

New Zealand's Natural History

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th October – 19th November 2022

Tour report written by local tour leader Michael Burton-Smith



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Lynette Hartley and George Hobson (leaders) with 15 Naturetrek clients

Note from author: When a species is named, I've included the Māori name in brackets. Where the common New Zealand name differs from international usage, the latter is included in italics.

Day 1

Tuesday 1st November

Arrival in Auckland City

Auckland Airport. New Zealand's biggest international terminal, and the heart of New Zealand's chaotic border control. Lynette and Michael arrived early, making sure nobody could sneak through customs and go missing. What ensued was a long wait, as passengers slowly filed through the welcome gates. Some ran to families for hugs, others met business associates, but none were birders. I stood, my Naturetrek sign beginning to wilt, hopes beginning to dwindle. Had we gotten the wrong flight? Were all the birders stuck in Singapore on transit? Then, miraculously, the group began to arrive. Each one figured they must have been the last, considering the lengthy delay in the terminal. Eventually, we were at nearly full strength, and ready to depart. Quick stops in Auckland City collected the final few – those clever enough to give themselves a few days in the country to acclimatise – and began our trek north to Whangaparoa Lodge, our accommodation for the first few nights.

Pleasant weather allowed for a quick swim, before we regrouped to head to Due Amici Ristorante for some of New Zealand's finest Italian cuisine. The walk home yielded some croaking Whistling Tree Frogs and a single calling Morepork (Ruru), New Zealand's native owl.

Day 2

Wednesday 2nd November

Tiritiri Matangi & Muriwai

Our first full day in Auckland was a scorcher, as the baking sub-tropical sun beat down on hot earth. A gentle south-easterly provided some relief as we set out for Gulf Harbour, a marina on the Whangaparoa Peninsula. As we waited for the ferry to arrive, we watched a family of Variable Oystercatcher (*Torea-pango*) on the seawall, and began to familiarise ourselves with other common New Zealand birds, including Pied Shag (*Kāruhiruhi*, *Australian Pied Cormorant*) and Spur-winged Plover (*Masked Lapwing*). On the ferry ride over to Tiritiri Matangi Island, we added two Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Tuanui*) and Fluttering Shearwater (*Pakahā*); both species breed on islands within the Hauraki Gulf and spend their days fishing in the highly fertile inshore waters.

Tiritiri Matangi Island is a pest-free sanctuary established in the 1990's, and now offering a rare opportunity for members of the public to see some of New Zealand's unique and endangered avifauna. We walked up the Wattle Track, which meanders through regenerative native bush to the lighthouse on the southern end of the island. It was go-go-go from the moment we got off the ferry, with wonderful views of Red-crowned Kākāriki (*Red-Crowned Parakeet*) and North Island Saddleback (*Tieke*) feeding in the New Zealand Flax (*Harakeke*) near the wharf, and fleeting views of a New Zealand Fernbird (*Mātātā*) foraging in low-lying Muelenbeckia. A particularly obliging North Island Robin (*Toutouwai*) greeted us as we went under the canopy of Pohutukawa. As we continued up the hill, we were rewarded with great views of Whitehead (*Pōpokatea*), New Zealand Bellbird (*Korimako*), and Stitchbird (*Hīhi*). After lunch and hot drinks at the visitor centre, we took a short detour to visit the roost of a

single Morepork (Ruru), who gazed dozily at us from above. Our walk back to the ferry added Brown Quail (Kuerā) to the list, as a single individual bumbled over the stony road.

The ferry ride home was bumpier as winds picked up, and those brave enough to remain on deck enjoyed good views of nine Flesh-footed Shearwater and five Fluttering Shearwater, as well as a single Arctic Skua (*Parasitic Jaeger*). We filled our afternoon by zig-zagging across the countryside of North Auckland to Muriwai, a significant colony of Australasian Gannet (Tākapu). We enjoyed close-and-personal views (and smells!) of the gannet colony, including eggs and chicks at various ages, as well as a breeding colony of White-fronted Tern (Tara) and a lone bull New Zealand Fur Seal (Kekeno) hauled out on the cliff-face. While driving back to Whangaparaoa, we had views from the bus of African Collared Doves, the only for the trip. We returned in time for dinner at Manly Bar & Grill, before bunking down for a good night's rest after a busy day.

Day 3

Thursday 3rd November

Shakespeare, Miranda & Rotorua

We arose the next morning and drove five minutes from the Lodge to Okoromai Bay, a narrow isthmus near Shakespeare Regional Park. The imaginatively named "Duck Pond" gave our first close range views of Paradise Shelduck (Putangitangi) and croaking Southern Bell Frogs. As we drove through the saltmarsh, we had unbelievable views of a family of Banded Rail (Moho pererū, *BuffBanded Rail*) crossing the road, including two bumblebee-sized chicks. Two Brown Quail feeding in the open were also exciting, but quickly trumped by a small loft of Brown Teal (Pāteke) roosting on the intertidal zone, and a carefully spotted New Zealand Dotterel (Tūturiwhatu, *Red-Breasted Dotterel*) foraging on the mudflats.

