, and he then showed

shearing using hand-clippers, a real art. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed this chance to ask questions and interact with the manager of a working farm.

Then it was home to a nice cozy fire, New Zealand wines and dinner with a choice of lamb, slow-cooked with a lovely sauce or chicken with



local mushrooms. By now we were feeling more than a bit spoiled! The Morepork teased us once again, but kept its distance from the lodge as we retired. Stargazing was cancelled due to heavy cloud cover.

**Mon., Nov. 8 Arthur's Pass  
Wilderness Lodge / Canoeing /  
Christchurch**

Perhaps we were crazy, as the morning previous had been a slight 7 degrees Celsius, but several of us signed up to go canoeing, departing the lodge at 6:30AM. By 7:00 AM we were on the water and in the company of one of New Zealand's truly stunning birds - the Southern Crested Grebe. They were calling

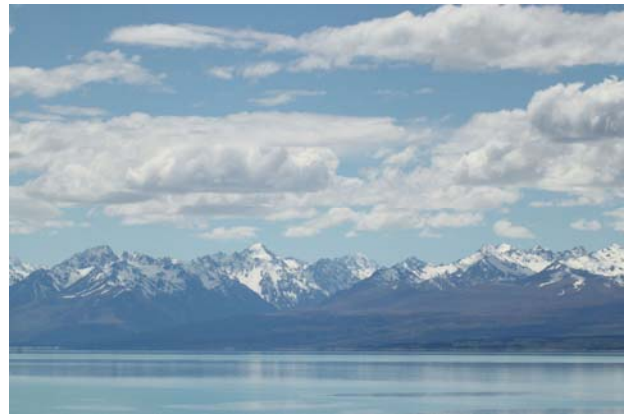


and staying close to each other as breeding pairs. We saw several and enjoyed getting relatively close to them in the boats.

The lodge has a fleet of very stable plastic kayaks, stable enough that our photographers could bring their big lenses. With light playing on Paradise Shelducks and New Zealand

Scaups everyone had a fine time. The staff led us to shore, and then put together a small fire to heat water for tea and coffee, before

returning to the water where we stretched out with a paddle to get back to the launch. Back for breakfast and several felt they'd worked hard enough to enjoy the Muster's meal - a huge plate with lamb sausage, bacon, farm-fresh eggs and more. Scotty was waiting with the bus, and soon we were on our way, albeit reluctantly! We stopped at the lake for those to see grebes that had not gone canoeing, stopped for views of now-far-away Black-fronted Terns and then on to Christchurch.



We stopped for lunch in Springfield, able to find some really good food already prepared, so efficient that yes, there was time for shopping. Slowly the pile of merino-wool garments, kiwi-themed items and paua-shell jewelry was collectively growing.

We went to the Antarctic Adventure to see Little Blue Penguins and as many of our group had been down to the ice it brought back vivid memories.

We got to Christchurch about 3:00 pm and, after settling into our rooms, we went down to enjoy the city's spectacular museum and the very fine botanic gardens adjacent to it. Some toured the Cathedral and several of us sampled the fare at an intimate restaurant at the gardens called the Curator's House. There several tried a salad with Whitebait, a small fish considered to be a New Zealand delicacy. The cozy interior, with sun pouring through large windows, growing softer and softer at the end of the day, was memorable. Alternatively, a few of the group tried the imaginative pizzas next door to our hotel at Winnie's. Lynn grabbed a menu to document the restaurant's rather wild culinary craftings. Scotty showed us some of the damage done by



the recent earthquake, but little did we know that several months later so many more of the city's fine historic buildings would suffer more damage from subsequent earthquakes. How fortunate we were to see it when we did.



