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**New Zealand Nature & Birding Tour  
January 5 – 18, 2016  
With Stewart Island Extension  
January 18 – 21, 2016**



Fred & Carolyn, Abby, Mary & Steve, Randy, & Guide Mark Ayre

**Tues., Jan. 5 Auckland**

As most of us had arrived yesterday or earlier, our morning start was perfectly timed for starting our tour. This week is a holiday for a lot of folks in New Zealand, so the roads were less travelled. We headed to the Mangere water treatment plant, a large mosaic of ponds, channels, and canals on the coast that

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plays host to many water birds. There were many life birds for all who had never been to this island nation before. We did come up with a very rare vagrant for New Zealand, a Japanese Snipe. This species nests in the Kurile Islands on the north end of Japan and migrates to New Guinea for the Japanese winter. A great start to the trip.

Our next stop was Auckland Centennial Park where we were introduced to some of the many tree ferns and old growth kauri trees. All this native vegetation is home to a number of the native birds species. So during our picnic lunch we watched New Zealand Fantail, Tui, and Tomtit feeding around us as we ate.

Our final stop of the day was at the Muriwai Beach area. This area is popular with lots of folks for fishing, surfing, and viewing the Australasian Gannet colony. We were able to see nesting birds about twenty feet away and were also treated to the hundreds of other birds that fill the wind swept headlands and islets just offshore. White-fronted Tern and Red-billed Gull also nested here, and all were relatively close. This was a really great way to finish our first day.



### **Wed., Jan. 6 Tiritiri Matangi Island**

We drove north out of Auckland to catch our ferry over to Tiritiri Matangi Island. The people of New Zealand have taken it upon themselves to undo what a couple of centuries of folks introducing all sorts of exotic species have done. Incredibly effective and utilizing unique tracking systems and traps, they are going island to island and removing every non-native animal. Tiritiri Matangi is one of those that has had that plan put into effect. Once all the vermin were removed, they started re-introducing native bird species. One note here as to why there was no re-introduction of native mammals, there are only four endemic species that call New Zealand home — three bat species and the New Zealand Fur Seal.



We did a four-mile loop trail finding Stitchbird, Kokako, New Zealand Bellbird, and many more. We finished up with a late lunch at the lighthouse and then birded our way back down to the ferry. We did find a pair of Southern Boobook Owl along the trail, which made that twenty-minute crossing go by just a little quicker.

### **Thurs., Jan. 7 Miranda Shorebird Centre / Waimangu Volcanic Centre**

Today we started our journey south from Auckland with our first stop being the Miranda Shorebird Centre. This group of folks have been working to protect northbound shorebird migration stopovers in Southeast Asia and China. They have also set up blinds to watch shorebirds along the edge of the estuary. Unfortunately the tides did not cooperate as well as they could have, so most birds were a little further out than we would have liked. But we got good looks at Wrybill, both oystercatchers, Pacific Golden Plover, and all those Bar-tailed Godwit.

There were some wetlands adjacent to the road and here we found Red-breasted Dotterel with young and two Pectoral Sandpiper. There was also a large flock of Royal Spoonbill roosting in a tree and a number of Kelp Gull loafing in a field.



We continued on to the centre where the director (Keith) talked to us about the worldwide work they were doing in the interest of shorebirds. Really a very worthwhile endeavor and they are certainly making a difference locally and internationally.

After lunch we headed further south to the Rotorura area and all the surrounding geothermal activity. A nice walk down into a very old crater full of steaming and bubbling water gave us the opportunity to see New

Zealand Dabchick and New Zealand Scaup (in some ambient temperature lakes). As we finished our drive to our next lodging we were surprised at the number of Swamp Harrier and the diversity of their plumages.

### **Fri, Jan. 8 Pureora Forest Reserve / Tongariro National Park**

It was getting ready to rain when we piled into the bus and headed over to Pureora Forest Reserve. We were having breakfast in the field as it started to drizzle, but that really didn't seem to have much of an effect on the birds. Orange-crowned Parakeet, Tui, Kokako, and lots of other birds continued to fly over our heads as they moved from one side of the road to the other. Given the weather, it was really a treat to have so many birds zipping by.

We took a short drive over to the Totara track, which is about a forty-five minute loop. As we were walking to the beginning of the entrance, a Kaka flew over, the first of three to do this. New Zealand Robin were very confiding and Long-tailed Cuckoo were busy calling overhead. It was nice to be able to walk and bird in this older growth forest before heading further south on the North Island on this blustery day.



