

# Birding Ecotours



## NEW ZEALAND BIRDING TOUR: ENDEMIC EXTRAVAGANZA

30 NOVEMBER – 14 DECEMBER 2024

29 NOVEMBER – 13 DECEMBER 2025



*Kea is one of our spectacular endemic targets on this trip of a lifetime.*

This New Zealand birding tour offers a once-in-a-lifetime experience and one that will live long in your memory. We really love visiting this top birdwatching destination, and we are sure you will too. New Zealand is one of the most remote places on earth, and during 80 million years of isolation a fascinating and unique fauna has evolved. In the absence of mammals, except for bats and marine species, birds became the dominant animals, and they evolved to fill most available niches. Many became flightless, and some grew to be giants, including a huge eagle and the giant browsing moas. Sadly, with the occupation of New Zealand by Polynesians about 800 years ago and Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the endemic species became extinct, including the eagle and the moas. Of those species that survived, some are still common, others are rare but still found on the larger islands, and many are only found in carefully managed populations on small predator-free islands. The stories of how New Zealanders have protected their birds are extraordinary, and these stories play an important role in our New Zealand birding tour.

This New Zealand bird tour itinerary is designed to find numerous New Zealand endemic bird species, as well as species introduced by Europeans and the many species that have naturally colonized from Australia. Located in the Southern Ocean, New Zealand is also rich in oceanic species of birds and mammals, and our bird tour includes pelagic trips at key locations.

The tour starts in Auckland from where we will pop over to the excellent Tiritiri Matangi Island, the first of three predator-free islands we will visit, to see rare endemics, including **North Island Saddleback** and **Stitchbird**, we will then start our journey south, our first stop on this journey being at the wader haven at Miranda.



*Stitchbird is usually seen on predator-free Tiritiri Matangi Island.*

Among the migratory waders we should find at the excellent Pūkoro Mirando Shorebird Center and surrounding area, is the only bird in the world with a sideways curving beak, the Curlew

**Wrybill.** In the temperate rainforests of the central North Island, such as at the stunning Pureora Forest Park, we hope to find **North Island Kokako**, **New Zealand Kaka**, and other forest endemics. In the nearby fast-flowing rivers we look for the very rare Whio – the **Blue Duck**.

Leaving the volcanic plateau, we will cross over to Kapiti Island, not too far from the city of Wellington on the southernmost tip of North Island. An overnight stay on Kapiti Island will offer us the chance of more highly sought-after endemics, including the gorgeous **Little Spotted Kiwi**.

After crossing Cook Strait, from Wellington to Picton, by ferry (offering good seabird opportunities), our tour continues on the South Island. During a boat trip in the Marlborough Sounds we visit a colony of **New Zealand King (Rough-faced) Shag**, which is only found in this isolated location and on Motuara Island, another predator-free reserve.

At beautiful Kaikoura, on the east coast of South Island, a unique phenomenon provides the ideal location for an easy pelagic cruise. This is the only place in New Zealand where there is no continental shelf, and the sea plunges 3,280 feet (1,000 meters) just offshore. Albatrosses, shearwaters, and petrels can be seen just minutes from the shore and give fantastic close views, and marine mammals are abundant. This experience is sure to be a tour highlight.



*The sight (and sound) of the ginormous **Antipodean Albatross** bobbing around the back of the boat, along with many other stunning seabirds is sure to be memorable.*

We will leave Kaikoura towards the town of Twizel. This region takes some beating for its beauty, with its many turquoise lakes, braided rivers and the grand, snow-capped peaks of Aoraki Mount Cook National Park. Birding here is a breathtaking experience, as we seek out mega birds such as the Critically Endangered (BirdLife International) **Black Stilt**, the unique **Wrybill**, on its breeding grounds, and the striking **Double-banded Plover**.

Dropping down to the extreme south of South Island we will visit several spots, such as Taiaroa Head and the Royal Albatross Center, the only mainland breeding site of **Northern Royal Albatross** and a unique opportunity to observe these birds on land at their nests. There is also a colony of the endemic Hoiho – the **Yellow-eyed Penguin** here.

