

New Zealand Birding & Nature | Trip Report

January 6 – 24, 2019 | Written by Client Karen Worcester



With Guide Greg Smith, and participants Karen, Fiona, Kay, Lesley, Kit, Elena, Jan, and Linda



Sun., January 6 | North to Hauraki Gulf

Welcome to New Zealand! Some of us met yesterday while getting to know Auckland a little better, and were happy to meet Mark Ayre, our New Zealand guide. We gathered in the lobby of the Grand Millennium Hotel, and then out we went to the comfy Mercedes bus we'd be calling home for the next few weeks. We left Auckland and drove south towards Mangere. Along the freeways here and in other open spaces, restoration plantings of native plants are common, and include New Zealand flax, cabbage tree (Cordyline, reminiscent of Dracaena), putokahwa (or New Zealand Christmas Tree) and toi toi (Austroderia - looks somewhat like pampas grass). The area is dominated by small volcanic peaks, often covered with lush vegetation. Some of the small volcanoes near the coast were used by the Maori as lookouts. Their sides still show the remnants of war trenches they used for cover.

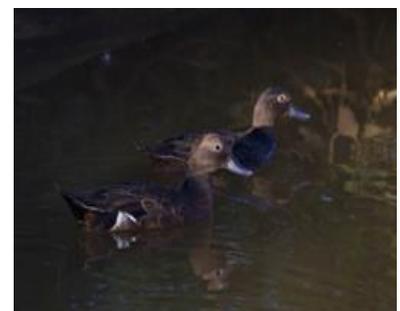
We drove along the south edge of Mangere Bay, out onto a causeway towards Puketutu Island. Wastewater ponds parallel the causeway on one side, with tidal mud flats on the other - this made for excellent views of shorebirds and waterfowl. Elegant Black Swans floated in the ponds, along with Mallard/Grey Duck hybrids. Welcome Swallows flew overhead, welcoming us to the first morning of our trip. As always, the first morning of the first day is a rush of new species. In the mud flats we saw Paradise Shelducks, Pied Stilt, New

Zealand Dotterel, White-faced Heron, South Island Oystercatcher, numerous Red-billed Gulls, the very occasional Black-billed Gull, and Red Knot (or Not Red, as some prefer to call them). There were huge flocks of Bar-tailed Godwit all facing into the wind, and Wrybill, with their bill bent to the right for probing beneath stones.

Further down the causeway, we also saw New Zealand Dabchick and Masked Lapwing (or Spur-winged Plover), while both Pied Shag and Little Shag sunned their wings on waterside structures. From the tall eucalyptus nearby, we saw Sacred Kingfisher, White-faced Heron, and a Shining Cuckoo that was calling.

We drove to nearby Ambury Regional Park and walked along the shoreline. Mangrove and pickleweed grew along the rocky beach, where bright orange lichen and white shell chips contrasted with the ubiquitous black lava rock of the area. Waves of godwits flew overhead, and while many Pied Stilts foraged in the area. A fenced area protected New Zealand (and Double-banded) Dotterel from predation by stoats and ferrets, and traps were set both inside and outside the fence. Small shelters were scattered in the area to provide young birds some protection from aerial predation. Farther down the shoreline, we could see thousands of South Island Oystercatchers roosting on the mud flats, along with Royal Spoonbill and Caspian Terns.

We drove back through Auckland, and then headed north on Highway 1 through beautiful mountainous terrain, where nikau palms and New Zealand tree ferns added drama to the forest landscape. There was also plenty of pasture land, all of which at some point in time had been cleared of forest habitat to make way for sheep, goats, cattle, and other grazers. Also, in some areas we passed large stands of Monterey Cypress (*Macrocarpa*), at one time planted around homesteads, and now ranging widely in the mountains. We stopped for lunch at The Parsley Pot Cafe on Sandspit Road near Snell's Beach, where we had fresh greens, pasties, quiches, corn fritters and other tasty offerings. From there we passed through Matakana and dropped down to the white sands of Pakiri Beach, a busy vacation area loaded with city dwellers on holiday. We walked across a stream (the Poutawa River) near where it entered the Hauraki Gulf to reach the beach enclosure, for a pair of Fairy Terns. There



are only 39 adults remaining, and with only three chicks produced this year, times are not good for this critically endangered bird.

Mon., January 7 | Hauraki Gulf

This morning we boarded the Norma Jean with Captain Piers and set out to explore Hauraki Gulf. We were joined by a sea bird biologist named Karen Baird from the Northern Seabird Trust. We cruised out along the Tawharanui Peninsula, which would be the site for our kiwi search later this evening. We could see the fencing that crosses the peninsula to keep this park predator free (they are still working on the rabbits). Many of the islands in the area are also now predator free and serve as important refuges for endemic birds.

The Gulf area is relatively shallow, hence the home of primarily smaller sea birds like petrels, Storm Petrel, and prions. There are several endemics or near endemics in the area like Cook's Petrel and New Zealand Storm Petrel. Once we were out in the open Gulf, Karen threw out chum bags full of salmon bits, and we watched as the birds begin to gather. We saw Buller's Shearwater with its well-defined back markings and the larger Flesh-footed Shearwater. White-faced Storm Petrel bouncing on the water, tapping down with their feet before lifting off again. The delicate Fairy Prion, with its blue-grey coloring, joined in the feeding frenzy as well. By far the most numerous birds were the Fluttering Shearwater, essentially a non-migratory species. This bird is highly aquatic, and we watched them swimming underwater around the chum bag almost like penguins.

The New Zealand Storm Petrel, once presumed extinct, was rediscovered in the early 2000s, and are now thought to number between three and six thousand individuals. Karen was involved in an adventurous effort to locate their nesting area, which proved to be on Little Barrier Island from which predators had only recently been eradicated.

By the time we got back to land it was nearly 3 p.m., so we had a snack, and drove back out to the reserve at Tawharanui for our evening outing. This area used to be farm land but is now owned by the regional council, and is managed for recreation and native species protection. The fence enclosing the peninsula is impressive, and protects against animals digging under or climbing over. All predators, like stoats and ferret, are thought to have been removed, and they are still working to control rats and rabbits. Takahe and other native birds have been reintroduced to the area and populations are growing.

Our guide Tristan walked us through a forest of Manuka trees and pointed out several other of the common plant species, including the fragrant paper tree, which is used to make a mint-like tea, and the vanishing koekoeko tree, which is highly sought after by the introduced tree opossum. Grey Warbler and Fantail darted in and out of the manuka, and many Pukeko grazed in the vicinity. We spent some time watching the endemic Brown Teal foraging in a nearby pond. We strolled up the main trail while still daylight to get the lay of the land, and to get looks at Bell Bird and North Island Saddleback. A Kaka (bush parrot) and several Eastern Rosella flew overhead. The forest is dense in places and some trees are laden with perched lilies, an epiphyte superficially resembling a Bromeliad. We also had great looks at a female Banded Rail, with chicks in the wetlands near the pond, and then returned to the parking area where we picnicked on Tristan's mom's excellent cooking (meat pies, salads, strawberries and cookies).

As dusk fell, Tristan located a Takahe near the parking lot, but by the time our group arrived it was darting back into the foliage. Some persisted and a got a good look at this charismatic mega-bird. As it grew darker we headed up the trail again, mostly without lights. Tristan apparently knew the area well, as he found a North Island Kiwi at the first place we stopped. They make a high-pitched, distinctive call and also make a considerable amount of noise as they thrash through the underbrush. In addition, Tristan was carrying a heat sensing scope,



which highlighted their shapes in the bush in white. We lined up quietly and waited for the Kiwi to emerge into the open grass area along the road. And he did! He scurried along at the edge of the vegetation long enough for us all to get a good look. Like other flightless birds, Kiwi have been hard hit by introduced predators in New Zealand. In some areas, Kiwi young are trapped and moved to offshore islands, where they can mature in a lower risk environment, before being rereleased back to their home areas.

