

# New Zealand with Sandwich Bird Tours August 31-September 18 2005

by  
John van der Dol  
and  
Brian Short

**“The boys done good in New Zealand”**



Wandering Albatross

## August 29/30<sup>th</sup>

After virtually no planning for this trip we arrived after 2 long flights via Singapore in Auckland at about 22.30 on August 30<sup>th</sup>. A shuttle bus picked us up and without any fuss we arrived at the Jet Inn which is just a few minutes drive from the airport. Here Brian and I settled in and tried to get some sleep but the anticipation of what was to come kept us both awake for most of the night.

## August 31<sup>st</sup>

After an early breakfast and checking out of the hotel we stood in the car park, bins and scopes at the ready, only to find that most birds around the hotel were common British Garden species. We saw our first **Pied Shag** and **Spur-winged Plover** (not the European species) and nesting **Welcome Swallow**. **Purple Swamphen** or as known here by the Maori name Pukeko paraded on a grassy field. A species we were to find very common in the days to come. After 15 minutes or so, Karen Baird our guide from Kiwi Wildlife Tours for the next few days, arrived in a very comfortable minibus and off we went. First stop – Mangere Inlet on the west coast on the outskirts of Auckland. A pair of **NZ Dotterel** were our first exciting new species soon followed by 49 **Royal Spoonbills** and several **Pied Stilts** (split from Black winged stilt by Clements!).

A single **Wrybill** close by the side of the road was immediately followed by a flock of c450 on the other side of the road. What a start. We continued on to Te Kauri Lodge, owned by Karen and Chris Gaskin where we had coffee on the balcony while **Tuis** visited the trees within feet of our cameras. A few **Fantails** and a **Grey Warbler** joined the party. Karen does not believe in sitting

still for long and we were soon on our way north stopping at Waipu Cove for two **Fairy Terns** of which there are only 15 pairs existing in NZ. Over 100 **Variable Oystercatchers** gave us much entertainment and **Sacred Kingfishers** were around also. We drove to a stream near Teal Bay specifically for a party of 32 **Brown Teal**, another very rare NZ endemic. The main reason for coming north was to meet up with Detlef and Carol Davies recent emigrants from Essex with whom we would spend the night. After dinner we were driven in the dark to a site near the coast where they have found Brown Kiwi from the public footpath. An hours walk down a gentle valley towards the sea with torches covered with red plastic to filter the light so as not to scare the birds and there amongst the sheep we found a **Brown Kiwi** and heard others plus **Morepork** in the distance. We retired at 10.30 totally exhausted. This was just day 1!

### September 1<sup>st</sup>

Lie in to get over jet lag? No chance. Up and on the road by 05.30 to make the dash back to Auckland to catch the 08.45 ferry to the island of Tiritiri Matangi. After a delay because of fog we did eventually get away and Brian and I were left to our own devices. Not difficult as there are not many endemic species to deal with and all are easy to identify. En route to the island **Little Blue Penguin**, **White-fronted Tern** and **Fluttering Shearwater** were seen in small numbers. Tiritiri is a predator free zone and many of the trans-located birds such as **NI Saddleback**, **Stitchbird**, **NI Robin** are doing well. We spent most of the day on the island and enjoyed the very rare Takahe amongst others. Our only omission was **Kokako** heard but not seen apart from a brief flight view.

We arrived back on the mainland by 4 o'clock and were soon picked up by Karen and immediately whisked off for more new species. Some nearby ponds produced **Grey Duck** and **Grey Teal**, **Australasian Shoveler**, but it was the endemic **NZ Dabchick** and **NZ Scaup** we were after. We succeeded in seeing both of them with 3 **Banded Rails** nearby as an added bonus.

Back to the lodge for two nights where we were greeted by Morepork within feet of the balcony. A relatively early night was not only deserved but necessary.

### September 2<sup>nd</sup>

After another early breakfast, a brief stop for **NI Tomtit** and **New Zealand Pipit** we were off for a pelagic around the Hauraki Gulf. We set off in clearing fog from Ti point and cruised around the gulf as far out as the Mokohinan Islands in a fast fishing boat. It wasn't long before Fluttering Shearwaters surrounded us followed by building numbers of **White-Faced Storm Petrels** and **Common Diving Petrels**. Odd **Little Shearwaters**, two **Buller's Shearwaters**, good views of **Fairy Prion** and both **Giant Petrels**. The weather was sunny and generally just wonderful. **Common Dolphins** rode the bow wave, **Bottle nosed Dolphins** were also seen and excellent views of a **Minke Whale** even showing its white flippers as it cruised by the bow of our boat.



