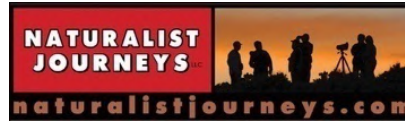


Birds & Nature of New Zealand | Jan. 7–23, 2026 | Trip Report by Dave Mehlman



Guides: Richard Schofield and Dave Mehlman; with participants: Alan, Anita, Anne, Freya, Holly, Kate, Ken, Pat, and Sue



Wed., Jan. 7 Muriwai Gannett Colony | Tarawhanui Reserve

By today, our entire intrepid group had arrived and collected at the Grand Millenium in downtown Auckland and all were ready and waiting to start our epic journey. Richard, our most awesome local guide, came by and collected us in the large van and we headed out for a day of birding and naturing in the greater Auckland area. Our first stop was the Muriwai gannett colony on the west coast of the North Island. This well-known bird nesting site provided us a super introduction to what was in store for us in New Zealand, providing a visual, auditory, and olfactory blast to the senses. The large number of nesting Australasian Gannets was the main highlight and the boardwalks allowed a very close approach so we could see lots of nestlings at various stages of development. Also present were waterbirds such as Kelp and Silver Gull, White-fronted Tern, and Variable Oystercatcher along with some of the common landbirds such as Tui, Yellowhammer, Silvereeye, and Welcome Swallow.

After fully taking this lovely site in, we drove to the Matakana Wharf Reserve for our first picnic lunch. The keen birders in the group dug up a Brown Teal among the large herd of well-fed Mallards present, and we found our first White-faced Herons, Swamp Harrier, and Sacred Kingfisher of the tour, along with omnipresent European Starlings and Common Mynas. After lunch, we finished our birding day by visiting the Tawharanui Regional Park, a fenced off mainland reserve. Enjoying a lovely afternoon, we found several Buff-banded Rails (the primary



bird target at this location), Australasian Swamphen (better known as the Pukeko), Masked Lapwing, the first of many Paradise Shelducks, New Zealand Fantail, and the introduced, but very attractive, Eastern Rosella. We finished our birding here, made our way back to the hotel in Auckland, and then finished our first day with a briefing and bird list review, followed by a very lovely, albeit late, dinner at a French restaurant near the hotel.

Thur., Jan 8 Tiritiri Matangi

Everyone navigated the Grand Millenium buffet breakfast frenzy on their own and then met Richard and the van on the street upstairs to begin our first full day of the tour. We first drove to the town of Gulf Harbour north of Auckland where we would catch the catamaran ferry to Tiritiri Matangi Island, one of the publicly-accessible predator-free islands off the coast of the North Island. After a short and calm boat trip, during which we found a few Fluttering Shearwaters, Parasitic Jaegers, and an Australasian Gannet, we arrived at the island dock, where we were greeted by a few White-fronted Terns and a Caspian Tern. After disembarking and receiving our arrival briefing from the local ranger, our group set off to find and enjoy the local avifauna. Right off the bat, a few in the group who wandered over to use the restrooms saw a North Island Saddleback feeding two fledglings—one target down! Continuing our slow walk up the Wattle Track to the visitor center and lighthouse produced some Brown Teal in the small pond, Red-crowned Parakeet, Whitehead, Brown Quail, Rifleman, a pair of Stitchbirds at a sugarwater feeding station, North Island Robins, and a Kokako. All before lunch!

Arriving at the visitor center, we had a picnic lunch and an opportunity to browse the gift store and visit the bathroom. A very cooperative Kokako also put on a show in back of the center, continuing our marvelous luck with this rare New Zealand endemic. After this interlude, we walked down to make sure to catch our return ferry in time, getting more observations of all of these species (including another Kokako!) on our way. At the dock, we joined the crowd, boarded the ferry, and traveled back to Gulf Harbour. After off-loading, we found the van, traveled back to the Grand Millenium, and then had a free night for dinner on our own, after a short briefing and review of the bird list.

Fri., Jan. 9 Pukorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre | Waimangu Volcanic Valley

We began the day by negotiating the Grand Millenium buffet a final time for breakfast, then brought our gear out to the curbside for loading into the van's trailer. We then set off through Auckland traffic for our tour of New Zealand. Our first stop of the day was the Pukorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre at the southern end of the Firth of Thames. The center is a major "wintering" site for shorebirds in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway and a major station for research on shorebird biology and conservation. We stopped at the Robert Findlay Wildlife Reserve and took a walk on the adjacent boardwalk through the coastal grasses to several hides,



bringing our scopes with us. As we walked, the sky above us was filled with the songs of skylarking Skylarks, providing a sweet audio backdrop to our visit. As we neared the coastal area and the hide, we began to see large flocks of Bar-tailed Godwit and South Island Pied Oystercatcher flying by and roosting on the mudflats, part of the 6,000+ and 2,400+ of each, respectively, estimated to be currently present on the center's grounds. As we examined other ponds, we found a large number of Wrybill, one of our main target birds here, and unique as it is the only shorebird with a beak that curves to the side, always to the right. With careful observation and scoping, we also found Pied Stilt, Pacific Golden-Plover, Double-banded Plover, and Red Knot mixed in with the shorebird flocks. Non-shorebirds included our first Gray Teal of the tour, some far-off Royal Spoonbills, distant Black-billed Gulls, and some White-fronted Terns.