Near the Kiwi sighting, we watched two young Morepork Owls getting some attention from a parent bird. As we walked deeper into the forest, we had another encounter with a Kiwi, which was much more difficult to see. Then Tristan took us onto a narrow trail, and called us two by two under a log, to view a large weta cricket clinging to the log's undersurface.



Our final excitement for the night was a very large (but by no means the largest) long-finned eel, that was skulking in the water near the bank of a tiny creek. It looked to be about four feet long, with an absolutely massive head. These fish spend decades in freshwater and then undertake a remarkable journey to their spawning grounds near Tonga. The females live longer and get larger than the males. They can be over 60 inches long and live 60 or more years in these streams before beginning their unique migration. They travel thousands of kilometers to their spawning ground, and then in a mass spawning event may lay as many as 20 million eggs each before dying. The larvae float back to New Zealand on the prevailing currents and are transformed to tiny transparent "glass eels" in the estuaries before beginning their migration back upstream. Yes, the real world is stranger than fiction...

Tues., January 8 | Miranda Shorebird Centre/Murwai Gannet Colony

We traveled back to Auckland to pick up the rest of our group, and then we headed off to the Miranda Shorebird Centre located at the head of the Firth of James. Rows of shell mounds are pushed up by wave and wind over the years, and in areas ponds have formed between the mounds. Hides (the Kiwi term for blinds) have been set up to watch the enumerable shorebirds that use this habitat. Wrybill and South Island Oystercatchers winter here, while northern hemisphere birds spend their winters here. There were large groups of Pacific Golden Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit, along with huge flocks of Pied Stilts wheeling overhead. Other species included Banded Dotterel, Red Knot, White-face Heron, and Black-billed Gulls. The Black-billed Gulls nest in braided river mouth and are losing habitat due to water extraction and disturbance, so their numbers are on the decline. At



the second hide, we also saw Black Swan, a vagrant Australian Shelduck, and Sharp-tailed and Pectoral Sandpipers.

We met Keith Woodley at the gift shop associated with the Shorebird Centre. He manages the Centre and is heavily involved in the shorebird association and other bird-related issues in New Zealand. He's written a book on Bar-tailed Godwit, partially because of his interest in how the godwits body changes in order to fly non-stop from their breeding grounds in Alaska. It's the fastest recorded non-stop flight by any bird species taking only 6-7 days. On their way to Alaska, they refuel in North Korea, where New Zealanders have been allowed to observe them given their conservation agreements protecting the flyway with China and North Korea.

We stopped for lunch and then headed for the Maukatia Takapu (Australasian Gannet) colony at Muriwai beach. This was quite a spectacle with gannets covering the surface of the rocky slopes below the lookouts. Each nest was built about pecking distance from the next, and lined with seaweed, grass, and bound with guano. Veteran birds occupy the premium real estate at the center of the colony, whereas young breeders and single birds are found along the outer edges. With predator control their numbers have been expanding and now number in the thousands.

On our travels back, Mark talked a bit about one of our potential destinations that was cancelled due to closure of Waitakere Ranges Park. A fungus has been killing the kauri trees, which are an Auricaceae, related to Norfolk Island pines. The fungus is thought to be carried on footwear, hence the closure.

He also talked a bit about New Zealand energy sources, which are primarily renewable. Hydropower is 60-65% of the electricity source, followed by geothermal at 28%, and then wind energy. There is no nuclear here and oil and gas account for less than 10%. Oil and gas is mostly imported here, and so is expensive, thus there are high incentives for use of alternatives.

We finished our day with a welcome dinner at Y-Not on the Queen's Pier.

Wed., January 9 | Tiritiri Matangi

Today we caught a ferry at Gulf Harbor, to Tiritiri Matangi Island. This island is managed by the Department of Conservation in partnership with a private trust, and together they coordinate the efforts of an enormous and enthusiastic group of volunteers. Visitors are required to inspect their clothing for seeds and brush off their footwear, and inspect their bags for rodents before landing to keep the island pest-free. Huge efforts have been put into restoring this island to a near native state, and the outcome has been spectacular—a beautiful, forested island laden with bird song.

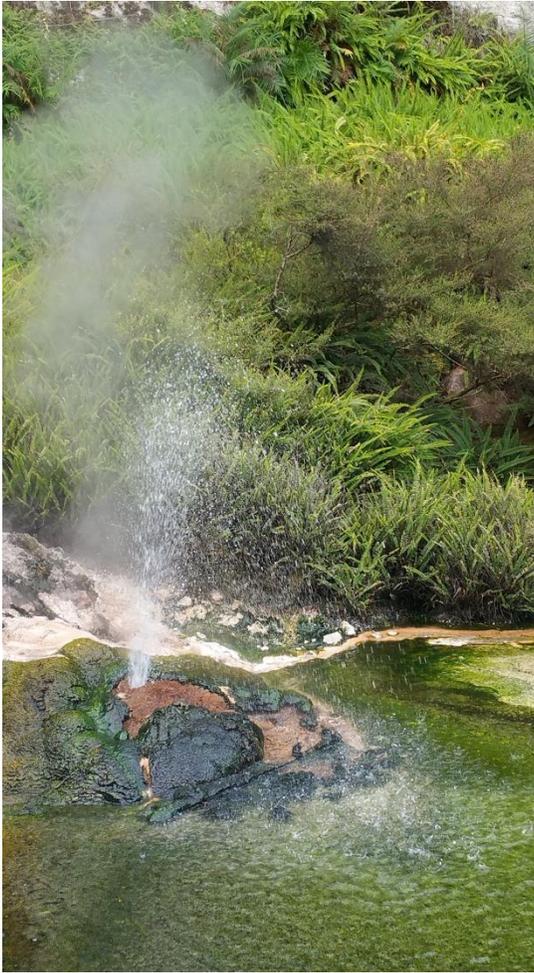


In the early 90's, efforts on Tiritiri were focused on an enormous revegetation project, with over 250,000 shrubs and trees planted. Aerial poison was spread to rid the island of rats, and then they began repopulating the island with eleven endemic and rare New Zealand bird species. Wikipedia here is concise: “These are kākāriki / red crowned parakeet, tīeke / North Island saddleback, pāteke / brown teal, pōpokotea / whitehead, takahē, little spotted kiwi, hihi / stitchbird, North Island kōkako, mātātā / fernbird, miromiro / North Island tomtit and tītipounamu / rifleman. Non-avian translocations include 60 tuatarain 2003, Duvaucel's gecko in 2006 and a large insect wetapunga in 2011.” When some of these translocations were instigated, food supplies were lower, and birds were supplementary fed. Now, populations (and the habitat around them) have grown such that birds can be exported to other pest-free areas of New Zealand.

We traveled by foot up a track and that included some steep boardwalks. On the beach near the ferry landing, we passed nesting New Zealand Dotterel, heavily protected by fencing. The trail left the beach and climbed through tree fern, cabbage tree, and flax into taller canopy forests where the putukawha are the size of ancient old oaks, and the ferns create a lush understory. Kokako, or North Island Wattle Bird, were on the brink of extinction at one time, being highly susceptible to predation. It showed itself several times, often from the deep canopy. Now and then its blue wattles flashed sapphire in the light. North Island Saddleback, Tui and Bellbird were easy to find, and Stitchbird were common at the honey feeders. We had Red-capped Parakeets cooperatively feeding on flax seeds and coming in for water. Small flocks of Whitehead periodically passed through and we saw the occasional North Island Robin. Three Boobook Owls watched us from their perches in some path-side tree ferns. Their success here is a mixed blessing as they also like to feed on Stitchbird chicks. After lunch up by the lighthouse, we birded our way down for our ferry ride back to the mainland...