As the weather set in, we began our voyage south, crossing the Auckland Harbour Bridge and leaving New Zealand's largest city behind. On the way south, we briefly pulled into Taramarie, a small stream mouth, where we got close views of Wrybill (Ngutu pare) and South Island Pied Oystercatcher (Torea), two species of wader found only in New Zealand. We spent the rest of the afternoon exploring Miranda, a collection of tidal mudflats, shell banks, mangroves and saltmarsh on the Firth of Thames. We had wonderful views of several long-haul migrants, including over two thousand Bar-tailed Godwit (Kuaka), seven-hundred Red Knot, and seven Pacific Golden Plover. We also had a flock of six Royal Spoonbill (Kōtuku ngutupapa) feeding on the far shell bank, and saw a breeding colony of Black-billed Gulls, among the most endangered gull species in the world.

We then continued south to Rotorua, located in the geothermally active volcanic plateau, with its distinct smell of sulphur. We stopped briefly at the lake which gives the town its name, and found a family of Dabchick (Wewēia) including two stripey-headed chicks. After watching these birds for several minutes, we headed back for the hotel and an eagerly anticipated dinner.

Day 4

Friday 4th November

Rotorua, Pureora & the Volcanic Plateau

November 4 was the second earliest morning of the trip, leaving the hotel at six o'clock to reach Kaharoa Forest Park in time for the dawn chorus. We made it early enough to have stunning views of Shining Cuckoo

(Pīpīwhararoa) in the treetops, a rare bird to see so well, along with Whitehead and North Island Robin, both specialties of North Island forests.

After returning to the hotel for breakfast, we continued south-west to Pureora Forest Park, where we took a stroll through stunning virgin forest. This forest is particularly notable for the mighty Totara and Kahikatea, some of New Zealand's tallest trees. A range of ferns and other small plants fill the undergrowth, as well as the indigenous New Zealand fuschia, or Kōtukutuku. The birds did not let us down either, with a flock of New Zealand Kākā circling noisily overhead, fleeting glimpses of Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo (Koekoeā) whizzing through the canopy, and several small groups of Yellow-crowned Parakeet (Kākāriki) foraging in the understory. Tomtits (Miromiro) provided brief views flitting through the forest, and their calls which give them their Māori name could often be heard from the canopy.

The day ended with a quick stop at the Ōwhango Bridge over the Whakapapa River, a fast-flowing alpine river surrounded by beech forest on either side. This river provides habitat for the high country specialist, the Blue Duck (Whio). This species specialises in foraging for invertebrates in the rapids, using its unique, fleshy bill to search under rocks for insect larvae. After scanning up and down the river for them, a pair came into view through the spotting scope, sunning themselves on some boulders downstream. We also had a close-and-personal encounter with a New Zealand Pigeon (Kererū), who devoured some berries only a few meters from the bridge!

Day 5

Saturday 5th November

Taranaki Falls and the Volcanic Plateau

After several big days of travelling the upper North Island, we took a slower day and stayed at the Skotel Resort, high on New Zealand's volcanic plateau. This highly active region sits on the convergence of the Australian and Pacific tectonic plates, and the resort itself serves as a ski lodge for the many visitors who travel in season for the slopes of the three main peaks: Ruapehu, Tongariro, and Ngāuruhoe. Throughout the day, the sky cleared to give incredible views of the mountains, and out to the west towards Taranaki.

We set off at eleven o'clock for a three hour hike through alpine heath and New Zealand's unique alpine beech forests, all with stunning views towards the mountains. Though the birdlife was reasonably quiet, we had wonderful views of Grey Warbler (Riroriro, *Grey Gerygone*) and Tomtit. The real highlight, however, was a brilliant performance by a pair of New Zealand Falcon (Kārearea) just west of the Taranaki Falls. Another juvenile falcon was also seen.

That evening, we set out on an after-dinner quest for North Island Brown Kiwi, which I had scouted out the night before. As we walked along State Highway 48, the horizon was brilliantly illuminated by moonlight reflecting on Ruapehu's snowy peaks. The calm spring air did not disappoint, and we heard the calls of two male Kiwi, one only just across the road from us!

Day 6

Sunday 6th November

Journey to Kapiti Island

Leaving the wonderful views and staggering landscapes of the Central Plateau behind us, we continued our journey south from the Skotel towards the Kāpiti Coast. Along the way, we pulled into a BP station, giving a special opportunity to grab some kiwi snacks and sweets, and even an early morning ice block! Another quick stop was made at the Ōtaki Sewage Ponds, in the hope of finding some Black-Fronted Dotterel, but the birds were a no show, and a rather unfavourable wind encouraged us to move on.

The day cleared up, however, and as the sun pounded down on Paraparaumu, we traded the van for the seaside air over lunch. We then had a briefing on entering predator-free islands and boarded our ferry for Kapiti Island. This was no ordinary ferry boarding, however. Our boat was on the beach, still on its trailer, and attached to a tractor! We ascended a ladder, and were reversed into the ocean, after which we set off for a thirty-minute crossing over calm seas to the island.