We will take the short ferry ride across to Stewart Island, New Zealand's third-largest island. A different set of seabirds are on offer on our pelagic trip here and we will also look for **Southern Brown Kiwi**. From Stewart Island a short boat ride will see us visit the delightful Ulva Island, which is like stepping into an ancient forested world, and it's great for rare endemic birds.

To end our tour, we will visit the dramatic fjord called Milford Sound, New Zealand's most stunning natural attraction, looking for **Fiordland Penguin** and, amongst the rocks en route, the tiny alpine **New Zealand Rockwren**. This must-see destination needs to be seen to be believed.



*Milford Sound is a famous scenic spot, it is a beautiful area and one of many such sites that we will enjoy during the tour.*

The food in New Zealand is legendary, especially the wonderful fresh seafood, the accommodations are varied and interesting, and the scenery is simply some of the most spectacular on the planet and will take your breath away. Combine the above with the incredible New Zealand endemic birds and we are certain you will have a great birding tour.

## Itinerary (15 days/14 nights)

### Day 1. Auckland to Gulf Harbour

A non-birding day. After your morning arrival into Auckland, New Zealand's capital, on North Island, we will meet and transfer to the picturesque Gulf Harbour, just north of Auckland. We will check into our comfortable lodge in the afternoon for the first two nights of the tour. This location forms an ideal base for our first day of New Zealand birding, tomorrow. If you would like to arrive into Auckland a day or two before the tour (maybe to relax after your flights, get over any jetlag, or do some sightseeing, such as checking out fascinating Hobbiton for example – great for any fans of the Lord of the Rings movies and also some nice birds there!), we can organize extra accommodation for you, just let us know when you book the tour.

Overnight: Whangaparoa Lodge, Gulf Harbour or similar

### Day 2. Tiritiri Matangi Island

In the morning we will take a short boat ride to the excellent Tiritiri Matangi Island, a protected haven for threatened species and home to New Zealand's oldest operating lighthouse. Tiritiri Matangi is a predator-free island, meaning the island is free of rats, possums, hedgehogs, cats, and stoats etc., thus providing a haven for many rare birds (many have been introduced or re-introduced to boost populations). We will visit several such islands during this tour. The restoration of the island started over 40 years ago and the progress made is incredible. We will spend the day on this picturesque island, enjoying everything it has to offer.



*The endemic and sought-after North Island Kokako has an amazing song and is a joy to see and hear.*

This excursion will offer up our first chance for many exciting localized native land birds, many with intriguing and enticing names, such as **North Island Kokako**, **Stitchbird**, **Whitehead**, **New Zealand Fernbird**, **North Island Saddleback**, along with the more familiar-sounding **North Island Robin**. We will also come across more widespread endemic species such as **Tui** (a large spectacular honeyeater with an amazing duet), **New Zealand Bellbird**, **New Zealand Fantail**, and **Grey Gerygone**.

The island is also great for rare endemic non-passerines such as the hulking **South Island Takahe** (a giant swamphen), **Brown Teal**, and **Red-crowned Parakeet**. We may also find the widespread endemic **Morepork** (a *Ninox* hawk-owl) and the very cute **Little Penguin**.



*The giant (25 inches/63 centimeters), flightless **South Island Takahe** was rediscovered in 1948 after being considered extinct for 50 years! It is considered Endangered (BirdLife International).*

In the evening, back on North Island, we will take a trip out nearby our accommodation to look for **North Island Brown Kiwi**, our first example of this extremely bizarre (even by New Zealand standards), endemic family.

Overnight: Whangaparoa Lodge, Gulf Harbour or similar

### Day 3. Pūkoro Mirānda Shorebird Center

Leaving Gulf Harbour behind us for the final time we will drive to the south of Auckland and the excellent Pūkoro Mirānda Shorebird Center, an important feeding ground and roosting area for many shorebirds (waders) which migrate from the tundra of the Arctic to avoid the northern winter. One of the most famous northern migrants is **Bar-tailed Godwit** (read about the fascinating migration of this species here), others can include **Far Eastern Curlew**, **Sharp-**

**tailed Sandpiper**, and **Red-necked Stint**. There are also several interesting endemic shorebirds likely to be present here too, such as the unique **Wrybill** (though we are likely to see more on their breeding grounds when we get to South Island), **South Island Oystercatcher**, and **New Zealand Plover**.