Thurs., January 10 | Miranda/Rotorua/Waimangu Volcanic Valley

We left Auckland for good this morning, first to try to locate Australasian Bittern in Whangamarino Wetland Reserve. This very large wetland complex is choked in some areas with introduced “cracked” willows, and in



other areas, it has been transformed into fertile farmland, with rolling hills covered with corn fields bordered with sunflowers. But there is still lots of beautiful, native habitat here. We stopped in sight of a small pond, to scan the landscape for bittern, and although we were unsuccessful, we got looks at numerous species of waterfowl, and also New Zealand Dabchick. Yellowhammers clung to the flower stalks of nearby flax as we moved on down the road.

We headed back to Miranda to the Robert Findlay Wildlife Area, where we had been two mornings ago. The Red-breasted Shelduck had been joined by a companion! At the large hide we could see Royal Spoonbill, Ruddy Turnstone, and Pied Cormorant, in addition to the many species we saw on our first visit.

From Miranda we began to head south through the Waikato River valley. We'd officially left the "natural" range of mangroves and of kauri trees. This area is dense with small scaled dairy farms and factories, and the trucks that carry the milk. Fonterra is the second or third largest dairy company in the world, and it was formed as a cooperative between various New Zealand dairy farmers. This is a very productive area with very fertile soil. The rolling green hills are very reminiscent of landscapes in some parts of California.

We stopped for lunch in Tirau, which is known for its giant corrugated metal sculptures of dogs, sheep, ducks, jacks-in-the-box, etc., popping out of rooftops. We traveled through Rotarua, a town situated on the shores of a lake (or submerged caldera) of

the same name. Steam was rising from the ground in various spots throughout town - in the botanical gardens, in someone's back yard etc. At the lake's edge we found the endemic New Zealand Scaup, as well as Black Shag, Little Black Shag, and Little Pied Shag with its bright yellow bill.

The Waimangu Volcanic Valley is the youngest geothermal ecosystem in the world, created by a giant explosion in 1886 when the Tawawera Volcano erupted. A series of craters were formed along a 16 km front; during the largest New Zealand eruption since European settlement. The forest has reestablished since the explosion, with first plants observed around 1915. It is now dense and lush, filled with tree fern and singing birds. In the valley, the many craters that were formed filled with hot thermal water to create a series of lakes. The Waimangu Geyser became active around 1900, and for several years exploded every 36 hours, throwing mud, rocks, and boiling water 400 meters high. Frying Pan Flats exploded in 1917 to create Frying Pan Lake, the largest hot water spring in the world. That explosion destroyed the hotel that was here. Frying Pan Lake and Inferno Lake appear to be linked in terms of temperatures and water levels, with one rising when the other falls, and there is a monitoring station set up to try to understand this relationship.

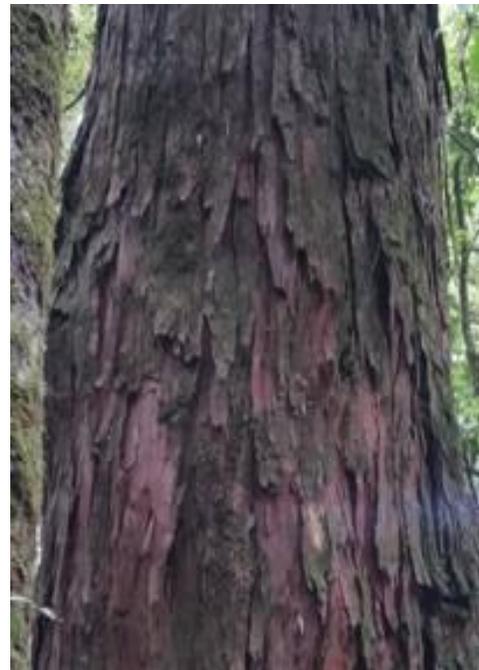
We hiked down through the forest, with the trail often opening to sweeping views of steaming lakes and forested hillsides. The lake edges were often ringed with mineral and bacterial deposits of orange, white, and green. Steam boiled up out of the water here and there and the heat in the valley was considerable. A steaming stream flowed from lake to lake, in place with mud pots and vents bubbling alongside. The short hike up to Inferno Lake was well worth it. This smaller round lake is surrounded by vertical walls and most of the time is sapphire blue and low in volume. However, we saw it on a day when it was milky and overflowing.

We caught the last bus out of the valley and back to the visitor center, where we climbed back in our van for the ride to Taupo, a town on a lake of the same name. This huge lake, the largest in New Zealand, is again a result of a crater filling with water, and its geothermal effects are evident in the hotel, where the floors are actually heated. Its eruption, was the largest globally in the past 70,000 years. Over 1100 cubic kilometers of material was ejected, and hundreds of square kilometers of land collapsed to form the caldera. Everywhere you look in this countryside, you see geothermal piping, transporting superheated steam to geothermal plants for power production.



Fri., January 11 | Pureora Forest/Lake Taupo/Tongariro NP

Today we traveled quite a way across the Northern Island, making a number of short stops along the way. We had a picnic breakfast with Tomtits, Long-tailed Cuckoo, Kaka, and Tuis. Then we drove to the Pureora forest - which is one of the largest intact tracts of native forest remaining in New Zealand. This forest was the site of vigorous protests over logging by environmentalists in the 1970s, who conducted "sit-ins" on platforms high up in the trees. Their efforts were effective, resulting in protection of this nearly 300 sq. mile forest, and enactment of federal law associated with the protection of native forests. Logging now is almost entirely on private lands. The Pureora forest was one of the few places the Kokako remained before being moved to protected offshore islands as part of their recovery.



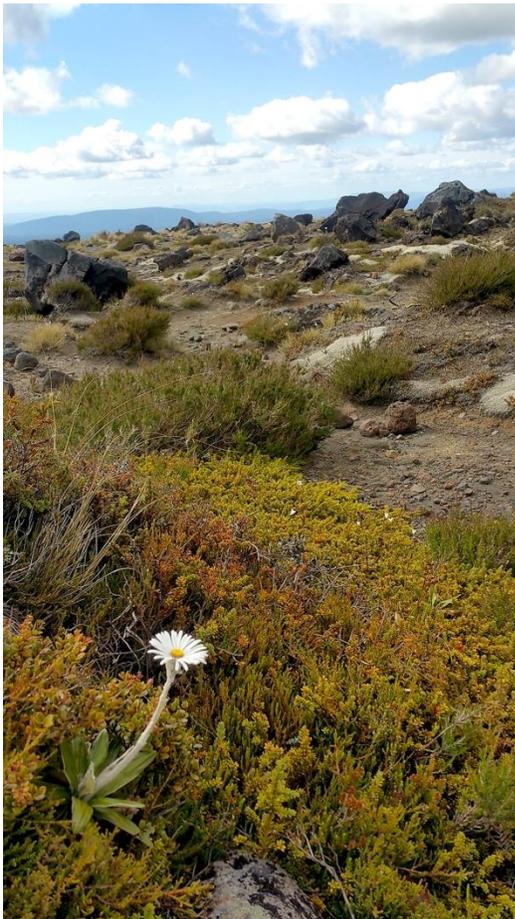
This forest has giant 1000-year-old podocarp trees. The several large trees that dominate the forest canopy include kahikatea, or white pine (*Dacrycarpus dacrydiodes*) (over 60 m in height), heavily used for making butter boxes; matai or black pine (*Prumnopitys taxifolia*) (to 30 m); and remu, or red pine (*Dacrydium cupressium*) (to 50 m) used for timber for housing. The enormous totara tree (*Podocarpus totara* or Chiefly Tree in Maori), was highly valued by the Maori as a tree "elder" and can live as long as 1800 years. The Maori made giant war canoes from these trees, that could carry up to a hundred warriors each! The forest here was filled with bird song, particularly New Zealand Robin, and we also had a Kaka perched in the open for us while Yellow-crowned Parakeets were flying through. There are only two native land mammals here, long-tailed and short-tailed bats.