Kapiti Island has been free of introduced mammalian predators for over a century, and tangata whenua (local Māori) have worked with conservation rangers to manage the island and restore it to its former glory. As we walked around the island, we had great views of Brown Teal, North Island Robin, Bellbird, and Red-crowned Parakeet. We also encountered two of New Zealand's famous flightless birds, the Weka and the Takahē. These are both massive species of rail which, in the absence of ground predators, lost the ability to fly and grew massive. As we ate dinner looking out over the sea, a lone Reef Heron (Matuku moana) flew past in the sunset.

After dark, we split into groups to explore the island at night. Though none were seen, several Little Spotted Kiwi (Kiwipukupuku) were heard, along with the duets of Weka, the eerie rattles of Long-tailed Cuckoo, and an evening chorus of Morepork. Some were even lucky enough to come up close and personal with a Little Penguin (Kororā), which come ashore in the safety of darkness to visit their burrows.

Day 7

Monday 7th November

The Ferry Crossing

The morning was spent on Kapiti Island, with everyone able to walk and explore at their own leisure until our midday boat trip home. Just before boarding, a Short-tailed Stingray (Whai) gracefully swam past us. The ferry ride home was smooth sailing, but without any exciting sightings.

This was our moving day, as we continued south towards the nation's capital, Wellington, and then crossed over to the South Island. The entry to Wellington is a steep descent from the Johnsonville Hills, ending in a spectacular view across the harbour. We made it in time for lunch at the Picnic Café in the city's famous Botanic Gardens and spent some time exploring the glasshouse and rose gardens. After lunch, we took a drive through Wellington's downtown, passing the parliament houses and several other buildings of national significance.

The highlight of the day was the ferry crossing over Cook Strait, the narrow channel of water separating New Zealand's two main islands. The bravest of us made camp on the top-deck, fronting the strong winds that funnel

through the Strait. The rewards were certainly worth it, with three species of albatross (Toroa, Northern Royal, Shy, and Salvin's Albatross), Fairy Prion (Tītī Wainui) Westland Petrel, Sooty, Short-Tailed and Fluttering Shearwaters (Sooty Shearwater are Tītī) and Common Diving Petrel (Kuaka). As we entered the Marlborough Sounds, the northern most part of the South Island, we had our first Hutton's Shearwater (Kaikōura tītī) Spotted Shag (Kawau tikitiki) and Pomarine Skua (*Pomarine Jaeger*). Just as the sun began to set, we arrived in Picton and headed for our accommodation and some well-deserved rest!

Day 8

Tuesday 8th November

Exploring Queen Charlotte Sound

With a free morning before our afternoon trip to Blumine Island, we made our way to the harbour lookout for a stroll and morning lunch. Though birds were limited, we did hear a male California Quail crowing from high in the oak trees, a behaviour common in New World quails not shared by their relatives in Europe and elsewhere. Following lunch, we headed out with E-ko Tours on a cruise through Queen Charlotte Sound. Within only a few minutes of leaving the docks, we starting seeing Australasian Gannets and Fluttering Shearwater at close range, as well as an Arctic Skua. The main highlight of the boat ride out was certainly two species of shag which are both found only in New Zealand: Spotted Shag, and the New Zealand King Shag. The latter is extremely rare, found only in the Marlborough Sounds. It was very exciting, therefore, when we saw not just one King Shag but four, including a juvenile.

Blumine Island is a predator-free island in Queen Charlotte Sound. This uninhabited island has no wharf, meaning we needed to make a slightly uncoordinated clambour down a ladder to reach the beach, where we were greeted by another friendly Weka. The reason we had come here was for one of New Zealand's rarest forest species, the Orange-fronted Parakeet (Kākāriki karaka). These usually alpine species have become incredibly rare over the last century, which led to their introduction to these lowland islands in the hope of salvaging them. We ascended the northern slopes of the island, hearing a pair, but a slip on the track prevented us carrying on. Getting back to the beach, we tried one more spot, an unassuming track along a shallow stream. Just meters in, we were blessed with unbelievable views of two parakeets only a few feet away. They seemed just as interested in us as we were them!

The ride back added no new birds for the day, but we did get stunning views of a pod of Dusky Dolphins, who swam around our boat for several minutes. Once we returned to the mainland, we hurried to the van and headed further south for Kaikōura, a peninsula that juts out of the South Island's east coast. Along the way, we stopped at Lake Elterwater to see New Zealand's only breeding population of Hoary-headed Grebe, who gave great views from the pier, and at the Kaikōura seal colony, which can be watched from close range from the edge of the state highway! Getting into our accommodation at around six o'clock, we gathered for dinner at seven. Several of us partook in some of the wonderful seafood which makes the town of Kaikoura famous around New Zealand.

Day 9

Wednesday 9th November

Kaikōura

Kaikōura sits at the edge of a deep-sea trench, where ocean currents bring nutrients close to the surface. This brings species usually only found in the open ocean close to land and offers a special opportunity to view these usually elusive species with relative convenience.