We got back after dark after a fantastic experience. We followed this with a Tai take away and yet another early night, before guess what? Tomorrow another early start.

### September 3<sup>rd</sup>

A pre-dawn departure and on our way south to Pureora Forest for some more new species. Didn't take long to find two or three **Kakas** and a couple of **Yellow-crowned Parakeets**, and a party of **Rifleman**. Onwards to Lake Taupo right in the middle of North Island. We were rewarded by

some **Little Black Shags**, **Black-billed Gulls** which were a target species. An **Australasian Bittern** boomed but did not show itself. Just down the road a little 2 **NI Fernbirds** gave stunning views whilst NZ Scaup loafed about on a pond in the reed bed.

A nearby river produced a brief flyby of a **Blue Duck** for Brian but not Karen or I. A brief search proved unsuccessful so we were forced to drive to a more reliable spot called Manganuioteao River where immediately on arrival we found a pair sitting on a rock. We photographed this rare endemic, watched **NZ Pigeon** feed above our heads and then left on our long way north to our accommodation at Waitomo Caves within striking distance of the airport next morning.

This hotel is of the same standard as Fawly Towers where the Manageress with thick round glasses came to the table to show us the plate of burned garlic bread apologising profusely and promising to try again. Our suggestion to accept the burnt offerings at half price brought a wry smile to her face and she scuttled off with the thought of having had her first success of the day at 20.30.

#### September 4<sup>th</sup>

Yes you guessed, up early and off to the airport for our 10.00 flight to Christchurch and the joys of South Island. Fond farewells at the airport and soon on our way with views of volcanoes and mountains below. Even the Kaikoura Peninsula could be identified from the air. Within 90 minutes we were landing at Christchurch and another adventure about to start.

It did not take long to collect our baggage and we set off to find Brian's son, Andrew, who is presently living in Kaikoura and had driven to Christchurch to meet us off the plane. Seeing Andrew was the main reason for visiting New Zealand (Yeah right!) and the fact that he lives in Kaikoura has nothing to do with Brian and I flying, literally, half way round the world.

We set off in Andrew's estate car which was virtually going to be our home for the next two weeks. A couple of stops at Waipara Estuary and Amberley Beach, both just north of Christchurch, produced some beautiful **Black-fronted Terns** and **Banded Dotterels** amongst other things. A search for Black Stilts produced no more than hybrids but it was a good exercise nevertheless.

We carried on north and after 2 ½ hours of driving we finally arrived in Kaikoura, the place in the world I have wanted to visit more than anywhere else. I knew I was not going to be disappointed as we looked offshore and saw 1,000s of **Hutton's Shearwaters**, a Giant Petrel, **Spotted Shags** and **NZ Fur Seals** on the rocks. This was an indication of what was to come.

Although very tired we had a nice evening meal in a smart restaurant with a dumb waitress who had as much charisma as the mechanical version of that name. It was a fine way to celebrate Andrew's birthday. With much anticipation we tried to get to sleep early but I don't think it worked.

#### September 5<sup>th</sup>

This was the day I had dreamed about ever since I read about albatrosses off Kaikoura. We had a taster off Cape Town a couple of years ago but this was going to be special, very special..

We met the owner of Ocean Wings Dennis Buurman at the reception centre for the Albatross Encounters boat trips who made us very welcome. We then set off with our boatman, Alastair, in the minibus down to the south quay where the boat sat on a trailer. It was launched with us on it down the slipway and off we went. Our first encounter after just a few minutes was with the huge raft of Hutton's Shearwaters of which we were now able to get excellent views. After just a mile or two **Pintado Petrels** started following the boat and Giant Petrels started taking an interest. Just 10-15 minutes out at sea, we stopped and Alastair slung the small plastic net with frozen fish liver

overboard and all hell let loose. Pintados went mental, Giant Petrels became aggressive and spread their wings to make themselves look even bigger and **Salvin's Albatrosses** piled in. If we had thought that these were big, in came the **Wandering Albatrosses** with wingspans of 3.6 metres, wider than the boat! This was madness, three sub-species of Wandering to sort out, Salvin's everywhere, then a load of **White-capped Albatrosses** to photograph when Alastair shouted "**Southern Royal**". Then **Northern Royal** and unbelievably a **Sub-Antarctic Black-browed**, the only one we were to see this holiday. Most of these would land and sit on the water within feet of the boat. Others were having a scrap over the tiny bits of fish offal they were able to get out of the basket. It did not seem worth it! Albatrosses were flying about all over the place.



