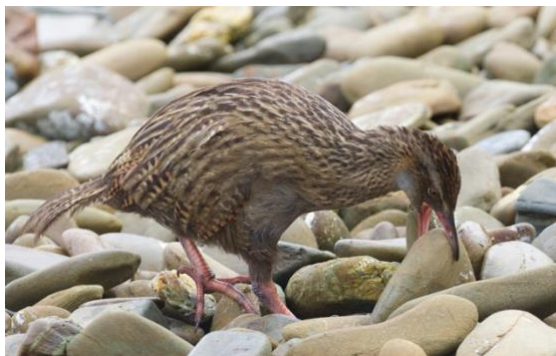


New Zealand Trip Report

January 20 – February 1, 2018 | Written by Greg Smith



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With Greg Smith and participants Barbara, Elna, Catherine, Sanford (Sandy), Cathie, Ginger, Daniel, Muriel, George, Giulio, Lou, and Joan



Sat., Jan. 20 Auckland

Everyone arrived yesterday or this morning (or earlier...) to this temperate, green oasis with a smile of anticipation. There were on and off showers, but that didn't hamper our attitude or our welcome dinner at the hotel.

Sun., Jan. 21

Tiri Tiri Mantangi | Murawai Gannet Colony

It was about an hour's drive north of Auckland to get to the small harbor for the twenty-minute ferry ride to Tiri Tiri Mantangi Island. This island has done an effective job of removing any and all predators (all of which are non-native) and then reintroducing native birds. It has been a roaring success! We stepped off the ferry and right away found out how successfully this experiment had worked. We got outstanding views of Tui, N.I. Saddleback (tieke), Rifleman (tititipounamu), Bellbird (korimako), and more

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of New Zealand's endemics. The native vegetation was no longer taking a hit from rats and mice and it seemed that everything was flourishing. We had a picnic lunch up by the lighthouse and had a 360-degree panorama as we started our walk down the hill to the ferry. A pair of Southern Boobooks (ruru - Moreporks) were found hiding out on a tree before we boarded the ferry for the ride back to the harbor.

Next up was a short one-hour drive over to the Murawai Australasian Gannet (takapu) colony. Perfect weather, windless seas with a fine swell and lots of nesting gannets! Most of the young of the year were well grown and were busy practicing their wingbeats for the inevitable first flight to Australia. There were a few late nesters whose young were just sprouting their first true feathers, but all of the young were still being attended to by their parents. If an adult landed in the wrong spot, or a young bird wandered onto somebody else's turf, well, there was always retribution in the form of some assertive pecking and pulling of feathers.



There were also some White-fronted Terns (tara) still about with their already-fledged young. But even though their on-the-ground nesting time was finished, they were still looking fine in their nuptial plumage.

Mon., Jan. 22

**Miranda Shorebird Centre | Rotorua |
Waimangu Volcanic Rift Park**

This was a shorebird superstar day! We were headed to the world-famous Miranda Shorebird Centre and its chenier shell bench. There was a brief downpour, so instead of heading to the hides (blinds) first, we went to the visitor center and talked with their executive director about the recent king tide flood, the shorebirds, and how the center was operated.



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Then it was off to the blinds where there were three volunteers who shared their local knowledge about the different birds we were viewing. In the water, directly in front of us was a large flock of Bar-tailed Godwits (koraka), and most all of these birds had flown non-stop for eight days from Alaska to New Zealand to spend their winter months in the forage-rich summer of New Zealand. Further out were at least 250 Wrybills (ngutupapore), another New Zealand endemic that had already finished nesting on the South Island and had just migrated north to the cheniers. And even further out was a mixed flock of South Island (torea) and Variable Oystercatchers (torea-pango), easily 400 – 500!

We drove on and had a quick lunch before heading towards Rotorua and Waimangu Park. It was a bit of a drive, but with the hills and fields being so green from the summer rains, it just seemed to roll on by. We arrived and parked ourselves on the edge of the lake for a quick stop. We saw our first Dabchick, three shag species, New Zealand Scaup (papango) and just a few more Black Swans (kakianau).



Waimangu is about a twenty-minute drive out of Rotorua. We climbed a series of rolling farm fields and arrived at the entrance to the park. This was a down and back trail that took us through a series of volcanic features in a rift zone. From placid lakes to steaming and then boiling lakes, geysers to roiling puddles, and colors ranging from every shade of green to turquoise stone blue, almost a lesson in volcanology. We knew if we saw birds on the water, it was not too hot a temperature, and that there were fish residing. Otherwise it was boil, snap, gurgle, emitting opaque clouds of steam that seemed to vaporize our views.

