

# 2016

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**BIRDS OF NEW ZEALAND NOVEMBER 2016**

We arrived home 4 days before Christmas after an exciting 5 week trip To New Zealand and its sub-antarctic Islands. Jet lag was bad this time round and after feeling like a zombie for 3 days I started processing 150 gig of cards on Christmas day.

Why go to New Zealand Ian Sinclair said to me tongue in cheek? - there are no birds there! Well there may not be many- we saw just over 150 species on the mainland and another 25 round the islands- but they have many truly remarkable birds and if you are- like me trying to see all the bird families of the world then the 6 endemic families – The New Zealand Wattlebirds, Parrots, Wrens, Yellowheads, Stitchbird and Kiwis make the trip an absolute must.

There were many highlights- here are just a few

New Zealanders are a friendly welcoming bunch and they can nearly speak English. New Zealand reminded me of being in a time warp. It's like the UK 60 years ago before they had motorways and in the smaller towns the high streets are just like the English high streets of old with quaint old shops selling a variety of stuff. With a tiny population of 4.5 million of whom 2.5 million live in the Greater Auckland area you often wonder where all the people are on South island. That is if you can escape the Chinese tourists who seem to outnumber the locals in some of the tourist traps. You even see Chinese signs in the shops and toilets!!

Having said that, the food and accommodation were remarkably good. We stayed in motel like Inns which always had a fridge and microwave and we often had a lounge as well as one or two bedrooms . New Zealand bakeries are special and we always stopped at one for lunch. Their pies are amazing and with loads of filled rolls and sandwiches and cakes for those that wanted I often missed out on an evening meal in a restaurant- it was all just too much food. Birding wise this was an easy trip – with not too target birds each day we usually started around 8.00am and were finished by 5.00pm. The Kiwi hunting did keep us out to after midnight on a few nights.

There were many special days- we landed in Auckland on the night of the earthquake in Kaikoura. Kaikoura was devastated- the road round the coast is still closed from both the north and south. They say the northern approach may be closed for 2 years and cost 2 billion dollars to repair. This of course put Zealand's premier pelagic. It also the dolphins, But the two pelagics brilliant ( we also missed out on high winds)

The Hauraki Gulf pelagic was great simply outstanding. In 35 years of had a better days birding. The with just enough wind to keep the behind us (unlike Hauraki) which had 3 penguins (Little, Fiordland species of Albatross and more than you could count.



paid to the Kaikoura pelagic – New put paid to Stephanie's swim with we did manage to do were simply the Whitianga pelagic because of

but the one off Stewart Island was birding I doubt whether I have ever weather (for once ) was perfect, albatrosses flying and the sun was made for great photography. We Crested and Yellow eyed ) – five Petrels, Prions and Shearwaters

New Zealand has many introduced birds- from Europe, North America and Australia – way too many for some people. There are probably more Blackbirds and Starlings in NZ than in the UK. However this can lead to really bizarre situations- Imagine California Quail gambolling with Blackbirds in a meadow with a Skylark twizzeling overhead ??? It couldn't happen anywhere else in the world.

Perhaps my favourite land bird was the Blue Duck. It took some time for us to track a pair down which always makes you think of the bird more fondly as the tension and worry mounts as the hours pass and still no bird. It was only early the next morning that we finally caught up with a pair- they have a colouration which matches the grey stone in the fast flowing rivers where they are found- in way they reminded me of South America's Torrent Duck- they certainly share a similar habitat. A remarkable bird

And lastly – you would be amazed at how confiding most of NZ's endemic birds are, which is also why most of them are critically endangered. You have to remember that before man arrived in NZ it had only 3 native mammals- all bats. Man has introduced his feral cats, dogs, domestic stock, rats, mice, stoats, and possums. Can you believe there are 72 million possum in NZ, which have had a devastating effect on NZ's birdlife. The NZ Dept of Conservation has been doing an amazing job of removing predators from many of NZ's islands and has been relocating critically endangered birds to these islands with much success for a number of years now. It may be very special for us birders to have NZ Robins at our feet and Wekas peering down our long lenses and Wrybills letting us photograph them from just a couple of metres away but this all comes at a tremendous cost to these birds who have evolved over the millennia with no mammalian predators at all.

