

New Caledonia and New Zealand

January-February, 2014

January 13-14, 2014: Travel to Noumea

Linda and I, along with our super-birder friends, Dodge and Lorna Engleman, left San Francisco at about 8:00 pm on Sunday, January 12. As we traveled to Auckland, New Zealand it became January 13, then January 14, then back to 13 and back to 14 as we crossed and re-crossed the International Date Line. We may have crossed five times, as we flew over a little kink in the line, but the map on the plane wasn't good enough to tell exactly where we were.

We arrived in Auckland after 12 hours flying to learn that we were a mere three hours earlier than the time in California. Of course, it was two days later than when we left. The date line always seems confusing. However, it was convenient to have such a small time difference.

After a couple of hours, we flew from Auckland to Noumea in New Caledonia, or Nouvelle Calédonie if you prefer. Our checked bag was the last one to appear, but it made it. We changed some money and went to pick up our rent car. Oops! The reservation was all messed up, but Avis did have a car we took, bigger than the one I thought I had reserved. That was lucky as we had trouble cramming all the luggage and people into the car.

After birding around the parking lot at the airport, and picking up a new lifer, Gray-eared Honeyeater (aka Dark Brown Honeyeater) we set off for Noumea. We had been told that driving was an adventure, "Signage is terrible and maps nonexistent." We wandered about town a bit before stumbling on the street that led to the hotel. We spent about an hour discussing routes to get to the Parc Forestiere, a combination zoo and botanical garden. We finally found the entrance and spent an hour or so birding in the area.



This male Rufous Whistler stayed around long enough for me to take his picture. This looks like one of those times when you want to use Photoshop to get rid of the twig that crosses his bill.

We found our way back to the hotel, by a completely different route, and wandered around the area checking out places to eat. Isabelle Jollit, a woman Lorna and Dodge had contacted and who had agreed to guide us on Saturday, found us and suggested we get some tea. We went back to a little Thai restaurant we had spotted and ordered food and tea. Isabelle was concerned that we might have trouble finding Mount Koghi tomorrow and contributed her expertise to mapping our route.

January 15, 2014: Adventures in Driving

Today, we drove to Mount Koghi. That simple statement doesn't capture the full essence of the experience. Armed with several maps, all hand-drawn, showing us the way, we set off shortly after breakfast.

We got to the outskirts of Noumea easily, retracing our way home yesterday. Then, we followed instructions, which took us past a cemetery and... well, we decided quickly that we had taken the wrong turn. We backtracked, and tried a slightly different route based on a different hand-drawn map. After a few tries, we stopped to ask directions. That proved to be problematical. Although the person we asked may have known how we should go, our combined French was inadequate to the task. We tried following his directions and got lost again. Lorna suggested we stop in a Chevrolet dealership we had passed, arguing that someone there might speak good English.

That proved to be a good idea, and 30 minutes later, we set off again following a collection of printouts from Google Maps showing us yet another approach. This involved driving to the village of Autueil and then following "old Rt-1" to L'Hermitage and the turnoff to the Auberge Koghi. We got lost again, but managed to find Autueil. While backtracking, we stumbled onto a road labeled "Rt-1" and decided to give it a try. In less than 10 minutes we located the turnoff complete with a sign for the Auberge, and turned onto a narrow winding road that ended at the Auberge. We arranged to eat lunch at the restaurant in the Auberge, a kind of country inn, and got permission to follow the trails on the property.

Well, it was worth the effort. We ended the day with 10 or 11 new endemics for the list. Some of us didn't see all the new birds, which explains the wishy-washy total. Right before lunch, Linda found a flock of New Caledonian *Myzomelas* feeding on some red flowers very near the parking lot. I managed to get a photo of one of the males.

Lunch was wonderful, gourmet French cooking combined with great service. Stuffed, we spent some more time walking the trails before heading back. We added several new endemics after lunch, including several nice views of the New Caledonian Imperial-pigeon, aka Goliath Pigeon, the largest *tree-dwelling pigeon* in the world.

These birds insisted on sitting on a perch with bright sun at their backs, making photography difficult, but I did get at least one good shot, which I've included.



About 4:00 we headed back down the mountain. Without effort, we found our way back by following Rt-1, ignoring the maps. When we passed the cemetery, we gave a small cheer. Then we managed to take the wrong road again, but did get back to the hotel suite we are sharing with the Englemans. Exhausted by the stressful driving, I decided to lie down for a bit and woke up about 8:30 to find wine, bread, and cheese waiting, courtesy of the indefatigable Englemans. The hotel suite is very well situated, and quite nice. I owe a review to Trip Advisor for both the hotel and the restaurant.

January 16, 2014: Kagu

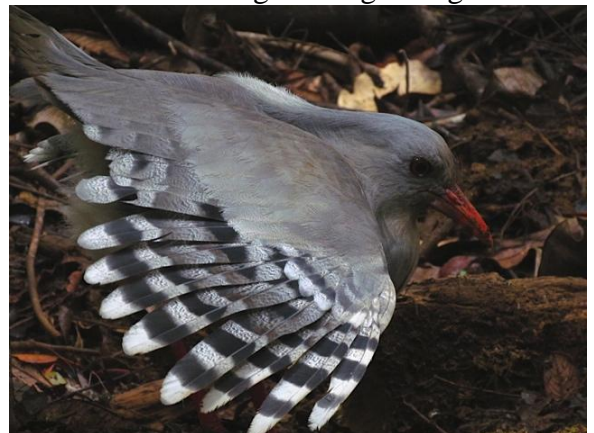
Today, we met Henri, our driver and guide for the day at 6:30. After picking up Trent and Meta, friends from Austin, who had arrived late yesterday evening. Then we set off for Parc de Riviere Bleu, or Blue River Park if you prefer. Henri guaranteed us that we would see the Kagu (or Cagou as the French spell it) as he had never failed to see it. We learned how he could be so confident after we got to the Parc and proceeded to *Sentier de Cagou*, Kagu Trail.



Henri snapped his fingers a few times, called “Coco. Coco,” and scraped the leaf litter to expose the ground underneath. Within seconds, “Monsieur Coco” appeared to feast on the bugs exposed by Henri’s ministrations. We shot frame after frame, getting a number of terrific shots. Here is one of them.

Soon two more joined the party, sometimes displaying some animosity toward Monsieur Coco. We got some video where they hissed at each other, a sound like static on the TV.

The Kagus were quite tame, ignoring us completely. Henri offered one a tidbit from his hand, which the bird accepted, but not with any grace. He hissed and flapped his wings, showing his displeasure — and the black-and-white pattern in his wings — but he took the food in the end. Dodge managed to get a decent photo of the display,



which is shown here.

As seeing this bird, the only member of his family, was one of the main reasons we had come to New Caledonia, we were thrilled. However, there were quite a few endemic species, found nowhere else in the world, which we had not seen yet. We spent the rest of the day walking various trails in the park, finally getting a good view of a Barred Honeyeater tucked in with myriad Dark-brown Honeyeaters.



In the afternoon, after a superb picnic — the French know how to eat, even in the Pacific — we went to see a “very special tree, *Houp Geant*.” *Houp* trees are endemic to the island, and this one, estimated to be about 950 years old, was spectacular. The trees grow so big and tall that they cannot transport water from the ground to the canopy in the normal fashion. Instead, they send down roots from high in the tree to the ground. These look like lianas, but are actually part of the tree. Frequently, according to the sign by the tree, the interior is hollow, serving as a nesting area for birds and other animals. A second tree, slightly younger at approximately 800 years showed a curious result. An *Aricaria* tree had sprung from the interior of the *Houp* and grew out of a hole high up on the trunk. Here’s a photo. It’s hard to see, but the large “branch” on the left side is actually an

Aricaria tree. The Houp tree is about 3m (10') in diameter, to give you some scale.

We liked the tree so much, we added it to the list of "Big Trees Linda and Jim have been photographed in front of." That photo will appear in our next Annual Report. Oh, phooey, it's below.

As we headed down from the tree, Dodge spotted a Walking Stick insect in a bush by the side of the trail. It turned out to be *two* such insects, but they didn't appear to be mating at the moment. We took



several photos, and one turned out OK. They are amazingly well camouflaged. Can you see both?

We got back to our hotel late in the afternoon to find a note from Isabelle, our local contact. She reported that Yvon, who was supposed to show

us around tomorrow, had hurt her ankle and couldn't walk. So we are own for tomorrow morning. That may be moot, as the forecast calls for 100% chance of rain tomorrow, with rain and thunderstorms at

100% for Saturday. Isabelle called it a hurricane, but that seems to be hyperbole. Nevertheless, our plans have been torn asunder. We canceled Saturday, with the option to change our mind if the weather should improve, laid in a good supply of beer, and prepared to spend the day birding wherever we could manage, which may be from the balcony of our hotel.



January 17, 2014: Col de la Pirogue

We checked the weather first thing this morning. No change in the forecast, which called for light rain with wind all day and heavier rain in the evening. Undeterred, we set out for Mont Mou, more generally known as Col de la Pirogue, which means something like Canoe Hill. We found the spot where we had planned to meet Yvon on the first try! Using a map supplied by Isabelle from Yvon's notes, we started birding our way to the top of the hill. We saw many of the now familiar species, with few

additions. We did find several gorgeous Red-throated Parrotfinches, a bird we missed previously, but were unable to get a good photo. Instead, we have several photos of some



amazing spiders we saw.

The first spider was some communal orb weavers. We had never seen anything like that before, but I suspect that entomologists know about them. The web was huge, covering several meters of linear space along a fence. The spiders were big and numerous. Here's a photo of one of them. You can see part of the web behind her.

Later, we spotted another huge orb weaver, although this one was not a communal weaver. Of course, I snatched the opportunity to add a photo to my spider collection. I really like this one better than the first. Unlike most spiders I know, this one has no markings on that amazingly smooth abdomen.