After departing here, we ate a picnic lunch on the bus due to the amount of driving to do to reach Rotorua, our destination for the evening. However, we fortunately had time in mid-afternoon to stop by the Waimangu Volcanic Valley. We spent about 2.5 hours at this wonderous site, walking down the valley on a trail and taking a bus back to the visitor center. This active geothermal area was full of hot springs, bubbling pools, and steaming waters, surrounded by lush vegetation. The valley was created by an eruption in 1886 and has been a tourism draw ever since, at one time harboring the world's largest geyser and famous pink terraces (which were destroyed or buried by later eruptions). We also (naturally!) were birding and saw many Tuis, several Gray Warblers (Gray Gerygones), a Yellowhammer, and a highlight for the tour, a cooperatively perching Shining Bronze-Cuckoo. Finishing our visit, we continued driving and arrived at our hotel in Rotorua. After checking in, we met for our daily bird list and review of plans for the following day, followed by buffet dinner in the hotel's dining room.

Sat., Jan. 10 Lake Rotorua | Whakamaru Dam | Pureora Forest | Tokaanu Wharf Road | Majors Bridge | Whakapapa

We enjoyed the buffet breakfast at the hotel, then loaded up our gear in the van, picked up our picnic lunches, and set off for another day of birding and travel on the North Island. Our first stop for the morning was on the shore of Lake Rotorua, where we got a nice primer on New Zealand cormorant identification since there was a nesting colony of mixed Little Pied and Little Black Cormorants at close range. A couple of Great Cormorants perched nearby provided a third species to the list. Also present were numerous Black Swan, New Zealand Scaup, a small flock of domesticated Graylag Geese, and a Pukeko, among other things. Continuing south, we stopped at Whakamaru Dam for a break and picked up our first Eurasian Coot, among the hordes of Canada Geese, Black Swans, and Paradise Shelducks.

We then arrived at one of the most magnificent forests visited on the tour, at least on the North Island, the Pureora Forest Park. This park preserves one of the last stands of old-growth Podocarp forest on the North



Island, a forest type that used to cover most of the island. It is protected today partly due to the efforts of conservation protectors, who insisted that proposed logging for this area be stopped in the late 1970's. During our several hours here, we enjoyed a picnic lunch, did some road birding, and enjoyed the mystical experience of walking among giant Tōtara, Rimu, and Kahikatea trees. The birding was awesome during this time and we picked up North Island Robin, Kaka, Long-tailed Cuckoo (or Koel), Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Whitehead, a Fernbird, a pair of New Zealand Falcons, Ring-necked Pheasant (they all count for the list!), among many more. After our final forest walk, we reluctantly climbed back in the van to continue our travels.

We stopped along Tokaanu Wharf Road which led through massive cattail wetlands at the edge of Lake Taupō, New Zealand's largest lake. Our target here was Australasian Bittern; as we all knew from experience, bitterns are very hard to spot among the wetlands. However, as we drove along, keen-eyed observers spotted a bittern lurking in the reeds. We promptly stopped and with careful searching were able to get glimpses of this bird as it stalked off through the cattails. Toward the end of our searching, it finally had enough and flew off, providing a bittern flight moment for all. Also present were some New Zealand Grebes, a Gray Warbler, and many of the usual suspects. Our next stop was in the nearby town of Tūrangi where we drove to a park along the Tongariro River to look for the rare and unusual Blue Duck, one of the few species of ducks that is a fast-flowing river specialist. After some diligent searching, we had great views of several Blue Ducks, including some fledglings, as they cavorted around in the water. While there, we also noticed that many European Goldfinches, along with some European Greenfinches and Common Chaffinches, were actively bathing in a riverside pool.

We then concluded the day by driving up from the main highway toward the small community of Whakapapa where our hotel for the evening was located. On the way up, we stopped the van in the road for nice views of some New Zealand Pipits adding another lifer for most in the group. We arrived at the hotel, with its magnificent view of Mt. Ngauruhoe to the north, checked in, and then had a bit of free time before our daily checklist and dinner. After dinner when it was dark, most of the group gathered for an owling walk along the road and into the quiet village. The group was able to clearly hear a Morepork calling but could not lure it close enough to be seen, much to our regret. After owling, we returned to the hotel for the night.

