

New Zealand 2019

(a trip by RVs, buses, and ship)

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Auckland

Yesterday we flew from Sydney to Auckland and joined more caravaners already here. After orientation and a bountiful banquet, I gave a presentation on Moa, Maori, and New Zealand. Today on the Hop-on Hop-off bus, Shari and I stop at the Auckland Museum. My main interest is to see the Moa.

Moa was a ratite, as are Ostrich, Rhea, Emu, Cassowary, Elephant Bird among other large flightless birds, and kiwi and tinamous among small ones. These birds are far-flung around the world, which means their ancestor was on Gondwana before it split off South America, Africa, Madagascar, Australia, and New Zealand. The birds evolved into their unique species after the split. Further changes in New Zealand, such as its nearly entire submersion followed by the uplift of the Southern Alps resulted in moa splitting into nine species ranging in size from turkey-sized to the Giant Moa which weighed as much as a cow.

In the museum, we see the 1913 reconstruction of a Giant Moa using emu feathers. It stands behind plate glass that reflects overhead lighting, making it nearly impossible to photograph, but I try. A close-up of its feet shows three powerful forward toes and a hidden hind toe, closely resembling those of the cassowary we saw in Australia. I also photograph a moa egg adjacent to an emu egg, the latter about the size of my clenched fist.



South Island Giant Moa

The Māori, sea-faring Polynesians, arrived in New Zealand about 1280 A.D. That date was arrived at from carbon-dating shells and seeds gnawed by a rat. Rats came with the Māori. Before their arrival, there were no land mammals in New Zealand and only three flying mammals, three bat species. The Māori survived on the North Island by planting kumara (sweet potato) and supplementing it with killed moas. On the South Island, it was too cold to grow kumara, so they ate moa and seals. In less than 160 years the moa was wiped out, one of the fastest recorded megafaunal extinction.



Three toes of moa



Moa egg compared to emu egg



Kiwi, a distant relative of the moa

Miranda

We pick up our RVs, buy groceries, and drive to the Firth of Thames at Miranda, arriving in time for a 3 PM presentation by Keith Woodley. I own and have enjoyed reading Keith's book, "Godwits: Long-haul champions." Although our group does not include dedicated birders—a few are casual bird watchers—Keith gives an amusing presentation with some intriguing details, especially about Bar-tailed Godwits. I am sitting in the back row of chairs and everyone maintains eye contact with the speaker, following every word. In brief, Bar-tailed Godwits breed in western and northern Alaska, migrate non-stop to New Zealand, winter farther inland, return north via China and North Korea, and complete the long-haul cycle every year. We know the incredible details of the migration from Keith's studies through the use of banded birds and, later, radio-tagged birds.

As of this date, the adults have migrated through and the juveniles have newly arrived to the shores of Miranda. After Keith's talk, some of us head out to the beach to see some 4000 Bar-tailed Godwits in flight and on the mudflats. The flocks mix with Red Knots, also in large numbers.



Bar-tailed Godwits in flight



Pied Stilts



Bar-tailed Godwits in background; Red Knots in foreground



Blow-up of Red Knots in previous photo, plus a few godwits



Bar-tailed Godwits in previous photo



Bar-tailed Godwits in flight, with one Red Knot flying below



Bar-tailed Godwits in flight

Waitomo Caves

To enter Waitomo Caves we walk down a gently sloping circular staircase illuminated by periodic lights. When photographed from the top down, it provides an interesting pattern. However, that array of lights is artificial. More fascinating is the pattern produced by nature, specifically by glowworms. I was unable to photograph the glowworms at Lamington National Park, but in this cave, we stand only inches from the glowworms and are also close enough to see their sticky strings. The glowworms are not actually worms, but rather insects; the adult stage resembles a mosquito. Without a mouth or stomach, the adult's purpose is only to mate, lay eggs, and then die. The eggs hatch into larvae, which is the stage that extends long strings, hanging vertically in the dark cave. The larvae emit bioluminescence and the little lights attract insects that wandered into the cave and then become stuck on the sticky strings. The larvae pulls up its strings and devours the captured insect.



Illuminated circular staircase



Stalactites as sheets



Fossilized seashell in limestone



Glowworm strings and a few lights



Glowworm strings



Glowworms in pitch black darkness

Hobbiton

To my surprise, many in our group say they have not seen any of the Hobbit or Lord of the Rings movies. Our guide tells us that is typical of the groups she leads. The movie set is in the midst of a huge sheep farm. Hobbiton is in a tree-surrounded hollow in the rolling farmland. We walk on paths through the movie set miniature village, tiny homes designed for the little hobbits, complete with vegetable gardens, local crafts, and clothes lines supporting miniature clothes. As real as everything looks, it is all fake. The doors to the homes enter to the dirt hill. Even the most prominent tree is fake, made up of thousands of fake plastic leaves and metal branches.