We had to leave our 21 day trip with Wrybill tours two days early in Dunedin to join the Spirit of Enderby- our expedition ship down to the Snares, Auckland, Campbell and Macquarie Islands which meant that we missed out on looking for the Black Stilt- the rarest wader in the world with only 100 birds left. This was one bird I was not going to miss! So on docking at Invercargill after our trip to the Islands we hired a car and set off for Christchurch airport from whence we returned to Auckland for our journey back home via Sidney but only after detouring into the Mackenzie basin to search for the Black Stilt. We found 3 juveniles around a lake north of Omarama on the road to

Mt Cook (looking absolutely brilliant on one of the few sunny days we had on South Island) and a pair of adults the next day near Mount John while we were looking for a Chukar.

Downsides- Well the earthquake that put paid to the Kaikoura pelagic was a major blow but that aside the only thing that really disappointed was the NZ weather. We could not believe how cold it was. Even on North Island (the top of NI is close to the same latitude as Sydney) our warmest day was 23 degrees and then it usually hovered around 20 degrees. South Island was generally at least 5 degrees colder – both lows and highs than North Island. It sleeted over Arthur's Pass and the road to Milford Sound was blocked with snow just a few days before we got there. We may have been unlucky but we only had 3 or 4 days without rain and our night walk for the Okarito Kiwi was called off following torrential rain which never let up for 36 hours. The only certainty was that on most days you would get all 4 seasons in a day.



We landed in Auckland at 10.00pm in the evening- a day before our scheduled trip was to start to allow for any possible delays. This gave us time to recover and play tourist in Auckland for the day. Auckland is surrounded by water- so the setting is delightful but the town itself is not much to write home about. We were surprised at the number of down and outs sleeping on the streets and after sorting out our cell phone we took a bus tour around town and the suburbs.

We met up with our guide Matt Jones of Wrybill Tours and our 4 other travellers- a couple from the UK, Rosemary a widow from the US and Derrick born a South African but now travels the world "birding" for supper at the hotel and were all present and correct to leave early the next morning.

We had a 4 hour drive up to Trousoun that day with our first stop at a forested patch where we met our first NZ endemic the Tui. Tui are delightful birds- members of the Honeyeater family they are common- as well as being good to look at- large white wattles under the chin and a lacy frill around their neck- their musical calls and whistles were to accompany us all around New Zealand. We picked up NZ Pigeon and Paradise Shelduck- another common endemic on the golf course here and our first introductions- California Quail and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos from Australia. Needless to say our first birding stop was done in the rain.



We then headed up the west coast to Hurawai to visit one of the three mainland Australian Gannet colonies in NZ. Great close up views and lots of white-fronted Terns as well. Then it was across to the east coast to some wetland areas for the endemic NZ Scaup and NZ Dabchick before heading onto our most fatherly point North on the Kauri coast Trousoun – home to the Waipu forest, the great Kauri trees of NZ and Northern Brown Kiwi. Kiwi need predator free areas to survive and we entered this protected forest at 10pm with a local guide but with little hope of finding anything in the pouring rain. After an hour of tramping

through the sodden forest with dismay setting in, we had to divert around a damaged boardwalk and there foraging around a pile of logs and brushwood was our target – Northern Brown Kiwi. We had good views for 30 seconds and then it was gone. In some Kiwi areas cameras are not allowed and flash is never allowed and the guides usually cover their torches with red cellophane to keep disturbance to a minimum- everyone is very protective of their kiwis which makes a night photo almost an impossibility.

So we were off to a great start- endemic family number one had been cracked!