Salvin's Albatross

But there were others to look at. I have always wanted to see a Prion and although we had seen some up north, here were another 100 **Fairy Prions** to dribble over. Another shout went up, "**Grey-faced Petrel**" and another. This was the dream, I have had for all those years, come true.

We pulled in the chum bag and carried on a little further in order to try and get rid off some of the Wanderers. They are aggressive and put other birds off especially when they are present in large numbers. But the birds were not about to let go and wherever we stopped we were surrounded by albatrosses and petrels. **Kelp** and **Red-billed Gulls** were also permanently present and two Black-fronted Terns flew over.

After about two hours we started the return journey only to bump into a pod of about a dozen **Hector's Dolphins**, a rare endemic in these waters. Excellent views as they played around our boat and on the way back we again sailed through the raft of 10,000+ Hutton's Shearwaters newly arrived back from the Tasman Sea amongst which we managed to find two Fluttering Shearwaters.

This must rank as one of the most exciting ornithological experiences to be had on this planet and another trip was planned for tomorrow. The afternoon was spent looking around the general area and about 70 NZ Fur Seals were found loitering on the rocks.

A home-cooked meal was much enjoyed and we retired fairly early in anticipation of a repeat tomorrow.

### September 6<sup>th</sup>

Another calm day with a one metre NE swell. We again went straight out and the experience was much as yesterday, but it would take a lot more than a trip or two to get fed up with this. Although the species were the same, the numbers were slightly less than yesterday. This really gave us more time to sort out the different sub-species of Wanderers. A female Snowy looks just like a male Gibson's and some Antipodeans look like Gibson's. It is not always easy and some probably cannot be separated reliably. It gave us a great opportunity to do more photography and even for a non-photographer like myself it is possible to get some stunning images.

The return journey today was augmented with about ten **Dusky Dolphins**, another new cetacean.

Although nothing new was seen this morning, we could not wait to get out on the ocean again and another trip was booked for the end of our holiday in about ten days time. But guess what, another sea trip tomorrow, but this time on the on the Whale Boat.

The afternoon was spent relaxing as from a bird point of view there is not that much to do unless you want to look at **Dunnocks** and **Blackbirds**. Our photos were downloaded on to disc in the local photo shop and some prints were run off. The quality of some of the shots was going to play a major role in our activities over the next two weeks as we had produced results we did not know we were capable of. The NZ branch of the gay camera club was born! (Follows references in our trips reports to South Africa and Sri Lanka)

### September 7<sup>th</sup>

We had to arrive at 07.45 at the Whale-boat station where we were encouraged to watch a short film show about the sealife off the Kaikoura coast. Then off in a coach to the same quay as the last two days, but this time we boarded a very smart fast jet engined sea cat which took us a long way out in no time at all. The onboard presentation was very interesting but rudely interrupted by a dark petrel flying past the window. It was nice to have our identification confirmed as a **Westland Petrel**, our first of the trip, although another three were to be seen this morning. Small numbers of the usual albatrosses were noted as we stopped a few times to do echo soundings in search of whales.

After about two hours of trying for whales without success the boat returned to shore. They were not around today and could not even be found by us, the other boats and aircraft out looking for them. As we got 80% of our money back for our lack of success I was quite happy to have been out on the ocean and we could use the money to book another trip at the end of our holiday.

We had a quick lunch in town and set off for the west coast and the start of our tour of South Island. Our next stop was to be Punakaiki, primarily for Westland Petrel which breeds there in the forested mountains. We booked in to the Papanoa Park Motel and went for a walk to the beach. Here we could watch hundreds of Westland Petrels feeding in the surf and Spotted Shags were passing by constantly. Biting Sand Flies soon put pay to our visit to the beach so we returned to the motel to wait until dusk. We watched a tame **Weka** in the garden and managed some more piccies.