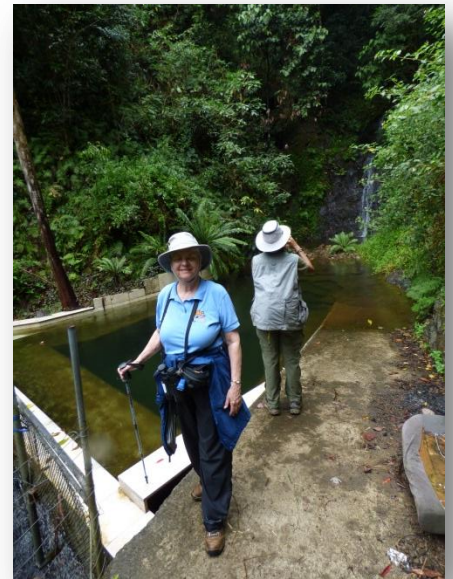


The rain was light all morning, and not really much of a problem. We walked to the top of the road and onto a path that led into an area of scrub and some trees. Lorna caught up to us and told us that she had been stopped by a local who explained that we were on tribal (Kanak) land. Lorna got him to understand that we were just looking at birds, and we got his permission — he claimed to be the chief's son — to continue. The trail ended at a cascade that fed a swimming pool near some long abandoned buildings. Fresh beer cans left by the pool indicated that the pool had not been abandoned.

We walked slowly down the road, with occasional repositioning of the car, until we couldn't think of anything more to do there. We did see another Goliath Pigeon, and I was able to get a better photo, which I slipped into the slot earlier in this write-

up. We decided to see if we could find our way back to Mount Koghi, but as we drove toward the turnoff to Auteuil, the rain became heavier, and we could see that the mountain was covered in clouds, so we just headed back to the hotel.

On the way, Lorna spotted a "dark heron" that we thought might be a Glossy Ibis, a rare bird on the island. We turned back and stopped by the airport. The bird turned out to be a Purple Swamphen, *Porphyrio porphyrio*, a bird we had seen several times elsewhere. As we watched three of them, a Swamp Harrier, *Circus approximans*, flew overhead giving us a great look. We carefully recorded the subspecies for both sightings, as there is an orgy of splitting species going on right now. This is based on DNA analysis. Trent commented wryly yesterday that someday we will probably dispense with scientific names altogether in favor of a long sequence of DNA GTACs.



After that, we really did go back to the hotel and spent the rest of the afternoon lounging around and working on our lists. We have arranged with Isabelle to see what the weather looks like tomorrow and maybe go to Farino if it isn't raining heavily.

January 18-19, 2014: Tropical Depression June, Leaving New Caledonia

It started raining heavily late in the afternoon, just as predicted on the forecasts. Dodge, ever the optimist, arranged to call Isabelle in the morning in case we could still go to Farino. I had previously talked to Isabelle and had her cancel the rent car, so we could simply cancel everything if necessary. About 2:00 a.m. I awoke to find it raining heavily. It wasn't a hurricane as Isabelle had feared, but it was a tropical depression. We finally called Isabelle about 6:00 to learn that the park was closed, so that settled that.



Left without any birding plans, we turned touristy. We headed to Tjibaou Cultural Centre, a museum devoted to Kanak culture. The center is located near a bunch of mangroves, so when the rain let up a bit, we birded there, padding the list a bit without seeing anything new, but some species we hadn't seen in New Caledonia. Of course, the cultural exhibits had some interesting moments.

After spending a few hours at the Centre, we moved to an Aquarium near our hotel, where we mixed with a number of families with small children. It reminded me of the Aquarium in California.

Ultimately, we just went back to the hotel, cleaned up, ate dinner and packed. I spent some time complaining to Citibank, who had refused a charge for gasoline. They agreed not to refuse any more charges. They had left a voice mail message on our home answering machine, which consisted of "To continue in English, press 1; para Espanol, ..." I told the fraud alert people that I thought it was incredibly stupid to leave a message on my home machine when they knew I was halfway around the world. Fortunately, with the Internet and Skype I was able to fulminate to my satisfaction. I have more to tell them, but it can wait until I get home.

Our ticket to fly tomorrow says we leave at 7:00, but the Aire Calidonie web site says 8:00. I am pretty sure it is the later time, but the Air New Zealand web site annoyingly shows the schedule only for the next 12 hours. I plan to mention something about that to them at some point.

I didn't sleep well, imagining many worst-case scenarios.

When I gave up and got dressed at 3:30, I checked the Air New Zealand site and found that the flight did indeed leave at 8:00.

After some coffee and a NYT Crossword, we left for the airport about 4:30. Dodge suggested that as we were early, we could drive up to Col de la Pirogue again in case the Cloven-feathered Dove might show up. I knew better than to follow that suggestion. Since I controlled the car, I just kept driving. However, when Lorna exclaimed, "I saw turkeys back there," I turned around. Sure enough we saw two adult females and at least 10 chicks. Just as we had for the Peafowl earlier, we decided that the birds seemed to be roaming freely and breeding, so we counted them as the last addition to our New Caledonia list. We wound up with over 50 different species, which satisfied me. We missed seeing some of the birds we hoped to see due to the poor weather.

Ironically, the morning was beautiful, though we heard a report that some people had been evacuated from the northern part of the island before the storm swept over them.

We got to Auckland and to our hotel a little before the Jenny and Terry Cloudman joined us, having flown all the way from Denver, with a change of planes in Sydney. All eight of us walked to a nearby Indian restaurant, where we ate too much delicious food, before returning to the hotel to try to catch up on our sleep. We get to sleep late tomorrow, as our guide, Phil Hammond, is not due until 9:00.

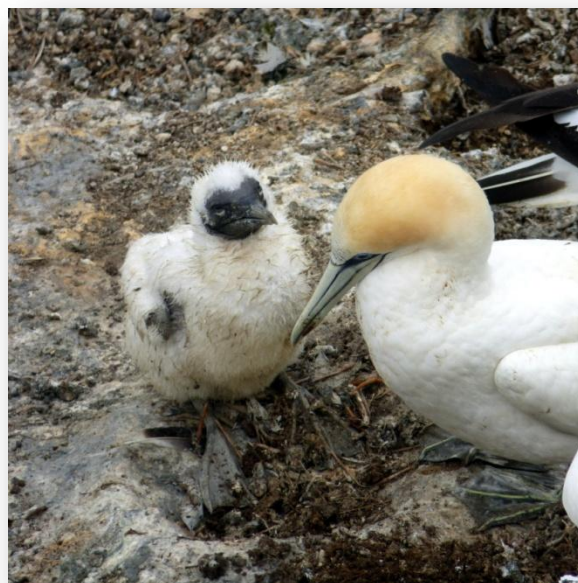
January 20, 2014: June Is Busting Out All Over Auckland to Trounson

Tropical Cyclone June was not done with us. Today, we just had rain, but that lasted all day long as we drove from one good birding spot to another, starting in Auckland and winding up in Trounson, further north.

Let me explain: On New Caledonia, there were 20+ endemic species, that is, species found nowhere else. However, one of these, **Kagu**, was worth all the others. So, once we had 5-star looks at Kagu, we had a good trip to New Caledonia. On New Zealand, there are about 60 endemic species, including at least 3 endemic **families**. We certainly have to see a member of all the endemic families before we leave. We'd like to see **all** the endemic species, and that is a stated goal of the tour.



We began by notching up our first endemic before we left Auckland, Red-billed Gull. Trent, a member of our group, complained that it was indistinguishable from Silver Gull, which is common in Australia, New Caledonia and probably elsewhere. We were told that there is a 30mm difference in the wingspread between the two species, but that is a bit hard to detect in the field. Never mind, we told Trent, and ticked it off. Other new birds were in the Rose Park across from our hotel, including both Tui and New Zealand Fantail, two birds we saw often on the rest of the trip, as well as Waxeyes, a local form of Silvereyes, which have been introduced all over the Pacific.



We drove to a colony of Australasian Gannets, not a true endemic, but a new lifer for everyone, and seen very well. We got some good photos, and some so-so video of the birds flying around. All Gannets look similar, and we like all of them.

A stop at a beach turned up several more ticks, including the endangered New Zealand Dotterel. These are rather pretty shorebirds in breeding plumage. We saw some birds that still had some signs of breeding, but most were in so-called

basic plumage. We saw two Oystercatchers that were to prove very common. We have seen them every day of the trip so far. One, a nice black and white bird, is called the South Island Oystercatcher. We had to ask about that as we are on the North Island. Turns out they breed on the South Island, then come here for the winter. Another somewhat larger Oystercatcher, the Variable Oystercatcher, has the ironic scientific name *Haetopus unicolor*, but only some of them are solid black with bright red bills.

A few more stops, and we finally reached our main target for the day, a chance to see the North Island Brown Kiwi. The bad news: the best way to find Kiwis is to hear them tromping thru the leaf litter searching for bugs and worms. The rain had wet down everything, so that we weren't likely to hear anything moving in the litter.

We set out anyway, walking on a boardwalk thru the forest with a local park ranger. We made an almost complete circuit without seeing anything except a really big Kauri tree. These trees are native to the area, which goes by the name *Kauri Coast*. (If I were in marketing, I'd have named it Kauri Koast, but no one asked me.) As we emerged from a track thru the woods, there it was, a male Kiwi the size of a chicken. We didn't have long to watch it, but everyone got a good look. It wore a band on its right leg, meaning it was a male. (Don't ask me how they knew that in the first place.)

We heard the onomatopoeic Morepork Owl calling, and chased it briefly. Remember that it is raining all this time, and as the Kiwi is nocturnal, it was late at the end of a long day. We just went to bed, too exhausted to do anything else.

January 21, 2014: Do You Believe in Fairies? Trounson to Warkworth

During the night, we had a huge thunderstorm pass thru. It lasted from 2:00 to at least 2:30, with heavy rain. At least June had the courtesy to wait until then, but it didn't bode well for the rest of the day.



Today's target bird was the Fairy Tern, one of the rarest birds in New Zealand. Although they occur in Australia by the thousands, the New Zealand population is about 40 breeding pairs. We spent the entire day driving from one place to another in search of them, without success.