Hobbiton is surrounded by sheep pastures





Fake tree at top of hill



Fake Hobbit homes are only facades





Women go round the Maypole

Waimangu Volcanic Valley

Marcia likened it to a miniature Yellowstone National Park. One could also imagine filming Jurassic Park here. Were it not for the multicolor panorama, one could also say we were descending into the gates of Hell. Properly, it is called the Waimangu Volcanic Valley, the result of the Tarawera volcanic eruption at 2 AM on 10 June 1886.

From the top of a mountain, we walk steadily downward through a temperate rainforest to hot lakes, scalding fumaroles, and hot steam mist. An acrid smell of sulfur permeates the air. Exotic tree ferns project umbrellas above a dense dark understory. Wooden bridges cross percolating streams and subterranean steam pipes beside hydrothermal vegetation. In the hottest spots, colorful algae thrive. One turquoise steam pool aptly is named "Gateway to the Inferno."

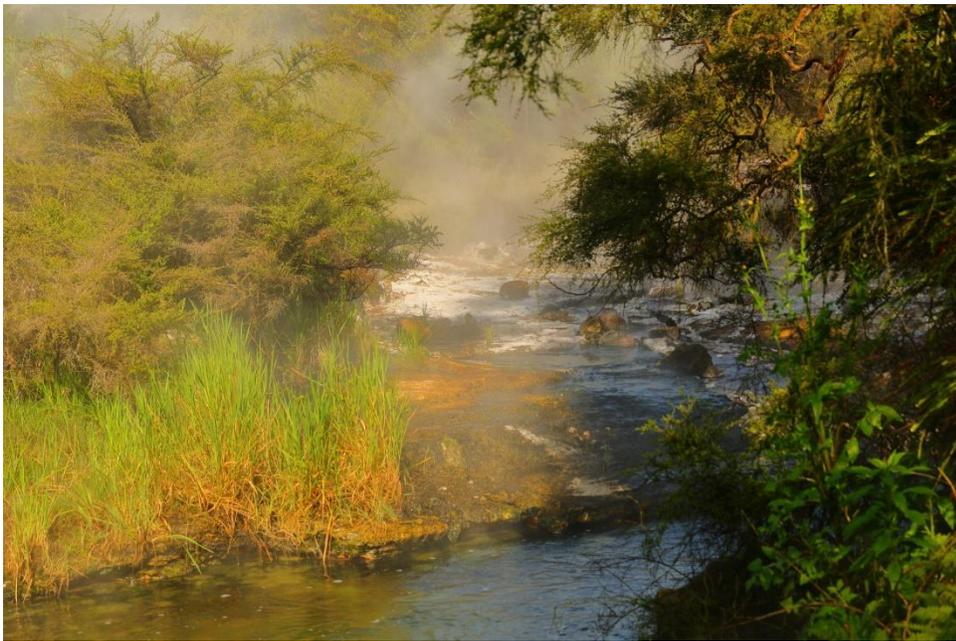


Waimangu Volcanic Valley











“Gateway to the Inferno”



Small geyser

Farther downstream, water cools and plant life responds in vibrancy. Singing Tui become more abundant, especially when we reach the lake. A New Zealand Fantail dances over the branches, swinging its spread tail left and right. Swarms of swans glide gracefully through the placid lake, pushed by submerged propellers. While some shoreline supports feeding New Zealand Scaup, Canada Geese, and New Zealand Dabchick, other parts spew forth geysers, some as timely as Old Faithful. Perched on a dead branch extending over the lake, a Sacred Kingfisher awaits opportunity.



Tui



New Zealand Fantail



Black Swan







Big Geyser





New Zealand Dabchick



Sacred Kingfisher

Jet Boat

We suit up in raincoats and life preservers in preparation for a thrilling jet boat ride over the Aratiatia Rapids. I take photos as Shari goes out with the first group. I am in the second group. The boat jumps over rapids and does 360 deg. spins all at rapid speed. The driver propels the boat close to protruding rocks and tree branches and skims the edge of cliffs. Jim asks the driver how long it took him to gain the skills he exhibits. The driver responds, "I learned it all yesterday." Despite the fast speed, I enjoy the river scenery and manage to identify 12 bird species along the way. I've supplemented my photos with

some from the boat company, taken by a photographer who had access to several viewpoints along the river.



