

New Zealand's Natural History

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 October - 17 November 2012

Report compiled by Alastair Judkins & Geoff Henderson



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Day 1/2

Saturday 27th/Sunday 28th October

In flight - journey from UK to New Zealand

Day 3

Monday 29th October

Tour leaders Mark Ayre and Alastair Judkins drove to Auckland airport to meet some of the group who had flown in that day. Some had already been in New Zealand for a few days getting a head start on their New Zealand adventure. After dropping the new arrivals at our hotel in downtown Auckland, which would be our base for the next two days, we met up with the rest of the touring party and set off on our first adventure together west of Auckland to the Waitakere ranges and the Auckland city walk.

On the drive to the city walk we had our first views of various endemic and introduced birds. These included Australian Magpie, New Zealand Pigeon, Barbary Dove, Myna, Tui, Fantail, and many introduced British passerines such as Blackbird, Song thrush, Starling, and House Sparrow. We had to slow down to let a Pukeko cross the road safely which gave us a great first view of this native rail. Feeding on a nearby golf course were more Pukeko and Spur-winged Plovers. A picnic was set up on a table close to some native trees allowing the group to enjoy their lunch with the sound of the Tui and Grey Warblers singing as they watched the Welcome Swallows catching their lunch over the surrounding grassed area. A good sighting of an Eastern Rosella was had close by on the ground, feeding on the grass, with a distant sighting of Sulphur-crested Cockatoo in the trees.

At the end of lunch, a male North Island Robin flitted and tiptoed at our feet hoping to find some insects disturbed by our movements. After a great lunch we got ready to have a short walk through some native bush. Just before the start of the walk there were Marsh Harriers soaring high above the forest and there were two NZ pigeons sitting in a low tree next to the toilet block giving us a fantastic view of these large indigenous birds. The walk followed a lovely stream alongside which grew huge tree ferns, Fuchsia, and towering Kauri tress as well as Podocarps such as Kahikatea, Matai and Rimu. We saw Fantail, Grey Warbler, NZ Pigeon and Tui amongst the primeval setting.

After the walk we headed further west to the coastline. We drove through the small popular summer holiday settlement of Muriwai and parked overlooking the Tasman Sea. Here we saw hundreds of Australasian Gannets at one of their breeding colonies. There were birds soaring and wheeling in on the warm wind and in various stages of their breeding cycle from nest building to sitting on new chicks. Also breeding on the cliffs were White-fronted Terns, Red-billed Gulls and Starlings. On the rocky shoreline Variable Oystercatchers were seen feeding below the tide line. We then saw two Barbary Doves before driving back to the hotel with a few bobbing heads on the bus after a long day of travelling.

Day 4

Tuesday 30th October

We woke up to a glorious Auckland day and headed to Miranda which is an area of tidal mudflats on the Firth of Thames to see a variety of wading birds. We arrived at around 9am as the tide was starting to head out with the birds becoming active and flying overhead. On the way to the shoreline we had good views of Pacific Golden Plover sitting in the low reeds. On the shoreline there are a couple of blinds to get good views of the birds without spooking them and protect birdwatchers from the elements. The sun was beating down on us so it was nice to have the shade. Once we were in the blind we set up the scopes to see what was around. In front of the blind there was a lone Whimbrel feeding on the ever increasing mudflat. The occasional Bar-tailed Godwit flew over the hide before a huge flock came in over us and settled in front of the hide to begin feeding with the odd Lesser Knot in amongst them. On a sandbar there were Red-Billed and Black-billed Gulls, White-fronted Terns and a couple of Caspian Terns. In the water close to the hide there was a Pied Shag scouring the shallows for fish.

After moving to next hide we had good views of NZ Dotterel and Wrybill through the scopes. It is great to see these endemic birds, especially the Wrybill which is the world's only bird with a bill curved to one side. Behind the shoreline was a wetland area which had more Godwits, Pied Stilt, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Lesser Knot, Red-Necked Stint, the ubiquitous Mallards, White-faced Herons and there were numerous Marsh Harriers cruising the waterways in hope of finding an easy meal. It was a great day at Miranda with many variables in our favour. After leaving the shoreline we had a small drive to the Miranda Shorebird Centre for lunch. This centre is the hub for visiting birdwatchers with great research and education displays, toilets, kitchen, comfy couches and gift shop.

