

New Zealand - Aotearoa [Land of the long white cloud] 3rd - 29th Apr 2006

Having acquired a 'kiwi' son-in-law, we decided to use the excuse to visit his parents and make our first visit to the southern hemisphere. They live on N. Island, and not wishing to follow the whistle-stop tour itineraries that package tours involve we decided to just visit N. Island this time. Although during their autumn and not the best for birds, it was the most convenient for various reasons. Aotearoa is the Maori name for NZ.

Flights - Air New Zealand from LHR booked via Expedia on the 'net. Very comfortable and we can highly recommend them, although the slight downside is that you fly via LA and have to endure the necessity of disembarking with all your carry-on stuff, standing in a corridor for about an hour while the whole flight is mug-shotted, finger printed etc through 'Homeland Security' only to sit in a sealed-off transit lounge and then get back on the 'plane when it has been refuelled - talk about OTT.

We arrived in Auckland at 5:30 a.m. and were picked up by our son-in-law Vaughn's parents who had kindly driven the 2 hrs from their home to meet us.



Managing to stay awake on the drive the most noticeable birds were **Australasian Harriers** over the fields, looking like bulky Hen Harriers, white rump included, but both sexes the same. On arrival at their house in Omokoroa, SE of Auckland, we suddenly 'hit the wall' and crashed out for 3-4 hours. After a snack lunch we took a stroll down to the shore to see what was about. Initial encounters were very familiar - **House Sparrow, Blackbird, Starling, Sky Lark, Goldfinch**. At the outset I should say that NZ has a lot of introduced species, and not only of birds. It is for this reason that a significant number of its endemic species are endangered, as the introductions include such predators as cats, rats, stoats etc. We learnt from a ranger that before European colonisation, NZ only had 2 species of mammal and these were both bats. More of the endemics later. At the shore, most evident were 3 of the 5 N Island species of shag or cormorant - **Pied Shag** [like a Cormorant but black above and white below], **Little Shag** [like a Pygmy Cormorant with a white chin and throat] and **Great Cormorant** [same as ours]. Perched on a wire and fishing on the beach were **Sacred Kingfishers**. These are widespread and can be found in both wet and dry habitats. Gulls are thin on the ground in NZ and **Kelp Gull** [aka Dominican Gull] and **Red-billed Gull** [aka Silver Gull] were 2 of the three common species here. Silver Gulls are the numerous ones you see flying off the outfield during Oz test matches. Waders on show were **Banded Dotterel, Variable Oystercatcher** [mostly all black but can exhibit Eurasian Oyc pied features except that the breast border is ragged], **Bar-tailed Godwit** - these summer in huge numbers [ie wintering from their northern hemisphere breeding grounds] and **Pied Stilt** [same species as in

Europe]. Back at the house, there were 6 **Pukeko** [aka Purple Swamp hen as found in e.g. Portugal] in a field at the bottom of the garden, **Chaffinch** and **Song Thrush** [these appear to much be more numerous than in UK gardens]. The next day we were taken to Tauranga to do a walk round Mt. Maunganui, an old volcanic cone on the coast that can be seen from miles around. On the sea here I located some recognisable Fluttering Shearwaters, which are very common and often enter sheltered natural harbours. Another shag revealed itself, **Little Black Shag** which does look a lot like a Pygmy Cormorant. Twelve **Yellowhammers** were nice, and every time I stopped, making a few squeaky noises soon had numbers of **Fantails** fluttering around my head. These are a type of flycatcher, looking not unlike a Long-tailed Tit in structure, and are very very common and inquisitive and were encountered anywhere where there were trees or bushes. They were usually

accompanied by **Silvereyes**, a small tit-like bird with white eye rings, and also more often than not **Grey Warblers**, or more accurately **Grey Gerygones**, again a flycatcher species.

It is worth mentioning here that if you look at a field guide for NZ, there are really very few land birds, in particular passerines. Away from towns and gardens in what the kiwis call 'bush' i.e. woodland, you will encounter in the main, these three species, and very less frequently, other native or endemic birds. The commonest roadside bird is the **Common Mynah**, again an introduction that is present in very large numbers. Looking at the field guide again you will notice that there are very large numbers of sea birds out there in the Tasman Sea or Pacific Ocean. Needless to say, I had pre-booked a pelagic!