Day 2 saw us heading south and East towards Warkworth and a small estuary where one can find the critically endangered Fairy Tern (only 30-40 birds left in NZ). While waiting for the terns to appear we had good photo opportunities with NZ Dotterel – a fairly common endemic as well as Variable Oystercatcher and lots of Bar-tailed Godwits. I was busy photographing a Dotterel when a Tern flew overhead and I missed it (Is it not it always the way??). Luckily we had time to spare because we waited another hour for another to appear. It landed on the far bank of the estuary but gave us reasonable scope views from afar.

We then headed on to Warkworth looking forward to first pelagic out in the Hauraki Gulf in the morning. The day dawned bright and clear making a change from the rain and we spent half an hour birding around Sandspit before boarding our launch. We found Buff-banded Rail amongst the mangroves and Variable and Southern Pied Oystercatcher together- making for nice comparisons between the two.

The focus for the day was finding those pelagic birds found off the northern coasts of New Zealand. So we headed out into the scenic Gulf heading for Little Barrier Island chumming at several locations along the way. The boat was overly full with over 15 people on board. I can't say I was too happy with this Wrybill exercise to earn a few extra bucks. They charter this relatively small boat for the day (the back deck would only hold 6 people) and cram it with people at \$230 a head. Fortunately many people were really sea sick- the seas were not rough but the boat wallowed crazily in the long swells. So the hardy had the back deck to themselves.



We had a really great day and excellent close up views of all the birds- my 400mm lens was actually too long for a lot of the birds. Only problem was the light- most of the birds were back lit with us looking towards to the sun- only day on the trip I wished for duller weather. The three most common birds were New Zealand and White-faced Storm Petrels and Fairy Prions and early on we had several Flesh-footed and Short-tailed Shearwaters and a couple of Cook's and Black Petrels. Further out we ran into hundreds of Fluttering Shearwaters, Red-billed Gulls and more White-fronted Terns.



Wow a really great day and tomorrow we were heading for Tiritiri Matangi.

Tiritiri has to be the jewel in the crown of New Zealand bird conservation and a must visit venue for birders to NZ. It finally became predator free in 1993 when the last rats were removed. It had been used for stock farming and most of the native bush had been destroyed. An extensive replanting exercise was carried out between 1984 -94 with volunteers planting over 250000 trees. These are still semi- mature.

This project still has another 30 years to go before completion when 60% of the island will be forested and 40% left as grassland for the grassland species.. This small Island (2.2sq kilometres) lies 4 kilometres offshore- a 15minute ferry ride from the mainland and you can see the city of Auckland from its shores. Today it is visited by 30000 people a year- some just day visitors and some like us staying overnight in a communal bunkhouse which gives you the opportunity to find Little Spotted Kiwi that night.

We arrived mid morning along with hordes of school kids to be given our bio-security lesson and our list of does and don'ts. We let the kids move off before leaving the landing stage and had not walked 50 metres before we found our first endemic- a pair of Brown Teal in a very muddy and surprisingly small pond. We then followed the uphill path through the forest and a North Island Robin hopped on to the path at our feet – these birds are remarkably tame and show no fear of humans – just a remarkable inquisitiveness.

One of the trickier birds to find and one which is often missed is the Kokako- a member of the NZ Wattlebird family along with the NI



Saddleback which we were also to find on the Island. It helps to know its call and we tracked one down shortly thereafter (2<sup>nd</sup> endemic family) and were to see several others during our stay. Another tricky bird was the Whitehead (3<sup>rd</sup> endemic family )- small, fast moving, and generally keeping to cover you needed patience and time to get a shot.

I said to Matt our guide that I wasn't leaving the Island without finding a Stitchbird ( now placed in its own monotypic family) and he offered to eat his hat if we didn't. Little did I know that they are common on the island (but found only on predator free islands). The rangers provide both the Stitchbird and Bellbird with feeding stations to supplement their diet while many of the trees are still semi mature. So a quick stop at a feeding station provided views that were way to close for a 400mm lens.