After lunch we got back in the bus to drive up the coastline and stopped next to a tidal pond with hundreds of Black Swans as well as Canada Geese, Paradise Shelduck, Pied and Little Black Shag. We then parked next to a large stony beach to get views of Sacred Kingfisher and Spotted Shags, then drove on, with flowering Pohutakakwa trees in the background. On the drive on the way back to Auckland we saw Ring-necked Pheasant and Turkey feeding alongside the sheep and cattle in the rolling green farmland.

Day 5

Wednesday 31st October

Today was a special day as we headed north to the Whangaroa peninsular to get on a 45 minute ferry to the sanctuary island of Tiritiri Matangi (which means “Tossed by the wind”). This island was formerly farmland, but between 1984 and 1994, volunteers planted between 250,000 and 300,000 trees. The island is now 60% forested and has had pests such as rats and cats eradicated. This has allowed various rare and endangered bird species such as Whitehead, Saddleback, Kokako and many more to be relocated there to establish a species “bank” to insure their survival and to act as a breeding programme for future releases on the mainland and other islands. As we got on the ferry we spotted a young White-faced Heron on the breakwater and a Variable Oystercatcher. The ferry ride across was blustery but this made for good birding with a Buller’s Shearwater being blown close to shore as we approached the island.

After being briefed by the ranger on the protocols of visiting the island we set out to see what we could find in the forest. With the new species of birds living there, the sounds were quite different from what we had been hearing on the mainland. We had fleeting but exciting calls and glimpses of Stitchbird, Whitehead and Saddleback before coming into a shaded gully to get great views of Saddleback, Stitchbird, and Riflemen collecting nesting material and feeding in close proximity to the track. We even saw where a pair of Saddlebacks were planning on making their nest in a tree just 3m from the track. Further along the track we had high views of Whitehead before moving on to a bird feeding station which had Stitchbird and Bellbirds competing for sugar water just 2m from the track giving us fantastic views. We continued up towards the bunkhouse where 13 of us including Mark were to stay the night.

After a quick lunch the 4 people not staying the night carried on down towards the jetty in hope of seeing some new birds before leaving the island. Straight away, two Takahe were sighted in a large fenced off area allowing us to see the large flightless rail that many New Zealanders have never seen. Continuing down the track the quartet was entertained by the numerous Tui, Bellbird and Stitchbird either at the feeding stations or drinking nectar from the numerous flax flowers. Just before the jetty was reached there was a Brown Teal on a small pond feeding actively close by and a great sighting was made of a superbly camouflaged Red-crowned Parakeet in the thick green vegetation. On the ferry ride there was a Fluttering Shearwater and Little Blue Penguins sighted ending a great day before heading back to Auckland. Those who stayed on the island were treated to Brown Quail feeding close to the lighthouse and a nocturnal walk on the track where they heard the calls of Little Spotted Kiwi and Morepork but the strong wind made it difficult to track them down for viewing.

Day 6

Thursday 1st November

The next morning some of the group saw the same Takahe, Brown Teal and a fleeting glimpse of a Kokako before getting on the ferry back to the mainland to meet up with the rest of the group and head south to Rotorua. Near Rotorua we visited Waimangu (black water) which is an area of thermal activity with steaming hot lakes, sulphurous vents, geysers and scalding streams filled with primordial algae and bacteria stained rocks. On one of the cold lakes there were Grey Teal and Dabchick feeding with numerous Grey Warblers and Tui sighted amongst the flowering Manuka. Californian Quail were heard but not seen but it was a great way to end a long travelling day before retiring to our hotel at Taupo.

Day 7

Friday 2nd November

Friday morning was an early pre-breakfast start with the group leaving Taupo at 6am to visit Pureora forest to the NW of Lake Taupo in search of Kokako and to view the magnificent podocarp forest. We drove slowly down the windy road on a foggy morning with a hint of rain on the horizon. We parked next to a large stand of towering native trees and while Alastair and Mark set up the breakfast table the fog lifted and the forest began to come to life with birdsong of Tui, Grey Warbler, Fantail and many introduced birds such as Blackbird and Chaffinch. Mark tried the playback call of a Kokako and got a response from high up in the trees. A Shining Cuckoo was seen just above the group in a low tree giving us a great view of its iridescent feathers. Then another great spot was made (by the same great spotter, AKA Janice) of a Kokako feeding in a tree just 10m from the group as they enjoyed their breakfast and coffees! Soon the forest was echoing with the haunting calls of Kokako and a group of Kaka swooped over forest with their harsh parrot calls.