(Rapid Jets photo)







(Rapid Jets photo)



(Rapid Jets photo)



(Rapid Jets photo)



(Rapid Jets photo)



(Rapid Jets photo)



(Rapid Jets photo)



(Rapid Jets photo)

Cape Kidnappers Gannet Colony

Two years ago, we visited the gannet colony by riding on a wagon pulled by a tractor along the gravel, boulder-strewn shoreline. This time when I attempted to make reservations, I found out that the tide was too high at the time we needed. I made other arrangements. Meantime, early this year there was an avalanche caught on photos. Two Japanese tourists were walking the beach when the landslide occurred. They narrowly escaped with cuts and bruises. Subsequently, the government closed the beach for walking or vehicles. Today, we can see the landslide.



Cliffs and shoreline, showing landslide at Cape Kidnappers

Our alternative access to Cape Kidnappers is by 4-wheel bus, winding through steep hills, deep gullies, and sharp curves through an expansive sheep farm. We arrive at the largest accessible nesting site for the Australasian Gannets. Actually, there are several nearby sites, two others shown on my photos, and a third we drive to right at the edge of a very high cliff.



First nesting colony



Second nesting colony



Third nesting colony

At this third colony, we can walk within a dozen feet of the gannets. Here we can observe mating rituals, males attracting females by bringing nesting material, copulation, sitting on an egg, and other intimate behaviors. I also take a close-up photo of the way you can separate this Australasian Gannet from its Northern Gannet cousin. They are nearly identical, but look at the vertical black throat line, which is absent on the ones we watched at the colony on the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec and at Cape St. Mary's in Newfoundland.

We learn an interesting flight characteristic of the Australasian species. When the juveniles leave the nest, they fly far north along the coast, swing over the northern top of New Zealand, and then wing their way to Australia. When mature, they fly back to this exact same location in New Zealand.



Male Australasian Gannet carrying nesting material



Copulation



Crossing bills, a mating ritual





Female gannet sitting on an egg



Colorful toes



Gannets have a wingspan of over 6 feet



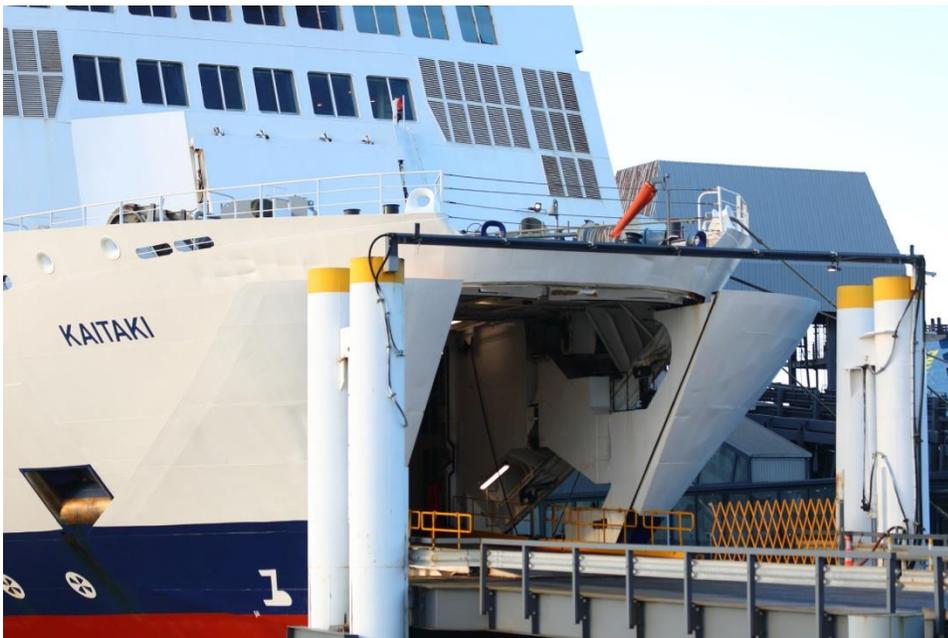
How to tell Australasian Gannet from Northern Gannet

Cook Strait: North Island to South Island

We are first in line to board the ferry to the South Island. I drive onboard and take the elevator to the seventh floor. From the outside balcony, I can see that most of our caravan are still lined up on the dock. In another half hour we are all boarded and while some head to breakfast I go outside to watch for pelagic birds.