Sun., Jan. 11 drive to Wellington | ferry to South Island

We started the day with the breakfast buffet at the hotel in Whakapapa and then loaded all our gear in the van and trailer for what would mostly be a travel day. After a few hours driving, we arrived at the Cook Straits ferry terminal in Wellington and joined a long queue of trucks, cars, and other vans. After what seemed like a long time, it finally became our turn to board the massive boat and we were directed to our spot. After parking, we could get out and all went upstairs to the main lounge where we managed to find some table space and get lunch at the on-board cafeteria. Unfortunately, the 1:30pm scheduled departure passed with no apparent sign



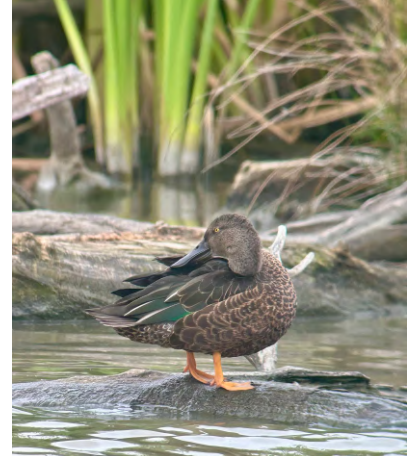
of movement and, eventually, the captain got on the PA system to say that they had “accidentally” boarded 64 too many passengers (and their cars, presumably!) and that this same number of passengers would have to get off before the boat could leave! Although it was not immediately clear to anyone how such a thing would be possible, given the 500+ passengers on board, after several hours, the problem was resolved and off we went across the Cook Strait.

During the trip, most stayed comfortably seated as the boat made its way across the strait; a few spent time scanning for birds outside the windows, noting several Fairy Prions and a Fluttering Shearwater or two as we crossed. We then arrived at the dock at Picton, on the South Island, and waited for the debarking process to complete. We drove to our nearby hotel, checked in, and then most in the group walked over to a nearby Thai restaurant for a late take-out dinner, which we ate in our rooms and then went to bed for the night.

Mon., Jan. 12 Marlborough Sounds | Blumine Island | Blenheim WTP | Lake Elterwater | Ohau Point Lookout

Today began with a buffet breakfast at our Picton hotel, after which we brought all our gear to the van for loading. The group then walked a short distance to the Picton harbor and the offices of E-Ko Tours, where we met Captain Paul for our morning tour of the Marlborough Sounds. Paul gave us a short introduction on the Sounds and our trip (and demonstrated proper holding technique for shags and presidents!) and we then boarded our boat for the trip. While in the water, we had great views of Fluttering Shearwaters, some sitting on the water, Australasian Gannets, White-fronted Terns, New Zealand Fur Seals, and the usual gulls. We also had very close-up looks at a nesting colony of New Zealand King Shags, a large cormorant whose range is entirely restricted to the Sounds. After this satisfactory “tick,” we went to nearby Blumine Island, a predator-free sanctuary island in the Sounds, and disembarked at the boat dock. Once on island, we took a short walk on the trails to look for island birds, which did not disappoint. Sightings included several Weka, one of which greeted us upon arrival, a Malherbe’s (or Orange-crowned) Parrot, Tomtit, South Island Saddleback, New Zealand Bellbird, and several Tuis. On our return trip to Picton, we saw a few Spotted Shags to add to our growing cormorant species list.

After getting to the dock, we thanked Paul for the great trip, loaded back up in the van, and commenced heading south along the east coast of the South Island. We stopped for a pleasant picnic lunch at Harling Park in Blenheim and then visited the Blenheim WTP where we took a walk across the Salicornia flats to look at the large ponds. Perhaps the highlight here was a large group of Royal Spoonbills sitting in the trees; nearby were hordes of waterfowl including Canada Goose, Black Swan, Paradise Shelduck, Mallard, Gray Teal, and New Zealand Scaup, with a few Pied Stilts mixed in to provide some contrast. Continuing on our southward trek, we



stopped at Lake Elterwater, which had a lovely viewing platform at the edge of the lake. A really nice sighting here was a large group of Australasian Shovelers, which allowed close viewing. Also present were several Hoary-headed Grebes, the only place we found this species during our tour. Other birds included another Royal Spoonbill and several Little Pied and Great Cormorants.

Resuming our southward trip, we stopped at the Ohau Seal Colony overlook by the highway and had great fun watching the antics of New Zealand Fur Seals, with the adults mostly snoozing and the young ones gamboling about. We also noticed, among the large number of Silver Gulls present here, a Parasitic Jaeger and a Northern Giant Petrel floating on the water. After completing this stop, we drove a bit further into Kaikōura, our destination for the night, and checked in at The White Morph, a hotel named after a plumage variant of the giant petrel. After settling in, we met, did our daily checklist, and then enjoyed a nice dinner in Kaikōura before turning in for the night.