We stopped down the road for another look at the forest, where we were able to see Bellbird, Tomtit and Fantail. A curve in the road brought Lake Taupo back into view and we were able to look back across this giant water body to where we stayed last night. We picnicked along the shores of the lake, and picked up feather light pumice stones washed up on the shoreline. Black Swan, Black and Pied Shag, Eurasian Coot, and New Zealand Scaup floated nearby in the water. Farther down the shoreline we went in search of Fernbird, and found one in the wetlands near the shore.

There are huge water manipulation projects here for hydropower production. Water is collected from the rivers by diverters, moved to Lake Rotoaira and then through turbines into canals draining to Lake Tairu. We stopped to walk out to one of the hydro-works at Lake Rotoaira with a male Paradise Shelduck escorting us all the way.

Finally, Mount Ruapehu was visible in the distance, covered with snow. We crossed a number of bridges over the Waikato River; finally arriving at the Whakapapa intake. Here we were able to sneak up on three Blue Ducks by the river's edge. Excellent looks at this species that is recovering nicely with the help of ongoing predator control.

As we climbed toward the mountain, we traveled through slow growing beech (*Nothofagus*) forest, and then arrived Chateau Tongariro, a beautiful old lady of a hotel (built in 1929), with stained glass, chandeliers and dress codes; it made for a lovely respite for the night. After depositing luggage and gathering up another layer of clothes, we traveled up the mountain into the tundra, where cushion plants and other tiny species were nestled among the rather severe rocky landscape. This area was the set for Mordor in the Lord of the Rings



trilogy, it is that stark. We continued up the mountain to the ski huts above the Whakapapa ski field. We were looking for the elusive New Zealand Pipit, but it was not to show. But we were rewarded with the long lighting of the sinking sun across the strange rocks of the slopes and the far distant fields and hills.

We dined formally, sans flip flops and shorts, with multiple place settings and waiters with napkin on one arm. It was lovely.



Sat., January 12 | On to Picton

We awoke to a crystal-clear morning on the mountain, with all volcanic peaks exposed to sunlight and sparkling with snow. We headed downhill, listening to Mark's commentary. He has a near encyclopedic range of knowledge about all subjects New Zealand, including geology, farming and dairy operations, ski fields, history of the land and landscape, cultural issues and of course, biology. In this case, he was talking about how the landscape formed, including the mud debris that flows downhill from an explosion, called "lahar". Mark described one such flow, which on Christmas Day 1958, took out a railroad bridge causing a train to plow into the Tangewhei River. We traveled across this landscape, trying to imagine how these forces of fire, wind, and water came together to create what lay before us.

Each of the small towns we traveled through had something to make them stand out from the others; for example, there is Wharapitu Junction, where a wrecking yard has become world famous for its vintage car parts and has been the set for more than one movie. Or Ohakuni, which is known for its delicious carrots, and where a giant carrot welcomes children to the "Carrot Adventure Park". Or Taihape, the gum boot capital of the world. Some of us were blessed in Taihape by the passing of a New Zealand Falcon overhead at the BP station.

We passed a forest of another California conifer, *Pinus contorta* or lodgepole Pine. This pine not only did not provide straight timber, it also spread out of control, and the Forest Service now sponsors pine removal work days. You can spend the weekend pulling up pines' seedlings, if that is a way you would like to spend it.

When we passed through Kaimanua, Mark told about the Kiamanua horses, a breed of its own descended from released war horses. It now is found in very high numbers and needs to be controlled. These horses are small and somewhat stunted, surprising for descendants of war horses!

Our road followed the Rangatiki River as it cut its way through the sedimentary mud stone found in this area. Through the alternating layers of mudstone, sandstone, and limestone, scientists have identified eleven or twelve periods of glaciation that have occurred in this region. In places you can see concretions, spherical balls



of silica and other particles that have adhered together and solidified. More recently, the native vegetation has been removed to make way for the range land here. Over time, the native plant root structure that had supported the slopes has decayed, allowing soil to overload with water and slopes to fail. Poplars are planted here and there to help absorb the water and stabilize the slopes.



We moved out of the hill country into coastal plains, which were flatter pasture land with the occasional farm house or corn field. When the plains became dunes, we found ourselves in Foxton, a seaside town with all the vacation amenities, including a squash club, riding club, and golf. At one time, this town was important for producing rope from the native flax plants here. We scanned the estuary here for birds of interest and found Lesser (Red) Knots, South Island Oystercatcher, Royal Spoonbill, Banded Dotterel, Bart-tailed Godwit, and one oddball bird, which we finally decided was a Curlew Sandpiper.

We stopped at the Otaki sewage ponds and located Black-fronted Dotterel there, along with Australasian Shoveler, Black Swan, New Zealand Teal, and Paradise Shelduck. Then we headed for our ferry in Wellington which departed at 5:00 p.m.

The weather for the crossing of Cook Strait was calm, meaning it was a somewhat quiet ride from the standpoint of seabirds, but a few White-capped and one Salvin's albatross were spotted. The ride really got interesting when we entered the beautiful islands and fjords of Queen Charlotte Sound, passing salmon rearing pens, mussel farms, sail boats, and oceanside homes. These hills, in places where the land is held publicly, are being controlled for Monterey Pine, with many acres pine-free.

Sun., January 13 | Marlborough Sounds/Kaikoura

This morning we explored Queen Charlotte Sound by boat, the E-Ko. Paul, our guide for the morning, was very knowledgeable about the area. He narrated a bit of the history of the Sound as we traveled out to the area



where King Shags typically roost. Much of the land in this area is privately owned, but DOC is pushing for regional protection or park development. Like many parts of New Zealand, the hills that make up the shores and islands of the sound used to be heavily wooded with the 50 m high trees native to the area. Those are gone now, logged first by native Maori, and then by European settlers. The Monterey Pines that were planted throughout the country have naturalized here and dominate of the landscape. There is an active eradication program on public lands, and Paul estimates that half a million trees have been killed, though from the looks of things that is a mere drop in the bucket. He told stories of the Guardians of the Sound, the local advocacy organization in the area, sending youth up the steep slopes with poison spikes to kill individual trees. They have even tried shooting them with poisoned bullets, but now rely mostly on aerial spraying using an extendable wand.

Some of the islands in the area are now pest free and are used as safe havens for endangered birds. On one of the islands, lives a supposedly impossible cross between a Little-spotted Kiwi and a Rowi. He has been designated a Blue Kiwi. So as not to contaminate the gene pool, he is kept away from other fertile kiwi, living his life out in exile.



We reached Blumine Island where we snuck up on the King Shag roosting site. This is the rarest seabird in the world. There are only 634 of these birds, all in the Sound. However, over a number of years of monitoring, their population has remained stable, so they do not appear to be declining. Forty-six were sitting at this roost, so we were able to see a fairly large percentage of the total population.