## **Tues., Nov. 9 Kaikoura Pelagic Cruise / Christchurch**

We headed out early for a day we'd all looked forward to, a day we



were thrilled to have sunshine and good weather for. We were scheduled for a seabird pelagic cruise north of Christchurch at Kaikoura. We stopped a few times en route for photos and for birding at St. Anne's Lagoons, where we found New Zealand Shovelers, Grey Teal and Australasian Grebes among other species. Scotty dropped us off in the

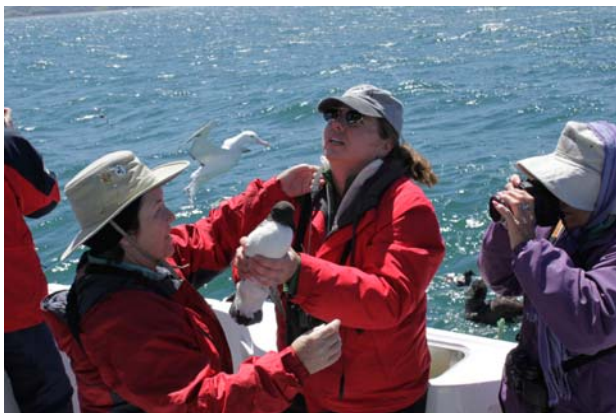
small town of Kaikouri for lunch and to place our daily infusion of funds into the local economy, today's mainly in the form of payment for jewelry. Two more pragmatic purchases included coats, as the wind was picking up and it had a real edge to it that would be colder out on the water. At the Ocean Encounters office we bundled up, Jean noting she now had seven layers on!





We boarded a most comfortable and speedy boat to head out to waters above an underwater canyon, an area remarkably close to shore. One company describes this trip as “a pelagic trip for those that don’t like pelagics.” The albatrosses and petrels seemed to be waiting for us, they soon gathered around the boat,

zig-zagging back and forth above our wake, showing off the grand expanse of their wings. There were two varieties of Wandering Albatrosses, Antipodean and Gibson’s and, as they landed in the water for their share of chum, we had time to sort out their markings. Cape Petrels were there by the dozen, joined by three darker petrels: one each of Flesh-footed and White-chinned and many endemic Westland. We had a great time observing, photographing, and marveling at the graceful flight of these seabirds.



We were out about 3 hours and time passed very quickly. New for even our most experienced pelagic enthusiasts were Hutton’s Shearwaters, there by the 100’s and Dusky Dolphins, a pair of which put on a good show. We had an opportunity to compare Salvin’s with White-capped varieties of the Shy Albatross complex. We visited some

rock sea stacks where we found an Australasian Gannet, a colony of nesting White-fronted Terns and some lazy, plump New Zealand Fur Seals. A most successful day!

Fortified with some tea or coffee and sweets at Cheviot, we headed



back to Christchurch. For some the boat was still rocking and many were simply tired, so dinner was catch-as-catch can in the local pubs and for a few just snacks from the grocery. It was race day in New Zealand, something on the order of the Melbourne Cup for carriage-horses so there was some great people watching to be had as parties came in to dine on prime rib, which Jerry and Judy also sampled, at our hotel.

**Wed., Nov. 10      Christchurch / Mt. Cook / Rare Black Stilts / Lake Tecapo**



Back to the alpine world today, to Mt. Cook, an iconic peak

of the Southern Alps, home to the Heritage, a famous alpine lodge. It was a healthy drive, so we broke it up with a satisfying walk in Peel Forest. We choose a loop track amid some huge Toatara trees, several 1000 years in age and in excess of eight-foot diameters. We found some friendly Silvereyes on the route, and got good looks at Bellbirds. A large flock of Redpolls came in on the forest edge and Bud snapped some really good shots. Our fine weather continued, almost unheard of here, but no-one wanted to say anything that could break the spell!





We went through the town of Fairlie and then across Burkes Pass. Just on the other side of the dam at Lake Tekapo, we stopped to see a beautiful Chapel of the Good Shepherd. There was a pair of Crested Grebes floating on the turquoise waters, and in going down to photograph them, Peg spotted a Cirl Bunting. We passed through the McKenzie Basin and stopped at the far end of Lake Pukaki to see



Black-fronted Terns and to find dessert, our now-daily afternoon tradition of ice-cream. Nancy found her Magnums, gourmet ice-cream on a stick, and several followed her lead.