Tues., Jan. 13 Kaikōura | Albatross Encounter

The day started with breakfast at a café in town, after which we returned to the hotel and then met at the Albatross Encounter office right next door. We met Captain Kevin for the morning boat ride and were driven by him in a van to the boat dock for our highly-anticipated offshore pelagic birding drip. Arriving at the dock, we got to climb on board the boat on land via a ladder (an interesting experience) and then, once seated, we were launched off the boat ramp and headed out to sea. This approximately 2.5-hour boat trip was a great experience, though not without the potential for seasickness. We cruised around and periodically stopped the boat as the captain put a large bag full of fish parts over the side to attract the seabirds. And attracted they were! Periodically coming in to haggle over the food offerings were a single, enormous Antipodean Albatross (part of the Wandering Albatross complex, which is taxonomically complicated), Northern Giant Petrel, Salvin's Albatross, White-capped Albatross, Southern Royal Albatross, and a few Pintado Petrels, fighting for scraps with their much larger tubenose brethren and/or sistren. Also present at times, though not always coming into the food offerings, were Buller's, Hutton's, and Sooty Shearwaters, Parasitic Jaeger, and Westland and White-chinned Petrel (the latter close enough to actually see the chin!). To top it off, at one point several Dusky Dolphins decided to play in our bow wave, adding a mammal component to our trip. A classic Kaikoura pelagic trip, probably one of the best such trips in the world!

After we returned to the dock, we were hauled out of the water and taken back to the Albatross Encounter office. We thanked Captain Kevin and his crew profusely for this great experience, got his official trip summary, and then had a free afternoon to explore the Kaikoura area. Some rested, others did laundry, a few walked



around the adjacent peninsula; all enjoyed a lovely day in this very sweet coastal town. Meals were on our own for the afternoon and evening.

Wed., Jan. 14 Waikuku Beach/Ashley Estuary | Maned Duck “twitch” | Arthur’s Pass Wilderness Lodge

Wet met for breakfast this morning at the Albatross Encounter next door, then returned to our rooms, grabbed all our gear, loaded the van, and then set off south and west toward the Southern Alps. After a bit of driving, the first stop for the day was Waikuku Beach on the south end of the Ashley River estuary. This lovely stop provided a great break and some nice birds, including more Bar-tailed Godwits, Pied Stilts, Gray Teal, some Black-billed Gulls, and a Royal Spoonbill, among many of the other usual suspects. We then took advantage of some “incoming intel” received by Richard and made a short trip to the town of Pegasus’ golf course to do our only real “twitch” of the tour! After parking our van beside the course, we walked over to some ponds and, after a bit of searching, found a single female Maned Duck loitering on the greens with some Paradise Shelducks. This species, normally found in Australia, is a rarity in New Zealand—but we were not complaining! Continuing our trip, we then stopped in Rangiora for a picnic lunch at Ashley Rakahuri Regional Park.

After lunch, we began our journey west into the Alps, eventually arriving at Arthur’s Pass Wilderness Lodge, our destination, in mid-afternoon. As we entered the road leading to the lodge, a short stop by some fields allowed us very nice looks at a bunch of Black-fronted Terns flying around, a new species for the tour. At the lodge, we checked into our lovely and comfortable rooms and then the group met in late afternoon for the lodge-offered tour of a high country sheep station. On this fascinating tour, we met Michael (a lodge co-owner) and his dog Pip and got a thorough introduction to New Zealand sheep, including a sheep-herding demonstration, an overview of wool production, “all about merino,” and the opportunity to say hello to some sheep in person. A very interesting and fascinating presentation on an industry that has been dominant in New Zealand for over a century. After the walk, we had some free time and then met for our checklist review and then an excellent dinner in the dining room.

Thur., Jan 15 Arthur’s Pass Wilderness Lodge

Today was specifically designated as a “no driving day” to give Richard a break, so we started with a lovely breakfast at the Lodge dining room. Most in the group then went for a walk on the grounds of the Lodge to see what was out and about, even though the skies were cloudy with a bit of occasional drizzle. The walk proved to be quite productive, weather notwithstanding, and we had decent views of Pipipi, Tomtit, New Zealand Fantail, a group of Rifleman (riflepeople?) at extremely close range, Gray Warbler, Silvereye, Dunnock, and Redpoll in the trees and Black-billed Gulls, Black-fronted Terns, and Paradise Shelducks in the fields. Followed by the walk,



we enjoyed a group lunch in the dining room followed by a free afternoon. At the conclusion of the day, we met in the lounge for our bird list, discussion of plans for the following day, and then our second great dinner at the Lodge.