We will continue our journey to Lake Rotorua where we can find **New Zealand Grebe** and **New Zealand Scaup** among other waterfowl such as **Paradise Shelduck**, **Australasian Shoveler**, and **Grey Teal**. Rotorua is on the central plateau of North Island with plenty of geothermal activity, we will also visit Waimangu Volcanic Valley, and the nearby boiling mud ponds!

Overnight: Rotorua

#### Day 4. Pureora Forest Park and Tongariro National Park

The forests at Pureora Forest Park are often referred to as the ‘dinosaur forests’, because they are dominated by ancient conifers in the Podocarpaceae family. Podocarps were the dominant trees in Gondwana 100 million years ago and are still dominant in some of New Zealand’s rainforests today, and no more so than at Pureora. Our morning will be spent in this, one of the finest podocarp forests in the country, where we will experience the haunting call of the **North Island Kokako** in its natural, misty rainforest environment. We will have most of the day here and will also look for **New Zealand Kaka** (an endemic parrot), **Yellow-crowned Parakeet**, **Whitehead**, **North Island Robin**, **New Zealand Falcon**, **New Zealand Pigeon**, the gorgeous **Tomtit**, **Shining Bronze Cuckoo**, with luck the secretive migrant **Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **Sacred Kingfisher**, and New Zealand’s smallest bird, **Rifleman**.



*At around three inches (seven centimeters), **Rifleman** is the smallest bird in New Zealand, they have an incredibly sharp-pointed bill (and practically no tail)!*

Later in the day we will finish up in Tongariro National Park, New Zealand's oldest national park, where we will look for the rare Whio – or **Blue Duck**. They like the fast-flowing rivers coming off the volcano here and they are a very interesting, ancient species.

Overnight: Whakapapa Village



*Blue Duck inhabits streams in Tongariro National Park.*

### Day 5. Kapiti Island

We will drive south off the volcanic plateau and arrive at Paraparaumu Beach where we will take a short boat ride across to the island sanctuary of Kapiti Island for an overnight stay. While on this small island we will be looking for further views of **South Island Takahe, North Island Saddleback, Stitchbird, Tui, Whitehead, Red-crowned Parakeet, North Island Robin, and New Zealand Kaka**. However, the main reason for an overnight stay here is to seek out the nocturnal **Little Spotted Kiwi** as well as **Morepork**, and **Little Penguin**.

Overnight: Kapiti Island

### Day 6. Kapiti Island to Wellington, ferry to Picton, South Island

We will have the early morning on Kapiti Island, perhaps enjoying views of the species listed above, or something different such as a **Variable Oystercatcher, Paradise Shelduck, White-fronted Tern**, or a flock of **Kelp Gulls** before bidding farewell to the island in the mid-morning.





*We should stand a good chance of connecting with the **Little Spotted Kiwi** (the smallest of all kiwis) while on Kapiti Island.*

We will then board the large ferry in Wellington on the southern tip of North Island bound for Picton at the northern tip of South Island. The crossing of Cook Strait takes around three hours and it provides another seawatching opportunity with possibilities including **Fluttering Shearwater**, **Hutton's Shearwater**, **Sooty Shearwater**, **Flesh-footed Shearwater**, **Black Petrel**, **Westland Petrel**, **Broad-billed Prion**, **Fairy Prion**, **Common Diving Petrel**, **Parasitic Jaeger** (Arctic Skua), **Northern Giant Petrel**, **Antipodean Albatross**, and **Shy** (White-capped) **Albatross**. We will stay overnight near the ferry terminal in town.

Overnight: Picton

### **Day 7. Marlborough Sounds (Queen Charlotte Sound) then to Kaikoura**

Our morning will be spent birding our way through Queen Charlotte Sound. We will have seen some of the area on the ferry the previous evening, as we came into Picton, but this will be a more specific birding trip and we will make our way to a small rocky island where a small colony of the very localized **New Zealand King** (Rough-faced) **Shag** breeds and roosts. We could also see the widespread **Australian Pied Cormorant** and **Little Cormorant**, and we may also encounter the interesting **Weka**, a flightless member of the Rallidae family.