With breakfast finished, we had a short drive to the Totara walkway which is a short circuit walk through an old growth podocarp forest. We were impressed by the size of the Kahikatea, Totara, Matai and Rimu, but also the lushness and the variety of ferns, mosses and lichen that carpeted the forest floor. Also impressive were the information displays provided by the Department of Conservation which gave a great insight into the natural history of what we were viewing. Soon we were driving on to the pumice lined shores of Lake Taupo in glorious weather for a picnic lunch while watching Back Swans, Dabchick, Little Black and Little Shag. After lunch we moved a short distance to a boggy area where Mark played a Fernbird call in an attempt to entice the furtive endemic bird to show itself. It worked a treat as within 2 minutes a Fernbird was within 5 metres of the group giving good views to all.

We then drove up to a lookout point where a quick sighting of a Tomtit was made from the vehicle. The lookout gave a stunning panorama of the massive caldera of Lake Taupo, New Zealand largest lake and the site of one of the world's largest volcanic eruptions. Close to Lake Taupo is Lake Rotoaira where Black Scaup, Grey Teal, Grey Duck, Black Swan, Paradise Shelduck, and White-faced Heron were seen before driving onto our final destination for the day, the smoldering volcanoes of Tongariro National Park where our hotel was on the slopes of Mt Ruapehu, New Zealand's largest volcano and the North Island's tallest peak. At this stage, Mark had to leave the group, with Geoff Henderson joining the group and continuing with Alastair.

Day 8

Saturday 3rd November

Geoff arrived in good time, met the group on a very foggy morning and soon we set off on the Taranaki Falls track with little view, but plenty of enthusiasm. After the recent eruption on Tongariro, the mountain was quiet as we walked through tussock lands and beech forest where the umbrella ferns showed that delicate green of late spring growth. At the falls, recent rain meant plenty of water power was on show as it plunged down the 20m drop. Grey Warblers were still able to be seen in under the mountain beech canopy, but despite keen eyes, low visibility made bird watching tricky. Mountain Foxglove and New Zealand's tiny endemic pygmy pine were on show as was the water sculpted volcanic rock in the stream beds. After a welcome cafe lunch, we set off for Ruatiti to search for Whio, the Blue Duck. Sadly after exhaustive searches in the Managanui-o-te-Ao River, which normally holds a good population, we learned that Whio are much less common there than they have been, despite invertebrate food appearing plentiful. Flowering Spider Orchids on the banks and both our native tea trees provided a backdrop to the river, which in all other respects looked wonderful.

Day 9

Sunday 4th November

Next morning the weather had cleared to allow an occasional peep at snow capped Mt Ruapehu and Mt Ngauruhoe through the cloud and the early morning frost reminded us that we were still very much at altitude! Setting off for Picton tonight, our first stop was to pick up lunch and continue the 'small town icon theme', with Ohakune's giant carrot! We left the volcanic plateau and headed down country with the Tararua Range flanking us to the east as the volcanic landscape gave way to more gentle terrain where the rivers make their way east to the Tasman Sea. The weather improved markedly as we drove down, and our picnic lunch spot on the banks of the Manawatu River at Foxton Beach was very pleasant. Quick eyes soon spotted a small group of Pacific Golden Plovers feeding amongst the NZ Samphire in the salt marsh. In the distance Royal Spoonbills were seen flying and scattered Godwit fed on the mudflats.

After some beach combing where the broad expanses of Foxton Beach meet the Tasman Sea, we headed down the last stretch to Wellington. Check-in time was unfortunately lengthened by late ferry departure, but eventually the best decks for seeing pelagic birds were spied out and the ferry headed off. The crossing was very calm - great for wary sea travellers, but not quite so helpful for making easy flying for pelagics. Nonetheless, NZ White Capped Albatross, Salvin's Albatross, Northern Giant Petrel, Westland Petrel, Sooty Shearwater, Fluttering Shearwater, Australasian Gannets and Spotted Shags were seen by keen observers who braved the cold wind until the light faded. As the sunset coloured, a peek at the sun setting over the distant Kaikoura Ranges spoke of our route over the next days. Finally, we very thankfully reached our rooms after a long day.