## Sat., Jan. 9 Tongariro National Park

Yesterday's rain and clouds disappeared by the time we woke up this morning. So after a large, but quick breakfast, we headed up to the crater above us. The road is used in winter for access to the ski fields and we were cooking to look at birds, alpine plants, and the views. It was springtime at this elevation and most of the plants were in bloom, with alpine daisy putting on the biggest show. Australasian Pipit were displaying and the introduced Chaffinch apparently like to breed even at these elevations.



We hiked up to Mead's Wall and found a few of the locations where *Lord of the Rings* was filmed. We could see the other two craters visible from this elevation and they too had some snow. It was just a stunning day up here.

We dropped down in elevation to one of the fast moving rivers in the area. Here in the shrubs above the river we had more cuckoos, Silver-Eye and plenty of Tui's. But the bird we were here for was the Blue Duck, a denizen of

whitewater rivers (much like our Harlequin Ducks back home). We found them below us; two adults, four downy ducklings, and two sub-adult juveniles (a previous clutch?). We were able to make our way down to the river and from behind the shrubs we were able to watch all of the birds foraging under the swift current.

## Sun., Jan. 10 Cook Strait / Picton

Early morning on this high plateau usually starts with a layer of low clouds, something we didn't experience yesterday. But today we got to see the clouds settle on the fields of flax. It drizzled a little as clouds are wont to do, but when we dropped down to lower elevations it cleared up and we arrived in Wellington to blue skies and in enough time for lunch before getting on the ferry for our ride to the South Island.

It was still sunny on the ferry and until about a third of the way across while being followed by Fairy Prion, Fluttering Shearwater, and lots of Red-billed Gull. Then driftwood-gray clouds appeared, which actually helped (as did the wind) in finding other pelagic bird species. We had White-capped, Buller's and Royal Albatrosses, along with an assortment of shearwaters. It was not a rough crossing and as we got into Queen Charlotte Sound the water was like glass. No one was feeling queasy, so that when we landed we checked into our waterfront hotel and walked down to finish the



day at a fine French restaurant.

### **Mon., Jan. 11 Queen Charlotte Sound / Kaikoura**

We had our own boat and guide for the morning to go out and explore Queen Charlotte Sound and all it had to offer. First on our list was the small population of King Cormorant (a rare and very localized species of “shags” only found here). We motored on glass-like water and were accompanied by Fluttering Shearwater and a couple of Parasitic Jaeger (who had made the flight south from the Arctic). And then ahead we could see a small group of cormorants clinging to the side of a cliff and these turned out to be the Kings. We had wonderful looks at these blue-eyed beauties with the yellow caruncle above their eyes.

Next we were off to the Cook Monument, a masonry tribute to Captain Cook, the early explorer of New Zealand and the South Pacific. Walking around the edge of the clearing were a number of Weka that were really not paying us any mind. This was the same greeting from a pair of Variable Oystercatcher that had chosen to nest near the monument. Not a bad stop for history or for birds.



Our final stop was for our morning tea/coffee in a cove along Arowapa Island. But before we could break out the goods we saw something jump out of the water ahead of us. And then it jumped again and we saw that it was a Hector's Dolphin, one of New Zealand's endemics. There are less than 7000 of these animals left in the world and all of a sudden we had three groups totaling about thirty animals swimming around us! They would swim on their back, they would float and poke their heads out of the water, and then try to ride what little bow wave we had when we

changed locations. This was just so much fun, especially given the sunny weather, the lack of wind, and the glassy water.

After docking, we had lunch and then headed south to Kaikoura, land of whales and albatrosses.

### **Tues., Jan. 12 Kaikoura**

This was our morning to go out for albatross and other deep-water pelagic species. And the seas looked to be free of wind, which would make this a much easier ride. We boarded the jet boat on land and then a tractor backed us into the ocean and off we went. What makes this part of Kaikoura such a hotspot for deep-water species is the under-sea canyon that comes within a couple of miles of shore. Within ten minutes of leaving shore we were shepherded along by Northern Giant Petrel and Cape Petrel (Pintado).



We made two stops on our trip where a wire-mesh filled with fish parts was thrown into the water and birds just started to find us. More giant petrels and Cape Petrel arrived, and then the big guns: Royal, Wandering, White-capped, and Salvin's Albatrosses all put in appearances within five feet of the boat. These birds are huge, and all seemed to have different personalities. We enjoyed absolutely wonderful opportunities for photography on this sunny day on the seas.