Our morning adventure was a pelagic with Albatross Encounters, looking for some of New Zealand's seabirds. New Zealand, with its rich oceans and few land predators, is the seabird capital of the world, with several species being found nowhere else. On our pelagic, we saw a large work-up of summer-visiting Salvin's Albatross, along with smaller numbers of Shy Albatross and New Zealand Wandering Albatross (subspecies *gibsonii*). Along with these species were five species of petrel: Northern Giant, Cape, Grey-Faced and Westland, and over two-hundred Hutton's Shearwaters. These shearwaters breed only in the mountain ranges which surround Kaikōura. We also saw several groups of Dusky Dolphins.

In the afternoon, the group split between those who wanted to explore Kaikōura town, and those who headed out on another boat on the quest for Sperm Whales. Both enjoyed great success, with wonderful weather allowing for brilliant relaxation on the foreshore, and several whales being sighted by the other group. After another dinner in Kaikōura town, it was a relaxing evening as many chose to stroll back from dinner and enjoy the evening air.

Day 10

Thursday 10th November

Arthur's Pass

We were back on the road after two nights in Kaikōura, this time heading south-west across the Canterbury Plains and towards Arthur's Pass. Arthur's Pass is one of only three road crossings onto the South Island's West Coast region, and consequently is a major route for both tourists and cargo. On the way, we pulled in at a quiet alpine lake for lunch and, despite cold weather, managed to pick out a single Great Crested Grebe (*Pūteketeke*) sitting on the water. As we continued driving, we also saw our first Black-fronted Terns (*Tarapirohe*) These terns will mostly spend their winters feeding out to sea, but come to South Island high country to breed.

Once in Arthur's Pass, we took a walk in the Temple Basin, which give incredible access to several alpine plants usually only accessible after hiking into the alps. These included Mount Cook Lily, which were obligingly showcasing their beautiful small white flowers on the very edge of the track! As we headed back towards the carpark, a flurry of activity on the road edge made for some brilliant last minute birding, with close views of Brown Creeper (*Pipipi*, *Pipipi*), Rifleman (*Tītīpounamu*), and Tomtit. The Rifleman is New Zealand's smallest bird, weighing only as much as our \$2 coin!

We crossed the pass and began our descent to the West Coast, stopping occasionally to take in the spectacular views. Once we made it into Hokitika, our accommodation for the night, we wolfed down dinner and prepared for one final adventure for the day. We were heading to the Punakaiki, a patch of regenerating forest an hour's drive north. Here, we took a night walk up and into the forested hillsides, where we waited in complete darkness. Right on cue, groups of Westland Petrel were seen flying overhead and, not after much wait, several began crawling

right under our legs (and sometimes on top of us!) on their way back to their launch pad. These birds spend most of their lives to sea, but return to the mainland under the cover of darkness. We also saw a Short-finned Eel, a native species of fish which can most easily be seen at night.

Day 11

Friday 11th November

The West Coast

The morning started in disarray when the bus, who had been our most trusted companion for the first ten days of the trip, decided to have a bit of a breakdown. Not to be defeated by technology, we all made the most of the opportunity and explored Hokitika. Hokitika is a classic kiwi town, with lots of nifty shops, interesting murals and monuments, and a stunning coastline. When we regrouped for lunch by the beach, we were all in high spirits despite the delayed departure.

Our mechanic worked some magic and, shortly after noon, our bus roared back into life and pulled into the hotel, ready to keep steaming on southward. On the drive, we had wonderful views towards Āoraki Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest peak. At quarter past three, we pulled into our target destination – Ōkārito. This tiny seaside town was originally founded in the New Zealand gold rush, but now serves primarily as a holiday getaway away from the hustle and bustle. As we pulled into the estuary, we were greeted by our first White Heron (Kōtuku, *Great Egret*). These egrets, while common around the world, are critically endangered in New Zealand, with just a single breeding colony of a few hundred birds.

At the southernmost end of Ōkārito's main drive is a trig walk through native forest. As soon as we exited the car, we had a flyover of New Zealand Falcon, and several Redpoll buzzing through. We heard several Fernbird calling from in the marshes, but other than a few lucky glimpses by some, none were showing themselves clearly. The forest contained a variety of unique native species, including flowering Kāmahi, and the Rātā vine. We also had great views of a male Tomtit; the South Island species has a brilliant yellow breast which makes them particularly resplendent.

Well behind schedule, and a little worse for wear, we finally made our way to the accommodation at the Rainforest Lodge, set amongst beautiful native forest in the foothills of the Southern Alps.

Day 12

Saturday 12th November

Haast Pass

This was the biggest day on the road for our tour, and so it was an early morning and back in the van before eight. Due to the impassable Southern Alps, we needed to begin heading south, even though our destination was almost directly east, which gave us a chance to pull into a small salmon farm. Though there were no particularly special birds, there were some spectacular salmon and, lurking in the depths, a few massive Longfin Eels. This long-lived species is found only in New Zealand, and is endangered due to overfishing and destruction of their habitat, so it was very special to see such large individuals out swimming during the day.