At dusk we walked out on to the road and watched Westland Petrels flying across the road over our heads to their nesting places in the mountains. Another new experience for which this place is famous. We followed this with a big steak in a bar 2km further north, which was more in keeping with the American Wild West than what we had expected in New Zealand, but then the west coast is a bit wild in places. An early night because the next few days required us to do a lot of driving.

### September 8<sup>th</sup>

Brian was up before dawn to watch the Petrels returning to the sea low over the Motel.

We started off early enough and went to look at the famous (well in NZ anyway) Pancake Rocks before we set off south in search of parrots that destroy cars! Our destination was the Franz Joseph Glacier. The scenery in this part of NZ is just stunning and there are hardly any people to spoil things. Nevertheless bird species are few so there is little need to stop en route. **Australasian Harriers** circled the hills and Purple Swamphens grazed the pastures along with **Paradise Shelducks** while New Zealand Pigeons could occasionally be seen bending branches in a leafless tree and a Weka or two by the side of the road.

After lunch we arrived at the glacier, but really apart from a couple of good views of South Island Tomtits all we saw was fantastic scenery and a big dirty ice cube. We moved on to Fox Glacier, which is supposed to be another site for parrots. Another walk and further stories of back-packers having seen flocks of them in car parks, birds being fed by hand in the high street last night and birds raiding dustbins. Things were becoming desperate, as we could not afford too much time. We had seabirds to see! A walk to another ice cube and back in the rain and then a cry "**Kea**". That must be one, but where is it. There, as it flew over the valley at some height. Is that the best we could do? We spent the next hour driving round car parks and housing estates looking for dustbins? If our friends could see us now!

That has to be birding at its worst and I was glad to be on our way even if we did not see a Kea demolishing a car. A small consolation was being shown the rubbers round the rear windscreen of a car belonging to a not very amused young lady.

Next stop, Lake Moeraki where the Wilderness Lodge organises guided walks for the Fiordland Crested Penguin. Well not only was the motel closed for a couple of weeks because of lack of business, there were no guided walks and then a member of staff said they had not been seeing any birds either. Disappointed we went to look at the beach where they can sometimes be seen but we were running out of time as we still had no accommodation. We moved on and found McGuires Lodge at Haast and over a lovely meal we looked forward to a better day tomorrow.

### September 9<sup>th</sup>

Today's itinerary was to get to Twizel and check the braided rivers for the rarest wader in the world. On the way we planned to make some stops for forest birds, which we did in the wooded hills above Haast at Gates of Haast. Here we managed to find some Rifleman, **Brown Creepers** and a female **SI Robin**. A Kea flew over the forest calling but again views were limited. Andrew found the **Yellowhead**, which was the target species, but it did not hang around long enough for Brian and I to get a view.

Our first new bird just out of Haast was a **NZ Falcon** on top of a pine and this one sat around long enough for our senior gay camera club member to get a picture. A stunning bird!

After a long drive we arrived at Omarama. Here we checked the braided Ahuiru river from the bridge but without success. We then tried to reach the area where the river enters Lake Benmore which was rather unproductive, but it did not help that we could not find a way to the shore.

We arrived back at Omarama in the late afternoon and checked again from the bridge. No luck, so we decided to walk down stream on the northern bank. After may be a quarter of a mile we struck gold. Here on a little pool we found our first and only **Black Stilt** a bird sporting a colour ring and some patches of white with a couple of Pied Stilts. Considering there are less than 100 pure birds in the world, this was quite an experience. It eventually flew off into the distance.

We were left with no alternative but to push on to Twizel in the hope of seeing that elusive all dark bird at the sites nearby. We covered the two remaining sites on our map but to no avail. We then decided to find some accommodation in Twizel and make for the east coast first thing in the morning. We were keen to get south towards Stewart Island. We had not seen any seabirds for a few days and we were keen to put this right.

### September 10<sup>th</sup>

In the early dawn we pulled up along side the DOC Black Stilt breeding site and were allowed a covert view of two breeding adults, but birds in pens are not what we came to see!

Time to move on, so back to Omarama a brief view from the bridge and then we made straight for the coast and a town called Oamaru where we knew there was a Little Penguin colony.