About ten minutes from the lodge, along the gravel banks of the Waitaki River, we stopped for Scotty to phone ahead for our check-in. Peg was pointing out a Spur-winged Plover to Toby, then lost her focus to look at an all black bird, not an ibis, but... a Black Stilt! Indeed there was a pair, of this incredibly rare species that numbers less than 100 or so in the wild. It was wonderful to find them on our own. We had a visit to the captive breeding facility on our agenda for the following day, but seeing them so serendipitously in the wild was a treat. We looked until all were satisfied, then made our way up to the lodge.

With so much sun, the glaciers of Mt. Cook and the closer Sefton Ridge were sloughing snow - big loud booms rang out, the sound of calving

glaciers. Several trails begin right from the lodge, and we spread out between two, most of the group walking a couple hours to Kea Point and back, and five going into Hooker Valley. This trail held two suspension bridges over rushing rivers. Both walks had expansive



vistas up to the peaks, and to the jade-colored milky waters below. Three had views of a New Zealand Falcon, and a sighting of our first South Island Rifleman.

Those arriving back earlier had time to look at exhibits of the Sir Edmund Hillary Alpine Center. There were several movies ongoing there, one a presentation about his mountaineering, and later philanthropic life. It was a fine afternoon, followed by one of the nicest buffets one could imagine, stuffed with seafood, meats, potato and vegetable dishes and a grand array of salads. The dessert table was the demise of many, and laden with food, we retired by 9:00PM. Our main challenge of the day was finding our room in the maze of the various wings of the Hermitage.....



**Thurs., Nov. 11 Morning in the Mountains / Black Stilt Recovery at Twizel / Blue Penguins and Shags / Dunedin**

Jean took a brisk walk out to Kea Point, and several of us enjoyed some birding on trails near the lodge before breakfast. We left at

8:30AM and ventured down towards the town of Twizel, where we had arranged to meet staff from the Department of Conservation for a tour of the captive breeding facility.

The story of near extinction caused by cats, rats and stoats was all too familiar by now. It was an insightful, but sad visit to the facility. The program has been running since 1985, when a mere 23 Black Stilts were known to survive. They had gotten so rare that some individuals had paired with Pied Stilts, a fairly recent immigrant to New Zealand (last 150 years), so this further compounds the challenge of restoration. We looked at two chicks in one of the rearing pens, and got a first-hand view of the amount of time and money needed to keep this conservation-dependent species alive. Braided rivers cannot be fenced like forests, as they are subject to huge fluctuation of water flow and sometimes massive flooding. Stoats and cats play the most havoc. Today about 169 birds are known in captivity and in the wild,



making this perhaps the rarest wading bird in the world.

Another of their problems is also a behavioral one, rather than take flight, they move forward to meet a predator, whether a native Harrier or an introduced stoat. This strategy does not serve them well. The captive breeding program aims to get them past their most vulnerable stages, those of egg and chick. But it cannot save them from perils of nesting and so only slow progress is being made. New lightweight satellite receivers may shed light on nesting and dispersal. Their future is uncertain, a sobering fact of the visit.

We left Twizel and continued to Omarama where we stopped for a break and found wool to purchase. We passed five lakes, most of them manmade, altered to provide electricity to a large part of New Zealand. We visited the giant earth dam site of Benmore Lake, and then descended into agricultural lands on our route through the Waitaki River Valley which drains the snowfields and glaciers of the Southern Alps. After crossing over, we were on our way to Otago, a very different region of New Zealand.



At Omaruru, we had a quick lunch, and then experienced a quick moment of distress when it seemed we were ill-timed to see precious Little Blue Penguins. They come ashore at dusk and leave at dawn, so only at colonies can you see activity during the day, and that is still limited as the penguins enjoy the privacy and

security of burrows. However, a wonderful conservation project here at Omaruru makes them accessible by day, by having special one-way glass viewing tunnels where your eye is drawn into a burrow. We saw

an adult brooding two eggs in one burrow, two large fuzzy chicks in another and a family group that carried on quite a conversation in a third. It was a wonderful experience, and at the outside artificial (box reinforced) burrows we were allowed to photograph those sitting effectively on their porch. We captured their images, and better yet images of our own group splayed out on penguin guano-clad lawns in front of the burrows.