In the mid-afternoon we will drive down the east coast of South Island to the famed town of Kaikoura (a pelagic paradise), where we will spend the next two nights.

Overnight: Kaikoura

## Day 8. Kaikoura Pelagic

With a backdrop of steep mountains and the sea that plummets into a deep ocean trough, Kaikoura is not only spectacular to look at but also a perfect habitat for pelagic animals. **Sperm Whales** are resident, **Humpback Whales** are seasonal visitors, **Dusky Dolphins** are abundant, the tiny, rare **Hector's Dolphin** is frequently seen, and there is a **New Zealand Fur Seal** colony close to the town. Pelagic birds, including albatrosses and giant petrels, are often seen from the shore. **Hutton's Shearwater** breeds near the tops of the 8,200-foot (2,500-meter) mountain range behind the town and can often be seen in vast flocks wheeling around just offshore. Not surprisingly, Kaikoura's economy is based on whale watching, swimming with dolphins, and albatross viewing, as well as commercial diving for crayfish and pāua (abalone).

An early-morning outing on the ocean from Kaikoura is the best possible way to start the day. Because conditions are so perfect for pelagic birds, we do not need to travel far, or for long, but we do see a lot of species. Possibilities include **Antipodean Albatross**, **Northern Royal Albatross**, **Southern Royal Albatross**, **Shy Albatross**, **Salvin's Albatross**, **Buller's Albatross**, **Black-browed Albatross**, **Southern Giant Petrel**, **Northern Giant Petrel**, **Common Diving Petrel**, **Westland Petrel**, **White-chinned Petrel**, **Hutton's Shearwater**, **Buller's Shearwater**, and the abundant **Cape Petrel**.



*Southern Royal Albatross is one of the many seabird species we should encounter on our Kaikoura pelagic.*

The afternoon will be at your leisure to take a stroll on Kaikoura Peninsula or edit the hundreds of photos you will have likely taken on the boat trip!

Overnight: Kaikoura

### Day 9. Kaikoura to Twizel

As well as targeting pelagic species at Kaikoura, we will also look for a rare introduced species, **Cirl Bunting**. Throughout our tour we will also see a number of species introduced from Europe, including **Eurasian Skylark**, **Common Chaffinch**, **Yellowhammer**, **European Greenfinch**, **European Goldfinch**, **Common Redpoll**, **Common Blackbird**, **Song Thrush**, **House Sparrow**, and **Dunnock**. These birds might not be of too much interest for European birders but might be so for birders from other parts of the world.

After our birding in Kaikoura, we will drive south to the town of Twizel.

Overnight: Twizel



*The tussocky grassland and braided river landscape we will be birding in whilst in sight of Mt Cook (the tallest mountain in New Zealand) is spectacular, and the birds are too!*

### Day 10. Twizel to Dunedin

There are many great birds on offer this morning, gorgeous **Black-fronted Tern**, **New Zealand Pipit**, **South Island Oystercatcher**, **Paradise Shelduck**, and **Swamp Harrier**. However, there are three species of endemic shorebird to be found here, and these will form the focus of our attention. The Kaki or **Black Stilt**, which is one of New Zealand's rarest birds, breeds along the rivers in this area, and we will spend time looking for this elusive bird. Like so many rare New Zealand birds it owes its survival to micro-management by conservation authorities, who operate captive breeding facilities, and private conservation groups.

We will also search around the braided rivers for breeding **Wrybill** and the pretty **Double-banded Plover** (a New Zealand breeding endemic which migrates to Australia during the non-breeding season).



*Black Stilt* (pictured) is deemed Critically Endangered by BirdLife International and there is a lot of work underway to try and prevent this very rare bird becoming extinct. One of the threats to the species' survival is hybridization with its cousin, **Pied Stilt**, a recently self-introduced species from Australia (several other species we will see during the tour are also self-introduced from Australia). The survival of this species certainly hangs in the balance!



Definitely one of the most highly sought-after species in New Zealand, the **Wrybill**.