Ferry to South Island

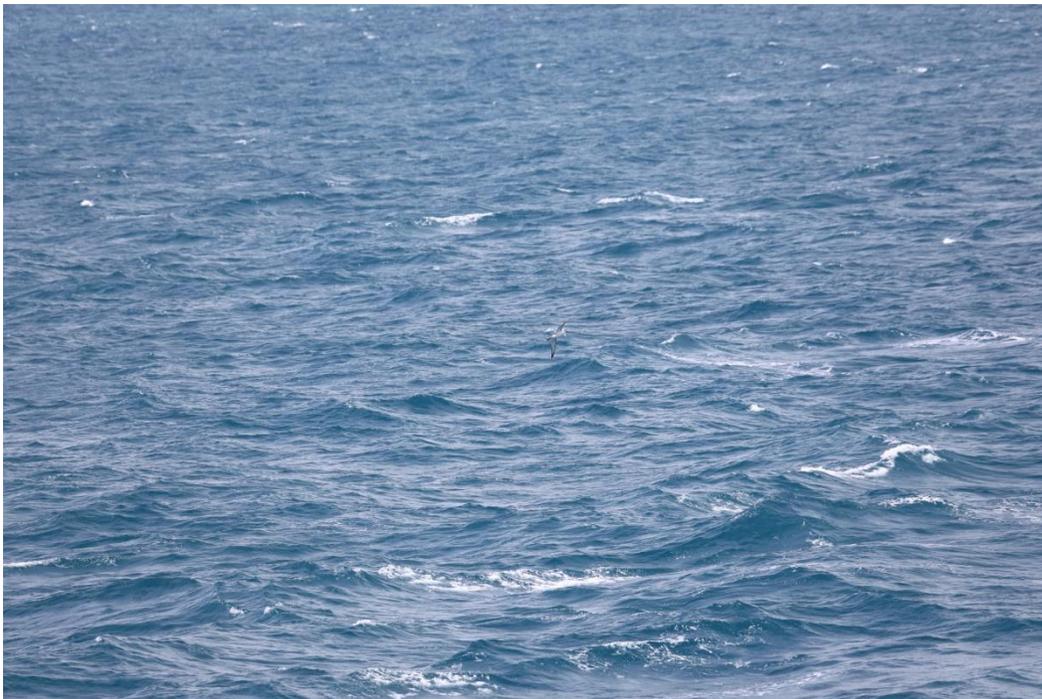


Driving the RV into the hold



Part of our caravan still lined up on the dock

Now that we are almost out of sight of either island, I begin seeing petrels, shearwaters, and albatrosses. However, the birds are mere dots in the vast ocean, an aquatic equivalent of a needle in a haystack. The next photo I took with my 400mm lens. Do you see the bird? A blow-up is shown below.



I take dozens of distant photos, hoping some are in focus and detailed enough to identify the birds. It will take me some time to crop and edit the photos and even more time to do identifications, so here

are only a few to show now. The first one I think is Hutton's Shearwater, but it might also be Fluttering Shearwater.



Hutton's Shearwater?

The next two images I identify as White-capped Mollymawk, also called White-capped Albatross. Correct me if you think I am wrong.





White-capped Albatross

After about three hours we reach the South Island and travel through a long channel between mainland, peninsulas, and islands. This section is often called the most beautiful of ferry passages.







Ruins of old whaling station in foreground





Picton

Albatrosses and dolphins

Individuals in our group could choose which of two boat trips to take today. Two-thirds choose the albatross tour while the rest chose the dolphin tour and the latter included two people that will don wetsuits and swim with the dolphins. Not surprisingly, I am with the albatross group and Shari is on the dolphin boat.

Usually to see albatrosses and other pelagic birds a boat needs to travel several hours to the continental shelf where these birds feed. However, today we need only go a matter of minutes to reach the shelf as it is extremely close to the South Island here. We soon see Northern Giant-Petrels and others join them and follow in our wake. Cape Petrels are numerous, also following the boat. They are the first to arrive when we stop and the captain throws out chum. Little by little other species arrive, including the very large Wandering and Royal Albatrosses.

After an hour or more of watching pelagic birds, the captain heads closer to shore where he finds a pod of rare Hector's Dolphins. They are quite small and I take dozens of photos to catch more than a disappearing tail or mostly submerged dorsal fin. We find New Zealand Fur Seals lounging on rocky shores and islands. Then we come upon leaping Dusky Dolphins, which is the same species as those on the other boat are seeing and some are swimming alongside.



