

New Zealand, Day Log

Contributed by Jos
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BASIC TRIP OUTLINE

After a stopover in Hong Kong and a transit through Sydney, I arrived in Auckland for the first segment of my trip - several days north and west of the city, visiting Waipu, the excellent Tawharanui and totally amazing Tiritiri Matingi island. Then I zipped south, pausing at Miranda, Pureora Forest and Lake Taupo areas, before crossing to South Island. Incorporating the legendary Kaikoura pelagic, the superb Twizel and Homer Tunnel areas and numerous coastal areas, I spent two and a half weeks on South Island, plus a few days on the unmissable Steward Island and its small neighbour Ulva Island, then returned to North Island for more good days near Auckland and the Coromandel Peninsula.

14 December. Airborne. Regardless of the route, regardless of airline, Lithuania to New Zealand is a long way! With at least 22-24 hours required in planes alone, I decided to choose a route that gave me a full day stopover in Hong Kong midway – a chance for some classic birding in this mega territory and a break from the endless hours in the sky. So it began, under cool grey skies, a short mid-afternoon flight from Vilnius to Helsinki, followed by a 90-minute transfer and another plane for 9.5 hours overnight to Hong Kong. Zero birds in Vilnius airport, semi-dark in Helsinki.

15 December. Hong Kong. A perfect stopover option - landed in Hong Kong at 8.30 am, half prepared to do battle with Hong Kong's protesters, but instead zipped through immigration in all of five minutes and, in no time at all, was on the airport link metro for a short ride to Tsing Yi to meet local birder, Mike Kilburn. So rather than satisfying my curiosity with the downtown troubles, today I was to be honoured with a visit to the amazing San Tan fishponds - an extensive series of rural pools tucked up against the Chinese border and the towering highrises of Shenzhen across the river, classic stuff! On site by about 10 am, popped out of a taxi and, at Mike's suggestion, started with a quick look at what appeared to be an uninspiring roadside hillock. An excellent start to the day it proved however - Chinese and Red-whiskered Bulbuls, a corker of a Pallas's Leaf Warbler, Japanese White-eyes, one Daurian Redstart, a little flock of Olive-backed Pipits and, among others, several Scarlet Minivets. Already better than spending the day downtown! Crossing the road, we entered San Tan proper, House Swift and Red-rumped Swallows overhead, a Grey Wagtail on a boundary stream, a Fork-tailed Sunbird in a bit of a hedge. And then the pools opened out in front of us, and right birdy places they turned out to be! A brief flit of a Black-faced Bunting at the outset, then a flock of Azure-winged Magpies, then several rather nice Collared Crows, then masses of starlings - flocks of them everywhere, big impressive Black-collared Starlings and numerous Silky Starlings in the main, but also a couple of Common Starlings, several White-shouldered Starlings and, a little later, White-cheeked Starlings too. As we zigzagged from pool to pool, with mighty fine Black-faced Spoonbills passing over now and then and singles of both Greater Spotted Eagle and Imperial Eagle, it was very much a case of which way to look - Great White Egrets and Little Egrets commonplace, so too Chinese Pond Herons, plus a scatter of other herons, including roosting Black-crowned Night Heron, a single Cattle Egret, one Intermediate Egret (uncommon at San Tan) and, if you count a pair of deceased wings as a bird, one Yellow Bittern! Pegging onto a fly-over of Black-faced Spoonbills, one European Spoonbill too. Also good for waders, eleven species noted (including Wood, Green, Common and Marsh Sandpipers), but the absolute highlight was a stunning male Painted Snipe, a San Tan rarity and cracking bird at that. And then there were the passerines! Eastern Yellow Wagtails and Amur Wagtails by the bucketload, Zitting Cisticolas and both Yellow-bellied Prinia and Plain Prinia common, Crested and Black Drongos, one big floppy Chinese Blackbird, occasional Stejneger's Stonechats, quite a few Long-tailed Shrikes, skulking Siberian Rubythroats, Dusky Warblers and Yellow-browed Warblers, many more. Out on the western fringe, yet more good birds, not least a Greater Coucal and a smart Wryneck, plus good from a Hong Kong angle, both Black-necked Grebe and Scaup, and a couple of Skylarks. A few hours on, now approaching 4 pm, it was time to cut and run, back to the airport. Two stunning parting gifts however - as we left via the Main Drainage Channel, a flock of magical Red-billed Blue Magpies and an equally endearing flock of Masked Laughing Thrushes. Uber back to Tsing Yi, metro to the airport. Hong Kong had done itself proud - I'd notched up 95 species, a darn good total for an airport stopover. Sincere thanks are due to one top HK birder. And then it was onboard for another long overnight flight, 11 hours to Australia.

16 December. Mangere. A three-hour stopover in Sydney, the city skies painted in a lurid orange pastel by the wildfires savaging the surrounding regions, a pervasive aroma of smoke adding to the effect, then onward for a 2.5 hour hop over the Tasman Sea and to my final destination, arriving late afternoon. Welcome to New Zealand, a land that's had its native bird populations devastated by introduced mammalian predators, yet at the same time had a whole range of introduced birds from Europe, Asia and Australia flourish. And so it was, departing Auckland airport, my first birds of the trip, Skylark, Eurasian Blackbird and Song Thrush! Could have stayed at home! Moments later however, with 40 exquisite Wrybills on the mudflats just yonder, there was no question, I was in New Zealand! And most fine it was too, a mere five minutes from the airport and to the salubrious backdrop of Amberly sewage treatment plant, I was at the expansive mudflats at Mangere, ranks and ranks of waders a stone's throw away, pushed by the rising tide. As well as the Wrybills with their kinked bills, thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits and Knots, waddling Paradise Shelducks, possés of Red-billed Gulls and lesser numbers of the dainty endemic Black-billed Gull and plenty more. Just to my rear, in a water treatment outflow channel, one of the only New Zealand Little Grebes of my trip and loads of Pacific Black Ducks of varying degrees of purity/impurity (most here having interbred with Mallard). An hour or so here and that was really that for day one, drove a few kilometres more to a leafy suburb and made acquaintance with a friend from a bygone era. As darkness fell, popped

out to a light show by the local glow worms, heard my first Moreporks, did my notes for day one - 33 species, 11 of which were introduced species!

17 December. Waipu Rivermouth & Tawharanui. Jeepers, did the heavens open! A major storm battering North Island, it was raining like bonkers, the wind was rocking the car and, on the sea, thousands of storm-blown shearwaters battled impressive waves! An ideal time for a spot of seawatching I thought, but receiving a full facial of wind and rain, that didn't last long - Buller's, Flesh-footed and Fluttering Shearwaters certainly abundant, loads of Australasian Gannets too, beyond that there could have been anything! 50 km north of Auckland, hopes of Australasian Bittern and crakes at Te Arai were out the window, so instead I confined my early morning birding to peering out from inside the car, notching up mostly an impressive collection of yet more introduced species – along with parties of Wild Turkey, occasional Pheasants and Spotted Doves, there was a distinct multinational flavour to the passerines ... Australian Magpies, Common Mynas and virtually everything it seemed from an English country garden! The lone native passerine seen this morning was a New Zealand Fantail! My main target this day was Fairy Tern, a bird on the brink of extinction, a mere 40 or so pairs surviving. Breeding on beaches and sandbanks, the combined impacts of disturbance, mammalian predators and habitat loss have all taken their toll, though the tiny population is slowly creeping up, in no small part due to the work of some dedicated conservationists. And of the pairs in existence, perhaps the easiest to see are those at the Waipu Rivermouth, a small tidal system and associated dunes. I arrived to a miraculous pause in the rain and a lull in the wind, so off I went, paddling across flooded saltmarsh, then settling myself on rocks to scan the sandbanks …Variable Oystercatchers and New Zealand Dotterel chaperoning chicks, White-fronted Terns and Caspian Terns patrolling the far sandbank, but no initial sign of the Fairies. Kept a wary eye on the moody sky, but more so I kept scanning a patch of sand that one of the two pairs currently at Waipu had been showing interest in over the previous days, apparently building a nest scrape, courting and the like. And then in flew a Fairy Tern, swooping around the nest area, shooing off nearby Kelp Gulls and generally showing very nicely indeed. After a while, the tern settled down and began to roost - perfect, Fairy Tern seen! Some 60 km to the south, my next stop was Tawharanui Regional Park, an exquisite predator-free reserve. Given I was camping here, it was a relief that the rain had finally given way to a pleasant sunny afternoon. With Australasian Swamphens and Brown Quails strolling around, I chucked up my tent and immediately set off to explore. With an absence of rats and stoats, there is an abundance of native passerines and other birds. Thus, in short succession, I found both North Island Saddleback and North Island Robin, plus Kaka, New Zealand Pigeon, Whitehead, Silvereye, New Zealand Bellbird, Tui and New Zealand Fantail. I also managed several of the highly localised endemic Brown Teals, as well as my first New Zealand Falcon of the trip, one zipping across the forest canopy. My real reason was staying here however was for a certain nocturnal resident, my first of the iconic kiwi species - North Island Brown Kiwi. After whiling away a little bit of time on the beach, several New Zealand Dotterels and a surprise Greater Sand Plover present, I duly awaited darkness. Torched up and ready, a half moon somewhat illuminating the route, off I went to walk the Ecology Trail up and over an open hillside and then a loop through thick woodland. An abundance of Moreporks calling, and two were soon perched a mere metre or two above my head, very photogenic. However, not a squeak or squeal from my targeted one just yet, I had hoped one would be feeding in the meadow next to the forest. With the kiwis probably on eggs or with chicks, there had virtually stopped calling and my best hope to find one was quietly stalking the forest paths and listening for the rustling as their trundle along the forest floor. Can't say this first evening was massively successful on the kiwi front - over two hours of listening and walking the trails and nothing. Deciding to give up and return to my tent, one then promptly darted across the path in front of me! Only a brief view, but a female judging by its large size and, yay, I had seen my first kiwi!