Fri., Jan. 16 Arthur's Pass Village | Castle Hill | Peel Forest | Lake Murray | Lake McGregor

Although today was our day to depart Arthur's Pass Wilderness Lodge, we squeezed in one final birding trip before departing. The group was up early at the van and we drove slowly through Arthur's Pass Village on a Kea quest. Despite a very light drizzle, our capable crew kept careful watch and, soon enough, a Kea was spotted lurking between some houses. We all piled out, got some quick looks and photos, and then the bird flew across the street, where we tracked it down and had more looks at this distinctly New Zealand bird—what a treat! And, it left the van's windshield wipers alone! After this, we began our trip back to the Lodge, stopping one final time in the Village for a short walk on a wooded trail. This walk turned up South Island Robin, Rifleman, Tomtit, and a fantail. We then returned to the Lodge for breakfast and packing and loading of the van.

We then set off on our journey to Twizel. Our first stop was the Castle Hill Conservation Area with its unique rock formations. Although primarily a scenic/photography stop, we noted a large number of Yellowhammers and Eurasian Skylarks in the area. As we finished our walk, a large group of Morris Dancers from Adelaide pulled up and began dancing, showing again that you never know what you will run into on a Naturalist Journeys tour! Departing here, we stopped in Darfield for lunch supplies, then arrived at the Peel Forest Scenic Preserve where we enjoyed another lunch in the field. After lunch, we hiked the Big Tree trail all the way to the big tree (an enormous Tōtara), amusingly passing several not-so-big big trees along the way. Birds here included more Pipipis, New Zealand Bellbird, Gray Warbler, Tomtit, and Silvereyes.

Leaving here, we climbed up a bit and soon arrived at Lake Tekapo in the Mackenzie Basin, a large area in the central South Island that is higher and drier than much of the surrounding country. Our arrival here marked the start of our search for one of the rarest, if not the rarest, possible species of bird we could find on our tour: the Black Stilt. Therefore, we spent the rest of the afternoon inspecting various wetlands to the west of and alongside Lake Tekapo for this stilt, of course noting everything else we ran into along the way. To compress a lot of time birding into a short description, we were not able to find Black Stilts, possibly due to high water, although there were plenty of Pied Stilts around to distract us, along with various ducks (Gray Teal, shelduck, scaup, shoveler, Mallard), some Great Crested Grebes, White-faced Heron, Swamp Harrier, and the usual Redpolls, Chaffinches, and Greenfinches. As the end of the day approached, we headed for Twizel where the group stayed at two different hotels and then finished the day with a group dinner at a local restaurant.



Sat., Jan. 17 Ohau C Ponds | Lake Pukaki/Glentanner | Aoraki/Governor's Bush Track | Mueller Lookout Walk | Lake Ohau Road

At Richard's suggestion, most in the group were up early for a quick run to some wetlands near Twizel to try to find a Baillon's Crake. Arriving at the site, we intensively scanned the pools of water and tried playback, but the crake proved to be elusive to the point that we could not find it. However, an assortment of other species rounded out a nice list for the morning, including several cormorants, Swamp Harrier, Gray Warbler, and a White-faced Heron. We then returned to a café in town for breakfast. We then left for our day's outing, following the road up the west side of Lake Pukaki toward Mt. Cook Village and Aoraki/Mt. Cook, the highest point in New Zealand.

Our first stop was along Lake Pukaki near Glentanner, another site for possible Black Stilt. Although the stilt continued to elude us, there were many Black-fronted Terns, Masked Lapwing, South Island Pied Oystercatcher, and assorted waterfowl at this spot. Pushing further up the valley and into the mountains, we stopped in Mt. Cook Village for a short hike on the Governor's Bush Track, picking up Gray Warbler, New Zealand Fantail, Silvereye, Dunnock, and the usual non-native finches. We then enjoyed a picnic lunch in a comfortable shelter and continued driving to the parking lot at the end of the road. Unfortunately, Aoraki itself was hidden by clouds, but we then enjoyed a nice hike in the awesome glacially-carved mountain valley on the Hooker Valley Track to the Mueller Lake lookout. A few birds were found on this scenic hike, along with quite a few wildflowers to distract us from the incredible mountain views.

Reluctantly turning our backs on the Alps, we retraced our steps back to Twizel and then spent the afternoon birding the west and south sides of Lake Ohau, again attempting to find some Black Stilts. There were numerous lakes and small wetlands along this road and we made sure to stop at almost every one. Many had lots of birds on them, including hundreds of Gray Teal, Pied Stilts, Double-banded Plover, Black-fronted Tern, and other typical waterbirds, but even with 11 pairs of binoculars going full blast, we could not spot a Black Stilt. Despite our lack of success specifically with the Black Stilt, we knew we had given it a thorough effort and therefore we turned around and headed back to Twizel. After a brief break, we met again at one of the hotels for our daily bird list and review of plans for the following day, followed by dinner in the hotel's dining room.



