

New Zealand Trip Report
2-26 November 2003
Stephen J. Dinsmore



Jim Dinsmore relaxing in Invercargill.



Steve Dinsmore on Stewart Island.



Our fearless leader, Ross Silcock, with a non-bird friend on the Chathams.



Bette Kulp on the South Island.



Frank Little on the Cook Strait crossing.

The initial thought of birding New Zealand in 2003 was planted back in late 2001 after talking to several friends who had done a similar trip that year. Some time in 2002 Jim Dinsmore and I agreed that this would make a nice father-son trip, so the final plans were made. The trip was supposed to have 8 participants, but 3 cancelled at the last minute leaving only 5 of us: W. Ross Silcock (trip leader), me, James J. Dinsmore, and Frank Little and Bette Kulp (a retired couple from California).

New Zealand is a long way from Mississippi, so my trip began on 31 October. I left home at 7:30 a.m., arriving in Atlanta at 11 a.m. and then Los Angeles at 3 p.m., where I met Ross. After a lengthy lay over and a 1 hour departure delay, we left LA at 9:15 p.m. and arrived in Auckland at 7 a.m. local time 2 days later (flight time was 12 hours and 15 minutes, but we crossed the International Dateline and “lost” a day). There, we met our driver, Kirilee Ramsey, and the other 3 participants and began birding!

2 November (Sunday)

After rendezvousing in the main airport terminal, we gathered our luggage, left the airport by 8 a.m., and then made a quick stop at an estuary on the outskirts of Auckland. En route to the estuary, we had our first taste of New Zealand town birding, and all the “junk” birds that have been introduced – Spotted Dove, Song Thrush, Eurasian Blackbird, etc. We also saw a couple of Purple Swamphens (local name is Pukeko) and a White-faced Heron. At the estuary, we found the mudflats covered with shorebirds on the incoming tide, mostly Bar-tailed Godwits (700+) and Red Knots (200+), but also including a single Wrybill, Pied (75) and Variable (2) oystercatchers, Pied Stilt, Australasian Shoveler, and several singing Eurasian Skylarks along the edges.



Red-billed Gull

From Auckland, we drove north along the east coast to a small bay at Waiwera to look for beach birds. We were quickly greeted by several Red-billed Gulls, the parking lot gull equivalent to a Ring-billed Gull in the U.S. On the beach we found our target bird – a New Zealand Dotterel. Also present were Pied and Little shags and a Yellowhammer.

From Auckland, we continued north to Wenderholm Park, a nice coastal beach area where we had our first real birding of the trip. It was extremely windy, making the birding tough. On the beach, we found a few birds including Pied Shag, both oystercatchers, and a Caspian Tern. In the woods we saw New Zealand Pigeon, Tui, Fantail, Chaffinch, Kingfisher, and Gray Gerygone. Kirilee and Bette also saw a covey of California Quail. A quick stop at a mangrove area produced a Banded Rail, a Black Shag, and a Ring-necked Pheasant.

A bit farther north, we made a quick stop at Waipu Estuary for Fairy Tern, and quickly found a cooperative pair. There are fewer than 10 pairs of this endangered bird nesting on mainland New Zealand. Also present were hordes of Variable Oystercatchers, including a spectacular albino individual, and distant looks at a couple of Australasian Gannets feeding on the ocean.



Group at Waipu Estuary

We then drove north to Kerikeri where we spent the night in the Abilene Motel. In the evening, we had our first taste of New Zealand nocturnal birding. We had made arrangements to visit Aroha Preserve to search for North Island Brown Kiwi. It was a beautiful, calm evening and we managed to hear 6+ male and 1 female Brown Kiwi, but alas we didn't actually *see* any. We also heard several Moreporks, the only native owl in

New Zealand (aside from the extinct Laughing Owl). On the return to Kerikeri, we passed a Brush-tailed Opossum on the road. This species is a major pest in New Zealand with an estimated 70 million individuals now residing there (or so we were told – that’s a lot of counting!). Our driver swerved so that we could see the animal, but she probably should have aimed for it instead. We were back at the motel by 10:45 p.m. and I’m certain this was one of the most welcome nights of sleep I’ve ever had! (440 kilometers)

3 November (Monday)

We were up by 6:30 a.m., but breakfast was late and we didn’t leave the motel until almost 9 a.m. While we were waiting, a little birding around the motel produced several Ringed Turtle-Doves, Eastern Rosella, and great looks at Silvereyes. We spent the next 2 hours traveling back south to Teal Bay, favored haunt of the endangered Brown Teal. We arrived at the bridge crossing the creek at the upper end of the bay and found an astounding 81 Brown Teal, nearly 20% of the world’s wild population! Also present were a pair of Paradise Ducks and a pair of Pied Stilts with 2 half-grown young.



Brown Teal at Teal Bay

From Teal Bay, we headed farther south, stopping for lunch in Whangarei. There, we bought groceries for tomorrow night’s stay on Tiritiri Matangi Island, and Ross and I also picked up some oil (vegetable and cod liver) for attracting pelagic birds as well as a supply of Tui (a local beer). We continued south and west; a pit stop in Wellsford produced great looks at a pair of New Zealand Pipits. From here we drove west and

north to Lake Kereta. On the road in we found a displaying Common Peafowl (a peacock, for those unfamiliar with its “official” name), a bird considered “countable” in new Zealand. There, we had great looks at New Zealand Dabchick, 4 Australasian Little Grebes, a pair of Grey Teal with a brood, and good numbers of introduced Black Swans. It was quite windy, and a search for Spotted Crake turned up empty, although we did attract several Fantails.

From Lake Kereta, we doubled back and headed for Orewa, where we spent the night at the Golden Sands Motel along the oceanfront. That evening we had a nice dinner of scallops and were joined by Karen Baird and Chris Gaskin, who run Kiwi Nature Tours, and Karen’s father, Johnny Kendrick. Johnny formerly worked for the Department of Conservation and it was interesting to listen to him tell stories about the recovery of many of New Zealand’s native bird species that he had been involved with. (367 kilometers)

4 November (Tuesday)

We arose early and had breakfast by 8 a.m. We then headed towards Gulf Harbor for a morning trip to Hauraki Gulf and then on to Tiritiri Matangi Island. On the way to Gulf Harbor, we stopped along a small creek to look for Western Reef-Heron (and found none). However, we had great looks at Eastern Rosellas and a Kingfisher, but little else.

The boat left at 9:30 a.m. with rain threatening and a stiff (~20 knot) breeze. The seas were choppy, but there was little swell. Birding in the gulf was excellent and we found large numbers of feeding seabirds. As we were passing Tiritiri we saw a nice dark morph Parasitic Jaeger, soon followed by a couple of close Blue Penguins. The first seabirds we encountered were small groups of Flesh-footed Shearwaters with a few Sooty Shearwaters mixed in. After a few minutes we encountered our first Fluttering Shearwaters and Common Diving-Petrels. We put out a couple of oil slicks, but got little attention from the birds. We then spent about an hour slowly working the bay and a couple of active fishing vessels, searching for other seabirds. In addition to the species already mentioned, we saw a few Cook's Petrels, lots of Buller's Shearwaters, Fairy Prions, and White-faced Storm-Petrels, and a Black Petrel.



Sooty (l) and Flesh-footed (r) shearwaters

At noon we headed for Kawau Island for lunch. We took a short walk around the buildings, hoping for a kookaburra. Instead we found several cooperative Weka and New Zealand Pigeons and a couple of wallabies. After lunch we enjoyed feeding the attendant Red-billed and Kelp gulls. At 2 p.m. we left for Tiritiri Matangi Island, arriving at 3:30 p.m. En route we stopped to look for a Shore Plover at a small island of sand and rock with a few trees. The wind made viewing difficult, and all we saw were a few Variable Oystercatchers and a pair of New Zealand Dotterel with a small chick.