Unfortunately they are only seen at dusk when they come ashore and the beach is overlooked by people in a stand, built specifically for this purpose, which Old Trafford would be proud of. They do guided walks of the breeding colony and are able to show punters birds sitting on nests. A little persuasion and a few bucks and we were shown two birds in a breeding box. Well, I am glad that the money went to a good cause because looking through a dirty piece of glass at two Penguins was not my idea of birdwatching. A party of 16 **Stewart Island Shags** sat on the breakwater though adding to our already good total of Cormorant/Shag species.

We moved on after having been told that the **Yellow-eyed Penguin** site just down the road would be empty also. Well, we were here, so we might as well have a look. Within one minute of arriving at the look-out Andrew had spotted our target. It came waddling down the beach and disappeared into the surf. Excellent stuff. Then a local approached us and asked if we had seen the penguin sat by the fence next to the path. No, we had walked straight past it. Why had it bothered to climb a tall nearly sheer cliff? We now have pictures of a bird no more than two feet away! I have come to the conclusion though that I am not really into penguins, their wingspan is rubbish and they don't fly too well either!

We carried on south, a brief one minute stop to see the Moeraki Boulders, yes they were still there and then to Shag Point to find two more Y E Penguins, ten more Stewart Island Shags and a couple of Spotted Shags plus a rather nice American lady who seemed only too pleased to give us her full sized guide to the birds of New Zealand. Now we had some real text to study!

We moved on towards Dunedin seeing three Royal Spoonbills on the way. Our destination was Otago Point, the home of, at last, some real birds again. This is the only mainland colony of Albatrosses namely the Northern Royal. A guided walk and looking through the observatory window, three birds were watched. I have to say, they look better at sea. We were given the life history of the species and a short film was shown. Amazing birds!

We had planned on staying on Otago Peninsula, but we had cleaned up so we decided to carry on south. We found accommodation at Balclutha and eat at Picasso's.

#### September 11<sup>th</sup>

We had breakfast, checked out and were on our way, first stop, Nugget Point. It was a beautiful sunny morning and visibility was excellent. We parked the car in the car park and walked the rest to the end of the Point by the lighthouse. Here we found an observation platform where we spent the next hour or two. The rocks below were covered in NZ Fur Seals and we tried very hard to find a Sea Lion but without success. They are supposed to occur here and I was keen to get some pictures.

Odd Shags and Red-billed and Black-billed Gulls were flying around but the prize of the day were the ten or so **Southern Buller's Albatrosses** which were flying up and down. Unfortunately they were a little distant but identifiable nevertheless.

We now had got it into our heads to find Sea Lions. Next stop, Curio Bay. A walk along the beach was unsuccessful, the female which had spent the last few days outside a beach café was also absent. So Waipapa Point had to be next as the map indicated NZ Sea Lions on the beach.

A rather frustrating march around a sandy bay produced no more than bathing White-fronted Terns and two small boys trying to bury each other in the sand. We were about to give up when Andrew decided to check just one last stretch of sand and there, right below the cliff, five **Hooker's Sea Lion** and a big bull further up the beach. We watched them for a while and took many pictures.

We now realised that if we put our foot down we could get to Stewart Island a day early. A few phone-calls (these mobiles are wonderful) and we were on our way to Bluff. Our accommodation on Stewart Island was able to take us a day early and so we boarded the mid-afternoon ferry a fast sea cat. One can see a few birds from the stern. A few Pintado Petrels followed the boat,

three more Southern Buller's Albatrosses were seen and a **South Georgian Diving Petrel** was identified. The locals say that it is virtually impossible to tell them from Common Diving Petrel but this bird was pure white underneath, including the under wing coverts and white ear covers. They do breed in small numbers on Codfish Island just round the corner and with modern binoculars and good light at reasonable distance I feel it is possible to tell some birds apart.

Amazingly we met Ulva, who was to take us to Ulva Island and Philip Smith who was to take us on the Kiwi tour, on board the ferry.

On arrival at Halfmoon Bay on Stewart Island we were met by Bev, the owner of our accommodation. The Bay Motel was very comfortable and we settled in very quickly. We were able to unpack as we were going to be here for three whole nights. A nice meal in a local restaurant and we were ready for bed.