After concluding our birding here, we will continue to the city of Dunedin on the south coast of South Island. A charming cruise from Otago Harbour will take us around Taiaroa Head, the only mainland breeding site of **Northern Royal Albatross**, a huge bird with a wingspan of over 120 inches (three meters)! Here too, we will look for **Spotted Shag**, **Otago Shag** (another very localized endemic), and **Silver Gull** (of the endemic form, sometimes split and referred to as Red-billed Gull). Here we will also be on the lookout for Hoiho – **Yellow-eyed Penguin** and **Little Penguin**, both of which breed in the area.

Overnight: Dunedin

### Day 11. Stewart Island

We depart Dunedin for Invercargill, where we will board the fast ferry to Stewart Island. We will base ourselves in the village of Oban for two nights on this gorgeous, almost pristine, island. Although not a pelagic trip as such, this ferry ride does offer an extra chance for a few new seabirds, maybe **Australasian Gannet**, **Salvin's Albatross**, or **Buller's Albatross**.

The main activity in Oban will be a nighttime quest to find **Southern Brown Kiwi**, potentially the final of New Zealand's kiwis on our trip. We will have enjoyed some great food during the tour and the fresh seafood in Oban is sure to rate as some of the best.

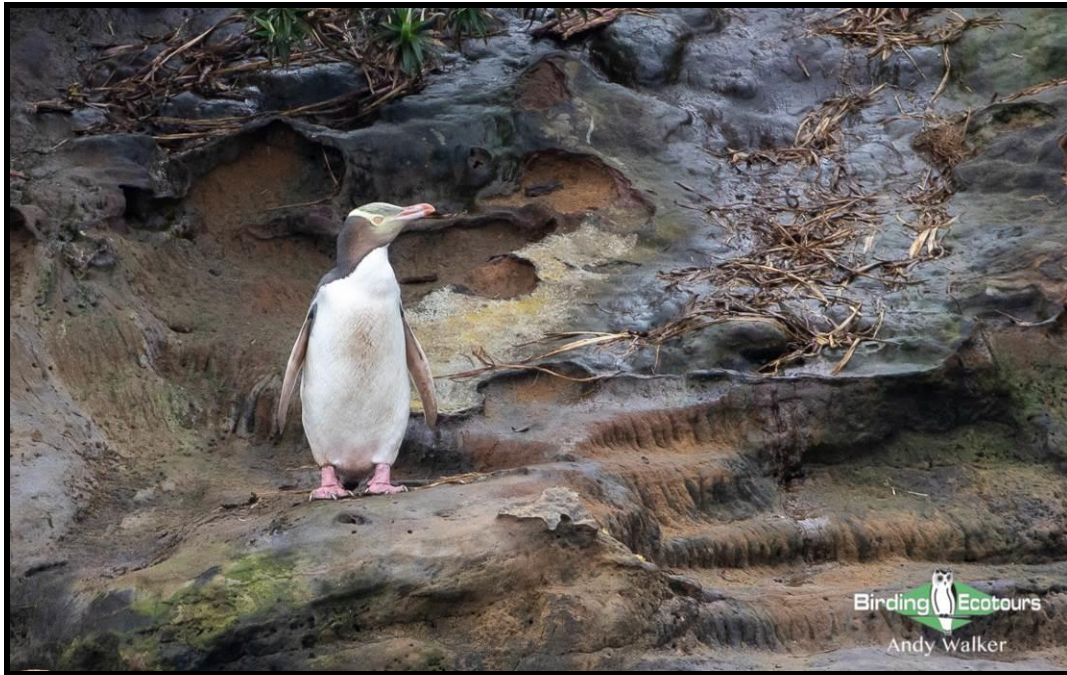
Overnight: Oban



*The attractive **Buller's Albatross** would be a highlight on any pelagic trip!*

## Day 12. Stewart Island birding, Paterson Inlet and Ulva Island

A charter boat will pick us up and we will delve into the South Pacific and Paterson Inlet. We will look for **Yellow-eyed Penguin**, **Fiordland Penguin**, **Little Penguin**, **Foveaux Shag** (a new English name for what was previously Stewart Island Shag, after the split of Otago Shag, a bird we will have looked for on the Otago Peninsula a few days prior), **Buller's Albatross**, **Shy** (White-capped) **Albatross**, **Salvin's Albatross**, **Brown Skua**, and **Common Diving Petrel**.