In crossing around to the island landing, we saw Parasitic Jaeger and the very densely furred, New Zealand fur seal. This animal can dive up to 240 meters! We also had a short visit with Hector's Dolphin, who approached our boat gleefully, but then sped off for other purposes or porpoises, as it were. This is the smallest dolphin in the world, at 1.4 m in length, and the only one endemic to New Zealand. The babies are about the size of a rugby ball, still creased from being folded up inside their mums. They have a rounded "Mickey Mouse ear" dorsal fin and feed both at the surface and on the ocean floor. Paul says that net entanglement is a large cause of mortality for them (with an estimated take of up to 150 animals per year), but they also die from Toxoplasmosis, the disease carried by cats that also heavily impacts southern Sea Otters off our California central coast. Hector's Dolphin is in serious decline. A number of fishing areas and gear restrictions have been put in place to help protect them, but not enough to stop the decline. We landed on Blumine Island and climbed down a ladder at the front of the boat onto its shores. We

were greeted on the beach by several Weka, a vulnerable species that is beginning to recover. The Weka is challenging from a conservation standpoint, because when placed on predator-free islands where it had never been present in the past, it can be hard on the endemic snails, skinks, geckos, and wetas. A charming flightless bird, nonetheless.

What a lovely place to be stranded! Several campers had decided the same thing, and had set up large family camp right at the trail head, with solar shower on the trail adjacent to the watering site of the extremely rare Orange-crowned Parakeet. Needless to say, no parakeets were visible at either of the nearby watering sites, though some of us (me!) had a glimpse of one flying into the dense scrub just as we were preparing to leave.

The Isaac Wildlife Trust (funded by a family-owned quarry company) has done much good towards protection of the Orange-crowned Parakeet through its captive breeding program at Peacock Springs. It has released birds to several predator free islands in the area, including this one. Fifty-four of these birds were moved to the island about 8 years ago. A number of untagged young birds can now be seen, and the population is estimated to have increased to around 80. This is another critically endangered bird. The total population is somewhere around 350 birds, restricted to four predator-free offshore islands and a few valleys on the South Island.

We watched gannet diving and a large group of Spotted Shag floating on the water as we were headed back to port. After a quick bathroom break, we headed out of town towards more southerly parts.

Never ones to miss wastewater ponds, we stopped at the Bleinheim ponds near Wairau lagoons. With 37 hectares of ponds used here to oxidize and treat wastewater, the water then flows to the Opawa River and then into the Wairau lagoons. Royal Spoonbill were grooming in the trees with their headdresses lifting up dramatically in the wind, and shovelers patrolled the water. Skylarks displayed overhead, a nice setting for sewage treatment!

We traveled through grass covered hills of Marlborough country, again strikingly reminiscent of the central coast of California, especially as we began to see more and more vineyards, with plantings of blue gum and Monterey Pine. In some places, the vineyards had installed wind turbines to help manage the occasional frosts.



At Elterwater Pond we stopped hoping for Hoary Grebe, but did find the usual suspects, including Royal Spoonbill, Australian Shoveler, Red and Black-billed Gulls, Paradise Shelduck, Canada Goose, Australasian Coot, Mallard crosses, Little Pied and Black Shag, Black Swan, Pukeko, Song Thrush, Caspian Tern, Pied Stilt, and Silver-eye.

Our road along the east coast took us through the area greatly affected by the Kaikoura earthquake of 2016. There were ruptures on multiple faults, causing a huge amount of coastal uplift and lateral shifting. Wikipedia says it has been described as “the most complex earthquake ever studied”, with ruptures on twenty-five faults. In areas the coastline has been raised up by 2 meters and shifted horizontally by as much as 12m. The quake itself occurred offshore at about 9 miles depth. In the Kaikoura area land shifts were to the north north-east.

The uplifted coastline is now evident by the bleached white shell of dead intertidal organisms, who were lifted out of their comfort zone. The ocean that used to crash near the roadway, is now many meters distant. The creeks are forming lagoon areas behind the shoreline, because they have not yet cut through the newly raised material. The quake did tremendous damage to the road and railway that parallel the coast, and the area was closed for several years for rebuilding, with the train only recently reopening.

We stopped at a New Zealand fur seal haul out and watched babies chasing one another, nursing, napping, and learning how to fight. Nearby was a Spotted Shag rookery.

Hutton’s Shearwaters (which we haven’t seen) breed up in the hills near here, sometimes with snow on the ground. The earthquake damaged some of their nesting sites. When fledglings head to the ocean, they get distracted by Kaikoura’s city lights and are then rescued by residents. This is the only breeding area in world for them, and biologists are trying to get them to imprint on other nesting sites that are closer to the ocean. There are only two remaining nesting areas left here, here in the Kaikoura ranges. Six others were wiped out by feral pigs.

We came into Kaikoura and found our very pleasant hotel, the White Morph, directly across the street from Kaikoura Bay. We had a nice meal at The Pier at the south end of town, and came back to watch an absolutely breathtaking sunset, with rays of light springing from the ocean, mountaintops lit with rainbows, and ominous clouds overhead.



Mon., January 14 | Kaikoura

The weather didn’t work to our advantage today, with boat trips cancelled due to high winds and seas. Three of our group opted to take a helicopter on a 50-50 chance of seeing sperm whales and they were glad they did! Had they not paid a little extra for the longer, forty-minute ride, they would have missed those magnificent animals altogether. But right at the end of the ride, one surfaced and stayed there for five minutes. He blew and lunged forward in the water, making for great photographic opportunities in the grey light. Even without him it

would have been a spectacular ride, with sun spots peeking through the dark clouds to strike the ocean surface, with the town of Kaikoura lit up in sunshine. Other folks walked to the southern point of the bay where we watched a Red-billed Gull nesting colony, while several Salvin's Albatross, Giant Petrel, Reef Herons, as well as flocks of Hutton's Shearwaters streamed by.

Tue., January 15 | Canterbury Plains/Arthur's Pass

This morning we made up for our Albatross Encounter cancellation yesterday by catching a 6 a.m. boat out to look for different pelagic species. We actually loaded up on the boat first, and then it was backed down the launch ramp. Though it was still grey today, there were spots of sun coming through and lighting up the water. Once the chum bag was thrown out, the birds quickly began congregating - Cape Petrel (Pintado), the very beefy Giant Petrel, and dwarfing them, the albatrosses. We saw five species, including Northern Royal, Southern Royal, Salvin's, White-capped and Wandering. This kept us entertained for quite some time, watching them vie for position at the chum bag, with the Wandering Albatross by far the most aggressive. We were focused on the birds and had to look twice as a giant grey back emerged just beyond them - it was a young humpback! He came within 15 feet of the boat and rolled to show his white undersides, and then gave us a pec wave goodbye before slipping back under the water. A little later, we watched a blue shark fin cutting through the water near the birds. He wasn't a big, but certainly had our attention, as well as the bird's...

As we sped back towards shore, we were escorted by a group of leaping dusky dolphins. We approached a fur seal haul out area from the water side and were rewarded by viewing pups playing and sunning on the rocks.

After our ride, we came back to Kaikoura for a late breakfast, and then packed the van up for departure. We passed through beech forests that will more and more dominate the landscape as we travel south. Mark commented that the black fungus on these trees produces nectar sacs, that in the past were food for nectar eating birds. Now they are food for introduced wasps that can reach plague proportions. There is a trapping program that seems to be working to try and control the wasp.

Near Cheviot is the St. Anne Wildlife Reserve. Small ponds here were covered in duckweed, with waterfowl added in for good measure. We saw Eurasian Coot, Pukeko, Black Swan, NZ Scaup and Canada Goose. The surrounding park is a virtual arboretum of exotic tree species, including giant sequoia and the beautiful Spanish fir.

We then circumvented Christchurch and traveled through the fertile Canterbury Plains, and up through Porter Pass. This area is highly erosive, with scree slopes of uplifted greywacke sending huge amounts of gravel and cobble downstream into the valley floor. The sediment buildup in the valleys causes the river systems to be



braided with multiple channels crossing freely back and forth across the floodplain. Invasive weeds like broom can clog these flood plains, reducing habitat for the various species (Black-fronted Tern, Wrybill and Black-billed Gull...) that use these areas for breeding.