Along the way, we visited a Kauri tree much bigger than the one we saw yesterday. It has a name, *Tane Mahuta*, which means something like *Lord of the Forest*, and is about 800 years old. Another for the list of trees we've been photographed in front of. Incidentally, *Tane* also seems to mean *male*, at least on restroom doors, which casts some doubt on the translation of *Tane Mahuta*.

The day was not a total loss, but the gale force winds blowing everywhere kept everything hunkered down. We were able to add Brown Teal, perhaps the rarest duck in the world, to our list, and wound up late again, not getting to bed until 10:30 again.

January 22, 2014: Once More Dear Friends Unto the Beach

Pelagic trip in Hauraki Gulf

We tried again for Fairy Terns, and did see some new birds on the beach, but no fairy terns. However, the winds had died down enough that we could go our planned pelagic birding trip to the Hauraki Gulf. We departed at 9:00 and returned at 6:30 in the evening, but for a change, it was a magnificent day. Almost every bird we saw, from the hundreds of Fluttering Shearwaters we passed shortly after leaving, to the single Kermadec Petrel we saw in the afternoon — first ever on a Wrybills tour — was a lifer and seen well.

Besides the birds, we stumbled onto a pod of Bottle-nosed dolphins, with several young, that played with the boat.

Some of the good birds: Little Penguin, White-faced Storm Petrel, and the prize for the day, New Zealand Storm Petrel. The last one was thought to be extinct until 2003, when it was re-discovered by Brent Stephenson and others:



Little [Blue] Penguin



White-faced Storm Petrel



New Zealand Storm Petrel

After we got well away from shore, our captain started chumming, cutting up fish and throwing them to the birds. The birds smelled the fish from far away and assembled to feast on the free food. We had close sightings of many different kinds of Shearwaters and Petrels. Years ago, I saw a Flesh-footed Shearwater on a trip in Monterrey Bay where Linda wasn't along. That was a *half bird* ever since until today. Today, we saw lots of them.

We were doing so well that we stayed out later than I thought we had planned. We got back to the marina at 6:30, and decided to spend some time searching for a Buff-banded Rail near the beach, with success finally. That delayed dinner until 8:00 again, and we got back to the motel at 10:30. I had to do some washing before

tomorrow, and watch the end of a cricket match between NZ and India. (NZ won a close one.) Another late night.

January 23, 2014: Is That a Kiwi in Your Pocket?

Tiritiri Matangi

Today, we went to the magical island of [Tiritiri Matangi](#), a sanctuary within sight of Auckland, but a world away. We got up very early again, leaving the motel at 5:30 for yet another try to find the Fairy Tern, with the same result as before.

Then, we bought some food for lunch and dinner and caught a high-speed ferry to the island sanctuary of *Tiritiri Matangi*. This island was farmed briefly in the 19th and early 20th century, but now it has been restored as a predator-free island for native species. Volunteers planted 280,000(!) trees to restore native vegetation. Several native species have been relocated to the island from other locations, including the signature bird of the place, [Takahe](#).



There are three endemic families of birds in New Zealand, and we saw a member of each before we reached the bunkhouse that is our home for today and tonight. We also had several great looks at a tame little bird, North Island Robin, an easy one to photograph. This bird may not be a full adult. It still seems to have some feathers to molt.

We spent the afternoon hiking the length of the island searching for the *Takahe*. They were thought to be extinct until 1948. Several have been relocated from places where they were vulnerable to this predator-free island — after the predators were eliminated here. Now, there are several of them. We learned that Greg, the Takahe that used to greet visitors had died after 20 years of service. I had trepidations that without a pet like Greg we would have trouble. However, we saw one fairly quickly, leaving room to search for more endemics. I even got a decent photo. However, I got a better one later. (See below.)



We tried to see a Fernbird. Linda, I, and Meta were the only ones who didn't get a look, but Phil, our guide, promised that we would have another chance later in the tour.

That left the [Kokako](#), a strange bird. Well, there are many strange birds here. Kokakos seldom fly, but they are still capable, unlike the Takahe. We discovered one on the trail as we made our way back to the bunkhouse. That left only the Little Spotted Kiwi, which awaited us after dark.

We ate dinner, steak, which Terry grilled, and fish, which I helped prepare with completely inadequate seasonings. It turned out OK, but some people complained when they

learned I had used some white wine in the process. “A waste.”

At 9:30, we started our search. We heard one very near the bunkhouse, but after spending some time looking for it, set off on a grueling nighttime jaunt along some of the same trails we had hiked in the afternoon. No luck. Gradually, our group dwindled. First Dodge left, then Trent and Meta, and lastly Jenny. That left Linda, Lorna and me to follow Phil. We hiked down almost to the wharf without any action. Phil’s cell phone rang. Eddie, a birder from Australia, called to say that he had seen a pair **copulating** near the bunkhouse. We raced back, uphill naturally, and searched until I arbitrarily called a halt at midnight. Linda and I left, leaving Phil and Lorna to continue.

Now, the great irony. Those who gave up early saw the Kiwi near the bunkhouse. That included Dodge, who had gone to bed and woke up in time to stagger out without shoes. Jenny had a good look, and had prevailed on Eddie to call Phil. Trent and Meta had seen the bird briefly on the trail as they walked back to the bunkhouse. Only those who stuck it out struck out.

So it goes.

January 24, 2014: Would You Like a Bittern with That? Miranda on the Firth of Thames

After our midnight stroll, I hoped to sleep late. That was frustrated by the sleeping arrangements in the bunkhouse. Terry, who had skipped the Kiwi search altogether, got up about 5:45. Shortly, I heard voices from the common area on the other side of the door. I gave up and ate breakfast with the other early risers.



We had time to wander around the grounds. A tame Takahe ignored all of us as he plucked some food from the lawn. The color bands on his (or her) legs would allow us to identify the bird, but apparently it hasn’t received a name yet. We suspect, though, that this is the replacement for the recently departed Greg.

Our transport off the island was a private water taxi, as otherwise we would have to wait until the ferry left in late afternoon. Then, we would have to deal with the rush hour traffic in Auckland to get to our next stop, Miranda, a famous shorebird site on the Firth of Thames.

As it was, we had time to drop our bags at a very nice “Holiday Park” before catching an incredible collection of shorebirds on the beach at high tide. In California, we feel lucky to see four or five Oystercatchers on a day. At

Miranda, we saw flock I estimated at 1000.

Our main target for the afternoon was a Wrybill, the eponymous bird of our tour company. This is a strange little shorebird whose bill turns to the right. It's hard to see the bill in the photo, but they are small birds and not very close. Take my word for it.

Then, we set off to find an Australasian Bittern. We stopped near a marsh with several duck hunting blinds and scanned the edge of the water. That is, Phil and I scanned. The others indicated their lack of interest by staying in the van. After some time with no bitterns, Linda popped out to suggest that everyone was ready to head home.

We ate supper and still had time to relax in the mineral springs at the holiday park. These parks cater to families with children, who arrive in RVs and regular cars. Tents spring up all around, and bicycles, skateboards, etc. The kids seemed to be having a great time. We were in the comparatively luxurious cabins that had their own bathrooms, bedrooms, well supplied kitchens, and everything you might want for a "self-catered" stay. We slept well, and set off for another the next morning for a pelagic cruise.



January 25, 2014: Can I hear you now? Pelagic Cruise from Witianga

Today, we drove to the town of Witianga and took a cruise on Mercury Bay to look for some pelagic species, especially Pycroft's Petrel. That bird is very similar to Cook's Petrel, and in the end, we relied on Phil and another expert, Adrian, for the identification.



Unlike our first pelagic cruise, where we saw **lots** of birds, most of them new, today there weren't that many, and most were birds we had seen previously. That gave me a chance to photograph some of the birds that came in close to the boat. These included the White-faced Storm Petrel, a small bird that, like all Storm Petrels, flutters around the waves, dipping down frequently to take tiny items from the surface.

I was very pleased with this photo, as you can see all of the field marks for the bird, including the white face. The posture, with the feet dangling, is typical.

I was so happy with the shot that I sat down next to Linda in a chair on the deck to show her the photo. Thus, with both hands occupied manipulating the buttons on the camera, I was totally unprepared when a large swell pushed the chair across the deck where it folded up. I smacked my head, specifically my left ear, as well as a

shoulder and hip, on the railing. I wasn't badly hurt, but did have an impressive bloodstain on part of my cap, and my ear was badly bruised. Luckily I had no detectable brain injury.

To add insult to injury, I found my left hearing aid lying on the deck with the lead a short distance away. I was unable to connect the lead back to the body of the aid, so I am now back to being unable to hear high-pitched bird sounds.

I am sad to say that my birding companions did not respond with the sympathy I thought I was due. At dinner, I rated it 3 on a scale of 10. Linda was concerned that we get a good picture of my ear, which I have no intention of including in this report. Terry proved up to the task, but required several takes.

Phil and the boat's skipper were *very* concerned to make sure I was OK, and I assured both of them there was no permanent damage.

I still like the photo.

The motel, actually another "Holiday Park," featured a mineral water swimming pool. We got back to the motel in time to soak for about an hour before the pool closed. Relaxing.

January 26, 2014: You Looking at Me? Wending our way to Topua

Today was mostly a travel day, with hours of tiring driving to get to our destination. We did manage to get some birding done, despite a persistent light rain. We returned to the "bittern place" and had another go at scanning the water's edge at a great distance. No luck.

We drove to Pureora Forest, a remnant of the woods that covered the entire country before men arrived 800 years ago. The forest was saved from logging thru the efforts of Steven King in the 1970s, according to a sign posted on one of the trails.

We saw our first target bird, a **Kaka**, a large brown parrot near a campground in the forest. We had some views of one of the birds while it perched on a tree. Then, two of them flew right over our head. A **Tomtit** in a bush at the same spot was our second lifer of the morning.

The best was yet to come. We walked down a trail to a forest canopy tower. The tower itself was nothing special; we've seen better towers in other places. However, we heard a Long-tailed Cuckoo calling. We left the tower to move to an area where we had a better chance of seeing one fly overhead. We heard it calling and soon spotted it. I had a fantastic look at this very difficult bird.

