

# ALBATROS-TOURS

ORNITHOLOGISCHE STUDIENREISEN

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## Neuseeland

31 January - 20 February 2017



### Participants

Christian Perez, Wilfried Mahu, Marco Capello, George Kenyon and Lucy Waskell, Dr. Wolfgang Nehls, Wilfried Hilmer, and Frank Voekler

### Images

Matt Jones

## 31 January 2017 – Day One

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We left downtown Auckland, navigating the rush and headed to Ark in the Park for some of New Zealand's more common species. Kicking off the trip list were New Zealand Pigeon, New Zealand Fantail and Grey Warbler along with the iconic sounding Tui. Moving on to the more exotic Californian Quail, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and Eastern Rosella looking like a paintbox. The Australasian Gannet Colony is always popular and there were lots of healthy looking chicks and aerodynamic adults whizzing around. Our first lunch stop combined looking at waterfowl; Grey Teal, New Zealand Scaup and New Zealand Dabchick were seen with a couple of Australasian Shovelers. Around the corner we found our first New Zealand Dotterel and a selection of Variable Oystercatchers. Our final destination for the night was Trounson. After a fantastic meal at the Kaihu Tavern we went out to find North Island Brown Kiwi and after a bit of searching we found a lone male. A pair of roosting Morepork in the grounds of our accommodation finished off a good first day.

## 1 February 2017 – Day Two

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Our day began with paying respects to Tane Mahuta (Lord of the Forest) a massive 2000-year old Kauri tree, seeing Fantail and Grey Warbler and adding North Island Tomtit to our trip list.

A disappointing dip was not finding Australian Little Grebe at our usual spot especially as we'd seen six birds on our trip before Christmas, however there were plenty of New Zealand Dabchicks and at our Waipu lunch spot we failed to find probably the rarest bird in New Zealand, the Fairy Tern, it just never showed



itself. There are only about 30 individuals left, but just one would have been nice! We made do with Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit and more New Zealand Dotterels before heading to Warkworth.

At a nearby park we added Buff-banded Rail to the list and a Spotless Crake that ran across the road. While looking at some showy Kingfishers we found a couple of Brown Teal on the same pond and Kaka flying high overhead as we left the reserve brought the curtain down on Day 2.

## 2 February 2017 – Day Three

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Probably one of the most popular things about birding in New Zealand for visiting birders are the pelagics and today was our first of the trip. Not too much wind but still plenty of birds to get the juices flowing. First to show were Fluttering Shearwaters, and looking in amongst the rafts of these little brown and white seabirds we found our first Little Blue Penguin. In deeper water we encountered a couple of Arctic Skuas harassing White-fronted Terns. Deeper into Hauraki Gulf itself Buller's Shearwater, White-faced Storm Petrels and Flesh-footed Shearwaters showed up. Our first chumming stop provided the prize of the day, the New Zealand Storm Petrel followed by a second bird and then a lone Black Petrel (Parkinson's). A handful of Fairy Prions and an incredible number of Cook's Petrels whizzed around the back of the boat and then as we steamed out to the Mokes we counted 36-plus Grey Ternlets roosting on this sea stack. A bit further out we chummed again and a couple more New Zealand Storm Petrels were soon attracted to the oily slick. We reckon we'd seen eight New Zealand Storm Petrels in total by the time we got back to the harbour.





## 3 February 2017 – Day Four

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Another highlight of the trip is the 24 hours we spend on Tiritiri Matangi. This small predator-free island is choc full of rare New Zealand bush birds. On the crossing from the mainland to the island we encountered a small pod of Orca swimming in the opposite direction. Once on the island we loaded our overnight gear on the truck, listened to the biosecurity talk from the Ranger and headed straight into the bush. It's very typical bush birding, trying to connect with every movement and deciphering every call. The birds we needed came thick and fast: Whitehead, North Island Saddleback showed really well, and North Island Robin. We found a daytime roosting Morepork which was a bonus for those in the group that hadn't seen one on our first night. Stitchbird showed well along with Red-fronted Parakeets, plus lots of Tui and Bellbird. Later in the afternoon we added Fernbird, Brown Quail and the massive Takahe to our trip list. After a barbeque meal of lamb and gurnard washed down with some New Zealand wine and beer we went out looking for Little Spotted Kiwi. After just thirty minutes we had an awesome encounter with a lone female that showed down to a couple of meters, probably my best ever view and the whole group saw it and went to bed happy. Myself and Christian decided to stay up a bit longer and saw another three Little Spotted Kiwi plus a Little Blue Penguin.