The various uplifted sedimentary layers along fault lines were quite visible in some areas; while at Castle Hill, limestone outcropping dominated the landscape. There are still large stands of Monterey Pine and/or Douglas fir in some areas. We passed Hayden Valley, the lone mainland area that still supported the critically endangered Orange-fronted Parakeets, from which all translocation has been sourced.



We arrived at the lovely Arthur's Pass Wilderness Lodge. The grounds have been carefully managed to restore the native forest, but a portion of the lower elevation lands are still managed for sheep. We met Neil, who solely manages this operation with the help of his border collie Meg. He also uses a Huntaway to gather the sheep from the hills, and we could hear his barking in the distance. Meg is not a youngster, but was only recently called to duty due to the sudden death of Neil's long-time helper. He says a fully trained dog costs about \$7000, and it looked to me as though they earn their keep. At a few whistles and shouts, Meg ran out to gather the sheep. She had a bit of trouble getting them moving, but then from far across the field we could see a stampede of white faces headed our way. They formed a tight little herd around us and Neil selected one out to talk about. Once the poor girl was lifted upright she leaned passively against Neil's legs while he discussed the finer points of her thick merino wool. We all got a go at holding her - she didn't really seem to mind much - but once released, she burrowed headfirst into the ball of wool that was the herd, and all we could see of her was her wooly backside.

On the way to the shearing barn, we visited a pen of orphaned lambs (including one black sheep and one little calf) who needed extra feeding and attention to get by. They got bottles and lamb kibble, and we got to pet soft

noses and put our fingers into their lanolin rich coats. Then we walked down to the shearing shed where Neil gave us a bit of a sales pitch about the merits of merino wool clothing. Fine merino wool is about 18 microns in diameter. Super fine wool, as small as 10.5 u, sells for an enormous price.

Neil gave us a shearing demonstration. He typically uses hand shears so he can leave a bit more coat on them. Professional shearers using electric clippers can shear a sheep in under a minute. For this back breaking work they earn between \$2.50 and \$3 per sheep, which doesn't sound like a lot, but when you consider that 2500 sheep get sheared here over a 3-day period, that would start to add up.



After the shearing they pick the sticks and debris out of the wool, grade it by strand thickness and color. Then it gets bundled up for Icebreaker brand and shipped to Christchurch for core sampling and then on to Australia or China for further processing into yarn, fabric and clothing.

We finished our day with a lovely meal in the dining room, complete with a sweeping view of the Waitakaruru Basin and the Southern Alps beyond.

Wed., January 16 | Arthur's Pass

We started the morning with a walk through manuka and beech forest with Michael, the resident naturalist. The manuka is an early successional plant that provides a shady habitat for young beech trees to get their start. Early efforts at beech planting were unsuccessful, but in the twenty years since forest protection began here, they have substantially colonized on their own, under the care of the manuka trees.



The beech tree here is a relict species from the Gondwana land mass and there are Nothofagus species in similar latitudes elsewhere in the Southern Hemisphere, including Patagonia and Australia. The distribution of these beech species was key to early recognition of the concept of continental drift; in fact, botanists proposed the idea long before geologists bought into the hypothesis. The beech forest is beautiful, with a few older trees of 150 to 200 years in age, that provided the seed base for the many younger trees surrounding them. Green mosses carpet the forest floor, holding moisture in the shallow glacial moraine soils found here. Mature beech forests are entirely dominated by beech, with few other species competing with them.

Much of the surrounding landscape is highly modified. Sheep farmers used fire to clear the land. Both Douglas fir and Monterey pine have been planted in large stands on the surrounding hillsides, but this 3000-acre has been managed for native species for 20 years. Fifty to a

hundred thousand fir seedlings are removed from this land every year. We were told an older fir forest planted by the Forest Service on the slopes above the preserve would cost more to harvest than the timber is worth, so there it will remain. We had glimpses of Tomtit, Grey Warbler, Bellbird, Rifleman, and Brown Creeper flitting deep in the forest. Mistletoe was in full bloom. Unlike our North American mistletoe, this plant does not harm its host tree, and provides important food for birds. Bellbirds incidentally sow mistletoe seeds because the sticky seeds stick to their beaks as they feed on the sweet nectar. Unfortunately, the brush opossum is a voracious consumer of mistletoe, and where opossums are present, the stands of mistletoe dwindle, and the Bellbird populations decline.



After breakfast, we traveled up to Arthur's Pass for a hike down from the summit. The Waimakariri Plain is a wide alluvial valley with a large braided river traversing back and forth across it. The mountains are steep, and primarily tree covered. We stopped first at the small town of Arthur's Pass, where a Kia was making a nuisance of himself grabbing sandwiches off picnic tables. Though we were thrilled to see this very rare bird, it was sort of distressing seeing him act like a commoner.

Our walk started in the high elevation scrubland with flax and tussock grass and colorful lichens. Then the hike downhill took us back into beech forest, where we got good looks at Rifleman and Brown Creeper. We heard a Kea squawk overhead; he apparently crash-landed in the tree tops just over Greg's head. Unfortunately, we didn't get to actually see this magnificent parrot in his native habitat. The trail was beautiful and well built. Mark drove halfway down and hiked back up; and when we reached the van, a picnic lunch was waiting for us. Most of us continued the rest of the six miles downward, while several went the rest of the way down with Mark and hiked back to meet us again. Lucky for them, they missed the 130 or so steps down and back out

of a gorge that knocked the wind out of the rest of us. Still, it was a beautiful hike with lots of good looks at tiny, tailless Riflemen and the Brown Creeper, that really didn't creep much at all!

After a quick rest, some headed out with Michael again, to explore the shrublands, riverbed and beech forest of the preserve. He showed us some of the tough lichen that colonize the baking hot rocks near the riverbed, which because of their acidity, are a first step towards making soil. *Helichrysum depressum* was an extremely homely plant found there as well, tough as nails with extremely reduced leaves. We walked through a mature beech forest to the 'moa' scrubland. Many of the plants there are adapted to the browsing pressure placed on them by these now extinct ten-foot tall birds (though to be truthful, there were five species, not all this tall). As an example, *Coprosma* grows with its tender leaves on the inside of the plant, protected by a twiggy, less palatable exterior. The very spiny porcupine tree bears its tiny fruits on the undersides of its leaves, so they can be easily carried off by hungry lizards, who then distribute their seeds for them. We also passed by Matagouri, or Wild Irishman, one of the few native New Zealand plants with thorns.

Thurs., January 17 | Mount John Observatory/Lake Tekapo

Today was mostly a day of travel, as we needed to retrace our steps back out of the mountains to the fertile Canterbury plains, the pastoral hills to the west, and then back into the mountains farther south to Mackenzie Country and the Lake Ohau Lodge.