Takahe

We spent the afternoon birding at Tiritiri Matangi Island, a New Zealand Department of Conservation Open Sanctuary and predator-free island. From the boat landing we walked the Wattle Trail to the bunkhouse. On the way we saw Saddleback, New Zealand Bellbird, Stitchbird, Whitehead, and a host of other native passerines. Around the visitor center we found our first Takahe, a large chicken-like flightless rail. We then unloaded our belongings

and after a home-cooked dinner of cold meats, salad, and brownies, we took to the trails for some dusk birding. Ross and I walked to the north end of the island and birded the trails there until dusk. We found impressive numbers of Stitchbirds and Saddlebacks, plus good numbers of several other endemics and Red-crowned Parakeet. We also glimpsed a couple of Brown Quail. Later, we walked the Wattle Trail again and found a very cooperative Kokako, plus the usual species.

Back at the bunkhouse, we enjoyed taking a few photos with Daphne, a tame female Paradise Duck. At dusk, we ventured out in the dark in search of kiwi. Our search seemed fruitless in the wind and rain. But at 9:20 p.m., I stumbled into another group and had a brief, but adequate, look at a Little Spotted Kiwi. We searched in vain for the bird for another half hour, but it had departed. After more searching, everyone but Ross and I decided to head for bed. They had no sooner left when Ross and I almost stepped on another Little Spotted Kiwi at 10:35 p.m. standing on the trail west of the bunkhouse! We watched this fascinating bird as it fed, sometimes as close as 5 feet from us! We finally got to bed at 11 p.m. (23 kilometers)



Ross with Daphne

5 November (Wednesday)



Red-crowned Parakeet

Some of us arose early and birded around the bunkhouse on Tiritiri Matangi. We had to be back at the ferry landing by 10:15 a.m. for our departure to the mainland. We walked the Kawerau Trail first, and then ended on the Wattle Trail. We found all the “expected” species plus looks at another Kokako, Red-crowned Parakeets, and New Zealand Robin.

We then drove south and west to Cascades Kauri Park, where a short walk turned up a small flock of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and an Eastern Rosella. From there we retraced our steps to Auckland, where we made a couple of quick stops to pick up some mail and escaped just before rush hour! From Auckland we continued south and east to Miranda, a famed shorebird spot. We arrived at 4:30 p.m., just ahead of the 5 p.m. predicted high tide and the best viewing time. We sifted through the shorebird flocks until dark (7:30 p.m.). The shorebird numbers were impressive and we dominated by Bar-tailed Godwits (2,600+) and red Knots (3,000+). We also managed to find several New Zealand Dotterel, a Banded Dotterel, good numbers of Wrybills, a Marsh



Wrybill

Sandpiper, a single Eurasian Whimbrel, a small flock of Ruddy Turnstones, a Red-necked Stint, a Terek Sandpiper, and 2 Curlew Sandpipers. We enjoyed fish and chips, a local favorite and New Zealand tradition, for dinner, and were joined by Ross' parents and brother. We spent the night in bunks at the Miranda Naturalists Trust Lodge in Miranda. (213 kilometers)

6 November (Thursday)

Today we were on the road by 8 a.m. after a leisurely breakfast at the Miranda Naturalists Trust Lodge. I used the late start to catch up on some paperwork and bird lists. We quickly drove east and north onto the Coramandel Peninsula and towards Whitianga. We checked into the Endeavour Motel by 11 a.m. and used the hour before lunch to go into town to check email. After a quick pasta lunch, we got on a boat (Infinity) at 1 p.m. for a trip to Red Mercury Island to look for seabirds. Frank and Bette opted to stay in the motel so Bette could sleep off a mild flu. On our way to the dock we spotted a Western Reef Heron walking along the town beach.

The weather offshore was stunning – warm with a light breeze and almost no ocean swell, perfect for seabirding! On the way out of the harbor we spotted a few Blue Penguins. We steamed northeast for about an hour and fifteen minutes to the 100 meter line where we encountered our first numbers of seabirds. We birded this general area until 7 p.m., generally between 100 and 190 meters of water. Birds were everywhere, predominantly Fluttering Shearwaters (850+) and Common Diving-Petrels (3,300+). We saw a single Parasitic Jaeger chasing terns on the way out. We encountered a nice mix of Flesh-footed (185+) and Sooty (60+) shearwaters that also included 2+ Short-tailed Shearwaters and 6+ Black Petrels. Buller's Shearwaters were common (84), but we found only 3 Fairy Prions, unlike our earlier trip where this species was abundant.



Group off Red Mercury Island (in background)

White-faced Storm-Petrels (485+) were unusually abundant; the local name is “Jesus bird”, which comes from their peculiar behavior of “walking on water”. But the real gems were yet to come. In deeper water at about 5 p.m. we began to encounter good numbers of gadfly petrels, and this continued until we left. This total included 47+ Pycroft's Petrels and 9+ Cook's Petrels, plus many more that were too far away to identify.

We also managed to see 2 Northern Giant Petrels, unusually late for this far north, plus 23+ Gray-faced Petrels. At 5:20 p.m. we were treated to great looks at a subadult Black-browed Albatross, which was soon joined by a Shy Albatross (*steadi*). Then, a short time later, a second Shy Albatross (*salvini*) appeared. Another interesting treat was the good number of Little Shearwaters (22+) that we encountered in the deeper waters, away from the hordes of Fluttering Shearwaters closer to shore. This trip was even more enjoyable because we were joined by two local birders and two visiting British birders – the extra eyes certainly helped! We returned to the dock at 8:45 p.m., just in time for a dinner of fresh fish at a restaurant by the dock. Back to the motel by 10 p.m. (122 kilometers)

7 November (Friday)

We left Whitianga at 7:30 a.m. after a continental breakfast and headed for Tauranga, arriving there at 11 a.m. Our trip to Volkner Rocks was supposed to depart at 10:30 a.m., and when we arrived we learned that the captain thought we were to leave at 8 a.m. After some discussion (he told us the trip would be 3 hours each way) we decided to give it a try anyway, knowing that birding time would be limited. We departed the dock at 11:15 a.m.; the trip out was uneventful bird-wise, although we passed over deeper water (500m) and saw moderate numbers of Flesh-footed, Sooty, Buller's, and Fluttering shearwaters and Common Diving-Petrels. But the best bird on the trip out was an unidentified phalarope, although we also saw a distant albatross, 2 Cook's/Pycroft's Petrels, and 2 Little Shearwaters. Volkner Rocks was a spectacular set of steep rocks climbing a couple of hundred feet above the ocean surface, right next to White Island, an active volcano.

We slowly circled Volkner Rocks between 2 and 3 p.m., looking in vain for our target bird, the Grey Ternlet. The rocks were home to good numbers of nesting White-fronted Terns and Red-billed Gulls, and the surrounding waters held good numbers of Sooty, Flesh-footed, and Buller's shearwaters. We also saw a single Pomarine Jaeger and 2 Parasitic Jaegers chasing terns around the rocks, and also saw 7+ Little Shearwaters there. The steam back to



Volkner Rocks

Tauranga was uneventful and we arrived there at 6:45 p.m. We had a great dinner of fresh fish at a nice restaurant on the Tauranga waterfront and then drove to Rotorua where we arrived at 9:30 p.m. We checked into Devonwood Manor where we would spend the next 2 nights. (314 kilometers)

8 November (Saturday)

This was a scheduled rest day in Rotorua. Jim and I did laundry early in the morning, then took a stroll into town. We walked the shore of Lake Rotorua along the east edge of town and found quite a few birds. The islands were covered with nesting Red-billed,



Black-billed Gulls

Black-billed, and Kelp gulls and Little and Little Black shags. Along the lake edge were good numbers of Black Swans plus a few New Zealand Scaup, Eurasian Coots, and New Zealand Dabchicks. The woods along the lake had a few Fantails and Gray Gerygones plus the usual assortment of exotics – Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, Common Myna, etc. We then had “lunch” in downtown Rotorua – Jim’s

favorite of breakfast (pancakes for me, a dish like an omelette for Jim) at lunch. After lunch I stopped at an Internet café and then strolled back along the lake edge where I found a small flock of California Quail.