The afternoon was at our leisure, but a few of us wanted to go back out and look for Sperm Whale. There were two choices, on a boat or in a helicopter. The helicopter was certainly more efficient, and after our bird-filled morning, it made more sense to look from the air. And we certainly covered more territory from up there and were able to find one Sperm Whale taking its ten minute break between its 45-minute, mile-deep dives. This was a perfect way to finish the day.

### Wed., Jan. 13 Drive to Arthur's Pass



We left the coast today and headed into the mountains for some different scenery. We stopped at a small lake where we watched nesting Double-banded Plover and South Island Oystercatcher. New Zealand Scaup were common, along with Gray Teal.

We drove a little further up the road and stopped at a regional park where we got out for a short walk and were able to get good looks at Australasian Pipit, a long-distance look at New Zealand Falcon, and a group of Spur-winger Plover.

The final stop for the day was at the Wilderness Lodge in Arthur's Pass, a wonderfully sumptuous place to spend our next two days. The lodge has created and provides nature and ranch oriented walks and hikes, and first on our list before dinner was an introduction to high-elevation sheep ranching. We watched as border collies brought a group of Merino Sheep to us and then watched as our host sheered a sheep. All this in ninety minutes and it gave us an understanding of how this community functions.

Oh, and then there was that wonderful meal ....

## Thurs., Jan. 14 Arthur's Pass

We joined the morning hike through the Manuka forest where we got great looks at a Fantail family and at a Rifleman. All of this before a tasty breakfast under clear, blue skies.

On our way to the park visitor centre we found Black-fronted Tern feeding along a braided river, their favored nesting locale. The centre provided us with lots of information about the beech forest and its inhabitants that we were going to look for in the surrounding forest. We stopped at the next town for our morning coffee and were greeted by numerous Kea. They were sitting on chairs, tables, and railings and would just stroll up to one of us to see what we were doing or what we were eating. They were almost comical in their inquisitiveness.

We drove up to the pass and went for a hike, but given that it was midday, things were pretty quiet. We moved through high meadow wetlands and then into red beech forest, but only the usual suspects put in an appearance. The highlight was all of the blooming wildflowers, anemones, mountain daisies, and others. This was definitely the right time to visit for wildflowers.

## Fri., Jan. 15 St. John Hill / Lake Taupo



This was a repositioning day as we headed further south towards the Aoraki National Park area. We climbed in elevation, which took us out of the coastal rain and winds. Clouds made it over the pass, but they hung there as decorations as opposed to weather-makers. We turned south and headed down the northeast shoreline of Lake Taupo. Wild clouds reflected off of the turquoise water to the right, while smaller lakes and ponds were on our left. And in these smaller bodies of water were what we were interested in, as

one of these sag ponds might provide a look at one of the rarest shorebirds in the world — the Black Stilt. It took a number of ponds, but then we found a single immature bird. We got pretty good scope looks at this bird and at mixed flocks of waterfowl. It was really sweet to see one half of one percent of this bird's population.

We finished the day by driving up St. John's Hill, hoping to see introduced Chukar. No luck, but we did see California Quail. Atop the hill are numerous observatories and this is where we took our afternoon coffee. The area around Taupo was designed to limit nighttime light pollution, as this is a world-renowned observatory site with numerous countries represented.



## Sat., Jan. 16 Black Stilt / Mt. Cook (Aoraki NP)



This part of the South Island has a series of lakes and channels that provide most of the island's power. Lake Taupo's water travels from one lake to the next, and as the water falls towards the next one, it goes through a number of power-generating plants.

And next to one of those channels are a series of ponds that provide habitat for Black Stilt and other species. First up was a stunning male Double-banded Plover in alternate plumage. This was followed by numerous teal, ubiquitous Black Swan, and another Black Stilt (that was much closer than yesterday's).

Then we headed south along the entire Western shore of Lake Taupo. Clouds reflected off of the still waters, while the other side of the road rose in elevation and gained numerous peaks along a parallel fault. We were getting close to Mt. Cook National Park. But the closer we got, the more the clouds gathered. We arrived and had a quick lunch and then set off on a track that took us to the base of the mountain. The clouds were still there, but they would intermittently break open and offer us views of different glaciers. We didn't get to see the entire mountain, but what we did see were living glaciers, with snow-white water cascading from their base.

## Sun., Jan. 17 To Dunedin / Otago Harbor Cruise to Taiaroa Head

We had some territory to cover for the first part of the day as we headed to the southeast coast and the city of Dunedin. After lunch and checking into our hotel, we took the long drive around the Otago Bay to Taiaroa Head.