Then we found this gem: **New Zealand Pipit**. Now, you might object that this is just a typical LBJ, Little Brown Job, and you'd be right. However, if you follow the taxonomy of the International Ornithology Union, formerly called IOC, this little bird was the 4500th species I have seen in the world.



I should note that following the Clements Taxonomy, a somewhat older and more conservative list, I am short of that goal. In fact, Clements regards this bird as a subspecies of Australasian Pipit, which we have seen in Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Previously, I have celebrated milestones only for each 1000 species seen. Typically, I try to have a little brown bird at a milestone, so I am happy to use the IOC list and claim this very cooperative bird. He sat on this post as though glued down while Dodge and I walked closer to get photos.

It's late, and I need to get to sleep, but I wanted to catch up on my reporting. We are staying tonight in a very nice, but curiously named, Acapulco Motel. I have free WiFi here, a rarity in NZ. I'm taking advantage by including these photos in the report. The motel features hot tubs in some of the rooms. Linda and I traded for one of these and used the heat to help relax tired muscles. Delightful.

January 27, 2014: G'Day Mate. Any tucker? From One Side of Lake Taupo to the Other

Got started this morning at 7:30 for a long day of driving that took us around Lake Taupo. This is a water-filled ancient caldera. According to what we were told, the volcano exploded about 2000 years ago and was a big enough event to be recorded in the Chinese chronicles: "The sky grew dark." This gave us a chance to see some birds that live in fresh water for a change.



As it turns out, we saw several birds from Australia that we hadn't seen in many years, since 1995 in most cases. One of our favorites of the day was this pretty duck, a Plumed Whistling-duck.

A pair of these ducks arrived from Australia about two years ago and have taken up residence in a city park they share with dozens of ordinary ducks and geese.

Along the way today, we stopped in Boundary Stream Mainland Island, an area of old growth forest that remains from a much larger forest. Much of the forest was logged in the early 20th century. This is becoming a familiar story.

This area has been converted into a "mainland island," using the techniques that worked on some of the small islands, such as Tiritiri Matangi, namely aggressive control of introduced predators. "Control" means poisoning them, Brush-tailed Possum from Australia, weasels and cats from

Europe, rats from Polynesia and various ships. After the predators have been eliminated, the birds sometimes come back on their own. Otherwise, they are transplanted from other locations.



The Kaka, a large parrot just the color of *caca* is an example of the latter. One flew just over our heads when we arrived.

The main target for today was the Rifleman, a strange almost tailless bird that never stands still long enough for a photo. We have yet to see a male — we have other chances — but had great views of several females. We

also finally saw Grey Gerygones, another bird that never stays in one place long. The name is pronounced Je-RIG-o-nee, though the joke is that it should be Jerry-Gone.

When we checked into our motel, Phil pointed out a *Weta*, similar to a cockroach, with an ancient lineage. Naturally, we took a photo of that also. We have free Wi-Fi here, and I may have enough bandwidth to include another photo. Here's a spider we found in our bathroom the other night. It is about an inch long and quite pretty. We let it have the bathroom back when we left.



January 28, 2014: Blue Meanies! Mostly along the Tangariro River, ending at Foxton

Today, we spent most of the day trying to get a look at some Blue Ducks, another NZ endemic, and, of course, endangered. It was a tough slog.



We started about 7:30 and drove to a hydro power plant facility. This is the spot where river rafters put in, and we wanted to get there before them. We had no luck with the ducks, but did see an amazing spider web on the bridge over the Tangariro River.

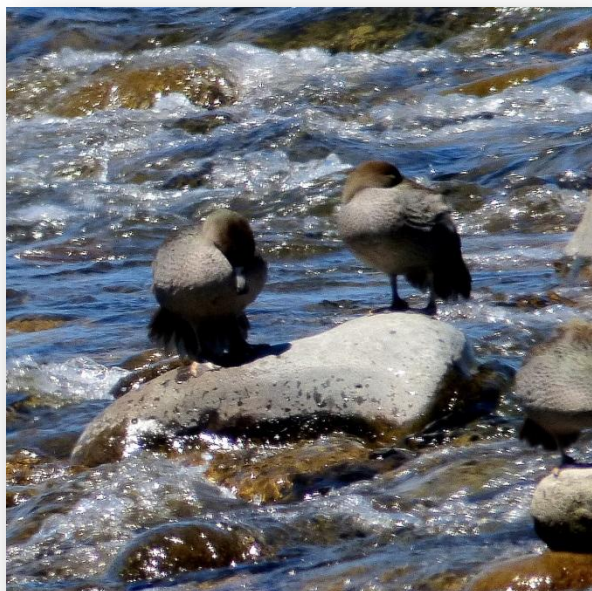
Notice that the web is quite complex, not simply a bunch of spider silk thrown together. However, it is not a typical *orb weaver* web, as we see so often. We didn't find any spiders near the web, but we took the picture for future reference.

We drove to another spot on the river and searched, again without success. Then, we had some luck: we ran into Eddie and Carolyn, a brother and sister pair of birders we had met earlier in the trip. They are following a similar itinerary as we are, and Eddie is a superb birder with a knack for finding difficult birds. He is the one who located the Little Spotted Kiwi on Tiritiri Matanga that some of our group saw. Phil and Eddie exchanged cell phone numbers in case one of them saw the ducks.

A little while later, as we checked yet another spot without success, Eddie called. We raced back to a spot we had already tried once. Trent spotted a duck thru his scope and Dodge, Linda, and I took a one second peek to see it. The etiquette for this situation is for everyone to take a quick look, then line up for a better one. In this case, though, the duck disappeared after I had my look and before Meta had hers.

We searched repeatedly, then following Eddie's advice walked down close to the river, risking ankle injuries all the way, across some "dry pebbles." That is Australian for "a bunch of big rocks out of the water."

No luck. Tired and discouraged, we walked to another nearby spot, then left to get some sandwiches for lunch. This is part of our daily routine: we eat breakfast of cereal and toast in our room, then go birding, then buy sandwiches at one of the countless bakeries we pass. Curiously, almost all of the bakeries are run by Asian immigrants, which Phil identifies as Cambodians.



By this time, many of us were ready to give up. We sat in the van munching while Phil and Jenny got out to look one more time. Jenny came rushing back to get us. There were six Blue Ducks sitting on the rocks and swimming in the river. She cajoled Terry into coming to take a good photo, but I managed to get a decent one with the little Lumix.

We watched them for some time, then had a quick vote on what to do next. The options were search for the Bittern or head for the motel. The motel won hands down. (We aren't real serious birders.)

By now, the near universal opinion is that the van is too small for all eight of us. You can almost hear the bones creaking when we get in or out. This route has a **lot** of driving. Even a short day involves two to three hours. We were happy when we rolled into the motel shortly before 7:00, turned over some dirty clothes to the proprietor, and headed out for dinner.

We are in the town of Foxton, a sleepy little place. The streets were deserted by the time we set out. Fortunately, Phil had arranged for a "day café" to open for us. They fixed a great meal that was a lot like Thanksgiving dinner: chicken (not turkey), dressing, potatoes, sweet potatoes (called *kumaras* here) and vegetables. For a change, everyone took dessert, a "sticky date cake" with custard and ice cream. Yummy!

Tomorrow, we plan to spend the morning looking at shorebirds along a nearby estuary, then take a ferry over to the South Island. We are supposed to have a chance to observe albatrosses during the ride. Should be fun. The itinerary promised "a short ride to our motel" after the ferry ride, which lasts three hours. I'm looking forward to it.

January 29, 2014: Going Strait Foxton to Picton, on South Island

Today, we left the North Island behind and moved to the South Island. This island is bigger in area than the north, but much less populated. Indeed, we learned that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the New Zealand population lives on the North Island, and most of them in Auckland. So, this may be quite different.

We started the day by checking the shorebirds on Manawatu estuary, in the town of Foxton Beach, 6km from the town of Foxton. We had already seen most of the shorebirds there, though we were able to add Little Tern to the trip list. This is closely related to the Least Tern found in the USA. One reason Phil wanted to go there was to see if we could pick out an American Golden Plover that was reputed to be mixed in with the far more common Pacific Golden Plovers. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I could hardly tell the two birds apart. Fortunately, we all agreed that there was no unusual Golden Plover in the flock of about 10 on the beach.



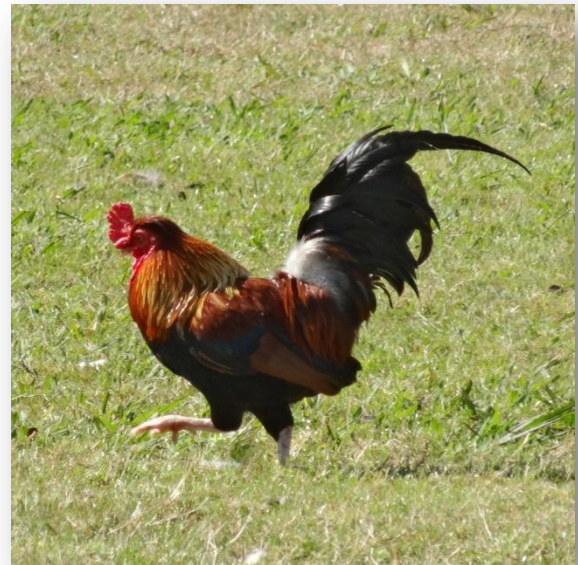
We were able to get a pretty good photo of the Banded Dotterel, aka Double-banded Plover, a beautiful little bird. The one I photographed, at Linda's direction, was still in breeding plumage. This bird was still quite a distance away and is about the extreme of the Lumix camera's zoom capability. I am quite happy with the result.

After we left the beach, we headed to Horowhenua Lake. That word is pronounced Horo-Fa-new-ee, the "wh" in Maori is pronounced "fa" Many places have Maori names, which are often poetic, even if we don't know the meaning of the words. This one happens to mean, "The place of the Horo people."

Tiritiri Matangi, I found by googling, means "tossed by the wind." It sounds much better in Maori.