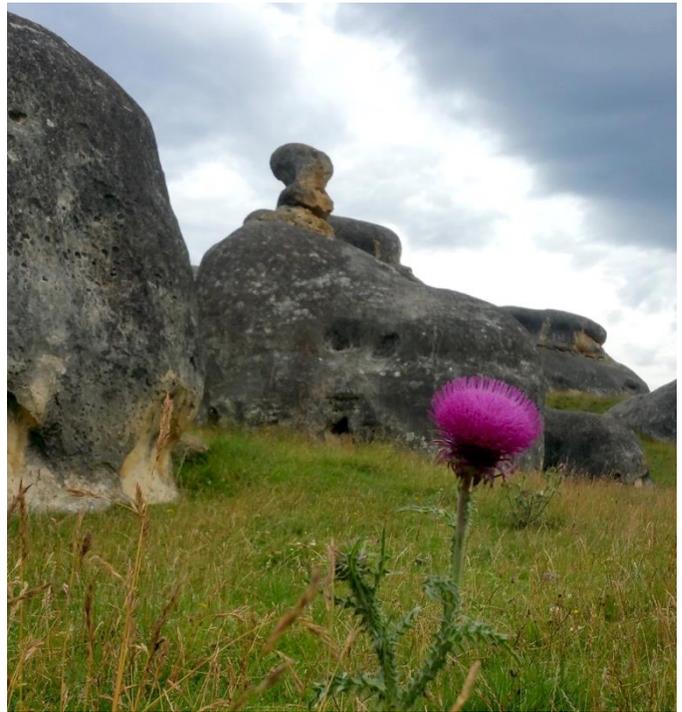
The landscape is naturally dry, like a desert grassland surrounded by tall mountain peaks. The rivers running through it are heavily laden with the gravel and cobble coming down from the scree slopes above, and the grassland is a wide alluvial deposit, filling the valley from mountain toe to mountain toe. The water in the rivers is milky glacier melt, colored by the fine powdered stone ground up in the face of the glacier.

Back in the day, this area would have been dense with tussock grass. But farmers burned the tussock to encourage introduced grass growth and now the landscape is quite modified, though very beautiful to the casual observer. Introduced grasses fill large areas, interspersed with stands of Monterey Pine. Lupine is widespread, introduced to "beautify" the area and now spread in multiple colors in tussock land and river beds. Willow is abundant along the river, which is problematic for the bird species that nest in what should be open cobble areas. The briar rose was brought in by gold miners and is now abundant in places.

The Ministry of Works developed the MacKenzie Country back in the sixties, with massive hydropower projects that enlarged a string of natural lakes and connected them via canals to multiple power generating plants. The town of Twizel, built in a circular design, is one of the three virtually identical towns built by the Ministry to support the workers on the hydro project. At the end of the dam projects, the little houses here sold for around \$6000. Now, they are worth \$400,000. Salmon hatcheries and grow-out pens are ubiquitous in this area, though some fish escape the pens into the canals.

We made several stops, at Lake Alexandria Wildlife Preserve, and at Lake McGregor, where we found Black Stilt and Great-crested Grebe.

At Lake Tekapo we found two juvenile and two adult Black Stilts, along with a nice selection of other water birds. There is a captive breeding program to collect and hatch Black Stilt eggs and a rearing facility near here. Predation by stoats is a major problem for these birds, who don't seem as savvy as their Pied brethren. The signage at this location claimed there were only 100 birds left, but it might be that sign is outdated. After we saw these, it seemed we could not help but see Black Stilts - they were everywhere.



We stopped at the Mount John Observatory, owned by the University of Canterbury. This makes for a wonderful high elevation overlook of Lake Tekapo and Lake Alexandria, the MacKenzie Plains and the mountains beyond.

We ended our afternoon at the Lake Ohau Lodge. The accommodations are basic, but the vistas are spectacular, perched on the edge of Lake Ohau with a sweeping view up and down the valley, and even a peek at Mt. Cook, glowing white on the distant horizon.

Fri., January 18 | Aoraki or Mount Cook

Today we traveled along the string of lakes all the way to Lake Benmore. For much of the way we traveled along the wide canal that transports water between them, passing several enormous hydro power stations along the way. We found four more Black Stilts at the input to Lake Benmore, along with Black-fronted Tern and Pied Stilt. At one small roadside pond, we spent a fair amount of time playing tapes for the Spotless Crake. We were rewarded for our efforts, but with a pair of Baylon's (or Marsh) Crakes instead.

We stopped at the upper end of Lake Pukeko at the Tasman Delta, which is a huge braided riverbed fed by the upstream Tasman Glacier. This landscape is formed by the glaciers that carved the valley, leaving terraces where they retreated, and the hillocks and mounds, or drumins, alongside the immense beds of deposited gravel.



We traveled up the Hooker River to Aoraki, or Mt. Cook Village, where we hiked out to an overlook with a sweeping view of Lake Mueller and the very top of the Mueller glacier. All this with the Sealy Range towering over it and Mt. Cook on our right. At one point, we heard the sharp crack of an avalanche, and at another we saw what appeared to be an avalanche of clouds spilling down the top of the mountain. Many photo opportunities were had, by us and the numerous other tourists that joined us at the overlook. The scrub landscape here is dominated by the very thorny Matagouri, or Wild Irishman (as Michael at the Wilderness Lodge called it). One new plant feature of this landscape is the striking “Horrible Spaniard”, which looks something like a yucca.



A few last stops at the ponds along the canal brought us more looks at Black and Pied Stilt, Grey Teal, White-faced Heron, and Spur-winged Plover. Then home to our lodge, with bird lists updated on the deck overlooking the lake, and a nice lamb dinner.

Sat., January 19 | Dunedin

Today we left the Lake Ohau Lodge and traveled towards our final destination of Dunedin. We traveled along Highway 83, past Lake Benmore, where grasslands were dotted with briar roses, escaped from gardens of the past. Stormy skies were beginning to brew and we could tell there were high winds in the stratosphere because of the grey, lenticular clouds overhead. Here and there rainbows colored the edges of the clouds.

We passed Lake Waitati, the first in another series of reservoirs below Lake Benmore, used for more power generation. Mark told us of an older couple who jetted off the top of the dam accidentally and lived to tell the tale. The town of Kurow was verdant, with a beautiful old church and roses in full bloom. We were back in an agriculturally intensive area, with fruit orchards, irrigated pasture, and windrows of poplars. There are lots of limestone caves in this area, some with primitive cave paintings, and many fossils, including some of giant penguin and crocodile.

In Duntroon, after photographing the funny murals on restroom walls, we visited a small geological museum with books, moa bones, and overstuffed “fossil” penguins. It’s a rich ocean full of food in these parts. The Maori



ate fish and shellfish, sweet potato, & various greens like fern and watercress. Coastal erosion in this area has exposed stones they used for cooking, blades, shell chips and other remains of their food gathering efforts.

We stopped to photograph Elephant Rocks - beautiful giant grey lumps of limestone rising from the pastureland like elephants on the Serengeti. The pasture was posted for sheep measles treatment; no dogs allowed! Our next stop was the Anatini whale fossil site. A kind land owner allowed public access on his land, so all could visit this site. The fossils were embedded in beautifully sculpted limestone outcropping, where wind and water had worn the stone into pits and pockmarks and peek holes and arches, and the whale bones were a bonus prize.

We continued on our way through Weston to Oamaru, where we had lunch in a rusted metal restaurant, near a park where tree trunks had been sculpted with birds, fish and whales. Oamaru was an important historical harbor for transport of timber and other products out of the area and the old Victorian buildings are made of carved limestone. The town takes advantage of its picturesque nature by recreating bygone times along their tourist-serving Main Street. Still, very charming. On the edgier side is the steam punk museum and associated sculptures found around town. In particular, the flame throwing, skeleton driven locomotive in the front of the museum is a sight to behold.

This is the home of a nesting area for Little Penguin. We have also heard leopard seals have shown up here, probably looking for a penguin snack. We did spend some time with a colony of shags, who were resting on a local pier. The large Otago Shag was a new bird for us, and they were joined by a large number of Spotted Shags. This population of Otago Shags used to be named Stewart Island Shags but is a recent victim of splitting. The Stewart Island population is now called the Foveaux (or Bronze) Shag. The Otago Shags don't breed south of Otago Harbor, and their populations may be moving north.



We stopped at the Orokonui Ecosanctuary, which is a predator-free reserve in the hills above Dunedin. A high fence encloses some beautiful native habitat and this area hosts a number of rare and endemic species. The area serves as a nursery area for the greater vicinity. If it hadn't been raining hard, we would have explored beyond the visitor's center.