Everyone left with a very big smile, that was only to get bigger as we were steered to a viewing site for another, much rarer penguin, the Yellow-eyed, which would start to come up on the beach from 5:30 on. We timed it just right, and watched three different individuals emerge, waddle through sand and stone and start their climb up the shrubby slope. Quite high on the slope we found four or five more individuals awaiting their nest exchange, freedom to return to the sea to feed.



We made two more stops en route to Dunedin and our next appointed lodgings. The first was at a lagoon with a number of ducks and teal and, the final one, a pretty headland area where just offshore we found three endemic species. Several dozen Stewart Island Shags were grouped together on several large rocks, some very large chicks within them. Flying

by were several dozen Spotted Shags, and at our feet literally were courting Red-billed Gulls. As we closed the door to the bus, the first heavy rain of our tour began, good timing as we drove south to the city.

After a VERY full day we pulled into Dunedin at 8:15PM for a late dinner at Speight's Ale House for a pub-type meal. Lights of the city were beautiful, especially those of the historic train station.

## **Fri., Nov. 12                      Dunedin / Otago Peninsula**

Today was a day of little driving and some grand scenery, both following the Otago Peninsula coast on the low road, and returning



through farms perched on high hills on the return. Before leaving for our natural history adventures, everyone enjoyed a free morning to explore the city of Dunedin. Several went to the Botanic Gardens,



others to tour the Cadbury chocolate factory, many to the art museum and its delightful Nova Café. A couple of the group did some shopping, successful in finding some fine-quality woolens and jewelry. We left at 1:00 pm to visit New Zealand's only mainland colony of Northern Royal Albatross, disappointing at this time of year as no view of the colony

is possible without disturbing them. So, while we learned a lot about the species, we had no sightings. At this time of year it's advisable to book a cruise. Making up for this miss, however, was an incredible visit to the Yellow-headed Penguin colony run by nearby Penguin Place. They took us first to their little rehab pen, where three patients were being fattened up before return to the wild. To see this rare penguin at such close range was a treat. The patients gulped down fish and waddled around as only penguins can.

From here we went to one of the best designed wildlife areas we've featured on our tours. The penguins are wild, and its people that keep a low profile, staying on tracks that ramble up and down dunes above the seashore. We walked in shade-cloth covered tunnels, stopping at a couple of fresh water ponds they put in. We spotted two adults coming for a swim and watched them for some time. We also spotted a few standing or sitting near their nest holes, one inside a shaded copse of shrub. Cameras were blazing and there was a bit of euphoria among our bird fans - a great afternoon all around.



We returned to Dunedin, and Scotty recommended a place where we

would not find tourists, the restaurant of the Leviathan hotel. From all accounts it was as if we were the penguins and the locals our admirers as they stared at the group with abandon and more than one male (all



males) were heard to say "what are they doing here" and "where are their husbands!" This outing by five of our women led to us adopting the group name, "Scotty's Lot."

**Sat., Nov. 13          Catlins Region / South Coast / Invercargill / Bluff / Stewart Island**

Pretty scenery was on the menu today as we made our way across the south coast of the South Island. There were dozens of places we could stop, but we chose one that promised fairly easy to see Fernbirds in the park's write-up. We found a pair of Paradise Shellducks with a brood of small, patterned chicks in the

pond, some Grey Ducks and some very tame Yellowhammers. Redpolls were abundant, but no Fernbirds....