Day 10

Monday 5th November

The day dawned clear but cool. No time for sleeping in though, as our charter to see out into the Marlborough Sounds had us packed up and ready to sail at 8am. Using his local knowledge, our skipper expertly put us within viewing range several very wary King Shags. We had a great look at these magnificent birds along with Spotted Shags still showing the bright green facial skin colouration. Little Blue Penguin were a treat to see, as we heard the story of how sanctuary islands in Marlborough's drowned valleys are used as a conservation measure in looking after our rare and endangered flora and fauna.

At Ship Cove, visiting place of Captain James Cook, we were able to contrast the sparse montane beech forest of the volcanic plateau of yesterday with a the much more luxuriant remnant of mixed podocarp hardwood forest. Lianas and epiphytes abounded and we were captivated by an inquisitive South Island Weka as it fossicked about for food. Luckily, our fresh scones were kept well out its reach! It was a magic scenic day in the calm waters of Queen Charlotte Sounds and it was great to have a little time for a cafe lunch and a quick look around in Picton before setting off for Kaikoura.

As we passed the wetlands which are being restored outside Picton, we made our way down the lowering rainfall gradient through to Blenheim, where the rain shadow helps make this a sunny spot - not to mention the heart of the Marlborough wine growing area. Before long our first view of the picturesque Kaikoura coastline emerged - where the Pacific swell is softened as it reaches the shore by the swirling Bull Kelp clinging to the rocks. At Ohau Point, some of the last year's New Zealand Fur Seal pups still played in bigger rock pools while the adults basked, often surprisingly high on rocks. It is wonderful to think these once threatened mammals have now a healthy population. A fresh scattering of snow on the Seaward Kaikoura Range was the view from our motel.

Day 11

Tuesday 6th November

After an enjoyable breakfast, we headed over to South Bay to embark on a pelagic bird tour aboard a 13m fibreglass catamaran with Gary as skipper and Chantal as guide. The conditions were challenging with 15kt southerly winds and a 1.5m swell. We travelled through large flocks and rafts of local endemic Hutton's Shearwaters that cut across the water in their hundreds. We were now over the edge of the continental shelf. Kaikoura has a very deep underwater canyon that reaches 1 mile deep and comes within 1km of land. The canyon is also fed by converging currents which creates a food rich upwelling. This attracts many marine mammals and birds such as Sperm and Humpback Whale, Dusky Dolphins and up to 14 varieties of albatross. After putting out a small bag of frozen chum a great variety of pelagic birds came in to investigate including;

- Southern Royal Albatross
- Northern Royal Albatross
- Gibson's Wandering Albatross
- Antipodean Wandering Albatross
- NZ White-capped Albatross
- Salvin's Albatross
- Black-browed Albatross
- Northern Giant Petrel
- White-chinned Petrel
- Westland Petrel
- Snares Cape Petrel
- Grey-faced Petrel
- Hutton's Shearwater

Dusky Dolphins came over to investigate the boat giving us an opportunity to view this enigmatic animal.

When we got back to land we had lunch before heading to a shore platform at the end of the Kaikoura Peninsula to get close views of NZ Fur Seals, Banded Dotterel, White-faced Heron, and various shag species in a stunning location. A higher vantage point gave the group views of Hutton's Shearwaters feeding just offshore. Four people opted to go on the peninsula walkway, others were dropped off in the township and also back to the hotel to relax before being picked up for a great dinner at the White Morph Restaurant. After dinner the group visited the Penguin Education & Awareness programme situated at the Kaikoura volunteer coastguard building. Underneath the building is a Little Blue Penguin colony with manmade nesting boxes and viewing area. In the coastguard lounge we were treated to a presentation about the Little Blue Penguins and some of the challenges that they face living close to human habitation. We then went below the building into the viewing area and saw Little Blue and White Flipped adult penguins and even heard a chick peeping in the egg as it pecked its way out!