Sun., Jan. 18 Lake Ohau Road | Tarras/Lake Dunstan | ferry to Stewart Island | kiwi spotting

We began this very full day with buffet breakfast at the main hotel in Twizel, then loaded everything in the van for a full day of travel. To start off, however, we gave the wetlands along the Lake Ohau Road one last try, quickly revisiting most of the sites we had been to the day before, again in hopes of spotting the Black Stilt. Unfortunately, though most of the same species were present, we still could not extract a Black Stilt from the landscape. Giving up on Lake Ohau, Richard had another spot in mind near Twizel, but the road to it was flooded, so we took that as a sign and turned around and began our journey south to Bluff. Heading south, we crossed over Lindis Pass, where we stopped to admire the view. Crossing down into Otago Region, the weather improved immensely and we made a stop in Tarras (the home of the infamous Shrek the Sheep) for a break and some merino wool item shopping. We also picked up lunch items and then drove a short distance to a roadside picnic area near Lake Dunstan where we enjoyed a fine, sunny picnic lunch.

Continuing south, we entered Southland Region and made a short stop in Gore for a break; here we also admired the giant Brown Trout statue and learned that Gore is the “Country Music Capital of New Zealand” (surely an answer to a winning trivia question!). Reluctantly leaving this happening town, we continued south past Invercargill and arrived at the ferry terminal in Bluff. Off-loading at the terminal, we put our carry-on gear into a large bin to be put on the ferry, Richard parked the van, and then, after a short wait, set off on the ferry to Stewart Island. Although only about an hour ride, we spotted a few seabirds in the Foveaux Strait, including Cook’s and Pintado Petrel, White-capped Albatross, Sooty Shearwater, and a few Stewart Island Shags. Disembarking from the ferry, we retrieved our bags from the bin and then walked over to the nearby South Seas Hotel where we checked in and had a bit of free time. Meeting later in the day, we did our daily checklist and then enjoyed a lovely dinner in the hotel’s dining room.

As the sun set and it became dark, we met again for one of the highlights of the tour: the evening kiwi spotting hike! We walked over to the close-by office of the operator (Beaks and Feathers) where we, and a multitude of others, gathered outside and received a short briefing from one of the guides. After that, we climbed into the operator’s vans and then drove to the Ryans Creek Aerodrome, where Southern Brown Kiwis come out to feed in the grass at the edge of the runway at night. Each of the guides had a red light and everyone was encouraged to talk quietly (or not at all!) and to ensure the flash on their phones was turned off. Starting our walk, we soon spotted a foraging kiwi in the grass, easily visible under the red light. Seemingly starving, the kiwis constantly walked about and probed the ground, regularly gobbling some kind of prey. In total, before the night was over, we tallied at least six Southern Brown Kiwis and heard at least five Morepork to make a very satisfying evening.



After midnight, we called it a successful trip and we boarded the vans to head back into town, where the guide kindly dropped us all off at the South Seas. What a night, kiwis, owls, and the Southern Cross!

Mon., Jan. 19 Halfmoon Bay | Ulva Island | penguin spotting

Our full day on Stewart Island started with continental breakfast at the South Seas. After that, we walked to the nearby boat dock and boarded the comfortable Paikea from Rakiura Charters for a morning pelagic trip in Halfmoon Bay to visit the Muttonbird Islands. This was an epic and memorable birding boat trip, aided by the crew's use of fish scraps to lure in an apparently ravenous and insatiable horde of albatrosses and petrels. By far the most numerous albatross was White-capped; they came right up to the boat and constantly bickered and fought for pieces of fish. Mixed in with them were some Salvin's Albatrosses and the much smaller Pintado Petrels, which had to fight for even the smallest scrap. A few Southern Royal Albatrosses put in an appearance at one point, as did a solitary Buller's Albatross, easily distinguishable by the bright yellow top and bottom to its bill. Circling around the boat were Buller's and Sooty Shearwaters, Northern Giant Petrel, and numerous Common Diving-Petrels (the latter mostly flushed by the boat as it moved along). We cruised by the shores of a few islands, picking up species such as Spotted and Pied Cormorant, Stewart Island Shag, Variable Oystercatcher, a pair of Brown Skuas, and a calling Weka. On a lengthy stretch of beach, a large male New Zealand Sea Lion was sunning itself, along with a SIPO (South Island Pied Oystercatcher). And, best of all, the seas were pretty calm, making for a great ride overall.