18 December. Tawharanui. All day at Tawharanui, walking assorted trails again, photographing Brown Teal and North Island Saddleback amongst others. Saw many similar birds as the day before, one addition being my first Grey Warblers of the trip (a species that would prove fairly common throughout the trip). Better however, I also found the first of the endemic butterflies that I was hoping to see - in coastal dunes, a small colony of the very quaint Rauparaha's Copper. One Monarch drifting over too. As night fell, I opted this time for the Mangatawhiri Trail quite near the reserve entrance. And what a contrast to the evening before - North Island Brown Kiwi within ten minutes, four sightings of probably three individuals in the first few hundred metres of the trail, an area where the forest track runs adjacent to damp marshland. If this wasn't enough, there was then an additional individual in the open sheep meadow as I walked back to my car! A successful kiwi night indeed.

19 December. Tiritiri Matangi. Departed Tawharanui early to drive 65 km to Gulf Harbour, a Laughing Kookaburra on roadside wires one of the first birds of the day, nicely offset by three adjacent Sacred Kingfishers. Today was the day of Tiritiri Matangi, a true jewel in New Zealand's sparkling crown. With mammalian predators eliminated and many species reintroduced or re-established, this island offers an enticing snapshot of what the rest of New Zealand should be like - forests echoing to weird and wonderful bird calls, a whole bunch of native species fairly abundant. From Gulf Harbour, it was a short (basically birdless) ferry to Tiritiri Matangi, and then the birding began - in the kilometre or so walk up to the lighthouse/bunkhouse (the only buildings on the island), it was a native bird bonanza, some of the first birds seen including New Zealand Bellbirds, North Island Saddlebacks, New Zealand Pigeons, Red-crowned Parakeets and, in abundance, highly melodic Tui. Having checked out the bunkhouse, my new des res, priority number one was to find Takahe - a gawky flightless bird thought extinct for many years until a remnant population was found in a remote area of the Southern Alps. At risk from introduced predators, some were moved to island retreats, including Tiritiri, where they are now doing well. And of the pairs on Tiritiri, one fortunately favours the meadow and bushland behind the lighthouse. So there I went, many Australasian Swamphens plodding about, me giving several a careful look to check I wasn't overlooking the Takahe ...but I needn't have, when suddenly a pair of Takahe strolled out from undergrowth, there was no mistaking - far bigger bird, massive bill. And what crackers they are, top class characters. Not just a pair, but a pair with a well-grown chick, plus an additional adult! In glorious sunshine, I watched these for perhaps an hour, before

deciding it was time to take a walk. Opted for the East Coast Track, a very pleasant and scenic trail - North Island Saddlebacks and North Island Robins at several points, numerous Whiteheads and New Zealand Fantails, plus four Brown Teals on a small pool. Overall, pretty good birding. Later exploration added three excellent Stitchbirds near the lower entrance to the Wattle Track, more splendid North Island Robins and both Eastern Rosella and more Red-crowned Parakeets. Not bad for butterflies too - added several Rauparaha's Coppers within a coastal colony, three Coastal Coppers nearer the island interior, a couple of Monarchs, several Small Whites and my first Common Bush Blues of the trip. Soon however, thoughts were turning to nocturnal offerings - Tiritiri Matangi is the easiest place to see Little Spotted Kiwi, the smallest of New Zealand's five kiwi species. After a couple of hours of relaxing to the evening chorus of Tui and associates, I prepared my night stuff, then wandered down to the coast to await darkness. A half dozen Little Blue Penguins gathering in the bay, three more in viewable nestboxes, plus a few seabirds flying offshore - Fluttering Shearwaters in the main, but also a Flesh-footed Shearwater. And then, as I lost the Little Blue Penguins to fading light, finally it was kiwi time ...and in no time at all, after a bit of rustling in the undergrowth and a ear-piercing screech, I found my first Little Spotted Kiwi - a little corker probing a grassy path just above the quay. Heard several more in the next hour, but failed to see any more. I did however see three very prehistoric looking Giant Wetas! Night over, back to the bunkhouse.

20 December. Tiritiri Matangi. My second and final planned day on Tiritiri Island, the basic idea was to rise at dawn and listen for the calls of North Island Kokako, one of three main species that I had not encountered the day before. Didn't really work out as planned, but successful nonetheless - in the cacophony of calls along Wattle Track, oodles of Tui and Bellbirds, plus a Stitchbird and a few North Island Robins, but not a single Kokako did I hear! Undeterred, I wandered past the Wharf, streams of Fluttering Shearwaters offshore, several Grey-faced Petrels in their midst, then headed towards Kawerau Track, another area reputedly good for Kokako. And it was here my luck changed - in fairly short succession, first a Fernbird, then an exquisite Rifleman and, icing on the cake, a splendid Kokako feeding on grassheads at the side of the track! Purple patch indeed, all three of the key birds I had hoped to see this day. A couple of kilometres further, approaching the northern end of the Island, an even more obliging Kokako, once again feeding on the ground and this time staying for a considerable time. And as I sat on the track and gawked, a pair of Takehe came ambling by, nonchalantly hauling their great bulks less than a metre from me! So, with success on all the desired birds, I took a stroll back along the East Coast Track, the main highlight being a cracking pair of confiding pair of Rifleman aside a footbridge over a gully, a vivid Stitchbird at the same locality. Arriving back at the bunkhouse, I was then to discover why I had not bumped into any day visitors - the boat had been cancelled. Well that put a bit of a spanner in my plans, no chance of getting off the island this day! Thereafter, a bit of a lazy afternoon and early evening, basically waiting for dark for another few hours of nocturnal wandering. And excellent it turned out – though it took rather longer to connect, the results were worth waiting for, two Little Spotted Kiwi at point blank range on Wattle Track, one almost bumping into me! I also encountered a Tuatara, an ancient iguana-like reptile, and a gathering of Tree Weta, a creepy ten of so huddled in a cavity. Nice night, not bad being stranded!

21 December. Miranda & Pureora Forest. Picture postcard weather, not a trace of wind. Departed Tiritiri at 10.30 am, the tourist boat arriving to drop off passengers kindly doing a special run to Gulf Harbour. And from there, via Auckland and exotics such as Spotted Dove and Barbary Dove, shot straight down to Miranda to catch the afternoon high tide. One of the top wader locations in New Zealand, Miranda is pretty amazing on tides that exceed 3.8 metres or so - virtually everything from this part of the Firth of Thames gets pushed onto a shingle bank or pools adjacent to the hides. And so I arrived, an hour or two before high tide, 3000 Bar-tailed Godwits and 1000 South Island Oystercatchers already roosting, plus a nice collection of added extras - 80 or so Red Knot, three Far-eastern Curlews, 20 Pacific Golden Plovers, several Banded Dotterels, a few Ruddy Turnstones and, in pride of place, an impressive 350 Wrybills, amazing birds. Adding to the collection, Black-billed Gulls on the shingle bank, several Caspian Terns, many White-faced Herons and an assortment of cormorants - Great, Little Pied and Little Black). As the tide rose, suddenly the smaller waders were in the air, a wheeling flock of hundreds of Wrybills. Over my head and to pools to my yonder, down they settled right in front of one of the hides. Taking a wander over, what a treat it was- at very close range, lines and lines of Wrybills in their smart finery, along with three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and a few Banded Dotterels. As a backdrop, occasional Australasian Harriers quartering, frequently provoking Masked Lapwings and Pied Stilts to set off in alarm. As the high tide passed, it was time to move on - destination Pureora Forest, a drive of about 2.5 hours. Arrived a little before dark, set up my tent in the Ngaherenga campsite and enjoyed another evening chorus, Tui in full voice, a medley of European flavours added in (Blackbird, Song Thrush, Greenfinch, etc).