There many other birds we wanted to track down. We found NZ Fernbird in one of the little marshy areas but never tracked down the Baillon's Crake some in our party needed. Another huge target was the Takahe – a huge member of the Porphyrio family- like a Swamphen on steroids. It took us to late afternoon to find one ( long after the day visitor ferry had left) and then found another obliging pair close to the lighthouse late in the evening and again early next morning. We ran into a couple of NI Saddlebacks – a spectacular bird with its red wattles but which proved infuriatingly difficult to photograph, and then on to another bird which I needed for my list- a Brown Quail –an Australian introduction which had found its own way on to the Island. We found a pair which were quite tame but difficult to photograph in the low light.

Supper time approached and Matt played chef as we braaied some lamb and a NZ fish I hadn't heard of, washed down with some good NZ wine. A NI Saddleback was our last daylight bird as we waited for darkness to fall and prepared for our trip out to find Little Spotted Kiwi. We left about 10pm – red cellophane covering our torches and it took about an hour to find our target as a LSK scuttled by close to one of the outbuildings around our bunkhouse. There was an option then to go look for the Little penguins coming ashore (a bird we had seen in Australia) but we decided we would try and get some sleep- we knew one member of our party snored loudly at night.

Up early next morning – the pressure was off- we had found everything we needed the day before. A visit to the gift shop was required and after second looks at most birds we were ready to catch the 11.am ferry back to the mainland. The trip was a resounding success and highly recommended. If you do nothing else when visiting Auckland- then do this

After leaving Tiritiri we headed south to one of NZ's (so called ) premier shorebird sites- the world renowned Miranda in the Firth of Thames ( I think NZ has as many English and Scottish place names as the UK does itself ). All I have to say about Miranda is that it was a severe disappointment. Yes we saw our first Wrybill – a million miles away and while we waited patiently for over two hours for the incoming tide to bring the birds closer,



they all suddenly took off and disappeared on to sandbanks well out of range. So some distant scope views of a handful of birds- mainly Bar-tailed Godwits and no photographs worth keeping. Such is birding!!

From Miranda we were supposed to head out along the Coromandel peninsular to Whitianga for our second pelagic, but a forecast of 40 knot winds put paid to that plan, so after another two hours of disappointment at Miranda we packed up and headed for Lake Taupo. Our next major birding area was the Pureora Forest Park and at least with our change of plan we were able to get there a little earlier.



We found most of our targets here- NZ Kaka- our first NZ Parrot ( 5<sup>th</sup> endemic family) Yellow-crowned Parakeet, Long-tailed Koel ( Cuckoo) NZ Falcon and NZ Pipit and NI Tomtit. We saw the Pipit and Tomtit well but really needed better looks at the other four which over the coming days we were to have. One of the nice things about this tour was the fact that there was always the opportunity for a second and often a third look at most of these birds.

From Pureora we headed in the late afternoon down to Turangi to look for a bird I was desperately keen to see- The remarkable Blue Duck. On the edge of town flows the Tongarito river- a trout fisherman's delight and every 100 metres there was fisherman in the middle of the river waist deep in his waders. Finding a Blue Duck amongst this lot was going to be difficult and so it proved to be. Two hours of searching proved fruitless but it was interesting to watch the Chaffinches and a Shining Cuckoo hawk flying insects from a suspension bridge across the river.

We were up early the next morning – just a 5 minute drive from the river and there in the early dawn light ( with no trout fishermen around) we found a pair of Blue Duck. We followed them for a hour as they made their way up a hundred metres of river moving from rock to rock and feeding as they went- a very special moment on the trip and a great start to the day.