### September 12<sup>th</sup>



Dawn broke and the weather was good yet again. So far we have been so lucky with the weather. It is not supposed to be like this down here at this time of year. Kakas were flying about all over the place and vying for our attention with the local Tuis. A quick breakfast and we were on our way to Halfmoon Bay where we were to meet Ulva and our water taxi. A small, but fast boat that was to take us to Ulva Island.

### Stewart Island Shags

This island has been cleared of man-introduced pests and endemic species have been translocated here, and they are doing well. Ulva Goodwillie is the local official guide to the island of the same name and she proudly and enthusiastically led us round for 4 or 5 hours. She showed us many interesting plant species and had a story to tell about most of them. Birds included Robins, Tomtits, Brown Creepers, both Red and Yellow-crowned Parakeets, Kakas, SI Saddlebacks and finally two Yellowheads which gave excellent views. She was very proud of the fact that the island was clear of any introduced species.

Brian, why did you have to call "**Redpoll**"? I don't think she believed it at first. An hour or two later I found a couple of birds in the undergrowth which eventually were identified as Dunnocks. This led to talk of shooting and eradicating! Oh dear, perhaps we should have put a sock in it? Ulva is both a wonderful island and must if one is staying on Stewart Island and also a very interesting and knowledgeable person with plans to come to the Rutland Birdfair!

We returned to our accommodation, had some bacon sandwiches, a short rest and then off down to the main harbour. This time to meet Philip Smith and his fishing boat. It was 6pm and by the time we had reached our destination it was dark. We had coffee on the boat and a short talk about Stewart Island Brown Kiwis and set off with torches in search of these pre-historic creatures. It took four hours of searching beaches and forests before a tape lure finally attracted a Kiwi which came steaming up the track like boy racer with "attitude" followed shortly after by a juvenile who had already learnt the technique.

I think I preferred the **Leopard Seal** which we found on the beach which apparently was only about the fourth time Philip had seen one on these beaches in 17 years of being out every other night. Another impressive mammal on the list. It was 11.30 when we arrived back at the quay. We wandered back to our base and it was not long after I could here guttural noises from the other room. Glad I had my own room!

### September 13<sup>th</sup>

We virtually had a day off today. We went for a walk in the morning, but from a bird point of view today was unproductive. We got some nice photos of Variable Oystercatcher on the beach and while Brian and Andrew went for a walk in the afternoon I decided to have a rest. Had there been a big party of us we could have chartered a boat to circumnavigate Stewart Island, but with just the three of us this would prove too expensive. Besides that the weather had been so calm that there appeared to be few birds close inshore. The ferry trips to and from mainland proved that.

A nice evening meal in the local pub by the harbour, but real drinking was out of the question as the pub closed at 9pm. Yet another early night and dreams of our return to Kaikoura. We were planning on getting back there as quickly as possible in order to get back out amongst the real birds. We could get back in two days.

### September 14<sup>th</sup>

The first ferry back to Bluff was again a calm affair in patchy fog most dense at the entrance to Bluff Harbour. A single Buller's, two Pintados, a Common Diving Petrel and four Stewart Island Shags were really the only birds of interest on the entire crossing.

We picked up our car out of the secure compound and set off north. We stopped at a couple of sites just north of Invercargill for Black-fronted Dotterel, but were unsuccessful. Three **Cattle Egrets** en route were really the only new birds for the trip north. We made for Timaru and arrived there teatime. Here we had, what I consider to have been, the tastiest Indian meal I have ever had in an empty restaurant. Either that or I had really missed spicy food. The motel was mediocre, but it was just for one night and we were too tired to worry about it.

### September 15<sup>th</sup>

A final dash and by late afternoon we arrived home at the same accommodation, back in Kaikoura. We stopped off at Lake Ellesmere on the way, but the mosquitoes made it an unpleasant experience and the 2-3,000 **Black Swans** did not improve the situation. It was high tide at the Waipura estuary, just north of Christchurch, and apart from finding a **Black-tailed Godwit** and a **Whimbrel**, both unusual species, there was not much there.

Three Giant Petrel sp and 1,000s of Hutton's Shearwaters signalled we were back. A wonderful home-cooked meal (of chicken soup, rice and bread) by Andrew and his Japanese girlfriend Erika at Let's (Thai Lady) house (don't ask) and copious amounts of red wine helped celebrate our return. I hoped the sea was not going to be too lumpy tomorrow.