22 December. Pureora Forest, Taupo & Jerusalem. A bit cold at dawn - a mere 5 C! Shivered my way out of the tent, first bird a very nice male Tomtit, a new bird for me! Seeking out a patch of early morning sun, I then tried to soak in a bit of warmth while enjoying quite a bit of bird activity - a flock of noisy Kaka on the forest edge, flyover Yellow-crowned Parakeets, a Sacred Kingfisher, my one and only Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo and, perhaps less illustrious, my first Dunnock of the trip (a species that would be abundant for the rest of the trip). Many more birds seen as it warmed up – among a mix of non-native species, also saw flocks of Silvereyes and Grey Warblers, at least ten Whiteheads, one Rifleman and one female Tomtit. Becoming quite hot by 10 am, I then thought I could turn my attention to finding a few butterflies ...this being New Zealand, I found a grand total of just six individuals, all one species! Fortunately it was a new species for me - Maui's Copper. Very similar to Coastal Coppers, a line of dark dots on the underwing seemed to be fairly consistent. Though Pureora Forest really deserved more time, I was acutely aware that I had a ferry booked to South Island next day, the ferry terminal still 450 km away. So, hitting the road, it was time to head south, next stop the Taupo area. First port of call was Wharf Road, a small road 6km north-west of Turangi that crossed a fairly extensive reedbed and ended at Lake Taupo itself. Hundreds of Black Swans and New Zealand Scaup dotted across the water and a very nice place to break for coffee. Black-billed Gulls populated a jetty pushing out into the lake, Welcome Swallows

flitted about and no shortage of Australasian Harriers drifting about. And I was just thinking how fine this area must be for Australasian Bitterns at dawn when one did the honours and flew across! A long slow flight from reeds to the west, over my head and off to reeds in the east - given it was now hot, sunny and mid-afternoon, this was luck indeed! Also Australasian Swamphens, Little Pied Cormorants and Little Black Cormorants here. A mere ten minutes drive away and I was in Turangi, heartland of Blue Duck territory. A curious-looking endemic, this species can sometimes prove rather problematic to find and, except lots of fishermen in the water, indeed I saw nothing at the first site I tried (beneath the main road bridge near town). Looking at the map, there seemed to be a riverside track following the river a few kilometres upstream, so I relocated to continue my search - and almost immediately, bingo! Adjacent to a shingle bank, feeding just off the riverbank, a very fine pair of adult Blue Ducks and a moderately well-grown duckling. Lying on the shingle, slowly the ducks approached, eventually just a few metres away, superb views! Pleased to see them here as my back-up localities all required quite some detour! With my main target of the day seen, I then decided to try and find Nankeen Night Heron - a relatively recent colonist to New Zealand, the only known individuals are a handful along the Whanganui River near the small village of Jerusalem, a two-hour drive to the south, albeit on pretty rubbish roads. On arrival, I was a bit dismayed to find seemingly endless habitat, a vast number of suitable roost trees and no obvious place they might hang out, or indeed any particular locality I might wait at dusk to see them. With no precise location, I very quickly understood that I was not going to see them and instead turned my attention to a number of butterflies that were active - as well as abundant Small Whites, a whole bunch of Common Bush Blues and, better still, just before the sun vanished behind clouds, two New Zealand Red Admirals, another new species for me. Then, however, a stroke of luck - seeing a few flowering shrubs across the main road bridge, I decided to potter across to check for butterflies. And what did I find? In a tree next to the bridge, one adult Nankeen Night Heron! Success! With that, with a bunch of Peafowl calling on the opposite hillside, I continued south for another hour or so, eventually turning inland to a nice campsite not far from Otaki.

23 December. North Island-South Island. Ferry day between North Island and South Island, but first a little time to savour the delights of Otaki Sewage Pools. Heaps of birds here, hundreds of Paradise Shelducks, 135 Australasian Shovelers, one New Zealand Little Grebe and oodles of other waterbirds, but also one special species - the main reason for my visit, and not too difficult to find, one smart Black-fronted Dotterel trotting along the water's edge. This was a welcome bird indeed, and it would be the only one I would see on my trip. With that, it was down to Wellington to await the ferry. Departed under grey skies, already a Fluttering Shearwater or two milling in the bay, White-fronted Terns patrolling the coastline. Not much to report for the first half hour or so as we chugged out through Wellington Harbour, but then we hit the open waters of Cook Strait, now in full sunshine and with a nice southern swell running. And from then on, for the ninety minutes in Cook Strait, birds galore - my first albatrosses of the trip (several White-capped Albatrosses, one Gibson's Wandering Albatross, three Southern Royal Albatrosses), plus well over 100 Fairy Prions, often right up against the ferry, as well as numerous Buller's Shearwaters riding the considerable waves. As my first ever venture into New Zealand waters, identification was a bit challenging to say and quite a few more distant birds sailed by without names, but in amongst the above and numerous Fluttering Shearwaters, did pick out at least two Westland Petrels, one Sooty Shearwater and, rather easier, three Arctic Skuas. All too soon, we entered the sheltered waters of Marlborough Sound, signalling an almost immediate halt to most of the seabirds, though Fluttering Shearwaters remained abundant right up to Picton, along with lesser numbers of Australasian Gannets and plenty of White-fronted Terns. Had hoped to fluke a New Zealand King Shag, but that really would have been lucky. Had to settle for several Pied Cormorants instead. And so I was now on South Island, part two of my New Zealand adventure beginning. Scheduled for a boat trip from Kaikoura next morning, I immediately headed south, sufficient time for two stops on route - Blenheim Sewage Pools and Elterwater. Effectively twitching local rarities at both, my targets fell with ease - Glossy Ibis at Blenheim (a pair breeding in a bustling colony of Royal Spoonbills), then three cracking Hoary-headed Grebes at Elterwater (a rare vagrant from Australia, though breeders at this site). I continued to within a few kilometres of Kaikoura, then headed inland to a quaint campsite surrounded by native bushland, sounds of Tui and Morepork ringing out as I pitched my tent.

24 December. Kaikoura. Warm, still and sunny, a perfect day for playing around on the water. Started the day with an unsuccessful attempt to find Cirl Bunting on the south side of Kaikoura, but I can't say I was too fussed - at 9.00 am, I was boarding a small boat with two others for a trip out to the waters above the Kaikoura Canyon just a couple of kilometres offshore. Here, in waters that plunge from less than 100 metres deep to almost 1400 metres, resultant upwellings bring pelagic birds galore ...and, chugging out there in our little boat, we were immediately met by the first of the mega birds - three Northern Giant Petrels on the water, then a cracking Gibson's Wandering Albatross arching in to greet us. Not stupid these birds, they pretty much understood that we had offerings of fish liver, perfect breakfast for them. By the time we cut the engine, a medley of albatrosses and giant petrels had already gathered. Overboard went our 'bait ball', in came the albatrosses ... totally amazing, a squabbling rabble of three-metre wingspans at barely a metre distant. Mesmerising it was, a constant grunting and gurgling discord between the Northern Giant Petrels and the albatrosses, all to the backdrop of a dozen petite Cape Petrels paddling around. Initially the albatrosses consisted of three or four Gibson's Wandering Albatross and perhaps six Salvin's Albatrosses, but soon other species appeared too - with massive pink bills, first a couple of Southern Royal Albatrosses, then their close relative, the darker backed Northern Royal Albatross. Fantastic, four species of albatross together ... and then there were five, a smaller White-capped Albatross flying in and settling to bob on the waves just yonder. And all in perfect weather! Spent a couple of hours out here, relocating a few times, each time dragging the albatross posse with us. Added attractions included a fly-by White-chinned Petrel, a smart Westland Petrel at the bait ball, one Sooty Shearwater, one slightly distant Hutton's Shearwater and one Arctic Skua. After a luxurious fill of albatrosses and petrels, we then chugged back to Kaikoura, Dusky

Dolphins and New Zealand Fur Seals en route back, plus common coastal birds, Red-billed Gulls et al. Well, that wasn't bad at all! Back on dry land, another quick look for Cirl Bunting again drew a blank, so I then headed south to St Ann's Lagoon, sometimes home to Cape Barren Goose. Well, it wasn't home to any on this day, I walked around the entire lake and not a sign of them did I see. It was however a pretty productive walk - not only did I stumble across a nest of an Australasian Harrier, complete with four big hissing chicks and assorted hedgehog skins, but I also found my only Yellow Admirals and Southern Bush Blue of the trip, plus a single Monarch and several Small Whites. And then to end this Christmas Eve, I drove down to Canterbury, had a quick look at Lake Ellesmere (lots of Wrybills and Banded Dotterels), then continued onward to Twizel, high in the Southern Alps. Arriving a little before dark, I set up camp at a nice place adjacent to a small river. No Santa Claus to report, no calling Moreporks or anything else either.