Whilst still in the Omokoroa area we walked the nearby Karangahake gorge, to see the waterfall at its end, and the river here produced **Grey Duck** [aka **Pacific Black Duck**], and **Welcome Swallows** hawking insects. The latter are not long distance migrants like ours, but stay in NZ all year, some showing some northerly movement in the winter.

We moved on, on 7th Apr and visited Miranda on the way north. This is on the west side of the Firth of Thames, a large inlet between the main land mass and the Coromandel peninsula which stretches north, to the east of Auckland. Miranda and its environs is known as the Shorebird Coast, being one of the main wader sites. There is an observatory here where you can stay. It is the main wintering site for the endemic **Wrybill**, a plover species which is the only bird in the world with a sideways curved bill, always to the birds right.. They breed on stony rivers on S. Island, in similar habitat to Common Sandpiper, or Dipper, but move to N Island in winter. April being their autumn, there were good numbers present [1500] on our visit, together with several **Curlew Sandpiper**, a good number of **Knot**, 200 **Barwit**, 100+ **Pied Stilt**, a **White Heron** [Gt.White Egret], many **White-faced Herons**, a distant **Royal Spoonbill**, a couple of **Grey Teal**, 10 **Caspian Terns**, and in a pool near the info centre, a **Banded Rail** [Corncrake sized] showed briefly. A single **White-fronted Tern** was also present - these were to prove quite numerous in all coastal locations. Just up the coast we were told there were a group of **NZ Dotterel** - we found these, with a group of **Turnstone**.

Our next stay was on the Whangaparoa peninsula, about ½ hr N of Auckland, in a cosy B&B. I had booked a pelagic with NZ seabirds [www.nzseabirds.com/haurakigulf.php] the following day, 8th Apr. This involved an 8 a.m. start from Sandspit Harbour, 40 min N of Whangaparoa and proved to be a bit of a marathon. We finally returned at 9 p.m.!! with Anne having expected us back at around 5:30. Needless to say the birds had been good. After departure on a small fishing boat heading out into the Hauraki Gulf, **Fluttering Shearwaters** were soon in evidence, together with **Black Petrels** as we proceeded further. We stopped at some islands [Mokohinau Islands] to drop off someone who was going to do some survey work. A nearby rock stack gave lovely close views of **Grey Ternlets** [**Grey Noddy**], although they proved almost impossible to film due to the huge swell. A few **Australasian Gannets** sat atop the stack. As we headed even further out, **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** began to come to the chum, and then **Buller's Shearwaters** [similar wing pattern to imm Kittiwakes]. We eventually sat in the swell a long way out and continued to chum, the skipper also chopping up fresh fish. Here's what we saw - 100's of **Grey-faced Petrels** [aka **Great-winged Petrel**], 50+ **Fairy Prions** [W-winged small petrel type tubenoses], 20 **Common Diving Petrels**, a single **Little Shearwater**, 2 **Wandering Albatross**, 1 of which gave a long fly-by view], 20 **Wilson's Storm-Petrel**, and, jewel in the crown, 10+ **New Zealand Storm-petrels**! These are not even in the field guide that I bought before the holiday!!

The story of NZ Storm-petrel is worth relating. Prior to Jan 2003 they were most recently only known from 3 skins, one of which is in the Nat Hist Museum collection at Tring, in the UK. In Jan 2003 some kiwi birders were counting seabirds off Little Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf and some photos were taken of a brief view of a Storm-petrel with a white belly which was assumed to be Black-bellied Storm-petrel [white belly with black central stripe]. On examination on land a number of features were not right for Black-bellied including the absence of a central black stripe. Eventually the seemingly outrageous possibility of NZ Stormie was proposed. In Nov 2003, a couple of UK birders, Bob Flood and Bryan Thomas [the latter I think a S. Wales birder], chartered a fishing boat out of Sandspit with a view to photographing White-faced Storm Petrel. They chummed off Little Barrier [this was a new technique for NZ then] and instead of White-faced, attracted up to 20 Stormies with white bellies. Many digital pix were taken and when examined back on land, and after circulation to the original kiwi birders, the conclusion was arrived at that NZ Stormie had been re-discovered! The taxonomy has still to be finally sorted and as far as I can make out on the 'net, the records are still to be ratified by the NZ Ornithological Soc rarities committee [latest info Nov 2005]. However the birds are now regularly seen on Hauraki Gulf pelagics. The beauty of an autumn trip is that the Black-bellied Stormies are not present in the area concerned. There is White-bellied Storm-petrel which breeds in the subtropics and is rarely seen off the NZ coast. NZ Stormie also has a different underwing pattern to these two and also differs in the border between the black of the breast and the white of the belly. I have some video which I hope to show at an indoor meeting when I've edited all the video I took on the holiday.