At the lake, we saw another big concentration of Black Swans, something that no longer surprises us. There were swans in the country when Europeans first arrived, but they were apparently extirpated. Some birds have been re-introduced, and others are said to have returned on their own from Australia. DNA analysis shows that the original swans were genetically identical to the ones from Australia, an exception to the general rule that everything here is its own subspecies at least. We also added *Gallus gallus* to our trip list. That's chicken in case you didn't recognize the scientific name. These birds are feral, but resemble their wild cousins that we saw in Thailand. Linda made this one her BOTD.

After that, we headed to Wellington, the capital of New Zealand, where we caught a ferry to take us over to the South Island. The trip took 3.5 hours, divided fairly evenly between Wellington Harbour, Cook Strait, and Marlborough Sound. Something different was in each one, but we enjoyed the albatrosses in Cook Strait best. We saw three species, according to New Zealand authorities, White-capped, Salvin's and Northern Royal. This split has not been adopted by international taxonomists, who consider the first two as subspecies of Shy Albatross. Clements, the taxonomy used by most world birders, and the most conservative considers the Northern Royal Albatross to be conspecific with the Southern Royal Albatross, which we saw many of on our Antarctic trip. The IOC taxonomy considers them to be different. We track both ways, but many people around the world seem to prefer the newer IOC version.



We had a promised "short drive" to our motel: five minutes. Then we walked down the street to a bar and restaurant. The bar was OK. The restaurant disappointed everyone, but especially Phil. He said that he has tried three different restaurants in this town, Picton, and hasn't liked any of them. It was certainly a comedown from the delightful dinner we had last nite in Foxton.

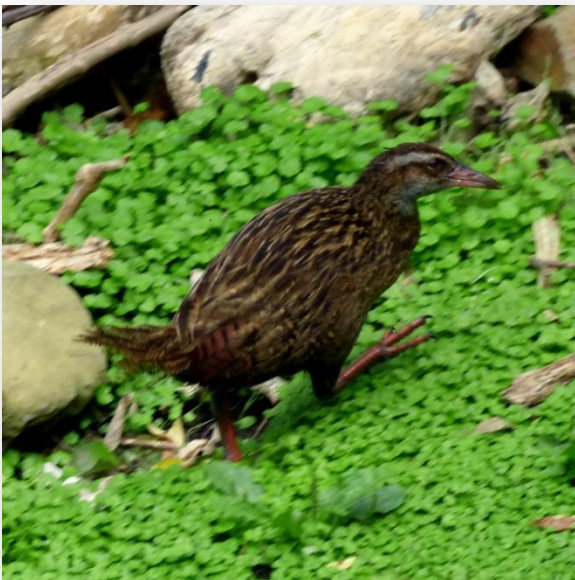
Tomorrow, we are schedule to boat around Marlborough Sound, landing on a couple of small islands in the process. Once again, we have a target bird, King Shag, found nowhere else in the world. I hope it turns up easily. I'm not ready for another day long search.

January 30, 2014: Soundly defeated with ultimate resolution Picton to Kaikoura

We started the morning with a cruise on Queen Charlotte Sound, one of the smaller bays making up Marlborough Sound. (A sub-sound?) We learned that a *sound* is a bay that once way a shallow river valley before sea level rose.

The plan was to find King Shag and Orange-fronted Parakeet, two specialties of the area. Orange-fronted parakeets are small parakeets represented by a tiny population of no more than 200 birds or so, all confined to Bluemine Island, where they have been relocated for protection. Bluemine is one of the *predator-free islands* in the bay. There are several more in other parts of NZ. Without predator control, most of the native birds are doomed.

The predators have all been introduced by humans, first the Maori who brought pigs, dogs, and rats with them; later, by Europeans who contributed more rats, cats, weasels and stoats, rabbits and hares, and brush-tailed possums to the mix. The rabbits and hares are dangerous because they eat the plants the birds need. The others simply kill birds or eat their eggs. We saw a stoat, aka short-tailed weasel, on the trip and added it to our mammal list.



We landed on Bluemine and immediately saw a new endemic bird, Weka, a large, very tame flightless rail. They would be easy meat for a cat. Phil had cautioned us not to be distracted by the Wekas. "We need to concentrate on finding the parakeets." The Wekas were so easy to see that we were able to follow his advice after a short while. We got some nice photos, and some video of one bird wander around ignoring us.

However, we saw no parakeets. Phil said, "I'm not allowed to play tapes on this island." Lorna *used her magic*, but no parakeets appeared. "Large island, few birds," Phil commented.

We had passed up several rocks where King Shags were expected on the way. I thought the sound had our number. We tried another spot, Resolution Sound, named for Captain Cook's ship when he visited the area in 1770. He had promised the King to name the most beautiful spot he

found after the queen, and obliged by naming the area Queen Charlotte Sound. He also found the King Shags interesting and counted them. His count was very close to the number found in the area today. They are restricted to a small part of the bay, far from Picton.



The Maoris had a simple explanation. Long ago, a Maori chief fished in the area and caught an octopus. He told the shag not to eat any of the octopus, but the shag disobeyed and ate one eye. The chief cursed the shag, which explains why the birds avoid the Picton area.

Fortunately, they don't avoid Resolution Sound. We found some sitting on some rocks.

Notice that they have been sitting on these rocks for quite a while. We also saw them swimming and flying, and counted a total of 11, or 5% of the total population. We rewarded the sighting with 5-stars.

When we returned to Picton, we got to observe a young Kiwi in the process

of being translocated to a safe island. This is an Okarito Brown Kiwi, aka *Rowi*, a critically endangered species. (Almost all endemic species in NZ are endangered, some more than others.)

We proceed to the town of Blenheim, which lacked a castle, but had many vineyards in the area. We ate a picnic lunch on the side of the road near one vineyard while looking for a New Zealand Falcon to show up. He didn't.

We then went to the Blenheim Salt Works, where sea water is converted into sea salt. Phil hoped to find some interesting shorebirds, but instead we found gale force winds. We were barely able to stand, much less see anything. We gave up quickly and continued our drive to Kaikoura. We are scheduled for another boat trip tomorrow, and Phil took some



time to contact the cruise operator to see if the weather would force cancelation. They had cut short the morning cruise and canceled the afternoon one, but expected the weather to moderate.

We stopped at a vista point along the road where we saw a colony of New Zealand Fur Seals on the rocks, with some mothers nursing young pups.



They shared the rocks with Spotted Shags, yet another NZ endemic, but fortunately more common than the King Shags. We saw a pair yesterday from the ferry, but we had much better looks today. With all the photos, this will be a tricky upload over a balky internet connection. As I type this, I have access to the local server, but no access to the web.

We ate one of the best meals of the trip at an Indonesian restaurant in town. The food was excellent, but the service very slow, so we cut short our attempt to find a Little Owl after dinner and crashed into bed.

January 31, 2014: Hey, Hey, LBJ, See an Albatross Today? Kaikoura

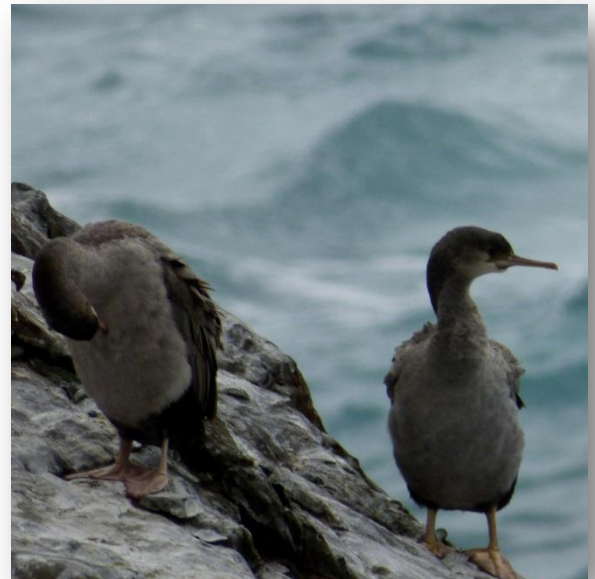
The main event for the day was another cruise to look for pelagic birds (those that seldom come to shore, usually only to breed). We got to sleep in a bit, boarding the van at 8:00. We tooted around the town of Kaikoura looking to see if any rare birds had slipped in overnight, then finding none, proceeded to board the boat. Boarding was interesting: the boat sat on a trailer; we climbed aboard; a tractor pushed the boat and trailer into the water, where we took off. We came ashore later by reversing the process.



We had some targets for today, but mainly the Albatross Encounter, as the cruise was billed, was designed to give us close looks at these interesting birds. As soon as we got a bit away from the dock we had a flock of Cape Petrels, also known by several other names, that followed us. They knew what was in store. Indeed, several birds seemed to recognize the boat and joined the queue behind us.

When we reached deep water, and the waves were less of a hassle, the captain threw some food in a wire container overboard. Immediately, there was a frenzy as many birds fought for a share of the gift. We have some video of the squabbling, which at times grew violent. The dark brown birds are Northern Giant Petrels, which are on the short list for World's Ugliest Bird, though honestly, they don't have a real chance against Jabiru or Maribou Stork. Here is a close up. They are known as the vultures of the sea, cleaning up anything left over.

When we reached deep water, and the





The highlight of the trip though, and my vote for Bird of the Day, was excellent close looks at Salvin's Albatross, a study in subtle shades.

The beautiful gray color on the head and neck distinguishes him from other "mollymawks," a local word for smaller albatrosses. The other albies shown above were New Zealand Wandering Albatrosses, a somewhat smaller subspecies than those we saw on our Antarctic Cruise in 2010.

We theoretically had the afternoon off, and Linda did manage a nap. I worked for most of the time, managing to lie down and shut my eyes just before Phil knocked on our door to wake us up, at 5:00. We ate a picnic supper of fish and chips at the motel, then set off to find a Brown Creeper.