25 December. Twizel & Omaru. Merry Christmas, I woke just after dawn and was rather pleased to see blue skies and promise of sun. In the absence of offerings by Santa Claus, I decided it only fitting to target one of the rarest birds in the world on this day - the enigmatic Black Stilt, global population 130 individuals. Unlike its cousin, the abundant and widespread Pied Stilt, Black Stilts are restricted to a few braided streams in the heights of the Southern Alps. And Twizel is just about the heartland of the restricted range, most of the remaining pairs on shallow streams nearby. So it was, I drove down the length of Lake Pukaki and to the maze of streams that enter from the north. At my intended destination, just beyond Glentanner airstrip, heavy rain in the preceding weeks had left the streams totally flooded, the shallow shingles flavoured by the Black Stilts totally submerged. No big issue, I merely relocated a few kilometres upstream and began my exploration - Black-billed Gulls and Black-fronted Terns along the river, Australasian Harrier flying over. Quickly found South Island Oystercatchers and Banded Dotterels, then about a half kilometre down I spied my target, one Black Stilt. One problem, it was rather distant and on the opposite side of a rather deep river! Failing to find any further individuals on my side of the river, I decided to wade across. Bad move! Fast flowing and cold, I got about midway and realized the current was seriously pushing my legs from under me, I began to predict an icy plunge and a goodbye to my optical equipment. Fortunately, having had the good idea of taking a sturdy stick with me, I gingerly edged the remainder of the way across and reached the opposite bank without incident. I was not looking forward to crossing back! Of more immediate concern was that the Black Stilt was no longer on the stream where it had been, it had disappeared! Fortunately, a few hundred metres further, I found another individual quietly feeding on a backwater. Cracking views of this one, feeding on its chosen pool not caring in the least about my presence. After a half hour or so with the bird, it then suddenly decided enough was enough and flew off, landing on another pool some hundreds of metres away! I decided it was time to cross the river again - opting for a deeper crossing place this time, I reckoned the current would be less with greater depth. And fortunately it proved so, I crossed without problem. With the sun still shining, it was now time to turn my attention to butterflies. Having seen a few coppers a little earlier, I set off to search them out and, in not much time at all, I was watching them - quite a few Coastal Coppers and, better still, a couple of colonies of the tiny Boulder Coppers, the exquisite males a glorious purple colour as they catch the light while sunning on rocks, the females a little drabber. In their midst, another new butterfly in the form of a Common Tussock, a butterfly that flies a lot, but lands very clumsily. I had hopes of further butterflies, but sadly it clouded over in the early afternoon, so I decided to quit the mountains and head down to the coast at Omaru for the evening, one more Christmas Day treat possible there. On route out, passing the flooded streams at Glentanner, I thought it worth a quick scan - and indeed it was, five Black Stilts paddling around in a patch of waterlogged grass! One adult, four immatures. At the coast, my first stop was in the harbour in Omaru - upon an old jetty, a mass of breeding cormorants, a line of Spotted Shags along one edge, then a packed mass of Otago Cormorants occupying the main part of the jetty, at least 300 in all. Not only a new species for me, but actually a new species completely - a result of a recent split of Stewart Island Shag into two separate species, namely Foveaux Shag and Otago Shag. It has to be said, however, they both look very much the same! I then relocated to Bushy Beach, a half dozen kilometres away, there unfolded my Christmas night - a clifftop overlooking a beach, damp and chilly, a grey sea, a couple of Fur Seals in the surf. An hour and a half of peering at an empty beach, two fellow observers to keep me company, nothing much seen. But then it happened, just as the sun went down, out of the sea waddled four Yellow-eyed Penguins, right crackers. One by one, they waddled up to an area of pebble beach, then paused 15 minutes or so, each engaging in a bit of display and squawking near non-stop. Too distant for photographs, but as they vanished into the shrubbery at the base of the slope, I departed only to find two more hanging out in the bushes at the top of the slope - absolutely superb, classic penguins and just a couple of metres away!

And so ended Christmas Day, or almost so, I then not very cleverly went through a speed camera to conclude the day. Camped a few kilometres south.

26 December. Otago Peninsula & Nugget Point. Fairly easy-going day, mainly seawatching at Taiaroa Head on the Otago Peninsula and at Nugget Point, dodging showers and getting a few butterflies in the occasional sunny spell. Taiaroa Head, best known for the only mainland colony of Northern Royal Albatrosses in the world, was excellent - a mass of breeding Red-billed Gulls all around the car park, then a treat of albatrosses offshore, a grand total of six species, I managed both Northern and Southern Royal Albatrosses (six and 14 respectively), plus three Gibson's Wandering Albatrosses, a bunch of White-capped Albatrosses, one Salvin's Albatrosses and, new for the trip, three Buller's Albatrosses. Not bad! Also one Northern Giant Petrel, one Hutton's Shearwater and moderately common Sooty Shearwaters further offshore. About 120 km to the south, seawatching at Nugget Point got delayed by a half-hour spell of sunny weather on arrival ...signal for me to look for butterflies. Not bad results (for New Zealand) - four species, plentiful Coastal Coppers on the cliff edge, a dozen of so Common Tussocks on grassy slopes, one fly-by New Zealand Red Admiral and, completing the set, one Small White. As cloud returned, back to birding I went - colonies of Otago

Shags, Spotted Shags and Royal Spoonbills on rock stacks, plus a reasonable bunch of birds on the sea, not least a minimum of 25 White-capped Albatrosses, one Gibson's Wandering Albatross and two Southern Royal Albatrosses, along with masses of Sooty Shearwaters, one Hutton's Shearwater, singles of White-chinned Petrel and Cape Petrel and, rather pleasing, seven Little Penguins bobbing about and an impressive 30 or so Northern Giant Petrels. Eight Arctic Skuas also. To complete the day, I popped down to the hide overlooking a beach just short of Nugget Point - as the sun set, one very nice Yellow-eyed Penguin up onto the beach and one Pacific Reef Heron on rocks at the edge of the bay.

27 December. Invercargill. Didn't have much planned for this day, did even less due to rain for half the day! Started on a high however, with a speculative trip to Awarua Bay producing a hoped-for Australian Gull-billed Tern. First ever breeding record for New Zealand, I didn't know the locality, but did know they were located on the edge of a Kelp Gull colony – 'find the gulls, so find the tern' was my reckoning. Needed a bit of luck given the vastness of Awarua Bay, but it seems the Gods of Fortune were smiling down – tucked in at the end of the first Kelp Gull colony I found, there was a Gull-billed Tern! A smart bird indeed, even nicer for a Caspian Tern alongside. Nearby, Turnstones and Variable Oystercatchers on the mudflats, several Banded Dotterels on the shingle, including one bird incubating on a nest. Royal Spoonbills and Australasian Harriers completed the line up. With that, so started the rain, a gusting wind picking up too. Popped into Invercargill on the off-chance that a party of Australian Shelducks reported a couple of weeks earlier might still be lingering. They weren't, but Tip Lagoon, their chosen home for a few days, was pretty productive nonetheless – hundreds of Black Swans, a mass of assorted ducks (Paradise Shelduck, New Zealand Scaup, Grey Teal, Pacific Black Duck, etc). Also checked the adjacent estuary, still no Australian Shelducks, but before rain stopped play, did note 35 Royal Spoonbills, 150 or so South Island Oystercatchers and a few dozen Bar-tailed Godwits. By now, a fairly impressive storm was brewing, the wind blowing stuff sideways. Got a phone call that my scheduled pelagic off Stewart Island in a few days was likely cancelled, so sat in my car and sulked till the rain stopped. But stop it did, so I then headed for Bluff Point to see if I could find a few seabirds in the buffeting wind. Bit too windy and very little cover, but did find one little nook to watch for a couple of hours – not a patch on Otago or Nugget Points, but did notch up about 360 Sooty Shearwaters per hour, plus about 15 White-capped Albatrosses and, a nice surprise, one Subantarctic Little Shearwater motoring through at close range. With the wind showing no sign of abating, I decided against camping and stayed very close to the Bluff ferry terminal, hopefully my ferry to Stewart Island wouldn't be cancelled next morning!