Tues., Jan. 23 Pureora Forest | Lake Taupo | Whakapappa River

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We spent the night in Taupo, which made the drive to Pureora Forest a little less demanding. Still, we were packed and rolling down the highway by 6:00 AM and at the forest edge by 7:00ish. So while watching Kokako, Orange-fronted Parakeet (kakariki), and Fernbird (kotata), we dined on an al fresco breakfast. A decadent way to start our day on a sunny morning!

A very short drive down the road and we went into the forest with its ancient trees, storied tree ferns, and a dripping lushness from the previous evening's rain. Interpretive panels told us about the Maori uses of the various plants in their daily lives. Many of the plants we walked by are now used as tidy houseplants that decorate our homes. Others were totally foreign, but had the appearance of being perfectly able to withstand different weather regimes around the world. And as we watched a small flock of Red-fronted Parakeets joust in the trees above, it was apparent we were in a very different world than the one we had left back home.



We were essentially driving around Great Lake Taupo in order to reach the volcanic base in Tongoriro National Park. Our lunch stop was on the shores towards the south end of the lake which was where an odd vagrant had shown up a week or two previously — a Whiskered Tern! Perched along with a number of different species of waterfowl and shags on the pier railing, it seemed to be at home and not the least bit uncomfortable in its new freshwater surroundings.



Our last three stops for the day were for Blue Duck, a species that has been hit hard by non-native predators. But with aggressive trapping and re-introduction of the duck into fast-moving streams, there seemed to be a turnaround in their numbers. At Whakapapa River intake we had eight total, with five from the first clutch and a solo bird with the parents from the second clutch. That was eight, and there were two more at each of three additional stops we made, for a total of fourteen in just under two hours. And while viewing one of the pairs of Blue Duck (whio), an Australasian Pipit (pihihoi) came in and bathed in front of us giving some great looks.

Wed., Jan. 24 Ruapehu | Foxton Estuary | Wellington to Picton

Spending the night on the slopes of Ruapehu produced rain, and then clearing skies so that we could view the Southern Cross. The early morning broke foggy, but by our departure time it was clear, so we headed up slope to the ski area of this still active volcano. Stunning scorias, jagged lava, and mats of alpine flowers led our way up to Mead's Wall and a view of more of this area's volcanos.

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We had some kilometers to cover today, so the rest of the morning was used to get us within ninety minutes of Wellington and the ferry to the South Island. After a very tasty lunch at The Little White Rabbit we did some birding of the estuary in Foxton. Wrybill (ngutuparore), Bar-tailed Godwit (kuaka), Sanderling, White-faced Heron (mutuku moana), and many more species showed us the basis for this being named a RAMSphere site.

With an accident on the road to the ferry, our arrival couldn't have been any more punctual! We checked in and were some of the first to board the ferry to Picton. Smooth seas and the right breeze helped get looks at Westland Petrel, White-capped and Salvin's Albatross, Fairy Prion (titi wainui), and Cook's Petrel (titi). A great way to finish our stay on the North Island and a wonderful introduction to the South Island.

Thurs., Jan. 25

Marlborough Sound | Kaikoura

The mornings on the coast always seem to have just a couple of hours of overcast skies to start the day. But by 8:00 AM when we hopped on our boat for a wildlife tour of Marlborough Sound, we could see blue sky coming our way. Groups of Fluttering Shearwater (pakaha) were mixed with Southern Black-backed Gull (karoro) and other water birds. The seas were flat and there was very little in the way of a breeze. First up was a small flock of New Zealand King Shag (te kawau-a-toru) roosting on some rocks; they didn't budge as we got long looks. We also saw Spotted Shag and New Zealand Fur Seal while we were making our rounds.

We landed on a small island that had all introduced species removed and the native species were subsequently reintroduced. First up were a pair of Weka foraging for crab on the beach. Then we gathered near one of the two small sources of water found on the island and watched as South Island Saddleback (tieke), Tomtit (miromiro), Silver-eye (tauhoiu) and Bellbird (korimako) showed up. Then an Orange-fronted Parakeet (kakariki) came in, one of only 300+ birds left in the wild and gave us a long and satisfying look.



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We got back on the boat and headed over to a cove where we were treated to a small group of New Zealand's endemic Hector's Dolphin (tutumairekurai). There are only about ten thousand of these animals on the planet, and we had about ten of them swimming around the boat and showing off their Mickey Mouse dorsal fins. A great way to finish off our exploration of the Sound before having lunch in Picton and then heading to Kaikoura and points south.