We both spent the afternoon lounging in the motel. I used the time to catch up on paperwork and bird lists before going to dinner at 6 p.m. Ross and I then watched the All Blacks (the New Zealand team) win their World Cup rugby match against South Africa while drinking a couple of Tui's (beer) before heading to bed at 11 p.m.

9 November (Sunday)

We left Rotorua at 5:30 a.m. and drove an hour and a half to Pureora Forest Park. We made a quick stop on the way at a roadside wetland where we saw Gray Teal, several New Zealand Scaup, and a nice assortment of other waterbirds. At Pureora, our goal was to hear the dawn song of the Kokako, and we were not disappointed when we found one at the first stop. This is a remnant of native podocarp forest with a few trees 1,000+ years of age. We eventually had great looks at this individual, and he sang off and on for the 2 hours we were there. Also present at this stop were Yellow-fronted Parakeet, Long-tailed Cuckoo, 3 Kakas, 2 Tomtits, several Whiteheads, New Zealand Robin, New Zealand Bellbird, and 6 flyover Canada Geese. On our way out we found a couple of California Quail, the first of several for the day.

We left Pureora at 9 a.m. and took a "shortcut" through the forest towards Turangi (Ross insisted the road was fine!). The road was actually quite rough due to unexpected logging activity and was covered by coarse gravel, and after about 10 kilometers we got a flat tire. Our next stop was in Turangi for an early lunch of sandwiches and dessert rolls. We left at 11:45 a.m. and headed south towards Wanganui. We made another quick stop along the south shore of Lake Taupo where we were soon enjoying great looks at a couple of Fernbirds. The nearby lake had a few Black Swans, a Pacific Black Duck, and several flyby Black-billed Gulls, but little else.



Black Swan

Farther south we had scenic views of several active, snow-capped volcanoes and passed through several patches of native beech forest. Up higher we saw open hillsides around the volcanoes that were covered by flax, a native bunchgrass, and introduced heather. We then headed for Orautoha and some small rivers where the rare Blue Duck resides. After scanning a couple of stretches of the river we found a pair resting on a rock in the middle of the river and enjoyed good views of them. We stopped for a quick snack of ice cream in Raetihi before continuing south to Wanganui, arriving there at 4 p.m.



Blue Ducks

We checked into The Avenue Hotel in Wanganui and lounged there for a couple of hours before meeting for dinner at 6 p.m. After dinner we met Sav Saville who took us to an evening roost site for Rufous Night-Herons. It was a beautiful calm evening and we heard several Shining Cuckoos and many Ring-necked Pheasants as darkness arrived. Only one night-heron was seen, and that only briefly by Sav and Kirilee. We were back at the hotel

by 9:15 p.m., just in time for dessert. Ross and I then watched France beat Ireland in the World Cup quarterfinals before going to bed at 11 p.m. (467 kilometers)

10 November (Monday)

This was a lazy morning and we slept in until just after 7 a.m. We had a nice hot breakfast at the hotel, followed by a couple of hours of free time before we left at 10 a.m. We quickly checked out Lake Victoria in Wanganui to tick Mute Swan, and also found a good number of Eurasian Coots there. We quickly drove south and stopped at the Rangitikei River near Bulls where we soon found a cooperative Black-fronted Dotterel. It was a surprisingly small plover, and very well camouflaged for its river habitat.

Our trek continued south to Manawatu estuary, a favored shorebird haven in the southwest part of the North Island, arriving at 11:45 a.m. We were also fortunate that our timing coincided with high tide (11:05 a.m.), although we soon discovered that it was a full moon tide and was unusually high. We were hoping to see Pacific Golden-Plover, but all the *Salicornia* beds were under water and we found zero plovers. The main shorebird roost continued 300+ Bar-tailed Godwits, 140+ Red Knots, 90+ Spur-winged Plovers, and little else. A few minutes scanning the ocean side of the spit produced looks at distant Sooty Shearwaters and an unidentified jaeger. We returned to Foxton for lunch at a very nice tea house (I had a delicious open chicken sandwich).



Spur-winged Plover

We were underway by 2:15 p.m. and arrived in Wellington at the ferry terminal at 3:45 p.m., well ahead of our scheduled 5:30 p.m. departure. On the outskirts of Wellington, we were stunned when a semi truck passed us and had a very vocal dog barking from a small metal crate attached to the undercarriage, just behind the wheels. After waiting there for a short time, we learned that the ferry was delayed and would depart at 6 p.m. A couple of Jim's friends from graduate school were living in Wellington and met us at the terminal at 4:30 p.m. They then took Jim and me on a short

tour of Wellington and had us back at the terminal by 5:30 p.m., just in time to board. We finally departed at 6:25 p.m.



Cook Strait ferry

The path of the ferry takes it out through Wellington harbor, across Cook Strait, and then up the Queen Charlotte Sound into Picton. The weather was quite breezy and the seas were moderately rough in the middle of the strait. Ross and I birded from the upper deck and saw good numbers of seabirds in the middle of the strait including 19 Shy Albatross (2 were close enough to identify as *salvini*), 1 Royal Albatross (Ross only), 3 Black-browed Albatross,

1 Flesh-footed Shearwater, 1 Fluttering Shearwater, and small numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and Fairy Prions. The ferry docked in Picton at 9:30 p.m. and we were at the nearby Beachcomber Inn by 10 p.m. (230 kilometers)

11 November (Tuesday)

We had a nice breakfast at the motel in Picton before heading to the marina for a 9 a.m. departure into Marlborough Sounds. Our boat was the Felix, and the weather was once again beautiful with a light northwesterly breeze and fairly calm seas. The narrow bay we passed through was full of Fluttering Shearwaters, and we also saw a light morph subadult Parasitic Jaeger, several Little Blue Penguins, a few Sooty and Flesh-footed shearwaters, a nice flock of Australasian Gannets, and small numbers of Spotted Shags. At Cape Jackson we found a large flock of shearwaters (99% Fluttering) that included good numbers of Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns plus 3 Fairy Prions. The seas here were noticeably rougher with a good 1-2 meter swell. After circling this area for about half an hour we headed south a few miles to White Rocks. White Rocks is one of only 3 nesting sites for the endangered New Zealand King Shag, and we were delighted to find 20+ resting on the rocks. On our return trip we made a quick stop at Motuara Island, a New Zealand Department of Conservation offshore sanctuary with restricted access. A short 45-minute walk on the main trail produced quick looks at a single South Island Saddleback plus many New Zealand Bellbirds and a few New Zealand Pigeons. But a special treat was seeing a New Zealand Robin up close, and do I mean close. We flushed the bird from the trail and Kirilee immediately began scratching the ground at her feet. The bird was quite tame and attracted to the noise, presumably because it thought her actions might stir up some insects. After a couple of minutes of this game, the robin pulled a large worm from the ground at our feet! As an added bonus we saw several Dusky Dolphins on this



A tame New Zealand Robin

trip, one of only a couple of marine mammal species for the trip. The return trip to the dock was uneventful and we arrived there at 1 p.m.