## 4 February 2017 – Day Five

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Up early to catch the dawn chorus we had much better views of North Island Kokako before the water taxi picked us up to go back to Gulf Harbour. On the road south our next destination was Miranda Shorebird Centre. The tide was OK but all the usual suspects were in place, most importantly Wrybill. Others of note were Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot and at least 8+ Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and one Marsh Sandpiper. No Red-necked Stints, Pec Sands or Pacific Golden Plover but we saw our first Black-billed Gulls and an unusual find was a New Zealand Pipit which is not a common bird at Miranda. A fantastic fish and chip supper finished off the evening.



## 5 February 2017 – Day Six

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Before breakfast we went back to the reserve and got better views of Wrybill, but no new species added. Onwards to Whitianga for our second pelagic of the tour. A massive boil-up of fish had attracted Buller's and Fluttering Shearwaters, Fairy Prion and a couple of White-faced Stormies. As we got closer we spotted a couple of Short-tailed Shearwaters in the mix. Once we reached our chum site all eyes were peeled for Pycroft's Petrel. The first 'Cookilaria' was spotted. Was it? Yes? No? A Cook's Petrel did a circuit of the boat but hold on, what's this? Pycroft's Petrel! Everyone got on to it and the bird did a slow cruise of the back of the boat. Time to relax and enjoy. We probably had 10-12 Pycroft's, 20+ Cook's and three or four birds that could have been either! A very showy Black Petrel that hung around and a New Zealand Storm Petrel did us proud. Heading back into the harbour we found our only Eastern Reef Heron of the trip.





## 6 February 2017 – Day Seven

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We were on the road early, which was a waste of time as we had a flat tyre and lost 40 or so minutes fixing it. Credit to the group, they all mucked in to help me get the flat tyre off and the new one on, it was like the United Nations Formula One Team with Dutch, American and Germans all pitching in. After our false start, we made it to Whangarino Wetlands where we had good scope views of Australasian Bittern. Lunch at Pureora Forest and flight views of our first Yellow-crowned Parakeet and Kaka. Whitehead produced the backdrop of calls and a Tui gave an alarm call followed by a New Zealand Falcon flying right over us. Awesome! The spare tyre was put to the test as I slammed on the brakes when a Long-tailed Cuckoo did several sorties above us. Double awesome! Off to the Tower Hide for a great encounter with a North Island Robin. Next stop was Tongariro River for Blue Duck but our luck had run out for the day.



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## 7 February 2017 – Day Eight

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We were all up before sunrise and back at the river for Blue Duck, a couple barely visible in the gloom. As the sun rose it was like focusing a pair of binoculars and four Blue Duck came into focus and light. Everyone was happy! More pre-breakfast birding and Australasian Bittern flew over plus goods looks at Fernbird, New Zealand Scaup and New Zealand Dabchick.

Via Taupo for a new tyre we headed for Boundary Stream and had lunch in the forest, which was unusually quiet, only joined by a single Kaka. A Rifleman joined the party and one turned into four as the whole family fed right in front of us. We heard a couple of distant Long-tailed Cuckoos but I was surprised not to even hear New Zealand Falcon. We left the forest saying farewell to North Island Robins and Whiteheads as this was the last time we'd encounter them on the tour. Down into the town of Napier and the clouds loomed. After a bit of a run around we found a couple of Black-fronted Dotterels. More frustratingly was the fly over of a White-winged Black Tern that only a few of us got onto. The clouds got darker and the rain heavier. A full on downpour was underway and a surprise find of a Great Egret in a roadside ditch next to the State Highway was a welcome one as we didn't even need to get out of the van to see it. We finished the day with long staying vagrants, Plumed Whistling Ducks, at the park in the pouring rain. Perfect weather for ducks!