Just before tracking west, we made two stops on the coast. The first, Knight's Point, offers truly spectacular views out and over the Tasman Sea and along the coastline. Carefully inspecting the coastline using the spotting scope, we also managed to pick out some New Zealand Fur Seals playing on the rocks, and a trail made by a Fiordland Crested Penguin (Tāwaki) between the sea and its nest. Unfortunately, the penguin must have been either on the nest or out fishing, for it was nowhere to be seen. Our other coastal stop was Ship Creek, a soft sand beach surrounded by mature native forest. While we enjoyed the view, a small pod of Hector's Dolphins came out hunting in the breakers, only a few meters offshore. These endangered dolphins are found only in New Zealand and due to their small size, rarely travel far beyond the shore.

As we turned west and started climbing Haast Pass, the southernmost access to the West Coast, we watched as the vegetation changed from the mixed-podocarp rainforests we had become familiar with and into mixed beech forests, more like the ones we had seen on the North Island's Volcanic Plateau. We made a stop at the Blue Pools Walk to wander through these open forests in the hope of finding a rare Yellowhead (Mohua) but alas, none were to be found.

Crossing over into the southern end of the Mackenzie Basin, we turned north and travelled along the eastern side of the Southern Alps. These mountains form a vast rain shadow, leaving their eastern side very dry; these plains make for excellent sheep farming. We headed up the Ōhau Valley to our accommodation, all the way taking in the natural splendour of the South Island. Our accommodation at the Ōhau Lodge was an excellent place to unwind from a long day in the van, with a spa bath, bar and comfortable lounge area.

Day 13

Sunday 13th November

Mackenzie Basin

As the sun came up over the Mackenzie Basin, we enjoyed great views over Lake Ōhau toward Āoraki over breakfast, and prepared for a somewhat chilly, but clear, day. Today's journey would take us through the basin to the north, then head into the alps themselves and up the Āoraki Mount Cook National Park.

Our first stop was Glentanner, the westernmost edge of the mighty Lake Pukākī, one of the many glacial lakes of the eastern South Island. Here, a wide marsh has formed where braided streams meet the lakeshore, and wetland birds gather to feed and breed. Unfortunately, two of our target species, the Black Stilt (Kākī) and the Wrybill, were nowhere to be seen, and heat haze made it difficult to view birds further north. However, we were given a great show by several Banded Dotterel (Pohowera), who roamed the gravel beds in search of food.

We continued higher into alpine country to the edge of the Āoraki Mount Cook National Park. Here, the normal plant species of lowland New Zealand give way to an entirely new suite of alpine plant life, all much shorter and hardier to cope with alpine conditions. On a bright sunny afternoon, we all made space on a lawn to have some lunch after crossing the famous swing bridges and passing the Alpine Memorial, which commemorates lost climbers from within the national park.

We returned to Ōhau Lodge for a relaxed evening, and to give the bus an overdue clean!

Day 14

Monday 14th November

Ōhau and the Otago Coast

The day kicked off with a real buzz as two Riflemen were spotted right on the door of the lodge, giving many yet another close encounter with this often-elusive species. We then set out east towards the Otago coastline and, other than the sudden realisation we had left our lunch at the lodge, had a seamless journey to Oamaru. This town dates to early colonial New Zealand, and has stunning architecture typical of this period. This was, of course, a birding trip, however, and so we sped through the town centre and to the old wharf, home to a vast breeding colony of Otago Shags (Matapo). These birds, only recently split from the Stewart Island Shag, are closely related to the King Shag, and are found only along this stretch of coastline. Also present were Spotted Shag, and we found the entrances to a few Little Penguin nests.

We carried on south towards Dunedin. This city, New Zealand's fifth largest, is also home to a great amount of early colonial history and has served as a major trading port for much of the country's modern history. Its peninsula, the consequence of a volcanic event millennia ago, attracts a variety of wildlife to the area, and it was for this reason that we set out along the eastern coast of the Otago Harbour in the hope of finding some unique sea life.

We boarded Monarch Cruises, a tour specially designed to find the wildlife of Otago Peninsula and Taiaroa Head, its northernmost tip. We were treated to views of the endangered New Zealand Sea Lion (Whakahao), New Zealand Fur Seal, two particularly playful Hector's Dolphins, as well as a Northern Giant Petrel, several Sooty Shearwater, and fourteen Northern Royal Albatross. These albatross breed on the headland, which is the only mainland colony for any albatross species in the world.

We returned to the hotel for a seven o'clock dinner and an early night after a long day on the road.

Day 15

Tuesday 15th November

Dunedin to Te Anau

With a big day of driving ahead of us, the morning was left free for an option of a deserved lie-in or a self-guided tour of Dunedin's botanic gardens. These gardens have a range of spectacular ornamental collections, including some of New Zealand's oldest pines, and a stunning collection of exotic birds in their aviaries. At around nine o'clock, we braced ourselves for a long afternoon of sitting down and climbed into the bus and prepared to travel to Te Anau. We stopped for lunch in Gore, an old sheep farmers town which has since become a major hub for freighters and travellers alike heading between Dunedin and Invercargill, New Zealand's two most southerly cities.