28 December. Stewart Island & Ulva Island. Given the state of the sea, I was pretty impressed that the ferry was running – this was no large boat, but a small catamaran! But gee, it was a memorable crossing! Had hoped for high winds to bring birds into the Foveaux Strait, but this was really over the top …with waves crashing right over the stern and the boat plunging and rocking, I simply couldn't use binoculars for the first 20 minutes or so, rather frustrating as heaps of birds were battling the sea! About half way across, now slightly sheltered by Stewart Island, it was just about possible to use binoculars by bracing against metal uprights ...and fantastic it was, thousands of Sooty Shearwater effortlessly cutting over the waves and a good bunch of albatrosses likewise looking quite at home (at least 40 White-capped Albatrosses, a single Salvin's Albatross and my only Black-browed Albatross of the trip). Though conditions left many birds unidentified, there were no problems with Common Diving Petrels - wonderful birds, like little humbugs whirring through the great troughs, an absolute minimum of 18 seen. Also three White-chinned Petrels, one Cook's Petrel and, highlight of the crossing, one superb Mottled Petrel right adjacent to the ferry. Arriving on Stewart Island, a considerable number of passengers looked none too well, but I was well-chuffed. Ever the glutton for punishment, I decided to immediately take a water taxi across to Ulva Island, another very bumpy crossing, albeit a mere 15 minutes. And so it was, I was now on Ulva Island, quite possibly the single best birding locality in New Zealand in terms of native land species. South Island Robins hopping around my feet, flightless Weka equally tame, flocks of mixed Red-crowned and Yellow-crowned Parakeets, four noisy Kaka ...and this was just the first quarter hour or so! Spent about five hours on the island and it truly was a most enjoyable experience - in dense forest draped in mosses and enhanced by enormous ferns, it was non-stop excellent birds, South Island Robins alone numbered at least 35, while the two parakeets topped minimums of 40 and 10 for Red-crowned and Yellow-crowned respectively. Continuing, it was top quality birds everywhere - flocks of Yellowheads and New Zealand Brown Creepers, several South Island Saddlebacks, a few South Island Tomtits, one Rifleman and, among the more common birds, plenty of Tui, New Zealand Fantails and New Zealand Pigeons. A pause on a beach not bad too - as well as two inquisitive Weka and a male Tomtit at the beach edge, also had a pair of Variable Oystercatchers with a chick, one Little Blue Penguin offshore and, on the non-bird front, one very impressive New Zealand Sea Lion dominating the sands! Crossed back to Stewart Island late afternoon, an impressive number of White-capped Albatrosses as I did so. On Stewart Island, having checked into my accommodation, I was now turning my thoughts to evening activities - the hope being my third kiwi species of the trip, Southern Brown Kiwi. At sunset approached, I started off with a quick visit to the town wharf, where Little Blue Penguins promptly performed, clambering up boulders to nests in crannies right adjacent to the jetty. From then on however, things went rather downhill - from darkness at about 10 pm till long into the early hours, I wandered the hinterland of Oban in search of my target. Heard a presumed individual rustling in the undergrowth along Hicks Road, saw both introduced Wild Boar and White-tailed Deer, even had a friendly encounter with the local police at 1.00 am on a lonely road far from town, but as for a kiwi sighting, not even a glimpse! Finally gave up at 2.00 am, returned to my accommodation, zero Southern Brown Kiwi.

29 December. Stewart Island. Mist and gloom for much of the morning, clearing only in the afternoon. No big deal however, today was really planned as a day of relative leisure before heading out after dark again. Did take a long walk out to Ackers Point, partly to see if any seabirds offshore (highlights a Grey-faced Petrel and a Common Diving Petrel), partly also to recce for my night wanderings, then also walked to Horseshoe Point (pleasant scenery, ten Kaka, two

Yellow-crowned Parakeets, several New Zealand Bellbirds, etc). One New Zealand Falcon also seen, flying across the main bay in Oban. An easy day over, so evening arrived, time for attempt number two on Southern Brown Kiwi. Was determined to have better luck this evening, so started with a 4km walk from Oban town out to Ackers Point. Masses of Sooty Shearwaters offshore and as darkness fell, so they came ashore, the tip of Ackers Point an active breeding colony ... truly remarkable to have Sooty Shearwaters flopping through the tree canopy and crashing onto the ground, the eerie wailing of many more birds emanating from slopes all around. A bit noisy to hear kiwis here, so I slowly wandered the coastal path a few kilometres to Golden Bay, fantastic habitat all the way. Several Little Blue Penguins wandering through the woodland, but not a squeak of a kiwi. Checked the golf course, nothing. Checked trails beyond Golden Bay, classic kiwi habitat, but also nothing. It was now approaching 1.00 am and a sense of déjà vu was setting in, a repeat of the night before! Checked the town's rugby field and the forest trails beyond, nothing. Oh groan, I wandered roads west of Oban, 2.00 am came and went. I decided to check one last area, the road up towards the airfield, got a fair way up and nothing, but then a loud characteristic screech - a Southern Brown Kiwi in dense cover right next to the road, three metres distant at most. But invisible! I waited patiently, fully expecting the bird to emerge to feed on the grassy road verge, but I could clearly hear it trudging the opposite direction! And so went my closest encounter with my bird. That was quite enough for me, I decided it was time to call it quits, turned and started back to my accommodation ...but there, a mere few metres back, bold as brass, one fantastic Southern Brown Kiwi feeding out in the open on a garden lawn!!! It was now 2.45 am, I finally had my reward after two nights of searching - and an amazing reward it turned out to be, it simply wandered around at a distance of just a couple of metres, first on the lawn, then shuffling around at the base of a hedge. Best views I would get of any of New Zealand's kiwis! I left the bird after 3.00 am, very pleased indeed. Back to accommodation I went, sleep well deserved.

30 December. Stewart Island & Ulva Island. With my pelagic cancelled and having scored my Southern Brown Kiwi the previous evening, I nipped down to the ferry port first thing and changed my ticket, departing this day instead of the next as planned. I then popped over to Ulva Island for another look round - pretty much the same birds as a couple of days earlier (Yellowheads, South Island Saddlebacks, South Island Robins, etc), but with one added curious sight - in dense forest right in the centre of the island, a female Sea Lion with pup! A most strange sight in the thick of the forest, apparently the females haul themselves into the forest to have their pups to avoid the heavyweight males who could otherwise squash the pups. A regular horde of White-capped Albatrosses on the hop back to Stewart Island, then a couple of hours to kill before the ferry back across the Foveaux Strait. Though far calmer than on my outward journey, winds had fortunately picked up somewhat, good omens for another productive crossing. And pretty good it turned out to be - White-capped Albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters as expected, plus a pleasing minimum of 30 Common Diving Petrels, three Cook's Petrels, a single White-chinned Petrel and a distant probable Mottled Petrel. Also managed one Little Blue Penguin, a couple of Foveaux Shags and, quite near Bluff, one Pomarine Skua, my only one of the trip. Once in Bluff, now late afternoon, I retrieved my car and set off for the scenic delights of the Southern Alps, the road to Milford Sound to be precise. Had plans to explore the rocky slopes adjacent to Homer Tunnel the following day, so drove as far as the Eglinton River Valley this evening, camping at the quaint Mackay Creek campsite, one South Island Robin greeting me on arrival, Moreporks calling after dark.

31 December. Homer Tunnel. Fantastic day - cracking weather (sun and up to 32 C) and amazing birds. An initial shock at Homer Tunnel however - in the exact area favoured by Rock Wrens, very prominent signs declared the area closed due to rockfall risk, all parking and walking prohibited. Given there are really no other easily accessible localities for this species in New Zealand, I pondered my options and decided the best would be to park a few hundred metres further down, then access the slopes on the opposite side - an amazing landscape of snow-capped peaks and rugged scree slopes, richly dotted in boulders. A half hour or so of scrambling, then loud piercing calls echoing across the slopes - I knew what that had to be, Kea! And indeed it was, four flying around over boulder fields a little higher. I started to hike up towards them ...but then they spotted me! And all four promptly flew down to meet me, landing on large boulders just metres away, calling loudly. As I admired them, they hopped from rock to rock, approaching ever closer. And then their intention became clear - they wanted my shoes! They boldly approached and attempted to pull the rubber from the soles of the shoes upon my feet - I was being mugged by mountain parrots with oversized beaks! Kea encounters over, I turned my thoughts to Rock Wren. By chance, two other birders appeared on the slope at this moment, folks I had also met on Stewart Island, and they had just seen Rock Wren. Excellent, tracked back to where they had seen the birds and, in not much time at all, one classic Rock Wren was on show - darting from boulder to boulder, a splendid fellow indeed. As for the rest of the day, I also had the idea to find one very localised endemic butterfly that should be on these very same slopes - the West Alpine Boulder Copper. Spent many hours in my endeavour, and ended up finding three pairs of Rock Wrens in the process, including a pair feeding young at the nest. As for the butterfly, I had success too - only a single individual, but a nice male West Alpine Boulder Copper active on a pebbly area in a dry stream bed, always landing on stones to sun itself. A little later, I did consider taking a cruise in Milford Sound, but seeing the port area was heaving with tourists, and knowing the very low likelihood of Fjordland Crested Penguin at this season, I soon changed my mind and instead began the long drive north. Stopped and camped near Haast.