Day 12

Wednesday 7th November

Landscape contrast was the theme of the day. Starting with spotting a Reef Heron and Black Fronted Tern we drove south over the Hundalee Hills to St Anne's Lagoon. Among the waterfowl there we noted Australian Shovellers and Cape Barren Goose from our vantage point near the Coulter's Pines with their massive cones. The rolling farm land gave way to the Canterbury Plains and our sunny lunch spot was on a terrace looking over the braids of the Waimakariri River where Black Fronted Tern breed.

Inland, over Porter's Pass, dramatic limestone formations and the Australasian Great Crested Grebe were on view. The contrast from dry rain shadow of the east, over Arthur's Pass into temperate rainforest was a dramatic one indeed - the many west flowing rivers carrying the result of westerly orographic rain. Shortly before arriving in Hokitika where we were to stay, quick eyes spotted seven Cattle Egrets and the fine evening was capped off by seeing the 'green flash', as the sun set into the Tasman Sea to the west beyond the hotel dining room. That night, some were pleased they walked to see glow worms near the edge of town.

Day 13

Thursday 8th November

Heading south on a clear morning, we called in to a pakahi/bog area where insectivorous sundews grew and a busy group of Brown Creepers came to check us out on the edge of the podocarp forest. Our lunch spot was idyllic - from the Aoraki-Mt Cook view point, with glimpses of the Southern Alps, a great picnic, and wafting perfume from the flowering heath like plants (*Leucopogon fraseri*) on the gravel terraces.

In the afternoon, walking towards Fox Glacier we were surrounded by dramatic glacially hewn rock walls up to the ice itself, with the mountains beyond. A curious Kea, the alpine parrot, kept us entertained as we finished our walk.

After checking in at Fox Glacier township and a prompt dinner, we drove to Okarito, hoping to see the one of the 385 Rowi (Okarito Brown Kiwi). The local guides split us into two groups and briefed us on listening techniques to maximise our chances. Staked out with mosquito repellent at hand, we listened to Morepork calls as we waited in the beautiful cool clear night. One group had brief looks which most managed to see as a feeding kiwi worked its way along beside the track. The second group was treated to great views at close range of this unusual animal as it moved up the track. It is great such an effort is being made to enhance this bird's chances of survival.

Back at the bus, the sky was very clear. We gazed at the sheer marvel of the stars and techniques for using the Southern Cross to find south were shared. The twisting drive back completed, we were very happy to get to bed - a very late but rewarding day!

Day 14

Friday 9th November

Early risers saw glimpses of the Southern Alps with Kea flying high and calling - symbolising that special alpine freedom. Our breakfast at Lake Matheson was to a brilliant back drop of Aoraki-Mt Cook and Mt Tasman - so clear you felt you could almost touch them. Lunches on board, we drove to Lake Moeraki to begin our walk through rich podocarp forest to Munro Beach. The epiphytes, filmy ferns and luxuriant tree ferns however, had to wait, as our goal was to look for Tawaki the Fiordland Crested Penguin on the beach. It was a beautiful, calm morning on the beach - sandflies were few. Eventually we were rewarded when a Tawaki made its way down the beach to the surf and was gone. It was such a lovely day we were loathe to leave - and just as well - as we turned to go another Tawaki emerged from the surf and made it way up the beach, stopping to preen, before going out of sight. A perfect reward for patience!

Driving on down the coast over turquoise snow-fed rivers, we began the climb up to Haast Pass. Thunder Creek Waterfall showed what amazing power water has in this rainforest region. Just beyond the pass, a short walk in the beech forest proved very fruitful with great views of Yellowhead and clear calls. This was very pleasing as numbers in recent years have been declining.

Today we left the lush rainforest crossed Haast Pass to the drier interior of Central Otago - about as far from the sea as you can get. From there, on over Lindis Pass to the Waitaki Basin to Twizel from where we were based for two nights. We had seen Aoraki Mt Cook from the west at breakfast, driven through the mountains and now, there it was, viewed from the east, and still clear - a rare treat indeed!