Then back to the end of Lake Taupo for good views of Scaup and NZ Dabchick . We also checked the reeds for Australasian Bittern and spotted one flying low over the reeds some distance away. On the other side of the road a Swamp Harrier flew past and then amazingly flushed not one but five Bitterns who all took to the air simultaneously. They flew high and did a couple of circuits for two minutes below slowly coming to earth once more. A once in a lifetime birding experience!

Then on towards Napier stopping at a small reserve called Boundary Stream- another (almost) predator free reserve with Kiwi and even Kokako which we heard calling but didn't see. Here we found our first Rifleman one of two endemic NZ wrens ( 6<sup>th</sup> endemic family) and had better views of Kaka. We had time on arriving in Napier to check out the airport lagoons and beside the Dotterel and the Marsh Sandpiper we found another Marsh Sandpiper lookalike- which eventually turned out to be a Wilson's Phalarope- only the 4<sup>th</sup> record for NZ – a real rarity!! A simply unbelievable days birding!!

From Napier we headed to Foxton and the Manawatu Estuary. This proved to be much better than Miranda with great views of Wrybill, Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Little Tern and Variable Oystercatcher. The next day would be our last on North Island as we headed down the scenic Kapiti coast towards Wellington. Fortunately the ferries were running again after the Kaikoura earthquake and we were soon on another boat for our 3 hour journey to Picton on South island

Our 3.5 hour ferry crossing to Picton was fairly uneventful, We had White-capped Albatross on the open straits and as we entered the sounds Northern Giant Petrel, lots of Fluttering Shearwater again and a few Spotted Shags. Our accommodation was only a 5 minute drive from the ferry. It was ok but not nearly as spacious as some of the accommodation we had become accustomed to.

We were up bright and early as our small launch which we were to use to explore Queen Charlotte Sound and drop us off at Blumine Nature reserve had a party who wanted to swim with the dolphins and could not get back to collect us until 1.00pm because of a double booking. So we were on the water by 7.00am heading off to look for NZ King Shag- critically endangered- only 125 pairs left- we were a little concerned because we were told they disappeared for a few days after the earthquake but our boatman knew where to find them and I was soon photographing 4 birds up on the rocks.

Then it was on to Blumine- another very small predator free island in the sound. Here our targets were Malherbe's ( Orange-fronted) Parakeet, SI Saddleback ( a separate species) SI Tomit ( just a sub species) and the South Island sub species of Weka. We landed on a small jetty on a grey drizzly morning and were told we probably would'nt need to walk more than 40 metres to find all the birds we were looking for.

And so it proved to be- Within an hour we had had excellent views of them all. Then the rain started and we had to wait over 3 hours for our pick up. Huddled under a tree with only the



Wekas' antics to keep us amused we miserably cursed out boatman for double booking . They had a problem with one boat and were trying to do the work of 2 boats with just one. So we sat in the steady down pour trying to keep our gear dry until the boat arrived –half an hour late- and guess what- the dolphins were not interested in swimming with anyone!



Now we had a change in the itinerary- Instead of heading down the east coast to Kaikoura we headed down the west coast to Westport- a small one horse (actually no horse) town on the coast which looked as though it had been dying for more than 50 years. The following day was really a bit of a filler – we visited the NZ Fur seal colony on Cape Foulwind ( so named by Capt Cook) .

There are only two roads on South Island that cross the mountains that run down the spine of the Island and one of them heads over Arthur's pass to Christchurch. Arthur's Pass was our next destination- home to the alpine parrot the Kea- Arriving at a lookout point near the top in the driving sleet we found a couple of Kea in the car park. Given the opportunity they will scuttle under your car to avoid the weather. These birds sussed out the tourists a long time ago and all around the village they waited to be fed by the tourists or to find an opportunity to get inside someone's vehicle where it takes them seconds to create havoc. They were particularly adept at stripping the rubber around vehicle's windscreens!!

We walked in a small forested area after lunch and found more Rifleman and SI Robin but the weather was miserable and we retired to our accommodation. A night walk was on offer to try for the Great Spotted Kiwi. The weather was bad and we decided to give it a miss- Matt had only seen it once in 16 years and true to form there was no sign of the bird.