*Yellow-eyed Penguin is one of three species of penguin we hope to find on this tour.*

A treat awaits us in the afternoon on the island sanctuary of Ulva Island. This primeval forest on the island is amazing and a great trail network allows easy exploration. The island comes complete with some really special birds and many of these are extremely approachable allowing for great photo opportunities.

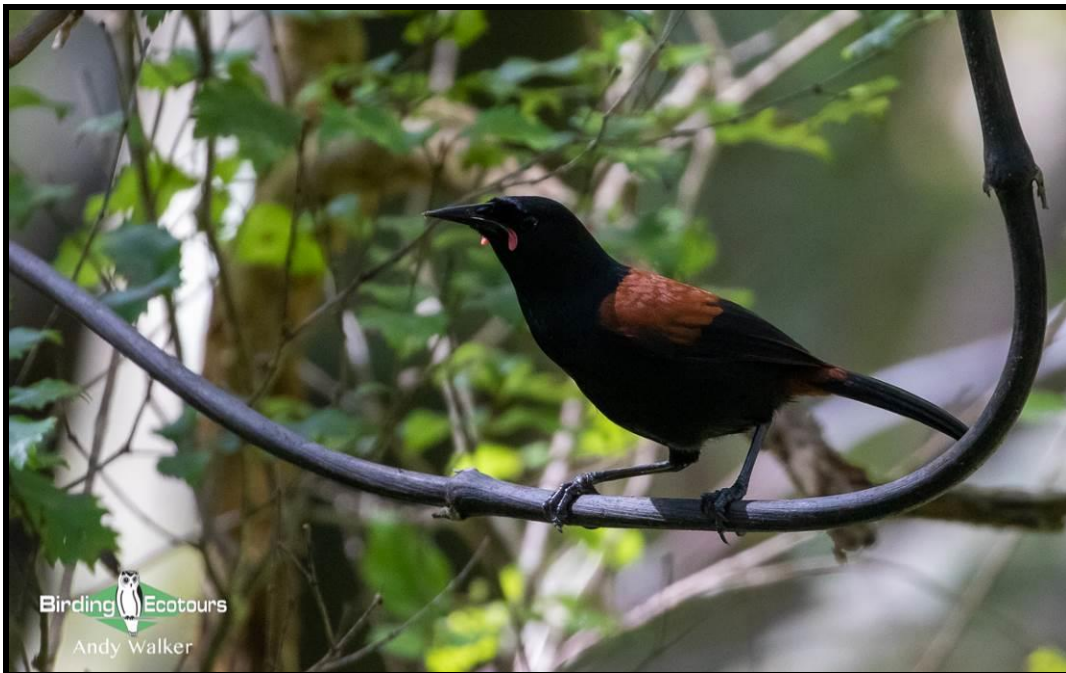
We will be on the lookout for as many of the specials as possible during our visit, depending on what we have seen over the previous two weeks of the tour. Potential targets include **South Island Robin**, **South Island Saddleback**, **Yellowhead**, **Pipipi** (New Zealand Brown Creeper), **Tomtit**, **Grey Gerygone**, **Morepork**, **Yellow-crowned Parakeet**, **Red-crowned Parakeet**, **New Zealand Kaka**, **New Zealand Pigeon**, **New Zealand Bellbird**, **Tui**, **New Zealand Fantail**, **Variable Oystercatcher**, and **Weka**.

Occasionally **New Zealand Sea Lions** might haul themselves out of the ocean onto the beaches of Ulva Island, a rather spectacular sight.

Overnight: Oban



*South Island Robin can be extremely confiding!*



*Usually rather shy, South Island Saddleback can occasionally show well on Ulva Island.*

### Day 13. Stewart Island to Te Anau

We will bid farewell to the beautiful Stewart Island (looking out for any further pelagic species on what will be the final ocean trip of the tour). Back on the mainland we will start a small loop

of the southwestern section of South Island. We will be suitably enticed by the glacially sculptured mountains and valleys of Fiordland National Park (even more stunning scenery, to go with all of the rest we will have enjoyed during the tour). Not far from the town of Te Anau, our base for the final two nights of the tour, we will drop in to the beech forests of Eglinton Valley where we will look for **Yellowhead**, **New Zealand Kaka**, and **Yellow-crowned Parakeet**. There is the optional-extra of a trip across Lake Te Anau in the evening to view the famed 12,000-year-old Te Anau Caves and their glowworms (cost not included).