The boat heading for dolphins



Cape Petrels, sometimes called Cape Pigeons because of the resemblance, are common



Wandering Albatross has a wingspan of over 10 feet



Northern Giant-Petrel with Cape Petrels in background



Southern Royal Albatross, the largest of albatrosses



Westland Petrel, a rare endemic, not known to science until 1945



Hutton's Shearwater, shadowed by another



Hector's Dolphins, rare and local to this area of New Zealand



New Zealand Fur Seals



Dusky Dolphin



Dusky Dolphin



Westland Petrel



White-fronted Terns



Return ride to dock

Southern Alps 1

From Christchurch we drive inland across a flat coastal plain, mostly devoid of forests, extensively agricultural, with small villages. The first line of snow-covered mountains forms the peripheral of vision, growing larger until we begin a gradual ascent.



After a couple of hours of driving, we stop at picturesque Lake Tekapo. Imported pink and purple lupines grow near the shore. Although attractive, their introduction is environmentally disadvantageous to the endangered Black Stilts that feed and nest in the gravelly alluvial fan that drains from Mt. Cook into the lake. While near the coast, Silver Gulls are abundant, here in the mountain lakes they

replacement is Black-billed Gulls, including one of which favors a no-parking sign for perching. We continue toward Mt. Cook, the highest mountain in New Zealand. The weather is excellent for photography.



Lupines



Black-billed Gull



Lake Tekapo



Mount Cook



Song Thrush near base of Mount Cook



Grey Warbler – Gray Gerygone



Paradise Shelduck



Near Mount Cook



Lake Ruataniwha



Lake Ruataniwha

Southern Alps 2

We travel south through the mountains that here are very barren, but striking in their bareness. In the Lindis Valley at a small wooded area bordering a mountain stream, I am surprised by the birdlife, especially two Silvereyes and a Yellowhammer. We continue to Cromwell, an old river-based town with a long history, including a boom during the gold rush. Here they have recreated Old Cromwell by moving original buildings to a river site and turning them into arts and craft shops.



Lindis Valley



Shari feeds cappuccino to a wooden horse in Old Cromwell

We reach our next campground in Queenstown, a ski village that reminds us of Breckenridge, Colorado. In late afternoon, we walk to the Steamer Wharf in Queenstown Bay. While waiting for the boat to arrive, I photograph a life size moa, using Valaree as a comparison. We board the T.S.S. Earnslaw, an original 1912 steamship, still operational and powered by a coal-fired engine. The steamship take us across a portion of huge Lake Wakaripu, longest in New Zealand, to a sheep farm with a substantial restaurant that can feed hundreds simultaneously from an expansive buffet. After eating too much, we waddle to the stage where a sheep shearing is explained and demonstrated. The speed and thoroughness with which the experienced sheep shearer accomplishes the task is impressive. Then he

shows us how his trained sheepdog follows his command to move a small herd of sheep up and down a hill and into a pen.



Moa and Valaree



T. S. S. Earnslaw on Lake Wakaripu



Walter Peak Farm



Great Crested Grebe on Lake Wakaripu



Sheep shearing



Sheepdog herds sheep

On our nighttime boat ride returning to Queensland, the cloudless sky gives me a clear view of stars. Several times now in Australia and New Zealand I have been trying to find the Southern Cross. Often I am able to find α - and β -centauri, the pointer stars, but the cross was always below the horizon. This time I can see the four stars that make up the Southern Cross. I gather many of my fellow travelers and lead them to the outside deck where I show them the cross, a first-time experience for them.



Southern Cross in lower left. β -centauri in upper right and α -centauri in far upper right corner

Southern Alps 3

Today we visit my favorite inland location on the South Island, Fiordland National Park. The park traverses the best native habitat we will encounter on this tour and, thus, it is my best opportunity to see native birds that have nearly disappeared from other areas owing to introduced predators. In addition, the scenery is stunning and varied.

Nine of us take a very early morning start from Queenstown, plus Shari who will drive to the Te Anau campground while I continue with the rest. The weather forecast for today is excellent, though the weatherman expects rain for tomorrow. It should be a good day for scenic photos.

Our first stop is Lake Te Anau where high winds churn the often-passive lake into turbulent tossing waves beating onto the shore.



Lake Te Anau

At McKay Creek, I photograph a female Yellowhammer. We look out onto a tall grass meadow and although we cannot see the river, we can follow its serpentine route by watching Black-fronted Terns hunting over its waters.



McKay Creek, Fiordland National Park



Female Yellowhammer

At another stop, we hear a bird perpetually singing, though hidden on the forest edge. Becky, who has amazingly good eyes for spotting birds, and I spend 15 minutes trying to locate the singer. Finally, we find a Common Chaffinch, a very common introduced bird from Europe. From now on, I will remember its distinctive song. My photo of it has the flare of a Japanese painting, though the dull pink and gray-naped bird stands out more sharply above the background.