This is not the same Brown Creeper we have at home. Indeed, there is a move afoot to use one of the Maori names for this bird, *Pipipi*, accented on the second syllable. One problem with this is that not all Maori tribes use that name. We could solve the problem by renaming our Brown Creeper to be Brown Treecreeper, aligning ourselves with the rest of the world in names for this genus. Alas, we don't seem to be very accommodating when it comes to changing bird names.



We did find the Pipipi, a classic example of a Little Brown Job, but it darted around in dense shrubbery, so I didn't get a photo. However, we do have a photo from the outing to share.

Several of these signs were posted along the trail. I claim that it refers to a picnic table on wheels, though we saw nothing like that. Others think the icon is a bicycle, which makes sense, but surely they could have done better. I welcome your suggestions.

February 1, 2014: The Kea to Happy Campers Kaikoura to Punakaiki

Today, we had only one target, always a stressful situation. We had a lot of driving thru farmlands of the South Island. The reason why we have to drive so much is that so little of New Zealand remains from centuries of human alteration of the islands. Farmlands dominate the landscape, and the endemic birds avoid them, with a few exceptions. To see the birds we want to see, we have to drive all over the place.

New Zealand broke away from Australia about 65 million years ago and drifted east and south to form the current island nation. Today, it sits astride two different tectonic plates, resulting in a mountain range running down the middle of the South Island. We drove across this range thru some lovely scenery. I took this panorama shot from a vista point along the highway. That is our road you see in the middle. This vista point figures



prominently in our review of the day.

Most of the day was spent fooling around. We stopped at an estuary to see if any rare shorebirds had turned up. None had. We plowed on. Phil asked once if we wanted to stop to look for, well, actually I forget what it was. We all said, “Kea!”



We finally got to the area where Keas stay, and heard one calling at a visitors center in Arthur’s Pass, but didn’t see it. Phil insisted we would get a better view at the vista point, so we went there and took pictures, but didn’t see a Kea. We went back to the visitor’s center, where we saw four of the birds cleaning up crumbs around the tables where patrons had coffee and scones.

After we got *tickable* Kea sightings, and some tall lattes to go, we returned to the vista point. Linda quickly found an immature Kea at the base of a small tree. We were delighted to see a “real” Kea. We also saw one flying across the highway into the forest on the mountainside. Very satisfactory. We drove on to our motel, and a very unsatisfactory dinner that took

forever. Tomorrow, we drive some more.

February 2, 2014: Beautiful Mountain Punakaiki to Franz Josef

Today, like yesterday, was spent mostly fiddling around. The real birding would be at night when we planned to search for the Okarito Brown Kiwi, the rarest of all the kiwis, with 385 individuals in the Okarito area and a few others relocated to safe islands, such as the chick we saw in Picton.

We stopped first to visit the World Heritage Site, Pancake Rocks. These strange rocks were laid down as limestone, but later modified into the curious stacked pattern shown here.



We spent the rest of the day killing time by finding all the same species we had seen already, with one notable exception. After checking into our motel in the town of Franz Josef, we spent about an hour birding along the road near where we will be going later. We hoped to see a Fernbird, which Linda and I needed to “clean up.” We more or less saw one on Tiritiri Matangi, but it stayed in a bush less than 5 feet from us, providing only occasional glimpses.

This time was different. One responded to *Lorna's magic* and popped out onto an exposed branch by the side of the road. We both had fabulous views of the bird, which we awarded the coveted 5-stars. Terry got some great photos. Here's one of them. A wonderful Little Brown Job.

We ate dinner early at what I thought was a nice restaurant. Both Linda and I enjoyed the food, even without the usual lubrication of beer and wine. We didn't want to be sleepy for our night's expedition. Others complained about both the food and service, so it must have depended on what was ordered.

Finally, it was time to meet Ian, described as a martinet, but who almost guaranteed seeing the Kiwi. The first part was correct. He immediately eliminated my vest as too noisy (nonsense, but I was in no position to argue), then gave us a 30 minute lecture on Kiwis in general



and these birds in particular. There are three territories in accessible from the road, each belonging to a specific Kiwi couple. Each Kiwi wears a radio telemetry device on a leg, allowing Ian to track them. He explained that after he located the birds, he would position us to listen for them, the only way to see one.

We set off about sunset, around 8:30 pm. He quickly eliminated one pair from the plan. BZ was in a region where it was very difficult to see him. His mate Beaumont was near the trail, but at the bottom of a cliff she wouldn't climb. So, we went after two other possibilities: Jolene, a female in the second territory; and White Eyes, a male in the third. We split into two parties, with five of us, including Linda and me, listening for Jolene, while the rest, together with a German woman who joined us, listening for White Eyes. Terry and Jenny had opted to sit this one out.

We stood in the dark listening for thrashing about in the leaf litter. I heard nothing, and neither did anyone else. Ian walked behind us occasionally taking readings with his telemetry antenna. Apparently, Jolene was staying 80 meters from the track. I don't know where White Eyes was, but no one in the other group heard anything either.

I confess that I started checking my watch. When it got to be a little after 11:00, I thought Terry and Jenny had made the right decision. Then we got a radio message from Ian. He thought we had a chance to find Beaumont, and we needed to come to where he was. That was about 1 km away, and we covered it as fast as practical in the dark. Well, we all had flashlights, but we had to keep them aimed at our feet, so we moved carefully. Finally, we caught up with Ian.

He gave us some last minute instructions on how to look when he switched on his red light. Then even I, without hearing aids, heard the sound of feet moving in the leaf litter. Ian's light came on. As instructed, I crouched down on Ian's left and looked near where he was pointing. There she was! A chicken sized bird with a long ivory colored bill and feet, but otherwise just brown.

We all had a look, but she moved back into the undergrowth after 30 seconds or so. Ian wasn't finished. We turned off all our lights and stood again in near total darkness, listening. We could hear her moving around. We waited. Without warning, Ian turned on his red light again. Beaumont stood at the edge of the track. She lifted her bill as though sampling the air, giving the appearance of standing on tiptoes. I couldn't suppress an "Oh, my God." It was spectacular. We watched her for several minutes before she moved into the undergrowth again and disappeared. My watch said "23:49."

Everyone was jazzed. We had our second 5-star of the day, an absolutely mind-blowing sighting of one of the rarest birds, rarest *animals*, in the world. Back at the van, we returned the bug net hats Ian had lent us (essential!) as well as the sweatshirt that replaced my vest (not needed). Phil started talking about what a fantastic experience it was. I suggested we talk while driving back to the motel.

We put off departure in the morning until 8:30.

Photos were prohibited, so no pictures of Beaumont, whose name means *Beautiful Mountain*, in case you were trying to figure out my tagline for today.

February 3, 2014: Sunshine on a Cloudman Day Franz Josef to Wanaka

Today was another long drive, with stops along the way to try to pick up a few forest birds that we hadn't seen well. New Zealand has three endemic *families* of birds, and we had seen members of each family. However, we had yet not seen a Yellowhead, one member of a family with three species. These are beautiful birds, with

bright yellow heads that you'd expect from the name. Typically, they hang out at the top of the canopy, hard to see well.

We got to sleep late after last night's grueling, but successful, search for the Okarito Kiwi, departing the motel at 8:30. Our route led thru the Mount Aspiring National Park, a beautiful old forest of native trees, then down along a river and lake into the very touristy town of Wanaka on the shores of Lake Wanaka.



In short, it was a day for admiring the scenery, not really for birding. I've included a picture of [Mount Aspiring](#) (Aspiring to what? To be higher?) to give you an idea of what it was like. As this is the *second* tallest mountain in NZ, maybe it is aspiring to be number one.

Now, one thing I haven't mentioned until now is the sad story of the New Zealand Falcon. This, as you will have guessed is yet another endemic, the only Falcon in NZ. Typically, we learned, one person spots the bird, usually the one with the best view in the van, and no one else.

That proved to be the case. Linda was the first to see one, when she occupied the shotgun seat next to the driver. The bird flew away, flying like a falcon, not like the harriers we have seen almost every day. No one else saw it. She asked me to count it for her with a 2-star code, meaning "I saw it, but I want to see it better."

Later, Lorna duplicated this feat when she was riding shotgun.

That is not to say that we didn't have numerous false alarms for the bird. We have stopped at least once a day to check out some bird perched on a tree limb that may have been a falcon, but usually turned out to be a pigeon. Twice this morning, Dodge called for a stop, in no uncertain terms, to check on a possible falcon. You understand that as Lorna had seen the bird and Dodge had not, the stakes were high. That also applied to Linda and me, but I managed to suppress it.

So, it was with immense relief for all of us when we took a walk on the Pleasant Flat Track after lunch. We saw and heard nothing until Jenny said quietly, "Here's a falcon."

So it was. We think it was a female because of its size. It saw on its perch while we watched and snapped numerous photos, one of which is here.



It was almost anti-climax when a short while later we walked down the Bridle Path Track in Haast Forest and managed to see at least two Yellowheads at eye level. Lorna used her magic again.

Some people, Lorna for one, voted for the Yellowhead as Bird of the Day, but I am happy to say that the falcon carried by a couple of votes.

Still more to come, including two days on Stewart Island. Tomorrow is a very long travel day, estimated at 6+ hours. We have learned that these estimates tend to be on the short side. We hope to see a Rock Wren (not the bird of the same name we have at home) along the way. Mostly, though, we will be driving thru scenic forest.



February 4, 2014: A Rocky Road to Success Wanaka to Te Anau with a detour to Milford Sound

Today was the most driving of the entire trip. We started about 7:30, heading out of Wanaka toward the south. We drove thru some very scenic country all day. We don't have much to report about birding today; we added only one bird to our list for the trip. More on that a bit later.

First, we stopped at a vista point along the Remarkables Mountain Range. The habitat is dry, as you can see in this photo, but with rolling grasses everywhere. It wasn't yet cold

enough for us to bundle up, but we went higher as the day wore on. By the end, we were wishing we had put on our thermals.

We drove into the small town of *Te Anau*, where we are spending the night later, and bought some pies for lunch at Miles Famous Pie Shop. I had always chosen a sandwich instead of a pie, but this time I went for a bacon and egg pie. It was delicious.