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## 8 February 2017 – Day Nine

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It was raining when we woke up and headed to Foxton. Along the way we had good views of Bittern and a lot more Black-fronted Dotterels. We lunched at a Dutch cafe and Marcel and Wilfred chatted in Dutch to the waitress who had never set foot in Holland! On the beach at Foxton we found Little Tern, Wrybill, Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots plus 4 Pacific Golden Plover in the company of 30+ Banded Dotterels. On the way back into town we stopped at a small pond to find New Zealand Dabchick, Pacific Black Duck, Australian Shoveler, and New Zealand Scaup.

## 9 February 2017 – Day Ten

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Great views of Grey Teal, Banded Dotterel and Pacific Golden Plover and Wrybill at the beach before the transfer from North to South Island via the Cook Strait ferry. We did some birding around the Wellington suburbs (Shoveler and Scaup) and on the ferry we added our first Spotted Shags to the trip list. Cook Strait provided us with our first alberts, White-capped, Salvin's and a lone Wandering Albatross plus Northern Giant Petrels, a few White-chinned Petrels, some Sooty Shearwaters and a small pod of Short-Beaked Common Dolphins. As we entered Queen Charlotte Sound a couple more Arctic Skuas were seen as well as Fluttering Shearwaters plus a lone King Shag. Not too shabby as ferry trips go.

## 10 February 2017 – Day Eleven

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Waking up on a new island, after breakfast we were back out on Queen Charlotte Sound. The first target was the very sought after King Shag. After 20 minutes looking we had six birds right in front of us. On Blumine Island we were welcomed by the always inquisitive Western Weka and on the bush path we had good views of New Zealand Bellbird, Tui, New Zealand Pigeon and Silvereye, plus a fabulous male South Island Tomtit. Suddenly high above us was a distinctive chattering call, almost laughing. Right on cue in front of the whole group an Orange-fronted Parakeet (Malherbe's Parakeet) landed on a branch right in front of us. Mega! All this within thirty minutes of being on the island. The parakeet didn't hang around but everyone had seen it and everyone was smiling. Fluttering Shearwaters, a sleeping New Zealand Fur Seal, plus plenty of Spotted Shags flying around kept us company on the way back to Picton.



A quick lunch before the long drive to Kaikoura, via a sewage pond, we got three Glossy Ibis. No sign of Cirl Buntings but we couldn't play the long game and stake it out as we (me) had a 7 hour drive ahead of us. The usual route would take two or three hours at a leisurely pace but since the 2016 Kaikoura earthquake the road doesn't exist and meant a massive detour for us. But importantly, at least we were getting to Kaikoura. A flooded field gave us good looks at Black-fronted Terns feeding and with the fuel light glowing on the van as we reached Kaikoura we went straight out for dinner, a beer, and then bed!

## 11 February 2017 – Day Twelve

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Before our Kaikoura pelagic we went to the Kaikoura Peninsula car park for close encounters with New Zealand Fur Seals. A bonus bird for the trip was a moulting Erect-crested Penguin that had been resident for around a fortnight. Not looking his best but always good to see a southern bird this far north. Other notable birds were South Island Pied Oystercatcher and Turnstone. Up onto the paddocks behind the town we connected with a pair of Cirl Buntings that were still obviously feeding young, beaks full of bugs and grubs, heading off into a distant bush.

At South Bay we met up with legend, Gazza Melville of Albatross Encounter for our first pelagic of the day. Safe to say another epic tour with five albatross species seen, New Zealand Wanderer (Gibson's), Northern and Southern Royals and Salvin's and White-capped. A very calm day but the birds showed up; fantastic looking Cape Petrels plus White-chinned and Westland Petrels along with the vultures of the sea, the sometimes comical Northern Giant Petrels that seem just as interested in fighting one another as they are in feeding.

Being at sea we could appreciate the impact of the Kaikoura earthquake, seeing the massive scars in the landscape that had taken out roads and left Kaikoura cut off for two weeks.

The afternoon of Day 12 gives the group a chance to do their own thing, some taking the opportunity to catch up on laundry, emails and shopping, and others choosing a second pelagic. Christian joined me for the afternoon pelagic which produced our sixth albatross species for the day, a wary but beautiful Black-browed Albatross and some Sooty Shearwaters that we hadn't seen in the morning. One of the most memorable moments was an encounter with the ever playful Dusky Dolphins that leapt out of the water behind us and a pod of Hector's Dolphins that duly played in the surf. Great to see these guys still here and that the great shake had not scared them off.