Pulling into Te Anau in the mid-afternoon, we were just in time to visit the Wildlife Centre. This facility has breeding enclosures for several of New Zealand's endangered birds, giving an opportunity for closer-than-normal views of these species. These included Takahē, Anitpodes Parakeet, Kākā, Brown Teal and Blue Duck. A particularly photogenic Paradise Shelduck and the brilliantly decorated photo wall was also a highlight for many! We pulled into our accommodation and bunkered down for the night, praying for good weather on our next day's trip to Milford Sound.

Day 16

Wednesday 16th November

Milford Sound

We set off early toward Milford Sound, into the heart of Fiordland National Park. New Zealand's largest national park, Fiordland covers high mountain peaks, glacial lakes, vast tracts of beech and podocarp forest, and, of course, several spectacular fiords. Our first stop of the day was a pull out in Eglinton Valley; here the frost keeps the valley floor free from vegetation. Our target species, though often tricky, decided to be kind: a single New Zealand Pipit sat proudly atop the scrub to give excellent views.

We then continued up the Eglinton and to the Mirror Lakes. It isn't hard to guess how this pair of lakes got their name, superbly reflecting the high mountains above them. We were very lucky to see a lone male Brown Teal, as well a group of New Zealand Scaup (Pāpango) and two friendly South Island Robin (Toutouwai), our first encounter with this southern specialty. Further up the valley, we pulled into Lake Gunn Nature Walk. This is a botanical beauty, with almost every available inch of beech tree coated in mosses. We saw a range of New Zealand's bush birds, including Long-tailed Cuckoo, Kākā, and Rifleman. It was especially lovely to hear male Brown Creepers singing from the treetops, as this species is found only on the South Island and its surrounding islands.

We headed over the divide and to the western side of the mighty Southern Alps, pulling in on the edge of Monkey Creek in the hope of finding our first mountain specialty for the trip. We didn't need to wait long, with a single Kēā appearing right on cue. Unfortunately, it wasn't a very obliging bird afterwards, disappearing into the forest. At the mouth of the Gertrude Valley, however, we struck gold: three Kēā all obliging us with close and personal views. These curious birds are extremely intelligent, and investigate new vehicles in the hope of finding something to eat – or destroy! Slightly further along, at the entrance of the Homer Tunnel, we had another pair of Kēā and a very obliging male Tomtit. Our target species at the tunnel, however, was New Zealand's ultimate mountaineer – the Rock Wren (Pīwauwau, *New Zealand Rock Wren*). These mouse-sized birds have no altitudinal movement, instead living in tunnels under the snow during winter. Of the trip, the Rock Wren was perhaps the most irritating; a single bird continuously called from within the scree, but never emerged to show itself.

With time running slim we had to leave our Rock Wren and Kēā behind, crossing the kilometre-long Homer Tunnel and making way down to Milford Sound. Once we arrived in Milford, it was a hurry to get tickets sorted and aboard our Sound cruise, navigating to the mouth of the Fiord and back. A true delight to all who went aboard was certainly a group of Fiordland Crested Penguins resting after a busy day fishing, as well as some purebred Grey Duck (Pārera, *Pacific Black Duck*), a critically endangered species in New Zealand.

After the ferry returned it was a bee-line for Te Anau for our second night, anticipating tomorrow's early start!

Day 17

Thursday 17th November

Journey to Stewart Island

The following morning, we were up and out of bed before dawn, as we had a flight to catch!

Crawling into the van, still weary eyed and a little dozy, we set off southwards towards Invercargill, New Zealand's southernmost city. This city was established as a trading port adjacent to Bluff Harbour, and enjoyed growth during the Otago gold rushes and subsequent farming booms. The main street has a distinct architecture most common in the southern South Island, and extremely wide roads designed in the days of horse-drawn floats. We had a wonderful breakfast in the city, then returned to the van for what would be our last journey as a whole group.

Arriving at Invercargill Airport, things looked a little dodgy. Fog was settled across the airstrip, though the bigger planes were still taking off. Once we got inside, however, we were informed that our smaller planes couldn't take off, as the fog was too dense around Stewart Island. The wait began. And we waited, and waited, and waited.

Finally, at two o'clock, the final call was made. No flights today. Fortuitously, the flight company had arranged us tickets aboard the last ferry to Stewart Island, and so we jumped into vans and set off to Bluff Harbour to board. We had a few hours, so a trip to the Bluff pub was made by many, while others hung about the terminal relaxing. Setting sail just after five, we ventured out beyond the harbour's edge and into the Foveaux Strait; though winds were relatively strong, it was clear the low fog had not budged over the strait. While bird numbers were relatively low, we did have good species diversity, with Little Penguin, White-Capped and Salvin's Albatross, Northern Giant Petrel, Fairy Prion, Sooty Shearwater and Common Diving Petrel all making an appearance in ones or twos. Two new species were also added to our list: a pair of Brown Skua (*Hākoakoa*) and a single Stewart Island Shag (*Mapo*).