We had a couple of hours to get to Kaikoura on the highway that had only opened a month before after the devastating earthquake in November 2016. As we looked out over the nearshore waters we saw area that had been uplifted by the quake. Most all of the rocks we could see were white, and all of these white-colored rocks had not been above the water's surface since before the habitation of New Zealand.

Now they were permanently above the seawater and bleached white. All this happened in a matter of two minutes' time and it changed this section of the coastline until the next earthquake leaves its mark.



Fri., Jan. 26 Kaikoura

We had been touring pretty hard and today was going to become timeless in a sense after we took a morning boat ride out to "Albatross Alley," a location just off the undersea shelf on the south side of the Kaikoura Peninsula. We met our skipper, Gary, down at the boat launch and were off to a place where Gary knew the birds would be, and actually knew some of the birds by plumage. As we headed out, our deckhand Kara pointed off the shore further south along the coast. It was very steep along this section, and she said that any of the bare-looking greywacke slopes were forested before the quake. So immense amounts of vegetation were

missing from these hillsides, another example of how the area had changed in a two-minute time span.

When we arrived at the location, Gary threw out a chunk of frozen offal and the first birds in were Cape Petrel, Westland Petrel, and shearwaters. Then the albatross (toroa), Salvin's Albatross and finally a Wandering, along with a couple of Royal Albatross made their appearances. The Wandering that has taken on the second caged

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offal was a male named Mike, whom Gary thought was raising a chick back on its nesting island. Mike ruled the offal while the others took in bits that had floated free. There was a constant change of birds coming and going, with Northern Giant Petrel, White-faced Storm-Petrel (takahikare-moana), and other species making an appearance. Most all of these birds were sitting on the water within fifty feet of the boat. Really a fine way to get good looks at these species that are usually viewed from a rocking and rolling boat!

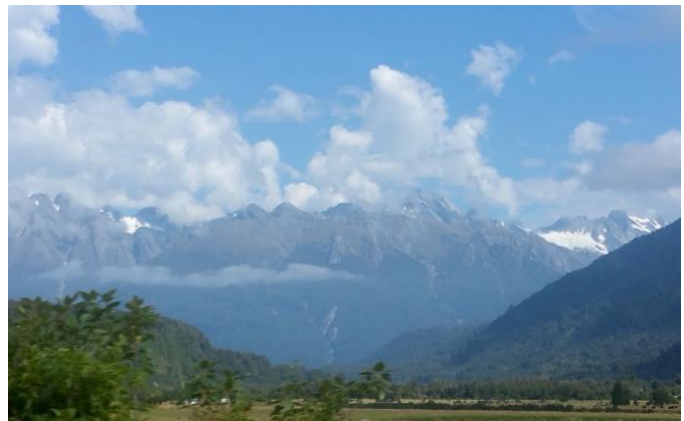


When we returned to the launch ramp we all had the rest of the day to explore on our own or just catch up on some needed chores. It gave us time to prepare for the rest of the trip as we were heading to points further south.

Sat., Jan. 27

Kaikoura to Lake Moeraki

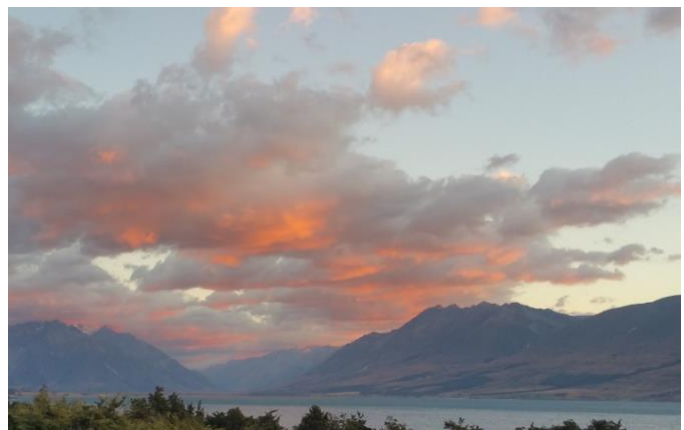
Today was set up to get us from the east side of the island to the west side and the World Heritage site known as West Land. This area holds the remaining 2% of old growth kauri forest, numerous glaciers, and New Zealand's Southern Alps. We had numerous short stops and arrived at the world-renowned Lake Moeraki Wilderness Lodge just in time for dinner. After eating we went out to view the local glow worm population before turning in for the night.