Taiaroa is a recently colonized mainland nesting sight for the Royal Albatross. As we arrived at the dock



for our boat ride out to the ocean, we could see both adults and sub-adults soaring on eleven-foot wing spans. There were other birds in the air, but the size and gracefulness of these birds stole the show.

We boarded the boat and headed out to the open sea as we viewed both Stewart Island and Spotted Shag, Variable Oystercatcher, Sooty Shearwater, and more of those albatrosses. On the far side of the head was a small colony of nesting Royal Spoonbill, all in the few shrubs that hung onto the side of this wind-swept real estate.

Further out to sea were other albatrosses, N.

Giant Petrel, Fairy Prion, and White-chinned Petrel. It was like we crossed an imaginary line and all of a sudden there were Procellariiformes everywhere. A little challenging to identify all of what was flying around us, but certainly no complaints.

After a short time in the swells, it was time to head back to shore. More Royal Albatross were in the air and a number of them made their awkward landings on the head. If it was a partner landing, there was lots of bill clacking and head bobbing. If it was a sub-adult, well it appeared that they would walk around and then take a good long look at their webbed feet.

### **Mon., Jan. 18 Drive to Bluff / Catlins Coast / Ferry to Stewart Island / Brown Kiwi**

Off we went in the morning to bird the Catlins Coast and make our way to Bluff where we would catch the ferry to Stewart Island. It was a sunny day and we had a number of quick stops along the coast. On mudflats we had mixed flocks of shorebirds, off-shore we had Hector's Dolphin, and there was always a few Tui around when we stopped at native forest.

We made it to the ferry with about forty minutes to spare, enough time to take a light travel bag and our optics before boarding. It takes about an hour to make the thirty-five kilometer crossing and the most abundant bird was the Common Diving Petrel. The most common bird on the island as we walked up to our rooms was the Kaka.

### **Tues., Jan. 19 Ulva Island / Seabird Cruise**

After breakfast we hiked down to the water taxi for our ride over to Ulva Island. The island is another predator/exotic species-free example of Kiwi restoration efforts. Without the threat of feral species, reintroduction of native species is possible. Here Northern Brown Kiwi and Yellowhead have become re-established. We were fortunate to get excellent looks at South Island Robin, South Island Saddleback, Kaka, and Red-crowned Parakeet. The native forest was in wonderful shape as we did a three kilometer loop.



At the end of our morning hike we gathered at the pier for our birding boat ride around a number of the offshore islands. Our first goal was Yellow-eyed Penguin, which is quickly becoming one of the rarest penguins in the world. And true to form, it took us quite a while to find two of these birds, one of which bathed and preened in front of us for twenty minutes — great views.

Further out into the deeper water we had three South Polar Skua looking to be fed off the back of the boat. This brought in a number of albatrosses with the highlight being a Buller's that quietly spent ten minutes with us, mostly within ten feet of the boat. What a striking bird.

### **Wed., Jan. 20 Fiordland National Park / Boat Cruise**



We left on the first ferry back to South Island this morning and had incredibly flat seas. Lots of



shearwaters, but the Gray-faced Petrel was the highlight. It took us less time going back than heading out given the seas.

Our destination today was Fiordlands National Park, with stops along the way. Mark said the best conditions to visit the park was during rainy weather. It was cloudy as we climbed and entered the park, but really only a little drizzle was falling. But given that we were going to take a cruise on Milford Sound, that wasn't bad.

New Zealand Sea Lion was the most common animal out here on the Sound, with wind-sheltered rocks providing haul-outs for this endemic mammal. Beech forests clung to the vertical faces of this glaciated valley as we motored down one side of the valley and made our way back along the other side.

The concessionaire had constructed an underwater viewing room in a secluded inlet that allowed all of us to walk down about 25-feet below the surface, all while staying dry and getting great looks at the

invertebrates and fish that call this saltwater inlet home. This was a unique view that gave us insight into what we had been motoring over for the last hour.

This was the last evening of our tour and we celebrated our two weeks of touring this island nation with a farewell dinner at the only restaurant around. Tasty and in a warm room, we all shared pieces of the journey before packing for our ride to the airport in the morning.

### **Thurs., Jan. 21 Drive to Dunedin / Flights Home**

It had rained all night, which, as Mark stated, is the best time to see this park. And as we climbed up to the tunnel to head to our flights home from Dunedin, we all saw the reason: waterfalls. Hundreds of them were cascaded down the face of these vertical walls. Yes, it was rainy and drizzly in the park, with water flowing everywhere, but once we were just a few miles out of the park, everything was dry. A fitting end for our final drive in New Zealand.