From Sinclair Wetlands, we continued on to the spectacular view from Nugget Point Lighthouse, where we witnessed the wind tossing up surf, with ocean birds enjoying the resultant banquet. We caught sight of a Black-browed Albatross, and dozens of Sooty Shearwaters whirling about just above the wave line. Maggie spotted a gannet coming in on its great porcelain wings. We found a smooth-coated female and young Hooker Seals in a cove and up on a rugged sea stack, two New Zealand Fur Seals. It was a brisk walk (Gingy described it as a march...) back to keep us on time, yet our next stop, a search for Southern Elephant Seals did not prove successful.



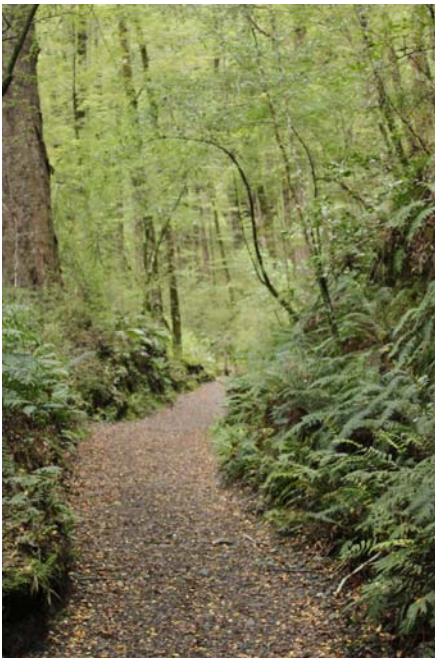


We stopped for lunch in the town of Owaka, at the Catlins Café, and then drove to Invercargill and on to the ferry at Bluff. We stopped for a quick bit of birding in a forest en route, hoping for more Long-tailed Cuckoos, with no luck.



The ferry ride across the straits was fast and furious, one wild ride as the wind was howling. We were happy to land on the Stewart Island side in Oban, and there we were greeted by both our hotel staff and resident

parrots, the Kakas. Several purchased groceries in town before climbing the hill, and had a lovely evening dining in, with a great view of the harbor from our rooms. Others tried the South Seas Hotel's Seacoast Restaurant, where they had fun interfacing with locals while enjoying another great meal.



### **Sun., Nov. 14      Stewart Island / Ulva Island / Ocean Beach Night Excursion**

Our hotel was perched up on the hill above Half Moon Bay and the tiny town of Oban, with fine views in all directions. Song Thrushes and Blackbirds gave a morning chorus and as our guide and ride to the Ulva Island boat dock over by

Gold Harbor arrived, the

Kakas put on a show, landing on our rooftop. We met an experienced naturalist for the walk on Ulva and she wasted no time in getting us lined out and on the trail. Others had joined us, so we had a big group and soon our photographers fell behind. But we all were able to get on the species we'd hoped to see, both of the plant



and bird realms.



The forests were stunning, with native hardwood and podocarp trees rather than beech forest. The understory was particularly lush, and in the undergrowth we had a grand time spotting Stewart Island Wetas that were quite common here. One adult had two fuzzy chicks; another seemed to pose for photos on a moss-covered log. Soon we heard the loud calls of south Island Saddlebacks and Bud caught just a fantastic photo. We heard Yellowheads before finding them, but once we got onto a pair, we had great views of them both in the tree canopy and on the forest floor. They kept company with Brown Creepers. Perhaps most endearing were the

extremely tame Stewart Island Robins, all color-banded according to the year of their birth.

After lunch, Remi, one of the robin researchers, explained that this was one of the only complete studies of a population expanding from a few founding individuals. Until last year they had a 90% rate for successful banding, and thus could work out the genetics of some 450 birds that stem from a small reintroduction here. The robins were so tame they'd come right up to your shoes, all the time keeping busy working through leaf litter for insects and other invertebrate foods. South Island Tomtits were common on the afternoon outing and we heard the elusive high-pitched calls of Rifleman. An added bonus to



this wonderful day of walking in pristine forest was our sightings of Blue Penguins from the shore, and from our boats going back to Oban. Lunch was a picnic on the beach, where we all wanted more cookies,



but our guide was a bit of a beach master and we dared not venture to ask.