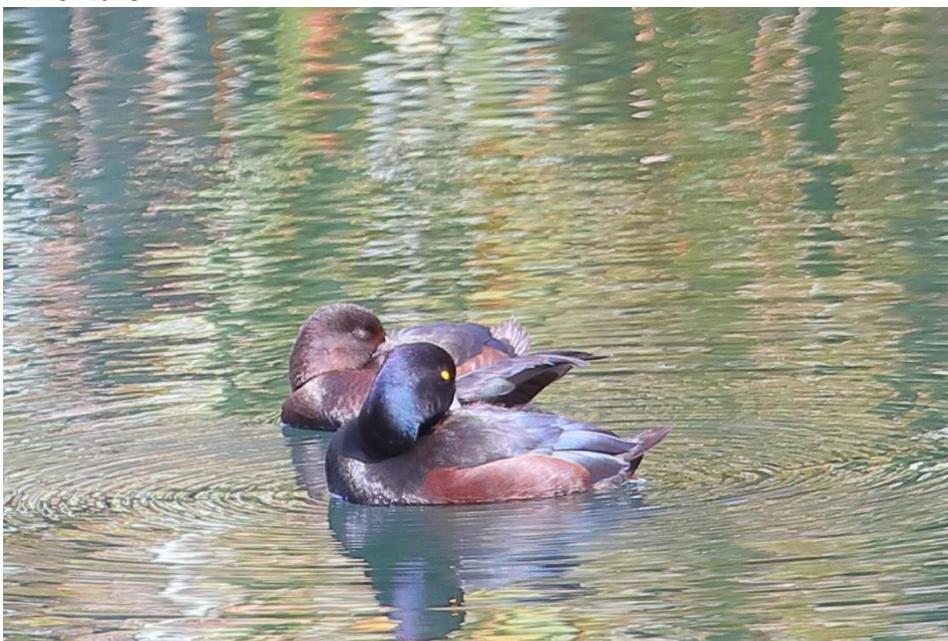
Common Chaffinch

Another singing bird I should have recognized by song, but did not at first, turns out to be a New Zealand Bellbird. Although it produces a variety of bell-like notes in its song, most memorable is a single note that reminds me of the gong from a church bell choir.

The most visited site by tourists carried by countless tour busses is Mirror Lake. Although overcrowded with smartphone enthusiasts, many taking selfies, it is a favorite site of mine also. Fortunately, we arrive in early morning and most buses have not yet entered the park. Rainbow-colored reflections on ripples of Mirror Lake enhance my photos. New Zealand Scaup favor the tiny lake and it is fun to watch them dive for food. I try catching them in the act of diving and after many attempts, I get what I want.



Mirror Lake



Pair of sleeping New Zealand Scaup



Diving New Zealand Scaup



Ed spots a tiny bird chasing through the dense riparian understory below the deck. It is a South Island Robin, another endemic species. At Knobs Flat, we have a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. While viewing the unfurled ribbon of a thin waterfall pouring from the mountaintop to the Eglinton Valley below, I catch a New Zealand Falcon—rare and endangered—soaring above the barren rocky mountain peak. We hike into the forest, densely wooded with moss encrusted fallen trees and a high canopy where a Tui pair chases and another Bellbird rings.



Mountaintop where New Zealand Falcon soared



New Zealand Fantail

While the bird life dwindles, the stunning scenery enhances. I take dozens of photos and have trouble deciding which of the many to include here.



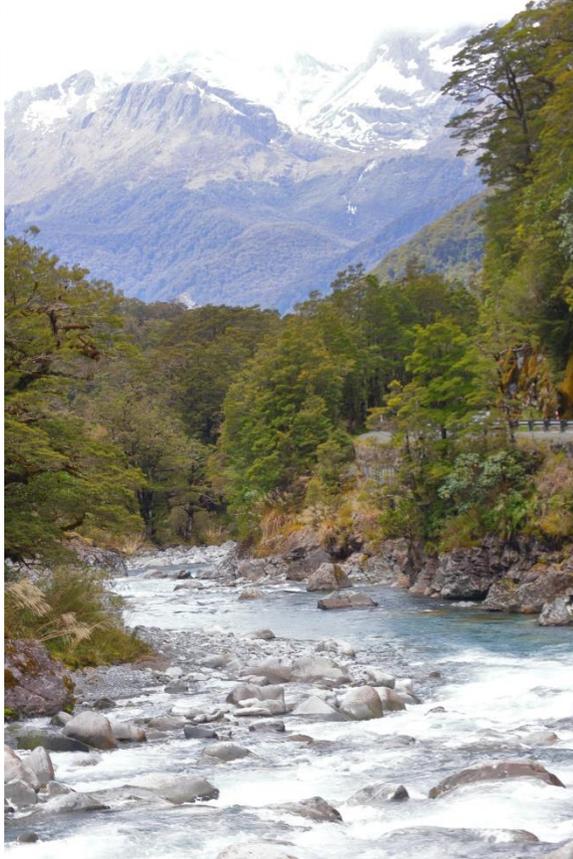
Note the four contrasting habitats: forest, treeless tundra, barren rock, snow peak