1 January. Munro Beach & Okarito. New Year's Day, mini attempt for a big day total - didn't do too badly for New Zealand, seeing 52 species in a limited amount of habitat diversity. Moreover, also had hopes for two particular species - Fjordland Crested Penguin and Okarito Kiwi. Of these, the first is generally out to sea from December to mid-January, so didn't have big expectations, while the second, though globally endangered with a population of just 350 or so, is relatively easy to see. So, dawn of the year 2020, Munro Beach, high cloud, calm sea. And not a penguin to be seen! Still, what with White-capped Albatross and Westland Petrel offshore, plus New Zealand Dotterel and Variable Oystercatchers on the beach, it wasn't a bad way to start the year. After ascertaining there really were no Fjordland

Crested Penguins lurking in the bay, I explored the neighbouring forest a little, thick luxuriant woodland with abundant ferns and moss, a couple of Kaka making a racket, Tui and Silvereyes common, several New Zealand Fantails and South Island Tomtits adding to the native mix. From here, I continued north through a mosaic of forestland and pasture, adding abundant open country birds such as Australasian Swamphen, Masked Lapwing and Sacred Kingfishers before finally arriving at Okarito about midday. Strong smell of smoke and offshore haze ... from 2000 km distant, the effects of the Australian fires had reached New Zealand! Simultaneously this day, Auckland experienced orange skies and the Fox Glacier turned a caramel brown. At Okarito, my goal was the nocturnal Okarito Kiwi, so with hours to kill, I ignored the smell of smoke and explored the coastline and vast Okarito Lagoon as best I could. Best way is to rent a canoe, but sticking to land I still did okay - Banded Dotterel and South Island Oystercatchers on the beach, Caspian Terns and a Black-billed Gull at the rivermouth (along with Kelp and Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns), Fernbirds on a small marsh. As for Okarito Lagoon, ten Eastern White Egrets (best place in New Zealand for this species), hundreds of Black Swans and a good bunch of common ducks and waders. Then, decided to check out the area in which I would be seeking Okarito Kiwi in a few hours - 6 km inland, the road section near the entrance to the Pakihi Walk is generally thought to be productive. Not bad forest, Grey Warblers, South Island Tomtits and three South Island Robins along the walk, as well as New Zealand Pigeons et al. Better however, a nice grassy track adjacent to the road that seemed perfect for kiwis, plus broad grassy verges to the road itself. Finally darkness arrived, Moreporks calling as dusk descended, two soon showing exceptionally well. Kitted out with red torch and a good dose of patience, I began my kiwi search - nothing on the grassy track, bar another very cooperative Morepork, so I turned to the road. Concentrated on the half kilometre below Pakihi Walk, basically adopting the strategy of standing in total darkness and silence waiting for one to hopefully approach. Perhaps a half hour of this and a bit of rustling in the depths of the darkness, undoubtedly a kiwi on the prowl. Art here was to suppress the urge to flick on the torch, but instead to wait in the pitch black until it was probably in a position that it could be seen. Fifteen minutes more of sporadic rustles, but not a single squeak, then the bird was clearly emerging onto the verge & flicked on the red light, Okarito Kiwi in full view, a female stretching up to peer at this human intruder. Back into the vegetation it went. A few minutes later, back out onto the verge it came, thereafter trotting across the road, its oversize feet plodding right past me. Thereafter, for 50 metres or so, it slowly wandered down the verge, feeding quite content and showing very well. Fifteen minutes to midnight, an excellent end to the first day of the year. Camped at the DOC site near the main road junction.

2 January. Arthur's Pass. Shifted 220 km with the plan to search for three endemic butterflies around Arthur's Pass this day. Rain however effectively cancelled that - a near write-off day, drizzle alternating with heavy downpours almost right through. Two soggy Keas near my parked car, one bedraggled South Island Robin, about the best of the day. Near 5 pm however, suddenly blue skies and a picture perfect evening, warm and sunny. A bit late for butterflies, but I did indeed find one of my targets - along with a couple of Coastal Coppers, there were also four Canterbury Alpine Boulder Coppers, these tiny little butterflies most exquisite. Capped off the evening with an attempt on Great Spotted Kiwi - now probably with eggs or young chicks, I didn't even hear one. My expectation to not see this species was correct!

3 January. Cheeseman Mountain and the Canterbury Area. Woke to perfect butterfly conditions - warm sun and no wind. With a cap of cloud over Arthur's Pass itself, I dropped 30 km to the west and took a gravel road up to a ski area below Mount Cheeseman. Great habitat for my two targets - large patches of snow tussock at 900 m altitude for Janita's Tussock, then high scree areas at 1400-1500 m for Black Mountain Ringlet. A very pleasing hour or so at the lower site, plentiful Canterbury Alpine Boulder Coppers sunning on tracks and rocks, a couple of Coastal Coppers, then as it warmed a little, the first of several tussock butterflies - weak fliers, but very mobile nonetheless. Were they Common or Janita's Tussock? At this altitude, they should be Janita's Tussock, and as I finally saw several settle, indeed they were! Pronounced veins on the upper wings, a lack of silver edging to the underwing streaks - distinctive features. So, with those seen, up to the higher altitudes I went for Black Mountain Ringlet. A specialist of scree slopes, this one took a bit more searching. A half hour or so following a zigzag track up the mountain, then a first moving blackish butterfly zipping over the scree. A bit of a scramble on my part, but there he was - Black Mountain Ringlet. A faster mover on scree than me, no photographs however. A second was rather more cooperative, kindly landing right at the track's edge - a nice butterfly. Also at this altitude, had a few more Canterbury Alpine Boulder Coppers and a couple more Janita's Tussocks, but all too soon clouds began to blot the blue skies. By 2 pm, the show was over - cloud cover and then drizzle precluding any further butterfly action. Still, I had found the main species that I wanted, so then decided to head down to coastal areas near Canterbury. South of Canterbury, I have to admit to detouring to twitch Mute Swans on Cooper's Lagoon (finding a flock of 36), then I spent the remainder of the afternoon at two localities north of Canterbury in wasted attempts to find Cape Barren Goose, another rare but introduced species. At site 1, sewage settling pools that were difficult to actually observe, I did get a Baillon's Crake, while site 2, the Travis Wetland Park, was pretty birdy overall, but produced nothing new. As darkness fell, I began a night drive towards Lewis Pass, got about two-thirds of the way and called it a night, camping roadside.

4 January. Lewis Pass. Another butterfly day, or at least that's what I had planned ...it turned out rather weather challenged again. Targets were Harris's Tussock and Butler's Ringlet, both high altitude range-restricted species. My chosen spot looked quite close to the road on the map, what I hadn't appreciated however was the vertical distance - it was a hard 2.5 hour slog up the side of a mountain to get to the desired grasslands! Couldn't complain too much though - in the moss-laden dwarf forest en route up, a whole bunch of interesting birds, not least 15 or so Rifleman, several Brown Creepers, a single South Island Tomtit and lots off Grey Warblers, New Zealand Bellbirds and Silvereyes. Having climbed under grey skies and strong winds, I had few thoughts of finding butterflies when I finally reached the grasslands flanking the summit. Miraculously, the clouds did break just as I reached the top, a moderately pleasant sun appearing. That said, the winds never abated and it remained pretty cold, thus I explored the more in hope than expectation. Almost immediately, however, I was rewarded for my effort - not a butterfly, but several pairs of New Zealand Pipits, a bird that

had been eluding me all trip! At least six in total, these would remain the only ones I would see on the trip. As for butterflies, I saw a grand total of one individual - a fast moving dark butterfly that I initially assumed would be a Butler's Ringlet. Alas no, after I chased it across the grassland, it settled and revealed its identity - an out-of-habitat Black Mountain Ringlet, the species I had found the day before! Clambered back down the mountain, drove west for 2.5 hours, arriving a couple of hours before dark. Perfect timing, I started by admiring gathering Westland Petrels off Pancake Rocks (also admiring three Wekas and the impressive geological formations and sea funnels), then headed up the nearby Bullock Creek Road for another attempt on Great Spotted Kiwi. A badly damaged road by recent floods and officially closed, I nevertheless got the end and waited for dark, roosting Kaka making quite some noise. As for Great Spotted Kiwi, I was somewhat more successful than at Arthur's Pass, in as much as I heard a single calling at some distance, but equally unsuccessful in as much as nothing seen. To be honest however, I only gave it a half-hearted attempt - I was slightly worried that it might rain and flood the already washed-out road, so I pretty soon backtracked, drove to Westport and camped.