After a wonderful dinner at the Stewart Island pub, we waited for darkness to settle as tonight had a very special mission: Kiwi. Stewart Island is home to the largest concentration of Kiwi anywhere in New Zealand, with tens-of-thousands of Southern Tokoeka residing there. This is the second-largest species of Kiwi, and Stewart Island is the best place to see them. With the help of some well-trained locals, we managed to get close encounters of three different birds on the Stewart Island airstrip, giving a special send-off on the group's last night together.

November 18

Stewart Island & The Departure

After breakfast in our rooms, it was an early dash across the hill to board our water taxis to Ulva Island. Ulva is another pest-free sanctuary, and among the only places you can get close to several South Island bush birds which have been virtually or entirely exterminated on the mainland. We did find time amid the scramble to get some group photos in, conscious that this was among our last moments together as the full contingent.

The water taxi crossing to the island was smooth and uneventful, with no birds of note spotted on the way. Once we set foot on the island, it was a different story, with brilliant encounters with a particularly curious pair of South Island Robins; here, they are the larger Stewart Island subspecies. As we carried up and onto the ridge, we were lucky enough to step right into a big mixed flock, with seven Yellowhead, several pairs of Brown Creeper, Weka, and both Yellow- and Red-crowned Parakeets. Ulva Island is one of very few places where mixed flocks like this, which would have been common before the arrival of Europeans, still occur. A real speciality of the island are the South Island Saddleback (*Tiēke*), which were almost completely wiped out after their last remaining stronghold was invaded by rats in the 1960's. Fortunately, a few birds were rescued and reintroduced to other islands, preserving them for future generations.

Once we reached the beach, it was time to say goodbye, as half of our group were departing early back to Invercargill while the other half still had another day to enjoy Stewart and Ulva Islands. After saying our farewells, exchanging contacts and giving well-wishes, the early group set off back to our water taxi to the main island. From there, it was up to the airport where, fortuitously, the fog had cleared just enough for a smooth take-off back to Invercargill. After a few hours wait, we'd all made our connections for the long journey home.

NB: While I was unable to remain on Stewart Island with the rest of the group, I am told they had brilliant views of the rare Yellow-Eyed Penguin (Hoiho) on a boat trip that afternoon – some people really do have all the luck!

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Apterygidae																			
Brown Kiwi, Tokoeka	<i>Apteryx australis</i>																✓		
North Island Brown Kiwi	<i>Apteryx mantellii</i>			✓	✓														
Little Spotted Kiwi	<i>Apteryx owenii</i>					✓	✓												
Odontophoridae																			
Californian Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>			✓				✓											
Phasianidae																			
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓					✓								
Brown Quail	<i>Coturnix ypsilophora</i>	✓	✓																
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓												
Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>		✓																
Anatidae																			
Plumed Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna eytoni</i>																		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓												✓	✓	✓	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓			✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	
Whio, Blue Duck	<i>Hymenolaimus malacorhynchos</i>			✓															
Paradise Shelduck	<i>Tadorna variegata</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Australasian Shoveler	<i>Anas rhynchos</i>					✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>		✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓						
Brown Teal	<i>Anas chlorotis</i>		✓			✓										✓			
New Zealand Scaup	<i>Aythya novaeseelandiae</i>		✓	✓				✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				
Spheniscidae																			
Fiordland Penguin	<i>Eudyptes pachyrhynchus</i>															✓			

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Yellow-eyed Penguin	<i>Megadyptes antipodes</i>																	✓	
Little Penguin	<i>Eudyptula minor</i>					✓								✓			✓		
<i>Diomedidae</i>																			
Northern Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea sanfordi</i>						✓							✓					
Southern Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea epomophora</i>								✓										
Gibson's Albatross	<i>Diomedea gibsoni</i>								✓										
Salvin's Albatross	<i>Thalassarche salvni</i>						✓		✓								✓		
Shy Albatross	<i>Thalassarche cauta</i>						✓		✓								✓		
<i>Procellariidae</i>																			
Northern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>								✓					✓			✓		
Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>								✓										
Fairy Prion	<i>Pachyptila turtur</i>						✓										✓	✓	
Great-winged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma macroptera</i>								✓										
White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>								✓										
Westland Petrel	<i>Procellaria westlandica</i>						✓		✓	✓									
Fluttering Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gavia</i>	✓					✓	✓											
Hutton's Shearwater	<i>Puffinus huttoni</i>						✓		✓										
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>						✓							✓			✓		
Short-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus tenuirostris</i>						✓												
Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>	✓																	
<i>Pelecanoididae</i>																			
Common Diving Petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>						✓										✓		
<i>Podicipedidae</i>																			
Hoary-headed Grebe	<i>Poliocephalus poliocephalus</i>							✓											
New Zealand Grebe	<i>Poliocephalus rufopectus</i>		✓																
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>							✓		✓		✓	✓						
<i>Threskiornithidae</i>																			
Royal Spoonbill	<i>Platalea regia</i>		✓			✓		✓						✓					