The Paikea ended its trip at the dock at Golden Bay, where we got off and then got right back on a smaller water taxi for a trip to Ulva Island, another of the important predator-free island refuges for native birds in New Zealand. Arriving at the dock, we got off and then ate our bag lunches near the small interpretive station on the island. After lunch, we set off for a couple hours of walking on a very delightful afternoon on a few of the trails. Although our primary avian target for the day was Yellowhead, we enjoyed the trails, trees, and the entire environment in general. The walk was quite successful, with everyone able to get views of several Yellowheads, which were complemented by Red-crowned Parakeet, bellbirds, Tuis, Pipipi, South Island Robin and Saddleback, several Kaka, Tomtit, and a few other odds and ends. At the conclusion of the hike, we met the water taxi back at the dock and were taken back to Golden Bay. After getting off the boat, we walked back to the hotel and then had a bit of free time before dinner at the South Seas Hotel.

Later on, about dusk, the group walked from the hotel over to the main boat dock for a penguin vigil, having received a tip that around dusk, penguins could be seen coming out of the water at that location. We gathered on the dock, along with other people wandering by who had heard about the penguins, and waited. All of a



sudden, along the edge of the shore appeared a small group of Little Penguins swimming in after a long day of foraging in the ocean! They neared shore, hopped out onto the rocks, shook themselves off, and then, after a brief wait, hopped into the boulders at the edge of the shore where they presumably were nesting. Indeed, a truly successful penguin vigil.

Tues., Jan. 20 ferry to Bluff (South Island) | Eglington Valley | Te Anau

We started the day by grabbing our carry-on gear again and walking over to the boat dock. We again put our bags into a bin and loaded aboard the comfortable catamaran ferry for the trip back to Bluff. Many again kept watch for seabirds during the trip, spotting numerous White-capped Albatross and Sooty Shearwaters, a Cook's Petrel, and many Common Diving-Petrels being flushed by the boat. Arriving in Bluff, we extracted our gear from the bin, loaded into the van (which Richard had gone to retrieve), and then drove to a breakfast restaurant in Invercargill. We then left the south coast of the South Island, heading once again into the Alps and the town of Te Anau. After arriving in town, we dropped the trailer at our hotel for the night and then continued into the mountains to explore the Eglington Valley. A couple of stops here yielded some great scenery and nice birds, especially at the Lake Gunn Nature Trail, where we found Rifleman, several Kaka, Gray Warbler, New Zealand Fantail, Tomtit, and South Island Robin. As the afternoon came to an end, we headed back into town, arriving back at the hotel where we checked in and had a bit of free time. We then met for the daily checklist and had dinner in the hotel's dining room.

Wed., Jan. 21 Mirror Lakes | Homer Tunnel | Milford Sound

The day started with the buffet breakfast at a scheduled time at the hotel, after which we gathered our gear for a full day in the mountains in the Eglington Valley and Milford Sound areas. Starting our journey, we stopped at the aptly named Mirror Lakes to take in the view and do some birding. Apparently, these lakes are a "must-see" for the tour groups coming from Queenstown to Milford Sound, since we were joined here by many, many other visitors. Despite the noise and commotion, we had more Kaka sightings, some New Zealand Scaup, Tomtit, South Island Robin, and a couple of Mallard x Pacific Black Duck hybrids (some of which seemed very close to the black duck end of the spectrum). Persisting on our way, we stopped at Monkey Creek where a large crowd was admiring the antics of a Kea. Oddly, this Kea seemed inclined to join our group by boarding our bus, but was dissuaded from such an activity. Perhaps it sensed some kindred avian-interested people?

Continuing, we arrived at the east entrance to the Homer Tunnel and parked the van. We were now at the most easily accessible patch of above-treeline habitat in the alps, home of one of our final target birds: the South Island (or Rock) Wren. The species is very hard to find on a tour, partly because of its overall scarcity and mostly because much of its habitat is high in the mountains, above treeline, which is inaccessible to most of us mortals.



But, Richard knew of this one area where he felt it was worth a try. So, we got out of the van, put on our packs for a couple hour outing, and then set off. Much to our surprise, however, as we were about to start, a Long-tailed Koel (Cuckoo) sounded off right near the van! Richard therefore attempted some playback and the bird responded by flying back and forth over the road a few times, providing some decent views of this hard to spot species. We then set off across the tussock grasses and arrived at a suitable location, which consisted of rocks and scree intermixed with scrubby vegetation. The group then sat and watched for any sign of avian activity. Truth be told, it was pretty quiet up there, though enjoyable with the sun out and many flowers around to identify for the botanists. Some, in fact, ate lunch while waiting and watching. Finally, toward the end of our time, Richard played some songs to try to induce a wren response and, indeed, they responded! A pair of South Island Wrens popped up, sat on the rocks and bushes, and generally posed very nicely for views and photographs—truly a memorable sighting of the tour.