We stopped and ate lunch at a picnic area on the way to Milford Sound, our ultimate destination. The road passes thru a tunnel, Homer Tunnel, named for the person who suggested building it. We stopped there to search for the Rock Wren, which shares the name of a familiar bird back home, but is completely different. It is in the same family as the Rifleman, another small bird we had seen before and saw again today.

We were really cold. We were higher up, and the wind was blowing fiercely. The Rock Wren is tiny, shaped like an egg with legs. We spent quite a bit of time scanning the rocks looking for it. The path that led thru the rocks was closed with a prominently displayed Danger sign. Phil said the trail has been closed for two years, so the strategy is to scan and hope to spot the bird flying.

Here's what we are looking at.



We spent quite a bit of time scanning. A Kea flew over and landed on a nearby rock. Here is his picture. I'd like to say this is a wild Kea, but we happen to know that he was begging handouts from other people in the area shortly before flying over to us.

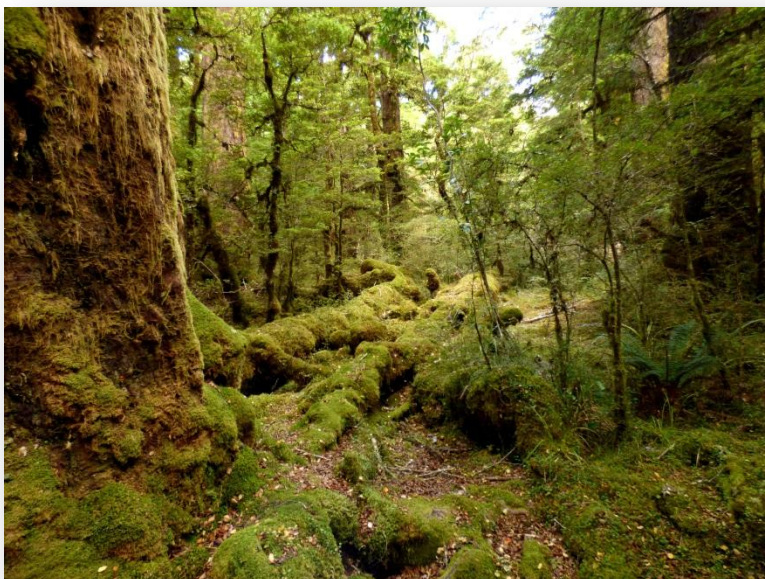
Phil finally spotted the Rock Wren as it flew between the rocks in the center of the picture. I could present this as a photo of the bird, which would be about 1 pixel big.

Amazingly, we had good looks at the bird. It sat on the top of the pyramid shaped rock in the center and displayed, bobbing up and down. Then it flew around the vegetation to other rocks. Some lucky people were able to see it in the scope, but I wasn't one of them.

Regardless, we awarded it 4-stars.

Then we continued on to Milford Sound, a World Heritage Site renowned for its beauty. It would be truly great on a bright sunny day. Alas, we had to make do with an overcast sky.

We had one more stop to make before we got back to Te Anua. We walked down the Nature Trail to Lake Gunn in the Cascade Creek section of Fiordland National Park. This is an old growth



Red Beech forest. The trees, *Nothofagus fusca*, are not the same beech trees we have. The scientific name means “False Beech.” The huge trees covered with moss gave the entire area an unreal feeling, sort of *Middle Earthist*.

We were searching for the South Island Robin, a close relative of the North Island Robin that was so cooperative at Tiritiri Matangi. This bird eluded us, but we did have great looks at Riflemen and neck-breaking looks at Yellowhead. The latter is highly sought after, rare and hard to see well. We were very lucky to have eye-level sightings yesterday.

Tomorrow, we travel to the third main island, Stewart Island. If the South Island is sparsely populated, Stewart Island is virtually uninhabited. We will spend two nights on the island, spending time on a full day trip at sea, and a short jaunt to nearby Ulva Island, a refuge for some specialties of the area. I don't know when I will have internet contact again. Maybe not until we get back to the South Island.

February 5, 2014: Who ya callin yellow? Stewart Island: Ulva Island, Kiwi Hunting

Today, we transferred our attention to Stewart Island, sometimes called the "third main island in New Zealand." That is a bit of hyperbole. There is one town, known as Half Moon Bay, unofficially, and Oban Township officially. A few hundred people live permanently on the island.

For birders, there are several attractions:

- Many otherwise difficult birds are fairly easy to see here.
- There are some special birds that occur nowhere else.
- The Stewart Island Brown Kiwi is reputed to be easy to see.

We got up early after re-packing to put everything we need for a two-night stand into one bag. For us, this presented no problem as we have tried for the entire trip to avoid opening the big green duffel. Usually, we wind up opening it anyway in a desperate search for some missing item, such as the baggie of fresh batteries. (My flashlight was failing.)

We drove a bit more than two hours to reach the ferry terminal in the town of Bluff. Then we had a short wait before ship left port. One hour later, we were trundling along the main street in town with our "little blue suitcase" to the South Sea Hotel, the only game in town. Linda says there was at least one more place to stay, but I didn't notice it.

We dumped our bags, picked up sack lunches, and walked to the other side of a hill to catch a water taxi that dropped us on Ulva Island, a small islet surrounded by Half Moon Bay. The islet is free of predators and home to a number of threatened species. A sign we saw proclaims it a "birder's paradise."

We were searching for a couple of special birds. The South Island Robin, which looks almost identical to the North Island Robin, but lives on South Island. Technically, we saw the Stewart Island subspecies of the South Island Robin, as we had missed seeing the bird everywhere else on the South Island. Here we had no problem with the bird.

That's Dodge's shoe the bird is sitting on. The hardest part of this photo was getting the camera to focus on something that close.

We also wanted to get a good look at the Yellow-headed Parakeet. Some people had claimed this bird from dubious



flyovers, but Linda and I were holding out for a better look. We got one as we walked up the hill on our way to the water taxi. Two birds flew overhead, but at least this time we could tell that they had green feathers on the back. “A countable tick,” we agreed, but still wanted a good luck.



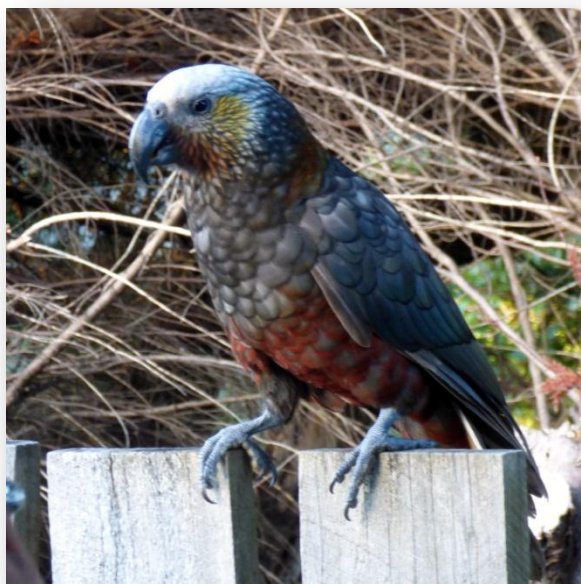
The birds are known to nest on Ulva Island. We wandered around the island for four hours, hearing the birds (as well as many others) several times. However, the steadfastly refused to show themselves. As we were waiting for the water taxi to arrive and convey us back to “the mainland,” Lorna used her magic again. The parakeets appeared. She started calling for Dodge — with considerable exasperation as he was not standing at her shoulder — that she had the birds perched. I wandered over and stood by her shoulder, as did Linda. One bird sat on a branch 3m (10ft) above us. I took numerous photos. The best is shown here.

Now, that is a lot better than a countable tick. We called it a 5-star sighting and named it a Bird of the Day, beating out the Kiwi, which I’ll get to later.

We ate supper and returned to our room to get ready for another late night Kiwi hunt. A Kaka — South Island Race naturally — serenaded us from a fence outside our

room. The first time we saw a Kaka, much earlier in the trip on the North Island, it appeared to be a large brown parrot. I joked that a Kaka was the color of Caca.

When seen up close, it’s obvious the brown color is an illusion. He’s actually quite an attractive bird with a habit of living near humans and cadging food from them. If the light hits just right, the head can appear blue. Here are two photos, one with a flash, one natural light. You choose.



We returned to the dock about 8:00 for the short ride to a different part of Stewart Island. There, we went ashore and hiked about 2-300 meters to a beach. There, we expected to see Stewart Island Brown Kiwis feeding on small bugs brought ashore by kelp.

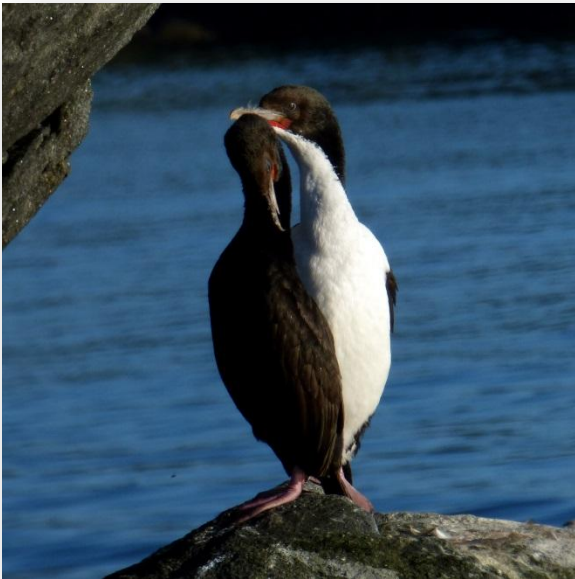
And so we did. Within minutes, we had made the acquaintance of “Suzy,” a 13-year old female. She ignored us as we stood quietly in the dark while our guide illuminated her with a “soft white torch.” It was a hell of a lot easier than Beaumont, and frankly, more interesting. She repeatedly drove her long bill into the sand and found some bugs to eat.