Overnight: Te Anau

### Day 14. Milford Sound

Leaving Te Anau for the day, we will head towards Milford Sound. A drive along the Eglinton River to Hollyford Valley will delight us with spectacular mountain scenery. In the valley we will seek out some unique endemic species, with **New Zealand Rockwren** being one of the main targets. Also high on the 'wanted list' will be **Blue Duck**, which we should have already seen on North Island, but will not complain at another look at this rare bird. Other birds possible today include **Tomtit**, **Rifleman**, **New Zealand Kaka**, **Kea**, **Pipipi** (New Zealand Brown Creeper), and many more.



*One of the tougher of the endemics to find, **New Zealand Rockwren** is a great bird!*

There is an optional-extra boat cruise on Milford Sound (which is actually an impressive fjord) in the afternoon, during which there is a chance of **Fiordland Penguin** and some great scenic photographs of hanging valleys and cascading waterfalls.

Overnight: Te Anau





*We will see **New Zealand Kaka** at several locations on the tour, they are always impressive.*

### **Day 15. Te Anau to Invercargill where tour ends**

We will reluctantly leave the land of fjords and complete this southwestern loop of South Island and indeed our whole New Zealand tour. We will reach Invercargill in the early afternoon where the tour will conclude, selecting “bird of the trip” should be fun!

Overnight: Not included

*Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.*

|                    |                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Duration:</b>   | 15 days                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Group Size:</b> | 6 - 10                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Dates:</b>      | 30 November - 14 December 2024<br>29 November - 13 December 2025                                                                           |
| <b>Start:</b>      | Auckland, North Island                                                                                                                     |
| <b>End:</b>        | Invercargill, South Island                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Prices:</b>     | NZ\$13,980 per person sharing – based on 6 - 10 participants (2024)<br>NZ\$15,520 per person sharing – based on 6 - 10 participants (2025) |

**Single Supplements:** NZ\$1,870 (2024)  
NZ\$2,075 (2025)

**Price includes:**

All accommodation (as described above from Day 1 through Day 14 see note below)  
Meals (from dinner on Day 1 until breakfast on Day 15)  
Expert tour leader and fully licensed local guide  
National park/birdwatching reserve/protected areas entrance fees  
Inter-island ferry (Wellington-Picton and Invercargill-Oban-Invercargill)  
Private transportation during the tour and transfers (possibly shared) to and from the airports  
Pelagic trips (Kaikoura and Stewart Island)  
Locally guided kiwi excursions (Tawharanui, Kapiti Island, and Stewart Island)  
Boat trips as described in itinerary (Gulf Harbour-Tiritiri Matangi-Gulf Harbour, Marlborough Sounds, Otago Harbour, and Stewart Island-Ulva Island-Stewart Island)

**Price excludes:**

International or domestic flights to get to Auckland and from Invercargill  
Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding/sightseeing/etc. excursions  
Optional glowworm cave boat trip on Lake Te Anau (estimated at NZ\$120 per person in 2024)  
Optional boat trip on Milford Sound (estimated at NZ\$100 per person in 2024)  
Visa if required  
Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls, etc.  
Soft/alcoholic drinks (drinking water is safe from the taps, please bring a refillable water bottle)  
Personal travel insurance  
Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))

**Accommodation note:**

All accommodation, twin-share with private facilities in quality hotels and motor lodges, with the exception of one night on Kapiti Island, accommodation on the island is basic with no private facilities – but it does mean we have a good chance of seeing **Little Spotted Kiwi!**

**Useful information:**

Due to the costs involved with visiting New Zealand, we run this tour with a slightly larger group than we would to other destinations, this is so that we can spread the cost across more people and therefore keep costs down for everyone involved. This decision is also based on the habitats we will be birding in on the tour which allow for larger groups, without reducing the experience of the tour.