Day 15

Saturday 10th November

A more relaxed day today we were close to our activities for the day. Driving up the hydro-canal, we saw how all the rivers of any size in the Waitaki Basin have been channelled into hydroelectric canals to maximise production of electricity. Our first view of the Tasman River delta showed us how all the Canterbury Plains must have formed during glacial times, with a wide braided bed leading down to the turquoise Lake Pukaki, with a back drop of Aoraki-Mt Cook. Horizontal terracing on mountain sides was further evidence of the power of glaciers to gouge away at anything in their path. After scanning for Black Stilt for a time, one finally flew across our field of view and up the valley as the weather closed in from the west.

Splitting into two groups, some of us explored round Mt Cook village area, while the rest of us braved the gathering high cloud and rain and headed up the Hooker Valley from White Horse Hill. As we left, an avalanche could be heard booming down off the slopes of Mt Sefton. Through the rain we noted the sequence from new moraine gravels through herbs to taller woody vegetation on areas which had been exposed for longer periods, while alert eyes found a New Zealand Falcon as it flew. The giant Mt Cook buttercup was just beginning to bloom in the valley, with its large dish shaped leaves uncurling as they emerged. We also spotted a cricket-like weta and a common gecko as we walked past Mueller Lake up through the successional shrubland to the second Hooker Bridge. The Hooker River thundered below us - milky-white with rock flour from the nearby glaciers. On the way back, a falcon conveniently perched on a roof for us to have a closer look. As we retreated east, the weather cleared again to a fine afternoon back in Twizel.

Day 16

Sunday 11th November

Our destination for today was Stewart Island, and being Remembrance Day, we noted each town's war memorial as we drove through the drier interior of Central Otago, where the rock tors on the block fold mountains have a rugged moonscape look, quite different from the young, jagged Southern Alps. Driving down the Clutha Valley, the rain came in and lunch was a hasty affair in Tapanui before continuing to Invercargill where we caught a quick glimpse of tuatara in the museum before checking in for the flights. A fine, smooth trip over Foveaux Strait gave us an idea of the size of the largely forested Stewart Island. Settling in to the motel units in Halfmoon Bay was interrupted by the antics of several boisterous Kaka which we all found very entertaining.

Excellent Sea food chowder and fish chips under our belts, we set off at 8.30pm aboard 'Wildfire' for Glory Cove for the kiwi excursion.

The weather was fine and cool as we walked in the gathering darkness over to Ocean Beach to look for the Stewart Island Brown Kiwi. Soon a female was found and we were privileged to spend time studying her behaviour as she probed for amphipods in the sand around the tide mark. Four kiwi were seen in all on the beach - a beautiful remote place under the southern sky on a cool clear night, with waves washing the golden sand behind us.

On the return boat trip Fairy Prions flew in and out of the searchlight and we managed a closer look when one landed on the boat! After a wonderful trip were very happy to fall into bed knowing that our boat charter next morning was not until 9.30am!

Day 17

Monday 12th November

Back aboard Wildfire, we headed round the coast and out to nearby Muttonbird Islands. It was great to see many Little Blue Penguins. With seeing several of both Fiordland Crested and Yellow Eyed Penguins, both on shore and in the water, we were able to become more familiar with their behaviour. Several Brown Skuas with their powerful, assertive flight were on the alert for prey. We also had great views of NZ White Capped Albatross, Snares Cape Petrel, Diving Petrels, a Northern Giant Petrel and Stewart Island Shags in calm fine conditions.

After entering Paterson Inlet, we hove to, and lunched on board at Sydney Cove on Ulva Island, before lovely walks on this sanctuary island. The mixed podocarp/hardwood forest (no beech on Stewart Island) was rich with ferns and the curious spider orchids and made a lovely contrast to the secluded golden sandy beaches. It was reassuring to note good views of Mohua (yellowhead) again, many chattering Brown Creeper, Tui, Bellbird, Kaka and a very fleeting South Island Saddleback. The Variable Oystercatchers at West Beach were doing their territorial patrols and it was great to see a Stewart Island Weka with chicks. The special treat for some though, was a Stewart Island Brown Kiwi walking near the path! After our trip back to Halfmoon Bay and an early dinner, the evening chorus of Tui, Bellbird and Kaka in the fading light was a special memory.