The evening wasn’t over. We also saw “Meg,” another female and “Speedy,” a young male. These were both probably Suzy’s offspring. Meg ignored us and fed, just like Suzy. Speedy got his name from his habit of heading for the bush as soon as the flashlight lit him up. That’s exactly what happened. However, the place he decided to hide was less than a meter from the path we walked down, and he didn’t move from that spot. So, he was seen better than the other two. All considered, this was much better than the other Kiwi sightings, not to mention the lack of sightings of the Lesser and Great Spotted Kiwis.

We got back to bed at midnight. Tomorrow is another early start.

February 6, 2014: Simple Math Pelagic trip around Stewart Island

Today we had our final pelagic trip of the tour. We boarded the boat *Aurora* at 8:00 after a quick breakfast in the hotel, and set off to look for anything new, but especially some penguins that are alleged to be around. Before we even left the harbor, we had fabulous views of one of the endemic birds of the area, Stewart Island



Shag, aka Bronze Shag. Several of them were sitting on a rock we passed. Here is a picture of two of them. This picture shows both color morphs of the species, a dark, or bronze color, and a pied plumage. Notice the red color at the base of the bill. These birds, who were preening each other, are still in breeding plumage.

This was a 5-star and got several votes for BOTD.

The rest of the day was spent watching albatrosses and other birds. Two simple equations tell the story:

1. From the bird’s point of view:
 $\text{Boat} + \text{Birders} = \text{Free Food}.$
2. From the birders’ point of view:
 $\text{Boat} + \text{Free Food} = \text{Lots of birds}.$

At one point we actually counted 130 albatrosses hanging around the boat for the scraps of fish doled out to them. The scraps were those parts of *Blue Cod*, the favorite local fish,

that humans don’t eat. This included the head, bones, and tail. The albatrosses fought over the scraps as gourmet offerings from a fine restaurant.

Several Buller's Albatrosses became our new favorite Albie, and tied the Shags for BOTD. Notice the gray head contrasting with the white top of the head and the lovely two-toned bill.



A beautiful bird. I voted for him at BOTD, but Linda preferred the Shags. Both were spectacular.

Here's a typical scene at Albatross Central. Some fish scraps have been tossed into the water. These are White-capped Albatross, a subspecies of the poorly named Shy Albatross. We recorded video to capture the sound of the squabble.

Tomorrow, we leave Stewart Island and travel north in search of two more endemics to complete our trip.

February 7, 2014: The Eyes Have It Stewart Island to Oamaru

Our trip is winding down, with few birds left that we haven't seen. We don't even have any more big trees to be photographed in front of. That doesn't mean there are *no* birds left to search out. Today, we have a new target, Yellow-eyed Penguin, which comes ashore late in the afternoon.

We got another early start, rising soon after 6:00 to pack up, eat breakfast, and catch the ferry back to the South Island at 8:00. The sea was like glass, which discourages most pelagic birds from following the ferry. However, we did see a tiny bird with wings beating so fast they were a mere blur. The bird took off from the water, flew very fast for about 100m, and dove into a wave to disappear. Common Diving Petrel. Tick. We had missed that bird on our Antarctic cruise. Not much to look at.

We arrived back in Bluff about 9:00 and loaded up on sandwiches for lunch. I am starting to hear some grumbling from the crew about the selection available. Today, I tried a chicken curry pie that was delicious, even after it got cold, but could have used more zip in the curry flavoring.

Given that we wouldn't likely see the penguins until much later, we had the bulk of the day to kill. We did just that, wandering from one interesting spot to another as we worked out way to Brushy Beach.

Phil had a report of a Little Egret, a bird all of us had seen many times, but one quite rare in NZ. We made our way to Fotro's Lagoon to see if we could spot it. We did, sort of. We had scope views of a white bird that looked sort of like an Egret thru all the heat waves. We ticked it, after some discussion, and moved on.

Next stop was Waikawa, where we looked for Great Crested Grebe without success.

Then we went to a place called Cannibal Bay, where we saw some Hooker's Sea Lions, a new mammal at least. A large male lay on the beach sleeping. Here he is, looking like a log, with a piece of driftwood in front of his head. We kept a safe distance away as he is a lot bigger than you might guess from this photo.



Finally, we headed to Brushy Beach, where Yellow-eyed Penguins nest. Most of the nesting activity is over for the year, though we did see one young bird. However, unlike many other penguins, these birds stay around the beach all year instead of going back to sea.

The beach is a popular spot and many tourists arrived while we waited for the birds to return. Eventually, we had good looks at one fairly close. We had to stand on the top of a cliff and look down on the penguins as they walked across the sand. Here's my best picture. Terry probably has a better one. You'll have to take my word for it that the bird really has yellow eyes. We saw them thru the telescopes.

We also had great looks at some female Hooker's Sea Lions walking on all fours, something impossible for New Zealand Fur Seals. An explanatory sign in the viewing area

incorrectly identified them as seals. On our way back, some people had a look at a hedgehog that hid under the van. That means that we have seen all of the introduced predators in NZ:

- Three mustelids: Weasel, Stoat, and Ferret
- Brush-tailed Possum
- Cats and Dogs
- Hedgehog, which eats bird's eggs

With that, we adjourned for the day.



February 8, 2014: Black is the New Black

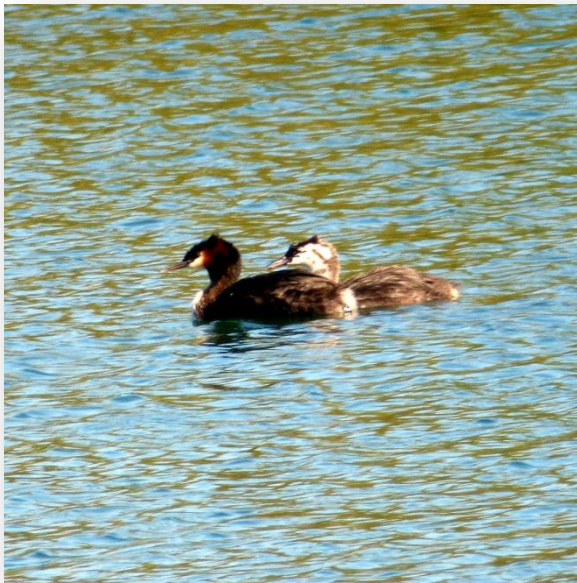
Oamaru to Omarama

From the sleepy village of Oamaru, we drove to a slightly larger town of Omarama, which is pronounced om-Mar-a-ma, with a very slight emphasis on the Mar. Maori words frequently sound strange as each syllable is given the same emphasis, or almost so. We stopped at one of Phil's favorite bakeries and bought some items for breakfast. That beat anything available in Oamaru.

We headed to a spot where we hoped to find Black Stilts, one of the rarest shorebirds in the world. The total population is no more than 140 individuals. The Department of Conservation (DOC) runs a captive breeding program. They remove eggs from the nests, where they have a statistical 5% chance of survival, and raise them in an aviary, raising the odds to 95%. However, once released into the wild, only 25% survive to breed the next year, falling



victim
to the familiar list of introduced predators.



On the way, we stopped at Kellens Pond, where we saw the Great Crested Grebe Phil was so anxious to show us. This is a natural introduction from Australia, but in very small numbers. Nevertheless, we found an adult with two chicks, so they are breeding successfully. Here's a "record shot," not very good, but enough to show the adult and one chick.

Terry should have a better picture that I will put in a revision of this report.

We stopped to eat lunch at the Visitor's Center, where we had a great view of Mount Cook, the tallest peak in NZ. The lake is filled with water that has a lot of suspended solids in it, giving it a turquoise hue.

We next
moved to

Lake Pukaki, which is Maori for "place where Black Stilts live."

Lorna proved herself the champion of spotters, when she found a single bird on the edge of a small pond. It was much too far away for a decent photo, but thru the scope, we saw that it was all black and had the critical field mark to distinguish it from a hybrid with the far more common Pied Stilt. The latter bird, *Hymenotis hymenotis*, is common around the world in the southern hemisphere. It survives



because it nests on rocks where it is able to avoid predators. The Black Stilts nest on sand and are easy pickings.

The critical mark? Leg bands. Every Black Stilt in the world has been banded, but not the hybrids.

We then moved on to another area around the lake, Glentanner. The DOC has been releasing young birds in the hope of providing a safer nesting area. Perversely, the young birds have moved down to a nice sandy area where they aren't protected. Several DOC personnel were in the area. They had put out some supplemental food for the chicks and were waiting around for a second feeding later. In the meantime, they did some fly fishing.

We talked to Cody, one of the DOC biologists at length about the program and got some good photos of the birds. Technically, these are not countable as they are released, captive raised birds. The first, single bird, has survived at least two years at the same spot where we saw it, so it is a legitimate one. However, we were happy to be able to photograph the birds up close. They were very used to humans, but at least had the decency not to run towards us when we arrived. That would be a dead giveaway that they weren't really wild.

I've included a photo of two chicks, which as you can see are not all black. The black gradually spreads as they age.

That was not the end of birding, but it was the end of photos to include. We stopped at a spot that is to remain a Wrybills secret, where we had a fab view of Baillon's Crake, known as Marsh Crake in NZ. Linda had glimpsed the bird at an earlier stop. I had missed it completely. Actually, it was becoming something of a *nemesis* bird, one that constantly eluded me. No longer.

That pretty much wrapped up the trip.





We had dinner at a winery in the area where we took the traditional group photo and named Bird of the Trip. Linda, as usual, had several categories and many entries. I didn't get them all down. In the photo above, starting at lower left and proceeding clockwise, Phil, Jim, Meta, Trent, Lorna, Dodge, Jenny, Terry, and Linda.

I had only one nominee for the NZ portion of the trip, the bird that made me say, "OMG," when I was supposed to be quiet, Beaumont, the Okarito Brown Kiwi. What a bird!

We actually logged another bird on the way home, Chukar, during a brief detour to Mt John Observatory. That brought the total for NZ to 150 species, a respectable number, with 70 lifers including more than 60 endemics, with many of those seen very well. Adding in the sightings from New Caledonia we saw 188 species, with an impressive 92 new species for the world. We both passed 4500 world species on this trip regardless of which taxonomic list we used.

All in all, a memorable trip.