Variable Oystercatcher

From Picton, we drove south along Highway 1 on the east coast of the South Island towards Kaikoura. We stopped for drinks at a nice tea house in Kekerengu and enjoyed great views of the ocean and beach. A quick walk on the beach produced several Banded Dotterel and a pair of Variable Oystercatchers guarding a nest with 2 eggs. A couple of New Zealand Fur Seals lounged on the rocks offshore, and there was a steady stream of Hutton's

Shearwaters flying south. We made another quick stop just north of Kaikoura to look at more fur seals and a colony of nesting Spotted Shags, and I had distant looks at a couple of Black-fronted Terns flying offshore. We arrived in Kaikoura at 5 p.m. and checked into the Alpine View Motel, our home for the next 2 nights. We enjoyed a nice dinner of fresh fish at a local organic restaurant a few blocks from the motel. (163 kilometers)

12 November (Wednesday)

After a hot breakfast at 7:45 a.m., we headed into Kaikoura to the Oceanwings headquarters for our 9 a.m. pelagic trip. After a bit of a delay, we were off to the dock at 9:15 and in the water by 9:30. Because of the strong northwesterly winds the day before, we had to travel farther offshore than normal to find seabirds – a whopping 8 miles! After less than 30 minutes, we spotted our first albatross, and soon we were surrounded by several dozen of these huge ocean



Seabirds, mostly albatrosses, behind boat



Shy Albatross (*salvini*)

wanderers. Wandering Albatross were the most abundant and hovered only a few feet behind the boat waiting for chum. Also present were good numbers of the smaller Shy Albatross, mostly *salvini* but with a few *steadii* mixed in. We saw only a half dozen Royal Albatross, but their impressive size more than made up for their scarcity. The attending flock of seabirds also included good numbers of Cape and Westland petrels, a couple of Short-tailed

Shearwaters, and, after nearly an hour of searching, a couple of White-chinned Petrels. We also saw a few Northern Giant Petrels and a couple of Buller's Shearwaters, plus hordes of Kelp Gulls. On the return boat ride a couple of us glimpsed the distant blow of a Sperm Whale. We had great looks at a lone Parasitic Jaeger on the ride out.

After a nice lunch in downtown Kaikoura, we returned to the motel to drop off Frank and Bette before heading out onto the Kaikoura peninsula. We checked the rocks near the tip for tattlers, but found none. We did see a few Ruddy Turnstones and oystercatcher, but the real show was the offshore seabird migration – Wandering and Shy albatrosses, Northern Giant Petrel, Buller's Shearwaters, Westland Petrels, 8,000+ Hutton's Shearwaters, and 3 Parasitic Jaegers. We then drove to the cemetery to look for Cirl Bunting, without success. We did see lots of finches, including our first Common Redpolls, and Ross and I opted to walk back to the motel in the hopes of finding the bunting in the surrounding lands.



View from Kaikoura

We again had dinner at the local organic restaurant (seafood chowder and a salad for me) and were back at the motel by 9 p.m. We stayed again at the Alpine View Motel in Kaikoura. (15 kilometers)

13 November (Thursday)

We arose early in Kaikoura and had breakfast at 7 a.m. We were on the road by 8 and drove south along the scenic east coast of the south island to Amberley, where we turned west and headed for the mountains. We made a couple of quick stops to scan the large braided river channels for Black-fronted Tern, and succeeded in getting distant



Great Crested Grebe with chick

looks at a couple of them. At one stop, we helped a British couple free their van from the sand – they probably learned their lesson about driving *in* a river bed. We stopped for lunch in Springfield, where we witnessed a brief hailstorm. We then crossed Porter's Pass (elevation 939m) and stopped at Lake Pearson. There, we had good views of several Great Crested Grebes, plus a few waterfowl and a Pied Oystercatcher. We continued west to Arthur's Pass

(elevation 920 m) where we stopped to bird for about an hour. In the parking lot at the pass visitor center we found a couple of cooperative Kea and had great looks at a Rifleman.

Our next stop was Lake Brunner Lodge on the south shore of Lake Brunner. We arrived there at 3:30 p.m. and would be staying there for the night. The lodge was

beautiful and the hardwood interior was rimu, a very expensive native wood that is hard to find, and was decorated with old photos of the native forest and the subsequent logging activities, plus mounts of a few native and introduced animals.

We arrived early for dinner (6:30 p.m.) to meet and visit with the other guests over snacks and a few drinks by a nice cozy fire. Dinner was at 7 p.m. and consisted of 3 courses served in fine style – an appetizer of pork with sweet onion jelly, a main course of steak, potatoes, sweet potato, and asparagus, and a fruit pie with ice cream for dessert. After dinner, all of us except Frank and Bette left to listen for Great Spotted Kiwi near Otira. We arrived at the town dump, apparently a favored kiwi hotspot, and listened for about an hour until it began raining. We heard no kiwis. The return trip was uneventful for birds, but we did see at least 4 Brush-tailed Opossums along the road. We were back at the lodge by 10:35 p.m. and in bed soon thereafter. (464 kilometers)



Lake Brunner Lodge

14 November (Friday)

Ross and I met outside the lodge at 6:30 a.m., hoping for another glimpse of a falcon. The skies were crystal clear and the temperature was a chilly 42 degrees – a perfect morning! We quickly spotted a Weka walking along the road and several Gray Gerygones were calling nearby. Then, at 6:35 a.m., a New Zealand Falcon rocketed over the lodge and our heads, grabbed a Eurasian Skylark, and then flew off into the forest. We walked the road hoping for another glimpse of the bird, but were unsuccessful. We then walked along the shore of Lake Brunner and found a couple of singing Fernbirds and a Pied Oystercatcher, in addition to other waterbirds like New Zealand Scaup. We had a nice cooked breakfast at 8 a.m. and were finally on the road by 9:15 a.m.



Arthur's Pass National Park

We retraced our path to Arthur's Pass, stopping briefly at Otira Valley to admire a couple of cooperative Keas. There was a thin layer of fresh snow here, and it was fun to see this alpine parrot in its natural environs. The higher peaks of the Southern Alps were very white after fresh overnight snow. Farther up at the pass visitor center we found at least 9 more Keas, but failed to relocate the Rifleman see the day before. From here we continued south and took

a shortcut to Lake Coleridge and Mount Hutt. We saw 3 more Kea, but little else. Our path took us south and we stopped for lunch in Mayfield at 1:30 p.m. We were on the road by 2 p.m. At the Rangitata River crossing on Highway 72 I spied an alternate plumaged adult White-winged Tern feeding right below the bridge with a group of 20 Black-fronted Terns. We all raced back to the middle of the bridge to enjoy close looks at this rarity.



Kea

South of Twizel we turned east towards the delta at the upper end of Lake Benmore, favored haunt of the endangered Black Stilt. There are fewer than 200 of these birds in existence, and all of them breed on lake in the Mackenzie Plains. When we arrived at the delta at 4:30 p.m., the wind was blowing at more than 30 mph. To our surprise, we found another Nature Quest birding group in the parking lot, and quickly learned that they had not seen any stilts. We stayed here for more than an hour, scanning the flats unsuccessfully for a Black Stilt. But we did see lots of other birds – Great Crested Grebe, Gray Teal, Pacific Black Duck, Pied and Variable oystercatchers, Black-fronted Terns, and dozens of displaying Eurasian Skylarks. We finally decided to call it quits for the day and try again in the morning. We returned to Twizel where we checked into the Mackenzie Country Inn for the night. We ate the dinner buffet at the motel at 7 p.m. (414 kilometers)

15 November (Saturday)

We arose early to try for Black Stilts again at Lake Benmore. We checked several marshy areas and the delta at the north end of the lake and found many Pied Stilts, a couple of hybrid Pied x Black Stilts, but no “pure” Black Stilts. We birded here until almost 8 a.m., returned to the motel for breakfast, and then came back to Lake Benmore and birded there until almost 11 a.m., again without finding a Black Stilt. Other than a



Banded Dotterel

brisk wind, there was little reason *not* to see one! However, the delta region was quite birdy and we saw 2 Great Crested Grebes, large flocks of New Zealand Scaup, a nice assortment of expected shorebird species including a Banded Dotterel with a half-grown chick, and many Black-fronted Terns.

Yellowhammers and Eurasian Skylarks were everywhere. But the real highlight was getting close looks at a cooperative Marsh Crake that responded nicely to our calls. We left the delta and tried a

second Black Stilt spot along the levee near Lake Poaka, again with no luck. At this point we decided to head south to check another locale at the south end of Lake Benmore

at the Ahuriri River delta. Access was a problem and time was limited, so all we were able to do was take a half hour walk along the river upstream from the delta, again without seeing any stilts. Bette was once again not feeling well and we were pressed to get to Queenstown, so we had to reluctantly write off the stilt.