Roadside beauty



Falls Creek



Milford Sound

As promised, today is a rainy day, only the second since we started in Darwin, Australia. However, rain today is a good thing and you will soon hear why. This time Shari and I traverse Fiordland National Park alone and our group will meet up again at the road terminus at Milford Sound. We stop a few times for me to bird while Shari continues to work on the trip video she prepares for each tour in the past few years. At Mirror Lake, I hear a bird constantly singing for at least 15 minutes. It is in the tall forest and I think I can locate the tree, but I cannot find it. Next stop is Knobs Flats and I hear the repetitive song again, but this time the singer is in clear view. A very small bird, it is a South Island Robin. Nearby in the woods I see a pair of parakeets feeding in the canopy. I cannot get a good look or photograph, but they must be the rare Yellow-crowned Parakeets, a species I've only seen in captivity. It is my first life bird of the tours.



South Island Robin

When we reach Homer Tunnel, we notice many changes. The stoplight controlling the one-way traffic through the tunnel has been moved a quarter mile from the entrance, and the roadside and parking lot are cordoned off with signs prohibiting stopping because of avalanche risk. This is where we always found the Kea with its reputation of pecking at tires and chewing on windshield wipers. I guess we will have to look for them elsewhere. Rain downpours on the west side beyond the tunnel as we slowly descend on hairpin curves to sea level.

Things have also changed at parking lots near the ship dock. Our caravan RVs are scattered and no one knows an alternative to paying \$10 per hour for parking. It used to be free and we likely will be here for five hours, so the fee is excessive. In the rain, I cannot get any useful information from employees charged with prohibiting me from reaching the dock office where Shari will pick up the tickets. They keep directing me to paid parking and telling me to walk in the rain. Somehow, I get past one employee and drop Shari off. I try to pick up her again 20 minutes later, but I am stopped. After some difficulty, I get past the guard again and pick her up. Now we need to figure out where to park.

We notice a shuttle bus and remember seeing a lot on an unmarked side road about two miles from the dock. We find it nearly filled with vehicles and nothing about paying. We can park here and a shuttle will pick us up, but first we need to find our scattered group and tell them about the lot. After 45 minutes, we find everyone except one who has already paid \$50. On the bus to the dock, I talk to an employee who tells me the parking changes started in October, but the workers cannot stand on the public highway to give directions and there are no signs except for those pointing to the pay lots. We hear there are cameras on the entrances that photograph license plates and are used to police whether everyone has paid. We have yet to find out if anyone will be charged for waiting for Shari and me to find out the free parking solution.

After that fiasco, we are safely aboard the ship for a cruise in Milford Sound. The sound is a water-filled fiord carved out by glaciers 10,000 years ago, eventually opening to the sea. Mile-high rock walls rise vertically from the sound. The rain has not lessened. Strangely, that is the good news as the captain explains. The tops of the rock walls are barren, so rainfall cannot seep into ground and instead it pours off the rocks in hundreds of waterfalls. When it rains, which it does 300+ days per year, there are many times more waterfalls than in good weather.

In spite of the inclement weather, overcast skies, and heavy rain, I manage to take some interesting photos. I find it amazing that many waterfalls are a mile high. Only a few times can I see the top of the waterfalls as clouds shroud them. To give perspective to the extreme heights, I try photographing some waterfalls with another ship at their base. At one waterfall, the ship captain drives into the edge of the downpour, drenching anyone standing at the bow. Rain washes dull color out of photographs, so a few brightly colored kayaks look like they are painted into a monochrome background.