The following day I had pre-booked a ferry trip over to Tiritiri Matangi Island, a 20 min crossing from Gulf Harbour on Whangaparoa or 45 mins from Auckland. This is one of a number of island reserves set up by the Dept of Conservation, and cleaned of all introduced predators and other species, in order to try and build up populations of the endangered endemic birds. You can opt for a ranger led trip but we opted to explore independently. Amongst other species, the important ones we found, which you won't on the mainland, were 4 **Takahe** [huge gallinule], 6 **Saddleback** [a wattlebird, a family unique I think to NZ], 12+ **Stitchbird**, **NZ Robin** and **Brown Teal**. We also saw **Bellbird**, a common endemic, and many **Tui** another fairly common endemic, **Red-crowned Parakeet**, **Whitehead** [a small passerine] and a

Blue Penguin on the sea [these are tiny, about the size of a Jackdaw]. We missed a pair of **Kakapo** [flightless parrot] by a few minutes.

On 10th April, after a visit to a museum relating the history of the giant Kauri tree forests [and their felling by Europeans - but that's another article], we visited Waipu Cove on the NE coast and found a pair of lingering **Fairy Terns**, of which there are only about 12 pairs. These nest at this site and then migrate a shortish distance across to fairly inaccessible parts of the west coast for the winter. They are a NZ race [*Sterna nereis davisae*] of the species of the full name **Australian Fairy Tern** found in Oz. These look a bit like Little Terns and are not to be confused with the dainty all white Fairy Tern that breeds in the tropics and is apparently now known as Common White Tern. This is a nice sandy inlet behind a dune system and had a good selection of waders also.

The 11th saw us at Muriwai on the coast immediately west of Auckland where we witnessed an amazing colony of **Australasian Gannets** in a superb clifftop location, with huge rollers coming in off the Tasman Sea. These look very much like 'our' Gannets except the black on the wing-tips extends along the trailing edge of the wing. Whilst scanning, Anne remarked on a bird that "looked a bit small for a juv Gannet" of which there were still good numbers present. I took one look at it and muttered "expletive, expletive, that's a **Brown Booby!**". This is a rare vagrant to NZ and thus a 'description species'. I got some reasonable footage and submitted the record to the NZ rarities committee. Since originally writing this I have heard that the record was accepted. We watched it for about 5 mins when it then had a vigorous preen and flew off to the west. Another new species here was **Dunnock!** For the afternoon we headed for a promising lake on the map [Lake Kereta] where we found **NZ Dabchick**, **Black Swan**, **Australasian Bittern**, **Australian Magpie** [not a corvid at all], and a couple of the huge endemic and very handsome **NZ Pigeon**. We then moved on to a small reserve near Waiwera on the east coast, and found **Australasian Shoveler**, **Grey Duck** and a pair of **NZ Scaup** [all black, appropriately]. We ended the day at Waiwera Spit where a river meets the sea, and found a dark phase **Pacific Reef Heron** [*Egretta sacra*].