Dunedin is nestled in the hills by Otago Harbor, which is a beautiful natural harbor formed by the Otago peninsula. Dunedin is a treed city, with lovely parks, museums, an extremely ornate train station, and an enormous new stadium near the waterfront. It's a University town, with all the energy that brings. We drove out the long Otago peninsula, which is a spectacular way to view the city and harbor. Through its whole length it was under construction to add a bike lane along the water, so it was a bit of a slow go, but worth it. The Royal Albatross Centre is located at the end of the peninsula. We spent quite a bit of time watching a number of these huge birds soar by.

Sun., January 20 | Milford Sound

This morning we said goodbye to three of our group and headed off to catch the ferry to Stewart Island. At Lake Waiholo we got the call that the ferry was cancelled due to very high winds. The wind had already kicked the waves up on the lake and the gulls were all hunkered down facing the wind, reluctant to go out foraging in this unpleasant weather.

Mark worked some magic and got our schedule shifted around so that we now found ourselves

heading to Milford Sound and Fiordland National Park. We passed the Balclutha river, where the gold rush of days past was initiated. If you were to examine the sediment layers of this area, you would find they match those of Nelson many miles to the north because the slip fault has caused the two plates to move in opposite directions.

Amazingly, we traveled through first the town of Clinton, and then not so very far away, the town of Gore, along what is now referred to as the "Presidential Highway". We passed both a shrubland preserve and a beautiful red tussock grass preserve. Many acres of this beautiful habitat had been drained and converted, first to sheep pastures and now to dairy farms. As we traveled further into the mountains, the wind and rain blew more ferociously. In some areas the tussocks were waving so much, they looked like flocks of sheep, running along in a tight herd, perhaps with some border collie nipping their heels.



We entered Fiordland National Park where the rainfall here is measured in meters. The precipitous mountains on either side of the Eglinton River valley are covered in red beech; the flat river bottom land is golden meadowland. We walked along a boardwalk in the beech forest to visit Mirror Lake, which wasn't reflecting much today, with the rain and wind. We stopped a second time and walked into the forest searching for (and hearing) Yellowhead, but he didn't show himself. A very sociable New Zealand Robin did come up and carefully inspect our boots.

At the mouth of the tunnel we sat in the van and peered through the rain in search of Rock Wren. They were sensibly tucked away in some protected spot somewhere, so we headed through the Homer Tunnel and found ourselves in the Milford Sound drainage. And draining it was! Waterfalls were everywhere, shooting off the walls of the canyon from invisible hanging valleys high up in the clouds. Were it not so rainy, we would not have had this fabulous show, as most of the waterfalls are ephemeral. We drove into our beautiful new lodge with slate floors and heated towel racks and sleek plumbing fixtures and fashionable shades of white, grey and black. We could see waterfalls from our living room window, lovely.

Mon., 21 January | Milford Sound/Stewart Island

This morning we ran through the rain to breakfast in the dining room, before heading down to the Milford Sound, where we boarded a boat to tour what Rudyard Kipling called the "eighth Wonder of the World". And wonderful it was, in spite of the rain, and because of it, Waterfalls poured off the cliff faces. Some vanished mid-stream - they were simply blown away into mist, others were enormous torrents of water pounding into the salt water below. The cliffs were enormously high; clouds encircling their peaks. As we traveled down the fjord towards the Tasman Sea, the rain stopped and the sun broke through the clouds at times, making rainbows in the mist. Dusky and Bottle-nosed dolphin joined us, and we also saw fur seals. The rains bring dark brown tannin-laden fresh water down into the fjord, which allows deeper water fish to come in closer to the surface to feed. This makes for good fishing for dolphins and seals.

When the ship docked back at shore, we loaded up in the van and headed out to catch the ferry to Stewart Island. Part way there we learned that the ferry had been cancelled again due to high winds. Mark again contacted the office and we ate lunch while waiting to hear back about new arrangements. We had all just got ourselves accustomed to the idea that we'd go back to the Dunedin area for our last few days when Mark let us know that we had plane reservations for a flight over to the island. Some were a little concerned because of the weather, but off we went. In a hurry too, because we had just enough time to get to Invercargill for the flight, and not a minute to spare. Mark put his ambulance driver skills to work and got us there in time, but it was touch and go all the way because of road construction. But we made it, and were walked directly onto the flight, luggage in hand.

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The plane ride was bumpy, but all was well, and we arrived at the Stewart Island runway welcomed by the sun. We were dashed from the plane through the wind into a van that delivered us to the tiny (and only) town of Oban, where our hostess met us and carried us up the hill to the Kaka Inn. There we had roomy, warm, well-appointed chalets waiting for us. And a number of Kaka were right there in the trees above our lodge, providing plenty of commentary. After settling in, we walked back down the hill to the South Sea Hotel and Pub, and enjoyed meals sized for hungry fishermen in a merry crowd of locals, tourists, Kiwis on holiday, and seasonal DOC employees.

Tues., January 22 | Stewart Island

This morning we hiked up and down the hills of downtown Oban - the only settlement on Stewart Island - in order to meet our boat for albatross and other pelagic species viewing. It was raining and blustery, but the rain



cleared for our ride, and when the chum bags went out, the albatrosses cooperated immediately. We were quickly surrounded by these graceful giant birds as they glided through the air, silhouetted themselves against the stormy, sun-rimmed sky, and argued with each other for pecking rights. We had four species vying for chum, including Salvins, Buller's, White-capped, and Royal. Other birds, including Cape Petrel, also gathered round, and we had a Brown Skua fly past. We then went off to scout along the coastline for Little Blue and Yellow-eyed Penguins. Yellow-eyed penguins are New Zealand endemics and perhaps a hundred and fifty pairs breed on Stewart Island. Our luck was not with us on the penguin search, but we did visit the "snuggery", where Pied Shags were nesting.

Our captain let us off at a small boat dock on Ulva Island. This island has had successful predator removal, though the earnest young DOC employees we talked to ensured us it was always a maintenance issue, because rats and other varmints had been known to swim or otherwise be transported to the island, and they were checking traps routinely. We had a picnic lunch on the beach under some giant old Monterey pines. The island is well appointed with beautifully constructed trails and boardwalks, and after lunch we wandered in and among the forest trees, looking for South Island Saddleback, Yellowhead, Brown Creeper, Fantail, and the beautiful Red-crowned Parakeet. Inside the canopy, the blustery winds could not be felt, and we were spared any rain. The forest floor was lush with ferns of all shapes and sizes. While we had been investigating the island, the tide had come in and we waded out through the wave wash to reach the launch ramp & our very bouncy ride back to the wharf.

We ate dinner at the pub and then strolled out to the docks to watch for a Little Penguin pair coming in to roost in the rocks. We weren't the only ones; there were fifteen or twenty people doing the same. The howling wind had us pressed up against the harbor buildings as ripples whipped across the surface in random and varied directions. They eventually came in from the open ocean so that everyone on the wharf had a good look!

Wed., January 23 | Time to Head Home...

The howling wind persisted until late into the night, but when we awoke it was much calmer, though raining. Two Kaka peered in our front sliding door as we ate breakfast, and a tap on the glass brought these curious birds over to investigate. We bid Oban goodbye and caught our small plane off the island and back to Invercargill. It was a much smoother ride than our last trip, and we got to get a good look at the intricate coastline and islands of this beautiful part of the Southland. We retraced our path back to Dunedin and were delivered safe and sound to the airport there, where we would all begin our trips back to our respective homes. It was a satisfying trip, with good people, gorgeous scenery, and lots of birds to be seen nowhere else on the planet.

Special thanks to Greg Smith for photographing the tour and for providing photos for the report.