5 January. Nelson Area. Easy-going day in the Nelson area, general birding along the coast at a number of localities. Started off at the Motueka Spit, catching the falling tide - hundreds of Bar-tailed Godwits and South Island Oystercatchers dotting the mudflats, Turnstones and Red Knots in far smaller numbers and, among them, my sole Whimbrel of the trip. Even nicer, one immature New Zealand Falcon sitting on a stump. Plenty of White-faced Herons too, plus one Weka nearby. Thereafter a mini-twitch to the Playhouse Cafe near Mapua. Usually a vagrant to New Zealand, a small population of Australian Wood Ducks seems to have established itself in recent years in the Mapua area, the pool outside the Playhouse Cafe being one of the more reliable localities for them. And so it proved - it took all of two minutes to find the desired birds, a pair feeding on a grassy lawn adjacent to the pool, one half-grown youngster with them. Now late afternoon, via a McDonald's for a coffee, it was onward towards the Picton area. Noticing some settling pools on the map, I decided to take a short detour just north of Nelson onto Boulder Bank Drive - a good move, the pools were packed with ducks, hundreds of Grey Teal, Pacific Black Ducks and New Zealand Scaups, plus plenty of Paradise Shelducks, Black Swans and Australian Shovelers. Even better, the adjacent bay was full of seabirds - perhaps a sewage outflow, something was attracting the birds, at least 500 White-fronted Terns in a feeding frenzy, along with huge numbers of Kelp and Red-billed Gulls, plus two Black-billed Gulls. Joining them, a few Australasian Gannets, 250 or so Fluttering Shearwaters and at least four Westland Petrels. Adding to the visual spectacle, 16 Arctic Skuas also active, swirling non-stop after the terns, stealing fish before they got to waiting young on the adjacent beach. As the sun began to set, I continued to Picton and, arriving after dark, found a quiet campsite east of town.

6 January. Marlborough Sound & Blumine Island. The twin attractions of Marlborough Sound and Blumine Island, almost legendary in birding circles - Marlborough Sound for the highly localised New Zealand King Shag, Blumine for being just about the only locality offering a reasonable chance of Orange-fronted Parakeet. And to see either, no choice but to take a boat. Several companies operate out of Picton into the neighbouring area, but only two - E-ko and Cougar - offer a drop-off on Blumine Island. I had contacted Cougar some time earlier and all was arranged, with the caveat that they couldn't land on Blumine if too windy (no wharf, beach landing only).

Day of departure, blue skies, no wind, calm sea …. no worries I thought. Wrong! Cougar said they didn't want to go, suggesting wind was forecast for later in the day. This was a major spanner in the works - it was really today or never, strong winds really were forecast for subsequent days! Popped over to the E-ko office, all of 50 metres away, and news there was far more positive - "perfect conditions for Blumine" they said. Yay, they had a half dozen folk heading for another island and they could take me to Blumine and pick me up two hours later or five hours later, my choice. I gambled on the shorter option. And, after a quick chat with the skipper, no problem with New Zealand King Shag, they would stop off at favoured roost points en route. Top marks to E-ko, less than 20 minutes later I was onboard motoring out of the harbour. Little did I know this about to turn into one of the best days of the trip! Little Blue Penguin as we headed out into the open sound, Pied Cormorant and Spotted Shag also. Bit of history and culture as we chugged along the coast, plenty of common birds too (White-fronted Terns, etc). All too soon, we were heading for a small rocky headland, some rather bold black and white birds roosting on one boulder, King Shags! Endemic to this single body of coastal water, the total population of New Zealand King Shags is just a few hundred birds and all breed on a handful of rocky islets within Marlborough Sound. And here we were, five of these dandy birds in front of us. I moved up onto the bow of the boat, in we slowly drifted, excellent stuff, nice views. Onward, next stop Blumine Island. Not far short of the island, fins appeared in the water, a pod of cetaceans ahead. 'Darn', I thought, glancing at the other tourists 'we'll end up half an hour sitting with dolphins, eating up my time on Blumine.' As we headed their way, my thoughts changed somewhat, 'mighty big fins … oh jeepers, that's not dolphins!' At this stage, even the skipper was quite excited - in front of us was a pod of Orca! The skipper commented that he'd been operating on these waters for over seven years and this was only the fourth time he'd seen Orcas. So a red letter day, and it just got better and better - almost an hour we stayed with them, the four Orcas frequently coming right up and under our boat, diving then reappearing, one time even breaching. And then, the cream on the cake, the big female dived and then suddenly surfaced alongside our boat with a shark in her mouth! She dropped it in front of the youngster also present, this adolescent then taking control of the shark, cruising alongside mother, shark in its mouth, blood oozing. What an experience! As the hour mark approached, the skipper announced it time to move on, New Zealand environmental regulations do not permit operators to remain with any cetaceans for more than one hour. Due to the extended time with these Orcas, the skipper suggested a change of itinerary to the other tourists - we all go to Blumine rather than their original island some distance further. No complaints from anybody aboard, so 10 minutes later I was jumping off the front of the boat into Blumine Island, slopes of lush forests rising above. E-ko guy suggested the best place for the Orange-fronted Parakeets would be right next to where we landed, a bushy area adjacent to a sandwich-sized patch of grass. Off the other tourists went for a hike, next to the

beach I stayed. Silvereyes and New Zealand Bellbirds in roving flocks, quite a few Tui and New Zealand Fantails, two Yellowheads, four South Island Tomtits, a nice mix. New Zealand Pigeons flying over, then the stars of the island - feeding quietly in a low tree barely a metre or so back from the beach, a pair of Orange-fronted Parakeets. It is a honour to see these birds - away from Blumine and three other small predator-free islands, the remaining population is now restricted to just four valleys on South Island, the numbers probably less than 100 individuals and continuing to decline. I completed my short visit to Blumine Island with a walk on the beach to watch several Weka strolling along, then pausing for a few butterflies - one New Zealand Red Admiral, one Coastal Copper and eight Small Whites. Returning to Picton early afternoon, I then decided to tweak my itinerary. I was scheduled to leave South Island two days later, but having seen all I was likely to see on South Island, I popped into Bluebridge ferry office to see if I could change my ticket. Good folk there, though the ferry was fully booked for days, they put me on standby and, low and behold, I got a place on the very next ferry! So 2pm, onboard I went, very much looking forward to another crossing of the Cook Strait. Smaller numbers of shearwaters than on the crossing two weeks earlier, but amply compensated by an impressive albatross showing, both Cook's and Northern Giant Petrels and, once again, loads of Fairy Prions.

In total: Southern Royal Albatross - 10 White-capped Albatross - 45+ Salvin's Albatross - 8 Northern Giant Petrel - 1 Cook's Petrel - 1 Fairy Prion - 80+ White-chinned Petrel - 4 Buller's Shearwater - 10 Sooty Shearwater - 1 Fluttering Shearwater - 40+ Australasian Gannet - 25 Arctic Skua - 2 Kelp Gull - com Red-billed Gull - sev White-fronted Tern - sev

Back on North Island, I set off on the long drive north, my aim to get as far as possible. Tired somewhere near Hunterville, I turned off and stopped at the DOC campsite at Simpson's Reserve. Already dark, I put up my tent to the backdrop of calling Moreporks.

7 January. Simpsons Reserve (Hunterville) & Miranda. Plan this day was to drive the few hours north to Pureora Forest to look for Shining Bronze Cuckoo, a supposedly common species that had strangely eluded me all trip. Waking at the Simpsons Reserve campsite, however, I was pretty impressed by the native forest that surrounded this small campsite. And having genned up on the call of Shining Bronze Cuckoo, it did not take me many minutes to realise that I could actually hear one calling right where I was camping! Didn't see this one, but a stroll along the access road soon revealed more - and there they were, a very active pair in roadside trees, chasing each other around, very nice indeed. Plenty of Grey Warblers too, their host species, plus Silvereyes, New Zealand Bellbirds, New Zealand Fantails, Tui, Kaka, Eastern Rosella and Sacred Kingfishers. So, seeing little reason to now detour to Pureora Forest, I decided instead to drive right up to Miranda and thereafter Auckland, a grand total of nearly 500 km. Other than a brief pause at Turangi (failing to relocate the Blue Ducks of two weeks earlier, but resulting in a nice New Zealand Falcon), I drove almost non-stop and arrived at Miranda in plenty of time for the afternoon high tide. High tide was unfortunately not very high, the result being the tide didn't even fill the bay in front of the main hide - approximately 600 Wrybills and three associating Sharp-tailed Sandpipers did shift onto the roost sites adjacent to Stilt Hide, giving cracking views, but unfortunately everything else roosted right out on the shingle banks, some 200 metres or more distant. Definitely scope work, but I did have some luck - among 3000 Bar-tailed Godwits and 400 South Island Oystercatchers, I picked out a single Far Eastern Curlew, 21 Pacific Golden Plovers and, new for the trip, two Broad-billed Sandpipers roosting in close proximity to each other. And with that, I completed the journey with an 80 km hop up to Auckland, back to the lands of Spotted Doves, abundant Common Mynas and assorted other avian interlopers.