The 12th and we started on our move north for a couple of nights in order to visit the most northerly point, Cape Reinga, not particularly for birds but the stupendous scenery and sand dunes, and Ninety Mile Beach, which is, all but a few miles a 90 mile long sand beach backed by dunes. A stop off at a recommended spot on the main road, by a hill known as The Dome, and a few metres up the trail soon had us looking at a **Tomtit**, another endemic, related to NZ Robin but not so threatened. It looks a bit like a Pied Fly but behaves like a skulky Robin. We B&B'd in Kaitia, the northernmost town with any facilities to speak of. From here it is still a 90 mile drive to Cape Reinga, 40 of which is along a gravel road. The gravel is marble sized and makes for interesting cornering! The following day was for the Cape Reinga trip. A stop off by Lake Omapere just off the main road, gave us **Australian Little Grebe/Dabchick** and **Paradise Shelduck**, a very common species seen on most bodies of water. Cape Reinga itself was fabulous with superb views of where the Pacific and Tasman seas meet, an incredible deserted beach with huge rollers coming in and buses of visitors turning up, taking photos and shooting off again. Many Buller's Shearwaters were passing the headland. We hiked down a cliff path to the magnificent beach just to take it in, totally alone, and were rewarded with views of a very tame Richards Pipit which they call New Zealand Pipit or Pihoihoi, but it's still *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, or rather richardae these days. These were quite common, even in areas with housing - I videoed one on someone's kitchen roof! On the return journey another new bird appeared in the form of a group of **Wild Turkeys** [US introduction] wandering across a field. We had some time to spare so stopped off at the Te Pahi dunes area, on the west coast, where we scrambled up huge sand dunes which wouldn't have looked out of place in the Sahara. You can dune toboggan on these on what is not much more than a tea tray but we decided the views were good enough!

The next part of the holiday was a week based at a timeshare resort in the Bay of Islands on the NE coast, a very scenic spot and a usual holiday destination for a lot of Aucklanders. This was mainly a sightseeing, walking stay, and a must do is a visit to the Waitangi Treaty grounds where the Maoris signed over sovereignty to the British in 1840 [but only because the French were threatening to stake a claim!] Additional birds seen around this very scenic area included **California Quail**, and a couple of **Arctic Skuas** offshore. Whilst staying here we visited Aroha Island, a small island within the harbour complex accessible across a causeway. An afternoon visit, after torrential rain in the morning, provided us with closer views of a couple of **Royal Spoonbills**, a number of what the field guide calls **Spur-winged Plovers**, but seem to be more correctly known as **Masked Lapwings**. There were 40 **Little Black Shags**, more than we had previously seen together, and many **White-fronted Terns** around a fish farm. Nearby on a wet verge a small covey of 6 **Brown Quail** [aka Swamp Quail] revealed themselves briefly [an Oz introduction]. Whilst there we booked an evening kiwi walk for the following day, and were rewarded with red torchlight views of 3 **Brown Kiwis** [the commonest of the 3 species] after patient searching listening for the strident calls of the females. At one point we had a **Morepork** [the only NZ Owl] calling very close but could not find it in the torchlight. Other highlights in this delightful area were a dolphin trip which provided close views of 6+ **Bottle-nosed Dolphins**, and a walk around the amazing Waipoua kauri forest on the west coast. Kauri trees are the most massive of any tree in the world, with huge girth but not the height of the giant redwoods in the USA. Ninety percent of the forests of these trees were felled and exported for the European furniture trade in the early pioneering days, and made many people very rich, but all the remaining forest is now preserved.

We then headed south again and made another visit to Miranda on the Firth of Thames, staying 2 nights in a delightful shoreline B & B. The numbers of **Wrybill** had built up to around 2000 and whilst scanning them a larger wader with an upturned bill appeared - a **Terek Sandpiper!** Apparently they often associate with Wrybill when on passage thro'

NZ. Also present on or near the shore were 1 **Curlew Sandpiper**, 12 **NZ Dotterel**, 6 **Banded Dotterel**, 200+ **Barwit**, 100+ **Knot**, 100+ **Pied Stilt**, 3000+ **South Island Pied Oystercatcher** [these move north in the winter], **Variable Oystercatchers**, an **Arctic Skua**, and 12+ **White-faced Herons**. A new species for us were 12+ **Black-billed Gulls** - these are the same size as Silver [Red-billed] Gulls, but less numerous and quite localised. Familiar birds included a **Song Thrush**, a **Rook** and many **Sky Lark**. We also visited a spot nearby called Matingarahi Point, which I had discovered from the 'net, was a possible location for the scarce **Spotted Shag**. There were none as promised on the shoreline rocks but a careful scan of some offshore mussel farm booms revealed about 7 resting on them.