The next day we retraced our steps heading west back towards the coast before turning south towards Franz Josef. One target was Eastern Great Egret ( still not split by IOC) which we found on one of the coastal lagoons-- the bird for some reason has a very restricted distribution in NZ. After lunch we headed towards Okarito to Munro beach where Fiordland Crested Penguins breed. We only found a couple of birds there which were a long way off- we would have to wait for Stewart Island for better views. We were looking forward to this evening's night walk for the Okarito Kiwi – the rarest NZ Kiwi with only 300 birds remaining, but once again the truly dreadful weather of South Island played its trump card. Our guide said there was no chance of finding the bird in the torrential downpour which lasted over 24 hours.



The next day the Fox glacier was obscured by clouds and rain so we headed on and turned once again up towards the mountains to Haast Pass . There are some beautiful forests in this area and we spent a couple of hours walking here. We found our first Yellowhead, our first Brown Creeper ( Pipipi) and more Rifleman, yellow-crowned Parakeet and SI Robin. We were heading for the beautiful lakeside town of Wanaka, but Matt had a surprise for us at the campsite just out of town. A pair of NZ Falcons were breeding here and we quickly found one in a large conifer, and watched as it swooped down and attacked a dog which was getting a little close. Amazingly these birds had a nest very close to the ground ( the result again of evolving with no mammalian predators). We waited and watched as it brought a bird ( caught after a very brief chase) back to its mate.

The weather improved the next day and we headed through some of NZ's most spectacular scenery towards Milford Sound. The alpine habitat nearby is home to NZ's other endemic Wren – the Rock Wren. Fortunately a pair were breeding just outside the tunnel and it only took 15 minutes for us to pick them and get excellent views as they scuttled around the rocks in front of us. Another tricky target nailed! Having found the bird relatively quickly we then had time to play tourist and drive down to Milford sound – a truly picturesque sight in the sunshine. Retracing our steps again we spent the night in Te Anau.

From Te Anau we drove straight through Invercargill out to Bluff to catch the ferry. It is 20 miles across to Stewart Island and the ferry does it an hour. It really motors which does not give you much opportunity to birdwatch along the way. Any way there was nothing terribly exciting to see and we pulled in to Oban harbour and actually walked 200 metres, trailing our suitcases behind us up to the hotel. Only 400 people live on the Island. There is one policeman, one paramedic , one primary school, several volunteer firemen, and of course everyone knows everyone's business.

In the afternoon the plan was to visit Ulva Island, another predator free reserve just minutes from Oban by water taxi. Ulva is home to many of the South Island specialities and would give us a final chance to see Yellowhead, SI Saddleback, Red and Yellow crowned Parakeet, Kaka and Rifleman. It was a lovely reserve and the birds were obliging and at the end of a pleasant afternoon we were keen to get back to the hotel for dinner and prepare for our night trip out to find Southern Brown Kiwi.



This was a night to remember- We went with the local operator and finished up with about 10 people and 3 guides for the trip- way too many for everyone to see a kiwi I thought. We



rain )- so a respectable tally.

went again by boat and landed on a narrow isthmus which entailed a half an hour walk through some forest to a beach where the Kiwis forage amongst the kelp.

We trudged in single file through the forest. I was about 4th in line and Stephanie was right at the back. Suddenly a Kiwi was spotted in the track ahead of us. Every one froze and we were all deadly silent. The Kiwi then proceeded to walk down the trail past 13 people stopping to sniff their legs and boot laces. He seemed to like Stephanie's boots ( so does our cat) and then slowly wandered off down the trail leaving us all astounded. We had glimpses of another two birds on the trail and then excellent views of another on the beach. A very special way to end our Kiwi hunting. We had now seen three of the five Kiwis ( it should really have been four but for the

Our final day on the island was reserved for a pelagic. Several Kaka flew past us as we headed back to the quayside and on a lovely fresh morning without a cloud in the sky we headed out to sea. But first we went looking for Fiordland Crested and Yellow eyed Penguins along the rocky shoreline. We had nice views of both as well as a couple of Little Penguins in the water.