The drive to Queenstown was pretty uneventful and included a stop for ice cream in Mossburn. Our driver noted that this region of tussock grasslands, steep mountains, and scenic river gorges was where much of the footage for the Lord of the Rings movies was filmed. We arrived in Queenstown at 4 p.m. and checked into the Gold Ridge Hotel, overlooking Lake Wakatipu and the snow-covered Eyre Mountains in the background. (274 kilometers)

16 November (Sunday)

We woke for an early breakfast (6:30 a.m.) at the motel so that we could spend the morning searching for Yellowheads. Frank and Bette elected to remain at the motel, so the rest of us headed north towards Sylvan Lake in the Livingston Mountains. The weather was rainy and foggy with a stiff wind thrown in for good measure. As we drove north from Queenstown towards Glenorchy the rain became progressively heavier. We crossed the upper end of Lake Wakatipu



Native beech forest

and saw a few Black-fronted Terns and other waterbirds. Somewhere in this stretch a stoat (ermine) crossed the road in front of us. A little farther, we turned off the main road onto the Sylvan Lake track. Right before the turnoff a Long-tailed Cuckoo flew across the road. We parked at the campground and walked the track almost to Sylvan Lake, a total distance of about 3 km. The woods were quiet at first, save a few introduced species (Eurasian Blackbird, Chaffinches, etc.), but we soon encountered small flocks of Rifleman (we counted 14 on the entire walk). We also saw New Zealand Robin, Gray Gerygone, and, finally, a couple of Pipipi (Brown Creepers, but not the same species as occurs in the U.S. Talk about confusing nomenclature...). But the real prize was finding a very cooperative pair of Yellowheads, calling regularly and apparently building a nest in a large dead tree. This is now one of New Zealand's rarest forest birds with probably fewer than 200 pairs left in the wild. Ross and Kirilee both commented that this species might exist only on offshore predator-free islands in the very near future, going the way of the Kakapo and Little Spotted Kiwi.

After the walk at Sylvan Lake, we retraced our steps to Queenstown and picked up Frank and Bette at noon. We drove to a nearby café for lunch and were on the road to Te Anau Downs by 2 p.m., arriving at 5 p.m. after a short snack stop. Along the way we encountered terrific winds, with some gusts certainly in excess of 50 mph, and wondered if the bus might get blown off the road. We had a relaxing dinner at our motel, the Te Anau Downs Motor Inn, and Ross and I stayed up to watch the rugby game at 10 p.m. (353 kilometers)

17 November (Monday)

We had breakfast at the motel in Te Anau Downs at 6:30 a.m. and were on the road by 7:30 a.m. Today we would spend the entire day exploring Fiordland National Park. As we headed north from Te Anau Downs, the mountains became increasingly snow covered and we were worried that Homer Tunnel would be closed. However, the snow line was just high enough to keep the tunnel open, although there were avalanche warnings everywhere and vehicles were prohibited from stopping near the tunnel. We had planned to stop and look for South Island Wren, but decided we had better not risk it and continued towards Milford Sound. We arrived there at 9:30 a.m. and booked seats on



Milford Sound

the 10 a.m. boat tour of the sound. Luckily, this was a little early for the daily tourist rush, and there were only 10 passengers on a boat that could seat 200. Milford Sound is undoubtedly one of the most scenic spots in the world, and the only way to see it is by boat. Jagged, snow-capped peaks rise nearly 2,000 meters straight out of the ocean, displaying precipitous escarpments and numerous waterfowls (one of the smaller ones was 200 meters high, 3 times the

height of Niagara Falls). Our target bird in the sound was Fiordland Crested Penguin, and we eventually counted a total of 14 of them perched on rocks near their nesting burrows. The captain nosed the boat very close to shore so that we had great views of these interesting looking birds. Ross and I glimpsed a distant New Zealand Falcon (seen in the background as we were watching a Kea), but otherwise birds were almost non-existent. The only other interesting wildlife was New Zealand Fur Seals, of which we counted at least 17. The boat trip was short, and we were back at the dock by noon.

After the boat ride, we drove back through Homer Tunnel and found a nice spot for lunch. We walked up a beautiful mountain ravine (Gertrude Valley) in the hopes of finding a wren, but the habitat wasn't quite right. After an hour here, we drove back towards the tunnel and stopped so that we could scan the higher rocky slopes for wrens. Ross and I remained here from 2:30 p.m. until 4:30 p.m. and finally found a cooperative, but distant, wren! After the rest of the group rejoined us, we drove south, stopping a few places to look for Blue Ducks (we didn't see any). Later, we stopped at a site where falcons had nested in 2001, but they weren't there this year. We then drove back to Te Anau Downs, arriving there at 6 p.m. We again ate dinner at the motel at 7:15 p.m. (299 kilometers)

18 November (Tuesday)

This was mostly a travel day since we were to fly to Stewart Island in mid-afternoon. We had a late breakfast at the motel (8 a.m.) and were on the road by 9. We drove south from Te Anau Downs and stopped at an old schoolhouse along Highway 99 to look for Little Owls. We didn't see any. We then continued south and east to Invercargill, arriving there at 12:30 p.m. We ate lunch at the museum of natural history and enjoyed seeing a couple of Tuatara, one of which was estimated at 123 years old! For a lizard less

than 2 feet long, we were impressed. After lunch we headed for the airport and a 2 p.m. departure to Oban on Stewart Island. The plane was late, and while wandering the airport Jim found an advertisement for the world's southernmost McDonald's. We finally departed at 2:30 p.m., crossed Foveaux Strait, and were in Oban by 3 p.m. While we were taxiing on the runway in Oban, a White-tailed Deer ran across the runway!



Me enjoying muttonbird for dinner

We checked into the South Seas Hotel in Oban and then Ross, Jim and I went for a hike in the nearby forest where we saw Kaka, Red-fronted Parakeet, New Zealand Pigeon, and Tomtit. The town “junk” birds included Tui and Common Redpoll, an interesting species mix. Ross and I then enjoyed a couple of beers on the waterfront before dinner. Prior to coming to Stewart Island, I had been advised to try one of the local

specials, muttonbird (Sooty Shearwater). Well, the dining room at the motel had it on the menu and I had to try it. I ordered seafood chowder and a half order of muttonbird (\$16.95). The taste was excellent and the stuffing soaked up most of the strong taste of this allegedly oily bird.

We left for the kiwi boat trip at 9 p.m. The leader was Phillip Smith, a local kiwi “expert”, and tonight he was taking a group of 16 people to see the birds. The weather was gorgeous with mostly clear skies and a light breeze. The boat crossed Paterson Inlet and landed on a small jetty on the inlet opposite Ocean Beach at 9:45 p.m. On the crossing, we saw several Little Blue Penguins, but no other seabirds. We waited for darkness to settle in and then walked through the forest towards the ocean beach where the kiwi feed on amphipods in the wrack line. On the trek to the beach, we heard the distant call of a *Pterodroma* petrel returning to its burrow at night. Once on the beach, we soon found our first South Island Brown Kiwi (Tokoeka) at 10:45 p.m. This bird was a juvenile and gave us only a quick look. At the far end of the beach, Philip imitated a kiwi call and a male answered immediately. After a few minutes, the kiwi called again, but much closer. Then, at 11:25 p.m., the bird walked out on the beach right in front of us. We waited a while longer and then it came into view again for almost a minute at a distance of less than 10m. While walking back down the beach, we found a third kiwi, probably also a male by size, at midnight. We then walked back to the boat and departed by 12:25 a.m. The return trip was uneventful, although we glimpsed several Fairy Prions in the boat's spotlight and had great views of the Southern Cross. We were back in Oban by 1 a.m. and in bed soon thereafter. (230 kilometers)



Kiwi zone sign

19 November (Wednesday)

We slept in this morning and had breakfast at 8 a.m. Jim, Ross, and I met at the dock at 9:30 a.m. for a chartered pelagic trip aboard a boat captained by Phillip Smith, kiwi tour leader the night before. There was a stiff breeze, even in the sheltered harbor, and we soon learned that gale warnings were posted offshore for later today. Our plan was to check for a couple of target species on islands on the way offshore, and then to spend the remainder of our time offshore in search of true pelagic species. Apparently, there was some confusion about this schedule since our captain planned to spend only half a day offshore and the remainder on Ulva Island, an offshore predator-free island. Thankfully, he was receptive to our plan and we spent considerable time offshore in search of seabirds instead of landbirds.