The day ended with a ten minute after dinner look for Little Owl which was very co-operative!





## 12 February 2017 – Day Thirteen

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Before we left Kaikoura a quick look at the bush reserve proved fruitful, adding Brown Creeper to our trip list - two birds flitted around in the top of the Manuka trees. South on the damaged coast road of State Highway 1 to Arthur's Pass via Christchurch we had a quick look at Ashley River. More Black-fronted Terns but not much else of note. Lunch was at the world famous Sheffield Pie Shop and with bellies full we headed for the spine of the Southern Alps. A very obliging South Island Robin fed in amongst the leaf litter on a forest path with a large and much more obliging flock of Brown Creepers. As the rain moved in we left a couple of soggy Kea in a mountain car park and headed out to dinner. After dinner a few brave souls were game to come out and look for Great Spotted Kiwi in the rain. We got drenched and only heard a distant bird call.



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## 13 February 2017 – Day Fourteen

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In the morning two of our group were leaving us at Arthur's Pass and we said farewell to Dutch birders Marcel and Wilfred. They were great fun to be around and great birders, cheers guys!

As we headed for the West Coast it was raining again but a male Falcon flew down the road ahead of our van and perched in a tree right next to the road. Everyone got out of the van for scope views of the soggy Falcon.

A quick dinner at Franz Josef then out to meet Ian Cooper who helps us to find the world's rarest kiwi. The Okarito Kiwi (Rowi) population is about 300+ birds. At one stage birds surrounded us, calling and snuffling, but we only had brief glimpses as a bird would run across the path. It was a painful night and the rain soaked us to the skin. Ian worked tremendously to make it work but after three hours we called it a night.

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## 14 February 2017 – Day Fifteen

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Most of Franz Josef glacier was hiding under very low grey cloud the next morning but even in the rain this is a stunning part of New Zealand. Windscreen wipers worked overtime on the van as we headed down the coast for our next bird and ticked the Australasian Crested Grebe. We were also very fortunate to find a pair of New Zealand Falcon playing in the thermals above a sea cliff. There was a lay-by opposite so we were able to park the van safely and enjoy watching the large female dwarf her male partner. They gave a really good show with several fly overs and at one stage calling to each other. I never get tired of seeing New Zealand's only endemic raptor. No luck finding Yellowhead at Haast but we made do with fantastic views of Rifleman and a lone Yellow-crowned Parakeet. The rain eased as we arrived into the charming town of Wanaka.

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## 15 February 2017 – Day Sixteen

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We had an early morning date with Rock Wren and even the sun shone as we drove through the Cardrona Range to the lake town of Te Anau for coffee and a pie, plus fuel for the van. Caffeine pumping in our veins we drove the Milford Road, which looks like it should be used in an expensive car commercial. At the Rock Wren site the rain decided to join us again but after some searching and rock scrambling most of the group got onto the bird, a lone female. The rain turned torrential so we headed back to the van for a while to let the rain pass. A break in the clouds gave us an opportunity to try again and we headed back to where we'd seen the bird. Bang! A faint call in front of us and the bird popped up and showed itself, and everyone got onto it this time. This diminutive little bird made it to the trip list.



Back at the van a lone Kea was kindly guarding our van, or possibly hiding from tourists scrambling to take its photo. As the rain eased we took a pleasant bush walk accompanied by South Island Robins, Rifleman, Brown Creeper and Fantails and later that night we dreamt of the Wren that Rocks!





## 16 February 2017 – Day Seventeen

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Homeward bound - for me - for a couple of nights but it was the group's first time to Stewart Island. The drive to Bluff produced a few Black-billed Gulls and Masked Lapwings in the fields and a few White-capped Albatrosses tracked the ferry along with a few Sooty Shearwaters during a fairly calm ferry crossing. As we arrived at Stewart Island's Halfmoon Bay we added Foveaux Shag to the list. The Stewart Island Shag was split into two species about 18 months ago; the Foveaux Shag and Otago Shag.

We spent the afternoon on Ulva Island and within 30 minutes we had South Island Saddleback, Yellowhead, Yellow-crowned and Red-crowned Parakeet at our feet. Looks at a cryptic Morepook as it tried to hide in a Rimu tree along with the ever present curious Weka and friendly Robins. A great three hours birding - I know I'm biased as it's my home turf but Ulva Island very rarely disappoints.