Sun., Jan. 28

Lake Moeraki to Lake Ohau

A much shorter drive today with a few stops to bird and do a few other things. Birds for the day were Creeper, a family group of Rifleman (tītītipounamu), the more colorful Grey Fantail (pīwakawaka) of the South Island, and some stunning scenery of the Southern Alps and Otago province.



Mon., Jan. 29 Mt. Cook

It was a warm morning, with a sunrise to remember. We were off to Aoraki/Mt. Cook National Park, but first we were going to look for another one of the world's rarest birds, the Black Stilt. New Zealand developed a string of lakes to provide the country with hydroelectric power. With pools of leaked water, we arrived at the site of where they raise juvenile Black Stilts (kaki) for release into the wilds. The habitat we were searching was very good for

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these braided river nesters, but we were unable to see one. Plenty of waterfowl and Pied Stilts (poaka), but not the bird we were hoping to find. So, off we went for our morning coffee/tea and onto a visit of Mount Cook National Park (Aoraki in Maori).

The glaciers that bleed water from Aoraki and the other high mountains in the park create a stunningly blue lake with a delta formed by their braided river. And it was the delta that we were driving on as we came to the edge of one of the fast-flowing braids. Off in the distance we could see a few of the wild population's 160+ Black Stilts, so we headed off in the direction of the birds with our bins and scope. We got good looks at one individual that was

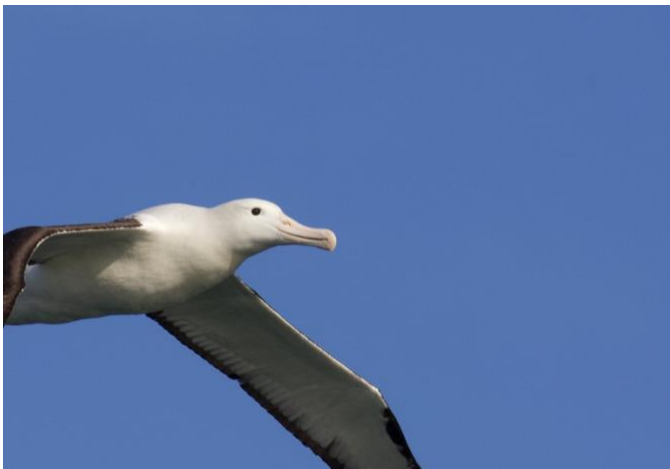


feeding at the water's edge, and then headed back to the bus to finish the drive to the park. Mt. Cook had been staring over our shoulder as most all of us got a life bird.

After a quick lunch, we took a short hike to a glacier-melt fed lake. We passed by so many of New Zealand's native plants and wildflowers. A perfect setting to look up the slopes of these peaks at their hanging glaciers and the rushing waters.

Tues., Jan. 31 Dunedin

We started our drive to the south end of the South Island with clear skies, and still somewhat unseasonably hot weather. This island has been going through somewhat of a drought, but it looked like relief was on the way with the remnants of Cyclone Fifi heading in this direction.



Our first stop was at the Duntoan Maori rock painting site. The drawings were 19th Century, not old by world standards, but certainly interesting and worth the stop. Next up was a quick stop at Elephant Rocks, odd-shaped and eroded, these rocks had been buried, and with subsequent erosion, had been exposed. It was a rocky start to our day. ...

We pulled into Dunedin with enough time to clean up after our lunch stop at Moeraki Boulders. And then Mark took us up and over the peninsula at Taiaroa Head (Otago Peninsula). It's always a treat to find a wild place so close to an urban setting. Blue bays, green hills, and very few homes, all on a peninsula that supports a nesting population of Northern Royal Albatross (toroa ingoingo).

We boarded our last wildlife ride of the tour aboard the *Vivian J*, at a small dock very near the Royal Albatross Centre. First up for this wildlife-rich peninsula were pinnipeds, including New Zealand Fur Seals (kekeno) and one

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of the world's rarest, the New Zealand Sea Lion (aka Hooker's Sea Lion — whakahoa). Then there was the nesting colony of Otago Shag (formerly Stewart Island Shag), and all of a sudden the latest example of flying pterodactyls, Royal Albatross. Young birds, older birds, but they were all huge birds with an eleven-foot wingspan, soaring past and over our boat. We had just wonderful lighting and spectacular views of these birds and the coastline. A really fine way to end our twelve-day tour of New Zealand.