Tonight our in-country partner company, Travel Time, had booked a special dinner for us at the Church Hill Café, one we can most decidedly recommend to any travelers. The intimate atmosphere, great wine selection and superb entrees made for an excellent evening. But, we were not done yet! Our night excursion had been cancelled the night before, so it was tonight that we'd meet Philip to head out to a remote beach to find (successfully) Stewart Island Brown Kiwis. It was not our plan for a 15-plus hour day, but hey, rare species were calling.



We took a boat past the island of Ulva, down to a remote arm of Stewart Island, and then walked in darkness on a boardwalk trail



across a narrow neck of land to Ocean Beach. In the dark of the forest we could hear the roar of surf. It was magical to be there in half-moon light, surf shining, with a seasoned guide that helped us find two kiwis. The first was almost right at the moment we entered the breach; we stood mesmerized as we watched it feed. It fed like a ground-cuckoo

would, by stabbing at amphipods that scurried about the sand. It would lift great wads of dried ferns and other drift line material of the beach to get at its prey. It was shaped a lot like an Agouti, a South American rodent also high-set in the back end, and it darted away quickly, as Agouti do when startled. We walked the length of the beach, seeing stars peek out from the intermittent clouds and near the end of the beach we found another, a female judged by the length of her bill.

Walking back through the forest we heard a male Kiwi calling. It was a magical night, though we trudged the last bit back to the boat, having gotten abundant walking in this day. We were tucked in just past midnight, a very full day!

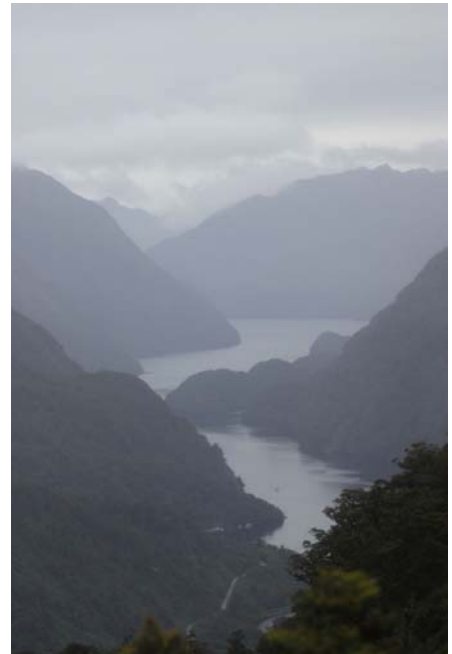


**Mon., Nov. 15      Stewart Island  
Ferry to Bluff / Fernbirds /  
Doubtful Sound Cruise**

The Kakas gave us early wake up calls, flying through the village and landing on our roof as if to say, hey, it's time to start the day. We were happy to see calmer waters in the bay, promising an easier passage across the straits to Bluff. With better

viewing, we were able to pick up five White-capped (Shy) Albatrosses, one Cape Pigeon, several Sooty Shearwaters, and quite a number of Northern (Common) Diving Petrels. This latter species almost seemed to race the boat, clipping along just above the waves with rapid wing beats.

We had a date with a local couple who run a small wetland reserve known to be a good place to see Fernbirds. As we'd tried several locations, we thought we'd try this one. With a couple of hours this would have proved fruitful, but with only about 20 minutes (we added this on to our itinerary), just three of our group had a quick peek, and the rest of us chuckled at our hundred-dollar Fernbird folly. In truth we were happy to donate to the cause of preserving this fine stretch of habitat, a property placed right on the edge of the sea with abundant salt grasses, giving way to land and a small stretch of trees.



In the future we'll spend more time here, but we were due at



Manapouri, for a 12:30 pm departure for our wonderful cruise. We had booked a trip down Doubtful Sound (really a fjord), in the heart of beautiful wilderness in Fjordland National Park. This is not far from the



area they discovered Takahe in the wild, after thinking they had gone extinct for some forty years. In such rugged terrain it was understandable how this could be so.