Royal Albatross

we had close views of a nesting pair later in the day. As we began to bend south, we encountered large flocks of Common Diving Petrels as well as a few Sooty Shearwaters, our first Cape Petrel, 2 Fairy Prions, a lone Gray-backed Storm-Petrel, and more Shy Albatrosses (both *salvini* and *stedi*). As we headed south, the captain detoured to a couple of smaller islands where we eventually found 4 Yellow-eyed Penguins. It was

now noon and we decided to spend the rest of our time birding offshore as far south as East Point. The number of seabirds in this area was low, mainly diving petrels and albatrosses. At 2:40 p.m. we found an active fishing boat east of the Breaksea Islands that was surrounded by seabirds. We birded here for about 15 minutes (we were running out of time) and saw ~60 Shy Albatrosses, 1 Southern Royal Albatross, 2 White-chinned Petrels, and a few Cape Petrels. By now, the winds were fierce and the seas were 3-4m as a result of the wind, a strong tide, and the topography of the bottom (we were atop a shallow underwater reef). By 3 p.m. we were headed inshore for the return trip. We saw a Northern Royal Albatross, 3 porpoising Fiordland Crested Penguins, and a Little Blue Penguin on the return trip and were at the dock in Oban by 5 p.m.

We began seeing Shy Albatrosses before we had left the harbor. Along the harbor edge we saw 3 Fiordland Crested Penguins near their nesting burrows, as well as numerous Stewart Island (Bronze) Shags. Our path took us northeast from Oban towards Bench Island, where we soon found a nice flock of Northern Giant Petrels that included 1 Southern Giant Petrel. While watching the petrels, we noticed at least 3 Brown Skuas harassing gulls in the distance;



Brown Skua

Back in Oban, we rested in our rooms for almost 2 hours before meeting at 7 p.m. for dinner. After a healthy portion of seafood chowder and fresh blue cod, I returned to my room for an early sleep.

20 November (Thursday)

We awoke early in Oban and packed for an 8:30 a.m. flight off the island. The flight was uneventful and we were in the van in Invercargill by 9:30 a.m. From Invercargill, we drove north and east through Balclutha to Dunedin, where we ate lunch at the city botanical garden. We mounted an unsuccessful search for Little Owl, but did see a few native birds like New Zealand Bellbird and Silvereye. After lunch, we drove east on the Otago Peninsula to Penguin Place, a private reserve for the Yellow-eyed Penguin. At



Yellow-eyed Penguin

2:45 p.m. we had reservations for an hour and a half tour. The tour was very well run and we viewed the penguins from blinds and a series of partially underground tunnels that reminded us of the shire tunnels from *The Hobbit*. We saw several birds at nests with chicks, and watched a couple arrive and depart the ocean. The beach was also a temporary home for a large male Hooker's Sea Lion. At the end of the

tour, our bus driver unexpectedly stopped the bus on the road, saying she had just spotted a Little Owl perched on an abandoned road grader we had just passed. Another bus behind us prevented us from looking for more than a few seconds and unfortunately we didn't see the owl. We returned later in the afternoon and looked for a good half hour, again without any owl sightings. We were extremely frustrated to be so close to seeing a bird we had searched for the entire trip!

After the penguin trip, we retraced our steps a couple of kilometers and boarded a Monarch cruise boat to view nesting Royal Albatross. The boat was packed with tourists, but fortunately we boarded early and grabbed a spot on the bow. The cruise lasted a little more than an hour and was also nicely run. The harbor and seas were calm, adding to the comfort. We saw at least 12 Royal Albatross nesting near the tip of the peninsula, and enjoyed watching a few



Royal Spoonbill

land and take off and circle the wind swept head. There were many other nesting birds including at least 9 Royal Spoonbill, a large colony of Stewart Island Shags, Red-billed and Kelp gulls, and White-fronted Terns. On the return trip we saw at least 3 Little Blue Penguins. We then retraced our steps to Dunedin and spent the night in the Pacific Park Dunedin, a secluded motel on the outskirts of town. We had a late dinner at the motel (8-

9 p.m.) and then Ross and I watched New Zealand whip France (40 to 13) in the World Cup rugby match for third place. (285 kilometers)

21 November (Friday)

This was the travel day for Ross, Jim and me to the Chatham Islands. We said our good-bye to Kirilee in the early morning and then Wynston Cooper, another Nature Quest driver, took us to the Dunedin airport for our 8:20 a.m. departure. We made the trip to the Chathams in 3 legs: Dunedin to Christchurch, Christchurch to Wellington, and finally Wellington to Waitangi, arriving in the last “city” at 3:45 p.m. local time. In what must surely be the oddest version of a time zone, the Chatham Islands are 45 minutes ahead of mainland New Zealand, mainly because an hour ahead would hit the International Dateline and mean a difference of a full day! On the flight over we met Dave Pons, one of two British birders that would be joining us in the Chathams.



Te Whaanga Lagoon on Chatham Island

The Chatham Islands are a remote archipelago about 500 miles east of mainland New Zealand. The islands are populated by about 700 residents and the main industries are fishing and farming. On the 15-minute drive from the airport to Waitangi, the main town, we passed through rolling countryside that had been cleared of native forest and was populated by more sheep and cows than people. We saw a few common

passerine species and hundreds of Black Swans on the very large Te Whaanga Lagoon, but little else. Dave, Jim and I checked into the Travellers Rest motel in Waitangi while Ross was situated in the Hotel Chathams a hundred meters away.

After a quick tour of the town from our host, Val Croon, we unpacked and then assembled for a quick hike to a shag colony west of town. We walked out on a small head and viewed a colony of about 20 Chatham Islands Shags. We also saw a couple of fly-by Pitt Island Shags and a pair of Chatham Oystercatchers, of which there are fewer than 250 in existence.

That evening, we were fortunate to have the local Department of Conservation biologist, Adrian Couchman, give us a short program on the islands and their birdlife. But we were doubly fortunate that he was joined by DOC seabird biologist Colin Miskelly, and it was fun to glean seabird information from him, including tips for finding the highly endangered Magenta Petrel at sea. We finally retired to our rooms at 9:30 p.m.



Chatham Oystercatcher

22 November (Saturday)

This was our first full day of birding on the Chathams, and it may have been the highlight of an already great New Zealand birding trip. We had breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and then drove east across the south end of the island to Owenga to catch a boat for a full day of pelagic birding. The boat was Tessa B and the captain was Tim Gregory-Hunt. The weather today was gray and hazy with light to moderate intermittent rain and a light northwesterly breeze. We left the dock at 9:30 a.m. and headed generally south. We began encountering seabirds almost immediately, including our first Buller's Albatrosses.



Buller's Albatross

Because the seas were calm on the lee side of the island, our plan was to spend a little time cruising near the shore in the hope of seeing a robin. We quickly found an area where the forest almost touched the sea and positioned the boat there. We soon found a few Red-fronted Parakeets and a couple of Tomtits and several of us had good, but brief, looks at a Black Robin. We also enjoyed seeing good numbers of nesting Brown Skua here.