Our mission there accomplished, we returned to the van to continue our trip to Milford Sound, first passing through the Homer Tunnel. Arriving at the Sound (literally, the end of the road) we had a bit of free time to wander around. During this time, a few in the group spotted a Fiordland Penguin by the boat docks to add a second penguin species to our tour list. We then boarded the Spirit of Milford for one of New Zealand’s classic boat tours: the loop around Milford Sound to the mouth and back. This tour captured the majestic scenery of this glacial fjord and we passed by steep cliffs, waterfalls, and wooded coves on our journey. Many of the regular birds were noted on the trip, including Silver and Kelp Gulls, Variable Oystercatcher, White-fronted Tern, and assorted other birds. After the boat returned to the dock, we found Richard and the van, loaded up, and headed back to Te Anau. We then met for our bird list and then had dinner in the first floor restaurant attached to the hotel, before calling it a night. While the group was in Te Anau, several took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Te Anau Glow-worm caves since the tour operator was based very close to the hotel, though it meant a late evening.

Perhaps the most amazing thing for today, however, occurred late in the evening. Freya’s aurora app indicated a major outbreak tonight and, when the group went outside after dark to check it out, there was a phenomenal aurora australis display over the lake. In fact, news reports suggested it was widespread that evening all over New Zealand; this provided an incredible night-cap to a great day.

Thur., Jan 22 Te Anau Bird Sanctuary | Taiaroa Head boat trip

The day began with our scheduled buffet breakfast at the hotel, followed by loading our bags in the van and trailer for a travel day. Our first stop, however, was at the Te Anau Bird Sanctuary in town. The primary subject



of interest for us here was its Takahe rearing facility where these large, flightless rails are raised for eventual release into the wild. We did see several Takahe, including some pairs raising chicks, providing us a view of this amazing bird which had somehow survived the forces of extinction which had done in so many of its avian relatives in New Zealand. Also around were a variety of other species, including Song Thrush, Eurasian Goldfinch, Redpoll, Silvereye, fantail, and a pair of semi-captive scaup which we could watch swim underwater with their feet. We then left here headed eventually for Dunedin, stopping in Balclutha (where Richard lives!) and in Waihola for lunch.

We arrived at our hotel in Dunedin in early afternoon, unloaded our gear, checked into our rooms. After a short break, we got in the van again and drove all the way almost out to the end of the Otago Peninsula where we found our boat for the Taiaroa Head trip, the Monarch, waiting. At that point, a light rain began to fall, but we boarded the boat along with other passengers and took the opportunity to put on the extra long raincoat that the boat provided. We then set out for about an hour cruise out to the head and just into the open ocean. Some in the group sat inside while others, fully covered in layers of rain gear, headed out to the bow. The rain, wind, and waves made for some interesting viewing conditions, but we were able to spot some of the nesting Northern Royal Albatrosses, both sitting on their nests up on the head and a few flying by. Also present were some Sooty Shearwaters, a Northern Giant Petrel, and many Stewart Island Shags to complement the normal Kelp and Silver Gulls and White-fronted Terns. We then returned to the dock, wet and bedraggled, but very satisfied after this last boat trip of the tour. Interestingly, a large flock of Royal Spoonbills was present in a small pond by the road both on our drive out and back from the boat. Returning to the hotel, we changed clothes, dried out, warmed up, and then met for our final daily checklist and a lovely farewell dinner in the dining room of the hotel. With great sadness, but a lot of satisfaction, we reviewed some of the highlights of the tour, exchanged hugs and farewells, and gave our incredible guide Richard a hearty thank you for an epic tour.

Fri., Jan. 23 Dunedin | departures

We had our final breakfast at the hotel before various parts of the group departed at different times to different places. A few even stayed around an extra day or two to see a bit more of Dunedin, before we all headed back across the Pacific Ocean to home.

Photos: Group (Dave Mehlman - DM), Buller's Albatross (Patrick Gregerson - PG), Pukeko/Australasian Swamphen (DM), Auckland (DM), Muriwai gannet colony (DM), Australasian Gannet (DM), Welcome Swallow (DM), Waimangu Volcanic Valley (DM), Whio/Blue Duck (DM), Weka (DM), Blumine Island (DM), Australasian Shoveler (DM), Royal Spoonbill (DM), New Zealand Fur Seal (DM), Arthurs Pass Wilderness Lodge sheep (DM), Castle Hill (DM), Pied Stilt (DM), Hooker Valley (DM), Lake Ohau Road view (DM), Boat tour (PG), White-capped Albatross

(DM), Birding by boat (PG), Steward Island Shag (DM), South Island Robin (DM), Eglinton Valley (DM), Aurora Borealis (DM), Southern Alps (DM), South Island Wren (PG)