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Ardeidae																			
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>										✓								
White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Pacific Reef Egret	<i>Egretta sacra</i>					✓													
Sulidae																			
Australasian Gannet	<i>Morus serrator</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓									✓		
Phalacrocoracidae																			
Little Pied Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax melanoleucos</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Little Black Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax sulcirostris</i>		✓																
Pied Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓					✓			✓		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓						✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			
Rough-faced Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax carunculatus</i>							✓											
Otago Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax chalconotus</i>													✓					
Foveaux Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax stewarti</i>																✓		
Spotted Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax punctatus</i>						✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Falconidae																			
New Zealand Falcon	<i>Falco novaeseelandiae</i>			✓		✓													
Accipitridae																			
Swamp Harrier	<i>Circus approximans</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rallidae																			
Weka	<i>Gallirallus australis</i>					✓	✓	✓		✓						✓		✓	
Buff-banded Rail	<i>Gallirallus philippensis</i>		✓																
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓					✓		
Southern Takahe	<i>Porphyrio hochstetteri</i>					✓	✓												
Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>							✓					✓						

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Haematopodidae																			
South Island Pied Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus finschi</i>		✓							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Variable Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus unicolor</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Recurvirostridae																			
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		✓			✓						✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Charadriidae																			
Masked Lapwing	<i>Vanellus miles</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>		✓																
Red-breasted Plover	<i>Charadrius obscurus</i>		✓																
Double-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius bicinctus</i>								✓				✓						
Wry-bill	<i>Anarhynchus frontalis</i>		✓																
Scolopacidae																			
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓															✓	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓																
Laridae																			
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Silver Gull	<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-billed Gull	<i>Larus bulleri</i>		✓					✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>			✓										✓					
White-fronted Tern	<i>Sterna striata</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	
Black-fronted Tern	<i>Sterna albobstriata</i>									✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			
Stercorariidae																			
Brown or Southern Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>																✓		
Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>						✓												
Parasitic Jaeger/Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	✓						✓											

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Columbidae																			
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
African Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia roseogrisea</i>	✓																	
Spotted-necked Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓															
New Zealand Pigeon	<i>Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Psittacidae																			
Kea	<i>Nestor notabilis</i>															✓			
Kaka	<i>Nestor meridionalis</i>			✓		✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	
Yellow-crowned Parakeet	<i>Cyanoramphus auriceps</i>			✓									✓				✓	✓	
Malherbe's Parakeet	<i>Cyanoramphus malherbi</i>							✓											
Red-fronted Parakeet	<i>Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae</i>	✓				✓	✓										✓	✓	
Eastern Rosella	<i>Platycercus eximius</i>	✓	✓	✓															
Cuculidae																			
Shining Bronze Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx lucidus</i>			✓		✓		✓			✓				✓	✓			
Long-tailed Koel	<i>Urodynamis taitensis</i>			✓		✓				✓						✓			
Strigidae																			
Morepork	<i>Ninox novaeseelandiae</i>	✓				✓				✓							✓		
Alcedinidae																			
Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus sanctus</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	✓								
Acanthisittidae																			
Rifleman	<i>Acanthisitta chloris</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Alpine Rock Wren	<i>Xenicus gilviventris</i>															✓			
Meliphagidae																			
Stitch-bird	<i>Notiomystis cincta</i>	✓																	
New Zealand Bellbird	<i>Anthornis melanura</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tui	<i>Prothemadera novaeseelandiae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Acanthizidae																			

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Grey Warbler	<i>Gerygone igata</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mohouidae																			
Popokatea, Whitehead	Mohoua albicilla	✓		✓		✓	✓												
Yellowhead	<i>Mohoua ochrocephala</i>																	✓	
Pipipi, Brown Creeper	<i>Finschia novaeseelandiae</i>									✓		✓				✓		✓	
Callaeidae																			
North Island Saddleback	<i>Philesturnus rufasater</i>	✓				✓													
South Island Saddleback	<i>Philesturnus carunculatus</i>																	✓	
Cracticidae																			
Australian Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Rhipiduridae																			
New Zealand Fantail	<i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Petroicidae																			
Tomtit	<i>Petroica macrocephala</i>			✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			
North Island Robin	<i>Petroica lonigpes</i>	✓		✓		✓													
Hirundinidae																			
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Alaudidae																			
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sylviidae																			
Fernbird	<i>Megalurus punctatus</i>	✓	✓								✓					✓			
Zosteropidae																			
Silver-eye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

		November 2022																	
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
<i>Sturnidae</i>																			
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓													
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Turdidae</i>																			
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Passeridae</i>																			
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Prunellidae</i>																			
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Motacillidae</i>																			
New Zealand Pipit	<i>Anthus novaeseelandiae</i>					✓									✓				
<i>Fringillidae</i>																			
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Emberizidae</i>																			
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	