Getting us into the wilds is a delightfully-crafted experience by Real Journeys. We took just light overnight bags, leaving the rest with our coach driver, and hopped onto a

high speed boat that took us across Lake Manipuri to one of the huge hydroelectric power stations.

From there we

crossed Wilmot Pass by bus, on a narrow winding road not open to the public, just to transport coaches for companies operating tours on Doubtful Sound and to a few commercial fisherman that run sets of lobster traps in the clear ocean waters here. We boarded the *Navigator*, got



settled into our en-suite cabins, and went out on deck as the first sighting of a Fjordland Crested Penguin was made. At the mouth of the Fjord we encountered several more penguins, both on land and in the water. They quickly won our hearts, hopping up and down slippery, kelp-covered slabs of rock, some more successfully than others.

In the water they were graceful and powerful, on land comical. We

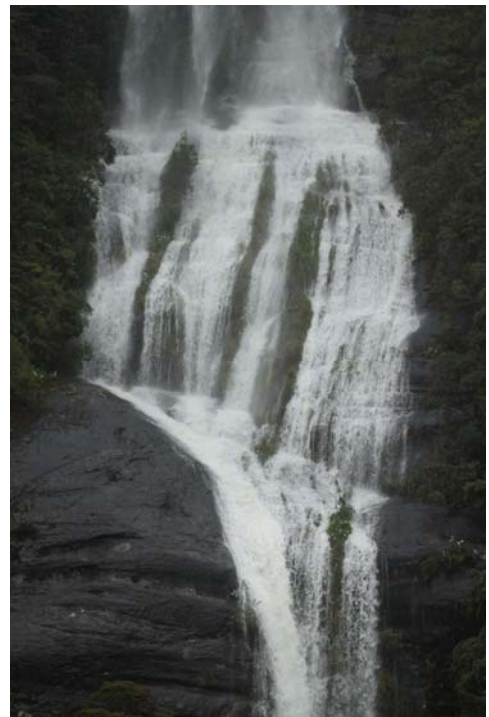
could discern males and females from their beak size and we learned that soon they'd be gone, finished with this year's nest cycle.



This area also held a colony of New Zealand Fur Seals that were just going in to their breeding cycle. Several big beach masters claimed territory on the rock islands, sitting tall to show off their bulk. They had great whiskers and we got close enough to hear their bellows and squeals. We also saw Pied Shags, Black-backed Gulls, and once in

quieter waters of the sound, both Paradise Shelducks and New Zealand Scaups. Rain began in earnest by 5:00 pm, so the call for hot soup and wine was well-timed. We were happy to find they had the Otago region wine we liked from Peregrine wineries, one called *Saddleback*. After all our hiking and hustling to fit everything in on Stewart and Ulva Islands, this relaxing cruise was very well timed.

After the soup course, they announced it was time for adventure. Full of soup and wine most of us just watched, as a herd of twenty-year olds took off in kayaks in a rather driving rain. Jean was game and got in the tender boat, for an excellent, narrated natural history ride along the shore. She saw a Shining Cuckoo and enjoyed the experience fully. Dinner was served as a buffet and the quality was good enough to find us foundered as we lined up for main and then dessert courses. We had Saddleback winery's Pino Noir. They then presented trays of New Zealand cheeses, oh my! We anchored in a quiet cove for the night, and fell to sleep to the sound of rain.





**Tues., Nov. 16      Doubtful Sound / Te Anau / Castle Creek  
Winery / Queenstown**

We woke to more rain, and views of mist rising from rushing waterfalls throughout the abundant vegetation. Heavy rain throughout the night had resulted in rushing rivers, and the effect was rather extraordinary.



Peg woke early, snuck up for some coffee and returned to read in bed, with the cabin door open. Such a life! At 6:15 they started up the engines, and it was great to be stationary, but have a movable feast of scenery before us. There were gushing waterfalls everywhere. Seen with binoculars, the ribbons of water came alive, dancing as they dropped through many-tiered layers of ferns, flowering shrubs, and epiphyte laden trees. The beech tree crowns became shiny in the spray, and tall podocarp conifers looked like fuzzy sculptures in the mist.