Day 18

Tuesday 13th November

The day dawned clear and crisp for flights off the island, with Southland Province stretching out in the distance before us. Once we were all sorted out at Invercargill airport, we set off for Te Anau and Fiordland National Park. Our picturesque picnic venue was The Wilderness Reserve just short of Te Anau, with its curious bog pine shrubs amongst the Racomitrium moss. The afternoon's excursion was the mossy beech forest of the Eglinton Valley at Cascade Creek, near Lake Gunn. Mosses, leafy liverworts and ferns dominated the forest floor here making an almost fairytale, primeval atmosphere. It was great to have even more views of Mohua - these birds are highly endangered. Riflemen also worked their way around the beech trunks searching for food. Our hotel was on the Te Anau Lakefront which was nice for those who felt like an after dinner walk.

Day 19

Wednesday 14th November

After finding out that the road to Milford, our destination today, had been closed for fear of rock fall, plan B, Borland Saddle in Fiordland was put into action. After a quick overview from The Ramparts and re-acquaintance with the Takahē in the bird park, we headed south west to the Hunter Mountains near Lake Monowai.

Climbing through the beech forest we saw the dramatic 'U' shaped valleys that glaciers have gouged out in times gone by. The gravel road took us within 300metres of tree line where we could see down into the Grebe Valley and the power pylons heading for the Manapouri underground power station. During lunch, Brown Creeper and Tomtit flitted around nearby. A climb of an hour or so took us up through the stunted mountain beech which is draped in Usnea, the 'Old Man's Beard' lichen. A great view opened out as the trees abruptly gave way to tall tussock grassland. Island Lake and the Fiordland Mountains to the west stretched out before us. This area also has a huge ancient landslide which had slipped off the mountain up valley from our track. The weather slowly began to close in and we made our way back out to the Redcliff Road and back to Te Anau.

Day 20

Thursday 15th November

Our last full day! Shortly after leaving Te Anau, we followed the formations of the Southland Syncline north east, and made our way pretty directly to Balclutha, where we just managed a short fine spell for lunch in Naish Park, before driving to Lake Waihola where a range of waterfowl live on a shallow fault created lake. After a brief scenic route giving hilltop views of Dunedin, we made the hotel. We settled in and prepared our gear for the evening dinner cruise on Otago Harbour, where there is a unique mainland breeding colony of Northern Royal Albatross. Caprice, our chartered catamaran, was waiting for us at Deborah bay and it wasn't long before we were sampling local cheeses and wine as we motored along towards Taiaroa Heads. Little Blue Penguins were seen as well as breeding colonies of Spotted Shags, Stewart Island Shags and Red Billed Gulls. Royal Spoonbills were also were breeding in the coastal Coprosma shrubs on the cliff. A fleeting look at a New Zealand Falcon was an interesting find and soon, despite the calm conditions, we saw Northern Royal Albatross flying majestically over us. On shore we saw juveniles practising their courtship rituals, though the birds were much more elegant in the air! A New Zealand Sea Lion also gave us a good treat by swimming close to the boat. We nosed out to sea where Northern Giant Petrel and Sooty Shearwaters scanned for food. As we came back in to the harbour, dinner was served as we spotted large rafts of Little Blue Penguins in the evening light. Once ashore, we drove up to Bracken's Lookout for a look at the city by night, before retiring after a full day!

Day 21

Friday 16th November

This was a free morning to explore a little of Dunedin. The hotel was right beside the botanic gardens which made a perfect venue for our final picnic. The later rhododendrons and azaleas in the upper gardens made a perfect floral setting for our lunch, complete with Tui and Bellbird song. The weather was fine and warm which made a perfect send off. Lunch over, we farewelled the gardens and headed for our last destination together on tour - Dunedin Airport and the long flights to come - the tour was at an end and was time to begin the journey home.

Looking back over the trip as a whole, the weather as a rule, was kind to us, there were many sharp, observant eyes in the group and we seemed to gel well to enjoy some witty repartee as well. Our journey had great contrast; from subtropical forests of Auckland, higher volcanic landscapes, pelagic boat trips, to dry rain shadow and wet temperate rainforests. Correspondingly, we experienced a wide range of flora and fauna. The bird list stood at 124 - from those who have adapted well to New Zealand's human influences (Harrier, Pukeko), to those which are now restricted mainly to sanctuary habitats such as the kokako.

Day 21

Saturday 17th November

Return flights to the UK

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