8 January. Rangitoto Island. A last minute addition to my itinerary, but a fabulous one at that. Sole target was Shore Plover, yet another New Zealand species at significant risk of extinction. Highly vulnerable to introduced mammalian predators, the remaining population of about 240 individuals is essentially restricted to small predator-free islands, the remote Chatham Islands holding about half the population. Reintroduced to the twin Rangitoto/Motutapu Islands, these successfully cleared of rats and other predators, Shore Plover now frequently reside in the bays either side of the causeway linking the two islands. A short ferry journey from Auckland, these are almost certainly the most accessible Shore Plovers in existence, though there was a question whether any were actually breeding this year or not. I departed Auckland early morning, fantastic sunshine and blue seas. Then, from Rangitoto wharf, it was a 90-minute hike across the rugged but rather beautiful lava fields of Rangitoto, then onto the causeway between the islands. Low tide, fairly extensive intertidal mudflats were visible, initially making me think my search would be harder and my birds more distant. No such issue - after several New Zealand Dotterels, one of the next birds I saw was a Shore Plover! Even better, I soon found that I was actually watching a pair with a newly hatched chick - fabulous stuff, a valuable addition to the global population. As they were in the middle of the mudflat, I presumed my photographs would be record shots only, but as I lay on my belly, semi-sunbathing, semi-watching the birds, it slowly transpired that the birds were wandering my way. And after quite a considerable period of time, the birds indeed had approached, the adults coming within a few metres, one even hunkering down to roost just three metres or so from me. A flurry of action when an additional Shore Plover suddenly appeared, the pair immediately becoming territorial and seeing off this intruder, that bird returning to a shingle bank off yonder, possibly its partner incubating a clutch of eggs in cover unseen. After a good couple of hours with these birds, my good luck continued with the finding of a small beachside pool - not only were there 32 Brown Teal and a couple of Little Pied Cormorants, but there was also a very smart Banded Rail, another new bird for me and one that I had been trying to see at several localities. So, the day had been ticking by in a most pleasant manner, I now had to trudge back across the island to catch the return ferry. A slightly slower amble this time, opportunity to enjoy yet more of the fruits of a successful predator eradication by conservationists - six cracking North Island Saddlebacks, one flock of very active Whiteheads, three Red-crowned Parakeets and a good mix of more abundant birds, including Tui, New Zealand Bellbirds, New Zealand Fantails and Grey Warblers. Back in Auckland, a short wander around the city centre, all under renovation and better avoided, then back to my friends in the west of the city.

9. January. Waitakere, Muriwai & Silverdale. With all key birds now seen in New Zealand, I decided today to potter

around the greater Auckland area, enjoying the spectacle of the Australasian Gannet colony at Muriwai, plus attempt to find some of the growing population of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and, hopefully, locate a Australian Little Grebe, a species that has established a small population in the northern parts of North Island. Locality one, the Waitakere Range, heavily forested hills only a few kilometres from my friend's abode and forming the heartland of the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo range. I had read reports of roosts in the valley below the Waitakere Golf Course, so that seemed a logical place to start ...except the road was closed due to Kauri dieback! Fortunately, the road was open as far as the golf course, so I parked there and wandered along its margins to the far side, loads of Masked Lapwings and Australasian Swamphens on the greens, plus Eastern Rosella flying over and Sacred Kingfishers at the edge of thickets. Down yonder, deep raucous calls echoed around the valley ...I knew what that was! And indeed, from the bottom of the gold course, scanning a line of tall trees opposite, a whole bunch of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, at least 20 in all. Well that was quite easy ...and just to be nice, several then flew over, hanging out in vegetation around the gold course. Next stop, the Australasian Gannet colony at Muriwai. Almost didn't bother with this site, but I am glad I did - a sometimes present Brown Booby didn't appear, but the sheer spectacle of the colony was impressive. Occupying slopes on the clifftops and spilling across a couple of adjacent rock stacks, approximately 1200 Australasian Gannets breed at this location, the sky thick with birds flying in and out, the colonies a polkerdot of these magnificent birds. With the closest birds mere centimetres away, and the colony at various stages from pairs with chicks a few days old to near full-grown, it truly was a sight to appreciate. And just for added appeal, along the trails either side of the headland, plentiful Rauparaha's Coppers active in the morning sunshine. So, a pretty successful morning so far. With thoughts now turning to Australian Little Grebe, the most promising site seemed to be the Te Arai stormwater pools over on the Hibiscus Coast, reports suggesting there had been birds there in previous months. Annoyingly I had virtually driven past these pools at the beginning of my trip without knowing that they might hold Australian Little Grebe. So off I went, a drive of about an hour, the destination adjacent to a rather busy road in a very suburban setting. Australian Magpies, Spotted Doves and Common Mynas in pastures and roadside, Australasian Swamphen and Pied Stilt on the first pool investigated. Manky Pacific Black Ducks on the second pool and just a single bird on the final pool ...but fortunately that single bird was an Australian Little Grebe! Happily diving and feeding, oblivious to cars and pram-wielding mothers in the immediate vicinity, this was a nice addition - my fourth grebe species of the trip, two of which are Australian vagrants. And with that, after a relatively fruitless search for butterflies in an overgrown cemetery (four Monarchs, three Small Whites, plus two Sentry Dragonflies), I returned to my friend's place, the remainder of the day an easy-going affair, punctuated by a Shining Bronze Cuckoo in the garden and a nice visit to an old mine shaft to see its creepy inhabitants ...eight pretty impressive Cave Wetas.

10 January. Mangere, Firth of Thames & Coromandel. Birding essentially over, I was heading to Coromandel this day for hopes of a few butterflies, a rare bit of downtime with friends and a mini-twitch for Cattle Egret. Popped in at Mangere briefly, the New Zealand Little Grebe still on its channel, plus assorted Wrybills et al on the mudflats, then drove down towards Coromandel. With almost all possible species now seen, desperate measures were required to add additional species to the trip list ...and thus a Cattle Egret twitch! Two-a-penny across half the world, it is truly a rare bird in New Zealand and thus deserving a small detour I thought (especially as I had also twitched Mute Swan earlier in the trip, an introduced species no less). And so it was, after a few meanders around various meadows, I found myself at the head of the Firth of Thames duly peering at a herd of cows and their accompanying flock of six Cattle Egrets! Species number 152 for me in New Zealand. From then on, butterflies only. Failed on Forest Ringlet, a rare species thought at high risk of extinction, but I did have a good afternoon otherwise - several colonies of Long-tailed Blues, my first of the trip, quite a number of Common Bush Blues, abundant Small Whites, a couple of Monarchs and two Coastal Coppers.

11 January. Coromandel. Lazy day, pottering down to the beach, even engaging in a spot of kayaking. Birding very much on the backburner, but did put in some effort for butterflies … and for my effort, notched up a 'massive' six species, thereby actually becoming the highest day total for butterflies! As for the species, quite a few Monarchs (and dozens of caterpillars) around Milkweed outside a cafe, many Rauparaha's Coppers in dunes behind the beach, one small colony of Common Bush Blues, a single Long-tailed Blue, Small Whites here and there and, rounding the day off, one Coastal Copper in the garden of our chalet. Had I done my research better, I might also have found Forest Ringlet - but as it was, I discovered that the site that I knew was actually private property with massive great gate preventing access! Ah well, did enjoy the massive Kauri trees nearby and impressive giant tree ferns! Special mention also to dwellers of an old mine shaft - in nooks and crannies, two dozen or more Cave Weta, long legs and antennas galore.

12 January. Karangahaka Gorge. Final day, and a stonking 28 C to round it off. Lying a few kilometres north of the Coromandel, my destination today was Karangahaka Gorge, a picturesque amalgamation of natural beauty and relics of an industrial bygone era, the ruins of mine workings slowly being engulfed by bush and forest. Of more interest to me, it was also the first release site for a unique biological control program - attempting to reduce the spread of invasive Japanese Honeysuckle, populations of Honshu White Admiral were released here, the honeysuckle being the only known food plant for the caterpillar. Years on, the Honshu White Admirals seem to have established themselves and that was my main target this day. And on arrival, one duly obliged in a matter of moments, a highly active individual patrolling a bank of honeysuckle. Not once did it settle however, so a few flight shots were the best I could manage. Wandering around for a few hours, I found a further two equally mobile individuals, plus three quaint Maui's Coppers, a bunch of Common Bush Blues and numerous Small Whites. Nice. And with that, it was time to head for Auckland. Squeezed in a quick trip to the botanical gardens in a hope to find either New Zealand Red Admiral or Yellow Admiral. Failed on both counts, plenty of Monarchs however, some settling long enough for a few photographs. And then it was all over, I dumped the car and headed for the airport. Final birds of the trip, perhaps predictably, House Sparrows hopping around on the lawn outside the terminal ...New Zealand, land of immigrants! And so it was, 6600 km in the car,

15 ferries and boats, 152 species of birds, 17 species of butterflies. Good trip, all there was left to do was the long haul back to Vilnius.

13 January. Departed Auckland just after midnight, arrived in smog-bound Shanghai 12 hours later. No birds seen, went through screening for the new Coronaviras, had a coffee and whiled away three hours, then boarded a Finnair flight to Helsinki. Ten hours later, touched down in Europe, a short transfer, then my final flight to Vilnius. Crappy damp weather on arrival, time to think about another trip!