A filling meal at the South Sea Hotel set us up for evening of kiwi spotting which unfortunately was not successful. This trip has been under new management since November 2016 and the success rate at finding the birds has not been the best. It meant we had to go back a second night.

## 17 February 2017 – Day Eighteen

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Our Stewart Island pelagic was the last pelagic of our trip and with good mate Ty skippering the Aurora Australis we left the main wharf. Within ten minutes we had stunning views of two Fiordland Crested Penguins, a bird that breeds around Halfmoon Bay but at this time of year becomes a challenge to find. Southern Brown Skua joined our trip list and another Fiordland Crested Penguin but sadly no Yellow-eyed Penguin. At the reef we were joined by White-capped, Salvin's and two gorgeous looking Buller's Albatross. A couple of Northern Giant Petrels were seen along with a few Fairy Prions and Common Diving Petrels. A single Mottled Petrel put in a brief fly-by, a couple of Cook's Petrels and single Grey-backed Storm Petrel. We had a fun picking out the odd Hutton's Shearwaters which were hiding amongst the Sooty Shearwaters which paid off as we found a lone Fluttering Shearwater, which is not common this far south.

Another splendid meal at the South Sea Hotel and then a second trip to find Stewart Island Brown Kiwi. As I used to guide for the previous owner of the kiwi spotting trip I asked if I could lead my Wrybill clients separately to the main group. Long story short we found two birds, a male in the bush as we walked to the beach and a large female walking towards us as we went back to the boat. We also got the attention of a young male sealion and had to take a detour to get back on the path! As we waited on the boat for the other group to return, Fairy Prion and Common Diving Petrel flew around the back of the boat in the dark and another sea lion swam into view. A nice end to a successful day's birding.





## 18 February 2017 – Day Nineteen

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Leaving Stewart Island on the 8am ferry we caught a glimpse of one of the Fiordland Crested Penguins we'd seen on the rocks the previous day. Other birds of note during the ferry crossing were White-capped and Buller's Albatross, and Sooty and Hutton's Shearwater.

Our destination this evening was Oamaru. Along the way we stopped at a site to look for Yellow-eyed Penguin. The wind was now blowing fiercely but we got views of seven adult Yellow-eyed Penguins hunkered down along with a lone Little Blue in the water below us. Spotted and Otago Shags were also present, and cute (if smelly) New Zealand Fur Seals. Into the coastal town of Oamaru before checking into our accommodation we observed a massive roost of Otago Shags at a dis-used wharf.





## 19 February 2017 – Day Twenty

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Our last full day and just one bird needed, the endemic and stunning Black Stilt. We arrived at one of our usual sites which was a bit of a shock. The area, usually puddles and little creeks, was a lake. The spot where we'd usually have lunch would require a boat to get to it. We spotted some distant birds, around 8+ but a long way off. If we wanted closer views we'd have to get our feet wet. Christian, Frank and Wilfred were keen to join me and thirty minutes later we had stunning views of several adult birds showing very well. Photos grabbed and Christian even had time to do his familiar "lifer dance"! If he saw a new bird a quick jig was jigged.

Before wading back across the cold water to the van we got another New Zealand Pipit and Banded Dotterels as we stood in the shadow of the stunning Mount Cook.

With dry warm feet back into the boots we tried a different site and found a sub-adult Black Stilt. The guys that didn't fancy the water crossing earlier had pretty good views along with Black-billed Gulls and Black-fronted Terns.





## 20 February 2017 – Day Twenty-One

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Our last day and destination Christchurch Airport. We got up early to look for Baillon's Crake but similar to the Black Stilt site it was flooded and we had no joy. The last species we could possibly see was Chukar and we got lucky with four of them feeding close the road near Tekapo.

With a nice round 150 bird species for the tour, Christchurch Airport was tapped into the SatNav and a few hours later the group was saying its farewells. I dropped George and Lucy in downtown Christchurch as they were spending a night in the city and everybody else was heading home from Christchurch Airport, to Germany and the Philippines. Home to Stewart Island for me.

The weather had not been kind to us this trip, but it was another great tour with some great birds seen in some stunning parts of New Zealand.