We passed a colony of Foveaux Shags ( Stewart island shags have been split (not IOC recognised) between Foveaux and Otago shags and are supposed to be geographically remote from each other.) while Matt opened box of chum big enough to feed most of the birds in the Southern ocean.

We chummed in many locations as we made our way about 10-12 miles off shore and the birds arrived in their dozens. We had 5 Albatrosses- White Capped -the common sub species of Shy which still needs to be split by IOC, Salvin's, Southern Royal, Gibson's ( the common sub-species of Antipodean) and Campbell- almost identical to Black-browed but with a yellow eye. The Cape (Pintado) Petrels were with us all day-. Northern and Southern Giant arrived along with White-chinned, Cook's Petrel and a couple of Common Diving Petrels, and as expected Sooty Shearwaters and Subantarctic Skua joined us on a regular basis. There were not many Prions but we did have Broad-billed and a solitary Grey-backed Storm Petrel came past but never came in close. We had the sun behind us , the birds were amazingly close and the photo opportunities were quite unbelievable.



A truly remarkable pelagic. I would rate it the best I have ever done and I have done more than a few.

Back on the mainland this was to be our last day with our intrepid little group. We were dropped off in Dunedin while the others on their penultimate day would head on to look for the Black Stilt in the Mackenzie basin.

We had booked to do a tour of the Otago Peninsular that evening and our tour bus collected us around 5.00pm from the hotel steps. The Otago Peninsular holds the world's only mainland breeding colony of Northern Royal Albatross. ( the majority of them breed on the Chathams). I decided not to join the main tour of the colony as you could only watch the birds through plate glass and instead wandered through the carpark to the cliff where the Northern Royals flew past every 5 minutes. Brilliant photographs and a brilliant decision- too bad I lost my 50\$ entrance fee. The remainder of the peninsular was interesting – we had our first Little Owl of the trip but as we descended to the beach to look at Yellow-eyed Penguins from a hide the rain started and tipped it down for the remainder of the evening. I caused much hilarity within the group when I was chased off the beach by a Hooker's Sea lion (nobody told me all you have to do is stand your ground and they will always back down) but when a large sea lion is bearing down on you and is only 10 metres away and showing no sign of stopping you turn tail and run!

We spent the next 10 days aboard the Spirit of Enderby but on our return we too decided to search for the Black Stilt on our way back to Christchurch. We had the best weather of the trip in the Mackenzie Basin with stunning views of Mount Cook and the glacial lakes and with directions in hand started our quest for the Black Stilt- the rarest wader in the world with less than 100 birds remaining. Our first site



a few kilometres past Omarama yield lots of Black-winged Stilt- their alarm calls starting as soon as they saw us 50 metres away continued until we left them in peace, but no Black Stilt. Our second site at the head of Lake Pukaki 40 kilometres away, proved to be the place! We found an immature bird in the middle of the track within 100 metres of opening the gate. I left the car and carefully circled the bird to get the sun behind me. It was not the slightest bit interested and could hardly open its eyes as it slept with its head tucked into its back. No wonder they are critically endangered!!

We found another two young birds feeding in the river entering the lake and left well satisfied with our haul of three. Imagine our surprise when we were to find a pair of adults the next day while we were busy looking for Chukar Partridge at Mount John.

And so our tour of New Zealand drew to a close. They have still much to do to repair the damage from the earthquake in Christchurch 5 years ago- it still looks like a bomb site in places but despite its earthquakes which had spoilt a couple of days of our trip we thoroughly enjoyed our trip around NZ- they may not have many birds but the ones they do have are very special and they are working extremely hard to preserve a future for their many critically endangered species.