The captain skillfully placed the boat close to several of the falls so we could feel the spray. We huddled under the shelter of an upper deck, but outside so we could soak in the views. Jean braved the front deck and then she and Lynn took refuge on the bridge. Nancy spotted another Fjordland Crested Penguin, one likely nesting on one of the islands that dotted the fjord. After nearly two weeks of sun in this verdant

land of green, we could not complain about rain, especially in Fjordland National Park, one of the wettest places on earth. The

captain told us it rained here about 265 days of the year, so regularly that many of the ferns would shrivel and die without the mist and rain.

We saw a group of kayakers taking shelter under a rock ledge, and then paddling out again into the mirror-like waters. Their bright red



and yellow colors were brilliant against all the green. Time passed quickly, we caught up on our bird list, enjoyed breakfast, chatted and wandered in and about various protected spaces of the ship to frame our photos.

By 10 am they had us back to the jetty, where we disembarked to

board the bus, then the high speed boat across the lower lake to where Scotty greeted us with the bus. He steered us to a delightful restaurant in an old church where we sampled savory pies, paninis, sandwiches, coffees and fruit smoothies. We tried one last spot for elusive Fernbirds, but had to be content with views of Silvereyes, Dunnocks, Yellowhammers, and Redpolls. Our drive to Queenstown took up much of the afternoon, passing through dairy and sheep farms and numerous pastures of domestic Red Deer. We enjoyed a short tour of the only winery of the region to have a cave and enjoyed a tasting, which only whetted our appetite to try some more. Tired from our days, we were content to eat at our hotel, which had a fine view from the bar and restaurant.

**Wed., Nov. 17**  
**Routeburn Track /**  
**Queenstown**

We had seen so many species and so many wonderful places that it was hard to imagine anything new could compete, but I think most would agree this turned out to be one of the most special days of the journey.





Two local guides, Anea and Karl greeted us in the lobby, eager to get us out on the trail. We had to tell them we were not up for a 23K walk but would be happy to do what we could in the time we had. We split into two groups, one bent on clocking some miles and the other content to encounter the wonders of nature on a flatter but scenic trail. We all did the first part of the Routeburn, along with the Milford Track, one of New Zealand's most famous hiking trails. It was a green marvel, winding through tall trees draped with mosses and lichens. There were some huge trees, and everywhere an intricate carpet of green. This was a true Hobbit forest if one exists, indeed several of the film's forest scenes took place here.



Our group that ventured to the lake spotted a new species for our list, the South Island Robin, and learned a great deal from Karl as he pointed out birds, plants and more. Our longer-distance walkers



reached one of the trail shelters, crossing rushing streams on suspension bridges. All of us were immersed in beauty for our final day - a perfect ending to our journey.

Travel Time had arranged yet another great surprise for us - dinner with a view at the Skyline Gondola Restaurant. We accessed tonight's restaurant by a steep ascent by cable-car and enjoyed dinner as lights of the city came on. Scenic views, a fabulous buffet, and so much to celebrate from this great journey made for a perfect final night. New Zealand and its people had charmed us all. We would leave with a few extra pounds and many indelible memories.

**Thurs., Nov. 18**  
**home...**

**Morning in Queenstown / Journeys**

Reluctant to leave, it was nice to have a full morning to explore town, gather gifts for those at home or simply stretch our legs. Bud got some great photos off the point of a pair of Crested Grebes. Time passed quickly, but we fit in one more amazing meal - lunch at a French café, which was simply divine. Some of our group were staying on to enjoy a free day in Queenstown, but most were ready to go home after a grand adventure. Until the next adventure!



Naturalist Journeys, LLC  
P.O. Box 16545  
Portal, AZ. 85632  
866 900 1146  
[info@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:info@naturalistjourneys.com)

*Trip Report and photos by Peg Abbott, Naturalist Journeys, LLC owner and guide. Special thanks to Gingy Ferguson for contributions.*