Our next stop was the 17 ha Little Mangere Island, a privately owned island where landing is prohibited (and actually impossible without the right equipment, which we



Pyramid Rock off the Chathams

we were obviously lacking). We were hoping to catch a glimpse of a Forbes's Parakeet, but the seas were rough and the forest was atop 200-meter high cliffs, so we didn't waste the time trying. From here we boated south a short distance to spectacular Pyramid Rock. This isolated cone-shaped rock rises abruptly from the sea and is home to an estimated 4,500 pairs of the Chatham Islands subspecies (*eremita*) of Shy



Group off Mangere Island

we were obviously lacking). We were hoping to catch a glimpse of a Forbes's Parakeet, but the seas were rough and the forest was atop 200-meter high cliffs, so we didn't waste the time trying. From here we boated south a short distance to spectacular Pyramid Rock. This isolated cone-shaped rock rises abruptly from the sea and is home to an estimated 4,500 pairs of the Chatham Islands subspecies (*eremita*) of Shy

Albatross. Hundreds of albatrosses were circling the rock and feeding in the surrounding waters, and we also encountered our first Cape Petrels here. We lingered at Pyramid until 12:15 p.m. and then headed back north towards Southeast Island. On the way we encountered a few scattered seabirds including a single Wandering Albatross.

We arrived at the 219 ha South East Island (Rangatira) at 12:30 p.m. and our plan was to find a sheltered cove and eat lunch. South East Island is another reserve where landing is prohibited, and it is a very special place for birds. The island has the largest remaining population of Black Robins, the only remaining wild population of Shore Plover, and hosts a few million nesting seabirds, primarily Sooty Shearwater, Fulmar Prion, and White-faced Storm-Petrel. A local expert told us that the seabird burrow density on the island is between 1 and 3 burrows per square meter! On the way to our lunch spot, we circled the north and east coasts of the island and counted 16 Shore Plovers, plus 2 Chatham Island Oystercatchers, 3 Little Blue Penguins, and several New Zealand Pipits. We enjoyed a peaceful lunch off the east-central shore of the island, but were unable to find any Black Robins.



Predator fence on Pitt Island

After lunch our plan was to put ashore on Pitt Island to visit a nature reserve there. We had planned to land on the southeast corner of the island, but the motor on the zodiac wouldn't start so we had to boat to the opposite corner of the island and land at Flower Pot. There, a local named Ken Lanauze met us and drove us to the Hunt Scenic Reserve where we took a short hike. The birdlife on Pitt is about as strange as

it gets. The most common birds on the meadows at the north end of the island (in addition to the ubiquitous Eurasian Skylarks and New Zealand Pipits) were Northern Giant Petrel and Brown Skua! A short walk in the reserve produced a nice list of native species including Red-fronted Parakeet, Tomtit, Fantail, Chatham Islands Gerygone, and Tui. We departed Pitt at 4 p.m.

After Pitt Island, we boated east for some late day pelagic birding. We didn't find any large concentrations of seabirds, but did see a nice range of species. The most abundant species was White-faced Storm-Petrel (hundreds), with smaller numbers of Shy (*eremita*) and Buller's albatrosses, Sooty Shearwater, and Common Diving Petrel. In addition, we saw 2-3 Royal Albatrosses, 1 white-capped Shy (*stedi*) Albatross, both Northern and Southern



Northern Giant Petrel

Giant Petrels and a White-chinned Petrel. We tried chumming in more birds, but had only marginal luck. It was finally time to head for home at 5:45 p.m., and we arrived in Owenga a little after 6:30 p.m. We drove back to Waitangi in pouring rain and enjoyed a nice dinner of fresh lobster (crayfish) pie, ice cream, and beer before calling it a day. (38 kilometers)

23 November (Sunday)



Albatross colony at The Sisters

We awoke at a leisurely 7 a.m. and met for breakfast at 8 a.m. After a grim weather forecast yesterday, things had brightened a bit and it was decided that we would attempt our second pelagic trip to The Sisters today. We drove north to Whangaroa (Port Hutt), 45 minutes to the north, and met our captain Darcy Clarke on his boat Te Ao (Maori for “the paddle”) at 9:30 a.m. From port, we steamed due west for a little more than an hour, passed through the

islands roughest waters, called “The General”, and then turned north, arriving at The Sisters at 12:45 p.m. On the latter stretch we encountered good numbers of Buller’s Albatrosses and Fairy Prions, plus one each of Common Diving Petrel, White-faced Storm-Petrel, Australasian Gannet, and Parasitic Jaeger. The seas deserve some comment here. The swells were quite impressive, but thankfully the great distance between them meant that sailing was not too bad. Wave height was 1-2 m at first, increasing to 2-3 m. The southern oceans have the nickname “Liquid Himalayas”, and we now understood why. The seas were very rough at The Sisters, with some higher swells.

The Sisters consists of 3 rock features: 2 are large steep rocks, each 30-50 ha, while the third is a smaller and lower rock shelf inhabited mainly by New Zealand Fur Seals (about 100 while we were there). The prime birding attraction here is the albatross colonies. The Sisters are home to an estimated 2,500 pairs of Northern Royal Albatrosses and 2,000 pairs of Buller’s Albatrosses. Also present were numerous Brown Skuas, Red-billed



Chatham Island Shags

Gulls, and White-fronted Terns, plus a few Pitt Island Shags, 1 Chatham Islands Shag, and 3 European Starlings (yes, they *are* everywhere!). We left the Sisters at 2:45 p.m., bound for port. The sea swells were by now very impressive and the ride back was wet and rough. As Darcy said, “The seas are a bit sloppy, eh mate.” The return trip was uneventful bird-wise, except for a lone Little Blue Penguin, and we were in port at 5:45

p.m. and back in Waitangi by 6:30 p.m. We had dinner at 7 p.m. and retired shortly thereafter. (105 kilometers)

24 November (Monday)

We ate a quick breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and then spent the day touring Chatham Island with local guide R. Lea Clough, retired military officer and lobster and abalone diver.



Chatham Island Pigeon

We began our tour by driving south from Waitangi, past Point Durham, and then south to the Awatotara River Valley.

The road ended on private property and we were told it was a healthy hike from there to the edge of the Tuku Forest Reserve. So, we instead opted to bird from the main road, and were soon successful in seeing at least 8 Chatham Island Pigeons. There are thought to be fewer than 250 in existence, so we were fortunate to see so many. Most of the

native forest in this area had been cut, so we saw few other native birds. We stopped at Point Durham on our way back north and a few minutes of ocean watching produced several Royal and Buller's albatrosses, a Northern Giant Petrel, and a pair of Brown Skuas, the latter evidently quite unusual on the main island.

We made a quick stop in Waitangi to pick up lunch and then continued north to the northern reaches of Chatham Island. We stopped at a couple of places along Te Whaanga Lagoon, where we saw thousands of Black Swans (4,300 from one stop!), numerous Pacific Black Ducks, and a few Pied Stilts, Banded Dotterel, and Ruddy Turnstones. We then drove to privately owned

Matarakau Point at the northeast corner of the island where we saw nesting Pitt Island and Chatham Islands Shags. The winds here were fierce, an estimated 30-35 knots. From here, we took a side-trip south to view some ancient (400+ years old) Moriori tree carvings. The carvings were extremely interesting, and many of them were barely visible from the effects of time. On one of the paths in this forest we encountered a family group of 5 Weka, and enjoyed photographing them at very close range as they almost stepped on our feet.