### September 16<sup>th</sup>

Dawn broke calm which was just as well. Today we were booked for two trips out on the ocean: this morning for birds and this afternoon for whales.

As usual Alastair our skipper took us straight out and it was not long before Pintado Petrels were following the boat. The first albatrosses to arrive were usually Salvin's, these were followed swiftly by Wandering, of which two dozen of the three sub-species were estimated. White-capped made up further variety while today we had two Southern Buller's at the back of the boat. Eventually they came close enough to allow us to get some stunning images. Four Southern and two Northern Royal Albatrosses joined the party and what a party it was!

There were feeding frenzies and scraps between Wanderers grabbing each other by the neck while Giant Petrels stood by awaiting their opportunity to get to the chum basket. Salvin's were seen having a conversation and Pintados were constantly chattering away. Fairy Prions had

decreased to just four birds, but Westland Petrels were now arriving in the area and four were seen. Three Grey-faced Petrels and a **White-chinned Petrel** gave us identification opportunities. All this made it yet another fantastic experience. A Fluttering Shearwater was picked out on the way back.

In the afternoon we joined the Whale Boat again. This time we were successful and as we stood on the top deck we were able to watch 10-15 adolescent male **Sperm Whales** playing around, sometimes fluking their tails as they dove down to feed. The rest of the afternoon was spent relaxing before another wonderful home-cooked meal by Andrew and Erika. This was followed by a few beers and a live band in a local pub. And the lead singer?—Alastair. Is there no end to this guy's talent? And guess what, tomorrow? Another Albatross boat trip! I prayed for calm weather.

### September 17<sup>th</sup>

My prayers were answered, another calm day and another trip out on the waves. Today Alastair pulled out all the stops with just the four of us in the boat. He knew what we were after and he knew where to find them.

He sailed out further south this time and within half an hour we had three **Antarctic Fulmars** under our belt. Our mission complete! Again we went further out and the usual albatrosses were everywhere, today joined by a juvenile Southern Buller's. But it was the petrels which took centre stage today. Three White-chinned, 15 Westlands and what turned out to be a single **Black Petrel**. One of the Gibson's had a red colour ring with white numbers 894 on it. To show how close we were to these birds we were able to photograph just the leg with the ring!

On the return journey we were able to watch the pod of about 15 Hector's Dolphins again.

This was to be our last bit of birding this trip as tomorrow we had to drive to Christchurch for our flight home via Singapore.



**Pintado Petrels**

**So the boys done good, but what about New Zealand as a birding destination?**

If you are after a long list of species then New Zealand is not going to be your chosen destination. If you like seabirds, then there probably is not a better place in the world and we were not even there at the best time. An ideal time is November to April. The experience off Kaikoura in particular is hard to beat. Northern pelagics at another time of year also look spectacular either in the Hauraki Gulf or off the North Cape. Bigger groups are required for these as chartering boats is expensive. Circumnavigating Stewart Island is also a possibility, even including the Snares Islands if the weather is favourable. It is also possible to undertake pelagics off Haast on the West Coast.

To clean up on the endemic passerines requires a lot of driving. Given three weeks it should be possible to see them all and include all the pelagics.

I would recommend two companies who have given us fantastic service:

1. Chris Gaskin and Karen Baird of Kiwi Tours at [www.kiwi-wildlife.co.nz](http://www.kiwi-wildlife.co.nz) can arrange any tour, north and south as well as any pelagic. Karen looked after us very well on North Island.
2. Dennis Buurman, the owner of Ocean Wings at Kaikoura, runs Albatross Encounters and we found him and his staff very friendly and helpful [www.oceanwings.co.nz](http://www.oceanwings.co.nz).

I would like to thank Alastair, our skipper, for a very professional and friendly service and Philip Smith on Stewart Island also runs a very professional set up to find the Kiwis.

I must thank Brian for coming up with the idea of going to New Zealand in the first place and Andrew, his son, for his company and driving us around the whole of South Island for two weeks.

Finally, New Zealand is a long way away, but it is worth it, and I will certainly return, hopefully with a bigger group concentrating mainly on pelagics.

[John@sandwichbirdtours.co.uk](mailto:John@sandwichbirdtours.co.uk)



Sperm Whale

All photos by John van der Dol