Our final location was in a B&B by Lake Taupo in central south N. Island. This is a good location for visits to the geothermal areas which are absolutely fascinating. A must visit is the geothermal area called Waitapu where there are steaming alkaline lakes, sulphurous caves, bubbling mud pools and many weird and wonderful formations issuing smelly gases. The nearby Tongariro state park has high volcanic peaks and a wonderful waterfall. Sightseeing and birding continued. One very difficult species to find is **Fernbird**, a very skulking marsh dwelling passerine, a bit like a Grasshopper Warbler with a long tail, the feathers of which are loose and separate. I was told they respond well to squeaky sounds. After many stops at a recommended spot and much pishing and squeaking we eventually had reasonable views as one came out of the dense marsh grasses to investigate and then dropped back down again.

Another must see species is **Blue Duck**, a NZ endemic which can only be found in high forested rivers. I had earmarked a recommended stretch of river, the Hopuruahine stream in the forested hills above Lake Waikaremoana. On the day we had put aside to go, it was raining torrentially when we left Taupo to travel east into the hills, and it continued to do so for 5 hours solid! This was the heaviest rain I have ever encountered, and it made the 80 mile drive along the 'A' road, which turned out to be another of their marble sized gravel roads with multiple hairpin bends, very interesting indeed. Eventually we were on a stretch of the track above what was a very full rocky river, and slowed down. Almost at once Anne, who was adjacent the river said, "there's some ducks just upstream" - stop vehicle, bins up and thro' the wet windscreen, YES!!! A pair of **Blue Ducks**. It was still raining but by changing seats I managed to get some excellent video of these unusual ducks. Not much is known about them, but they have flexible, rubbery, flattish off-white bills with a fringe of black fibers around the tip of the upper mandible, which completely shrouds the lower mandible. They are quite large, a bit bigger than a Mallard I would say, and a dull blue grey colour overall with reddish chestnut spotting on the breast. Unlike most other ducks they are not sexually dimorphic. Eventually the rain stopped and we walked a couple of trails and viewed raging waterfalls before we headed back to Taupo.

A walk the next day in Tongariro state park to view Taranaki falls was very enjoyable and gave us views of **Mealy Redpoll**, more **Richards Pipits**, and near the Whakapapa ski village, a **Rifleman**. This strangely named bird is a tiny little 'flitter' not unlike a Goldcrest, but with a very short tail. It acts like a Treecreeper when foraging on the tree branches but like a Goldcrest amongst the leaves.

The final visit was a stop off in the town of Rotorua, by lake Rotorua, a strange place which smells of rotten eggs the whole time. The whole area is a geothermal area, where steamy gases issue from roadside drains, bushes etc, and where the lake edges 'steam' all the time. The smell is due to hydrogen sulphide issuing from the molten depths below. We were told by our hostess in Taupo that this whole area is where the earth's crust is thinnest, at only 15 miles. Sounds a lot but when you realise its only the distance between Cardiff and Newport between your feet and molten lava, it becomes a bit scary. Altogether a spooky but fascinating area. Over the lake in the drizzle we saw 100's of **Red-billed Gulls** and also a good number of the other small gull of NZ, **Black-billed Gull**. There were also 1000's of **Welcome Swallows** feeding on flying insects.

After a final night at our son-in-laws parents house, we headed back to Auckland. With a couple of hours to spare we paid a visit to the Mangere lagoons, an excellent wetland area only 20 mins from Auckland international airport. No new species were added to our list but a good selection was present, including about 400 **Wrybill** giving us a final chance to observe this bizarrely adapted wader.

All in all a great holiday and we look forward to South Island in a future trip. If you're hell bent on collecting 'ticks', don't expect a huge list. As I said, there aren't a large number of land birds. We had a trip total of 98 species of which 69 were new. We missed out on **Kokako**, another wattlebird, which is very difficult to find and involves a break of dawn wait in forestry which is miles from anywhere, so calls for a very early start. We had earmarked a reasonably accessible area of forest but on enquiring at a Dept of Conservation office, found that they had trapped and removed all but one of the birds at the site, and relocated them to a non-visitable island reserve to try and build up a non-predated breeding population. Doh! Our chances of finding 1 bird in a large area were remote. Obviously we also didn't 'get' some unique S. Island species too.

There are no still bird photos but I hope to upload some video clips in due course.

John Wilson