Weka

Next, we retraced our way along the north edge of Te Whaanga Lagoon, stopping a couple of times in an unsuccessful attempt to call up a Marsh or Spotless Crake. From here, we drove west across the entire north arm of the island to another privately owned beach near Waitangi West. The strong northwest winds were really churning up the seas here, creating some awesome swells and crashing waves. It was along this isolated stretch of beach that we counted at least 26 Chatham Oystercatchers, more than 10% of



North coast of Chatham Island

the world's entire population! Every individual we saw was color-banded, a testament to the intensive work to save this species. We also found several small flocks of Ruddy Turnstones, a few Banded Dotterel, and a large nesting colony of White-fronted Terns. As we were leaving a steady rain overtook us and we decided it was time to head for home. On the return trip, I counted 11 Weka, adding to the 18 we had already seen. We were back in Waitangi by

5:45 p.m., ate dinner at 7 p.m. (fresh blue cod), and retired at 8:30 p.m. (182 kilometers)

25 November (Tuesday)

This was perhaps our most relaxed day of the trip, in part because of the weather. The wind howled all night and was blowing at a steady 30-40 knots by morning. To top it off, it was overcast with intermittent rain most of the day. The sea swells were very impressive, even in Waitangi harbor, and even more impressive on the open ocean that was exposed to these strong southwesterlies. We had breakfast at 8 a.m. and spent the morning birding around Te Whanga Lagoon. We found a few shorebirds along the north edge of the lagoon, including a few Bar-tailed Godwits and Ruddy Turnstones and a lone Australasian Shoveler (an extremely rare bird in the Chathams). We came back to Waitangi for lunch at 12:30 p.m. At 1 p.m., Lee Clough took us on another drive, this time up the beach north of Owenga to the outlet of Te Whanga Lagoon. The beach ride was peaceful and on the eroded dune line we saw evidence of the peat that lies under the island's soil. The only access to the inlet is unfortunately at low tide, when the beach is exposed enough to drive a vehicle. However, the birding would probably be best at high tide when birds, especially shorebirds, would be concentrated there to roost. We arrived at the inlet at dead low tide and found a few small flocks of Bar-tailed Godwits, a flock of 14 Red Knots, a lone Whimbrel (Eurasian form *variegata*), and lots of nesting Banded Dotterel. After spending about an hour at the inlet, it was time to leave so that we could beat the incoming tide. We made a quick detour to Manukau Point to watch the surf and see the grave of the last full-blood Moriori, Tommy Solomon, before returning to Waitangi at 4 p.m. We spent the next couple of hours packing before meeting for dinner at 7 p.m. Dinner was parmesan blue cod with pavlova for dessert. We were back in the motel by 8:30 p.m. (180 kilometers)



Bar-tailed Godwit

26 November (Wednesday)

This was the last day of the trip, and it was mainly a travel day. We had breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and spent about an hour enjoying the ocean view from the restaurant. After that it was some last minute packing before the airport shuttle picked us up at 9:15 a.m. Our plane left a little late at 10:45 a.m. and we were in Wellington at 11:45 a.m. local time. We said our good-byes in the airport and I caught a 1 p.m. flight to Christchurch (it was delayed an hour, so I got to Christchurch at 2:30 p.m.).

After the trip ended, I had 4 free days before attending a meeting in Christchurch the first week of December. I used this time to catch up on a few south island misses, including Black Stilt (I saw 3 at the Lake Benmore delta and 7 at the Ahuriri River delta), Great Spotted Kiwi (1 heard at Arthur's Pass), Pacific Golden-Plover (Lake Ellesmere), and Cirl Bunting (near Lake Ellesmere).

General notes about birding in New Zealand

New Zealand must have one of the highest percentages of introduced passerines. Major "junk" birds include introduced species like Eurasian Blackbird, Song Thrush, Eurasian Skylark, Chaffinch, and European Goldfinch. Some of the more common native species included Purple Swamphen (especially on the North Island), Welcome Swallow, and Silvereye.

The birding pace in New Zealand can be quite relaxed because of the low species diversity and ease of finding most of the birds. Our days included stops for a sit-down lunch and a mid-afternoon "tea". Almost all breakfasts were cooked and were usually provided by the motel. Dinners were casual and the food was great. There were also plenty of local snack foods available – Ross had a fondness for peanut slabs, a local favorite. The beer was excellent and included Tui (a north island favorite) and Speight's (a south island favorite).

Lastly, here are a few miscellaneous tips for those planning to travel in New Zealand. They have a different power source, so bring an adaptor (readily available in the U.S.). Many motels did not provide washcloths, so I had to purchase one there. Internet access was good (many Internet cafes in the larger towns), but all motels charge for local calls if you are using a dial-up provider. Ross signed up with a New Zealand Internet provider (1 month contract) that worked very well and cost about \$30 U.S.

Species list (158 total)

North Island Brown Kiwi
Stewart Island Brown Kiwi (Tokoeke)
Little Spotted Kiwi
Great Spotted Kiwi
Fiordland Crested Penguin
Yellow-eyed Penguin
Little Penguin
New Zealand Grebe (Dabchick)
Australasian Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Wandering Albatross
Royal Albatross (Northern and Southern subspecies)
Black-browed Albatross
Buller's Albatross
Shy Albatross (Salvin's, White-capped, and Chatham subspecies)
Antarctic (Southern) Giant Petrel
Hall's (Northern) Giant Petrel
Cape Petrel
Great-winged Petrel
Cook's Petrel
Pycroft's Petrel
Broad-billed Prion
Fairy Prion
White-chinned Petrel
Parkinson's (Black) Petrel
Westland Petrel
Flesh-footed Shearwater
Buller's Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Short-tailed Shearwater
Hutton's Shearwater
Fluttering Shearwater
Little Shearwater
Gray-backed Storm-Petrel
White-faced Storm-Petrel
Common Diving-Petrel
Australian Gannet
Little Black Cormorant
Great Cormorant
Pied Cormorant
Rough-faced (New Zealand King) Shag
Bronzed (Stewart Island) Shag
Chatham Islands Shag
Spotted Shag

Pitt Island Shag
Little Cormorant
White-faced Heron
Pacific Reef-Heron
Rufous Night-Heron
Royal Spoonbill
Mute Swan
Black Swan
Canada Goose
Paradise Shelduck
Blue Duck
Gray Teal
Brown Teal
Mallard
Pacific Black Duck
Australian Shoveler
New Zealand Scaup
Swamp Harrier
New Zealand Falcon
Wild Turkey
California Quail
Brown Quail
Ring-necked Pheasant
Indian (Common) Peafowl
Weka
Buff-banded Rail
Baillon's (Marsh) Crake
Spotless Crake
Purple Swamphen (Pukeko)
Takahe
Eurasian Coot
(South Island) Pied Oystercatcher
Chatham Oystercatcher
Variable Oystercatcher
Black-winged (Pied) Stilt
Masked (Spur-winged) Plover
Pacific Golden-Plover
Red-breasted (New Zealand) Dotterel
Banded Dotterel
Shore Plover
Black-fronted Dotterel
Wrybill
Bar-tailed Godwit
Whimbrel
Marsh Sandpiper

Terek Sandpiper
Ruddy Turnstone
Red Knot
Red-necked Stint
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper
Curlew Sandpiper
phalarope sp.
Brown Skua
Pomarine Jaeger
Parasitic Jaeger
Kelp Gull
Red-billed Gull
Black-billed Gull
Caspian Tern
White-fronted Tern
Little Tern
Fairy Tern
Black-fronted Tern
White-winged Tern
Rock Dove
African Collared-Dove (Barbary Dove)
Spotted Dove
New Zealand Pigeon
Chatham Island Pigeon
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Kea
New Zealand Kaka
Red-fronted Parakeet
Yellow-fronted Parakeet
Eastern Rosella
Shining Bronze-Cuckoo
Long-tailed Koel
Morepork
Sacred Kingfisher
Rifleman
South Island (Rock) Wren
Sky Lark
Welcome Swallow
Australasian Pipit
Dunnoek
Eurasian Blackbird
Song Thrush
Black Robin
Fernbird
Gray Fantail
Tomtit

New Zealand Robin
Whitehead
Yellowhead
Pipipi
Gray Gerygone
Chatham Gerygone
Silver-eye
Stitchbird
New Zealand Bellbird
Tui
Kokako
Saddleback (North Island and South Island subspecies)
Australian Magpie
Rook
Common Myna
European Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
European Greenfinch
Common Redpoll
European Goldfinch
Yellowhammer
Cirl Bunting