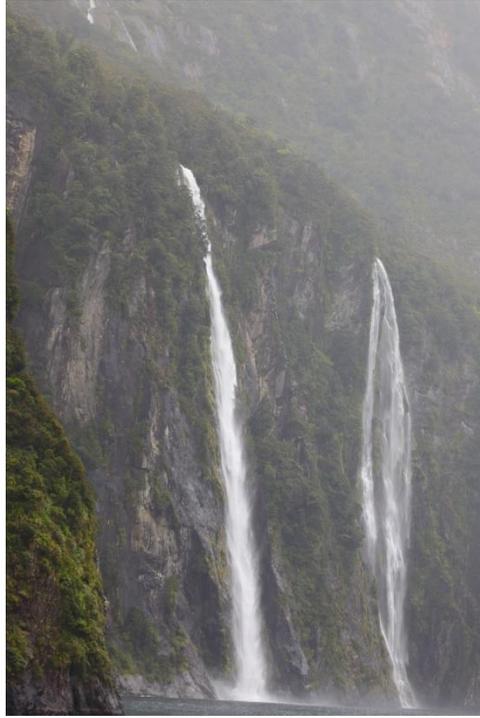
Colorful kayaks in monochrome setting



Finding a path from barren mountaintop to sea



The Four Sisters, only seen in heavy rains



Top of mile-high water fall + bottom of same waterfall



Size comparison



Dense vegetation clings to steep slopes, watered by nearly daily rain

The captain has sighted penguins resting on narrow ledges and rocks at the edge of the fiord. I am in good position to take photos and when the captain aims the ship closer, my long lens gives me good close-ups, something those with cell phones cannot do. These are Fiordland Penguins, also called Fiordland Crested Penguins, a rare species. I see a few standing together and another hopping from rock to rock. I also photograph some at a later enclave, totally over a dozen today.



Fiordland Penguins



Fiordland Penguin caught in mid hop

We reach the end of the fiord where it opens to the Tasman Sea, named after the Danish explorer who in 1642 was the first European to see New Zealand. In the open sea I find Sooty Shearwaters, a Westland Petrel, and an albatross, perhaps Royal.



Tasman Sea

The ride back to the dock has one more highlight, a small colony of New Zealand Fur Seals resting on a flat rock. A bull seal lords over his harem.



New Zealand Fur Seal

Back on land and in our RVs we have a two-hour drive back to our campground. Fortunately, we finally see the Keas, one while waiting for the stoplight at the west side of Homer Tunnel and another at Monkey Creek. A Kea is a parrot that lives in cold alpine habitat, often devoid of trees.



Rain-drenched Kea

Crossing South Island

The drive today, crossing New Zealand from west to east, to me is usually the least interesting of travel days. I have become somewhat immunized to the millions of white sheep dotting vibrant green

pastures. They keep the grass so trimmed that the fields look like hilly golf courses stretching in every direction. For variety, some pastures support black or black-and-white cattle, sometimes mixed with the sheep.



Green pastures with cattle and sheep

I pull off at a rest area near Mandeville that turns out to be a pretty site with ponds of ducks and a flock of Lesser Redpolls constantly flying from tree to tree. A Eurasian Skylark is putting on an aerial show above the pasture across the highway.



Mandeville rest area



Eurasian Skylark “skylarking” about 200 ft. above a pasture

Our next stop is Sinclair Wetlands, a favorite of mine although often frustrating because of high winds that keep the birds hidden in the flax. This time it is calm. I know from my readings that the New Zealand Fernbird can be found here, although not by me in my prior two visits. Nor have I found the fernbird elsewhere. I study the app on my iPhone for details of what to look for and barely get the phone back in my pocket when a fernbird flies past me and perches close by for two seconds in amazingly sharp view. I quickly draw my camera from its holster and take multiple shots of the bird that meanwhile has secluded itself in shoulder-high bushes. The New Zealand Fernbird, a lifer, is barely discernable in my best photo, but I can make out the distinctive rufous crown, prominent white supercilium, dark eye, and dark streaking on its back, all characteristic of the South Island subspecies.



South Island subspecies of New Zealand Fernbird

Much easier is it to photograph an attractive pair of New Zealand Shovelers resting at the edge of the weedy pond. I am struck by how oversized are their bills.



New Zealand Shovelers

The next bird passages me from extreme excitement to disillusioned disappointment. The Yellowhead is an endangered species used as a poster bird for protecting wildlife. I think I may have seen it once before, but now have my doubts, so I have since been on the lookout for a better view and convincing photo. I see a yellow-headed suspect and immediately shoot a dozen photos. Through my camera lens, I am convinced I have finally gotten it. It bothers me, though, that it is in the wrong habitat. Upon reviewing my photos on my computer, I recognize it as a fairly-common Yellowhammer with an unusual absence of head markings. Win some; lose some!



Yellowhammer

The oystercatcher I photograph is an identification challenge. Is it a South Island Pied Oystercatcher or the pied variant of a Variable Oystercatcher?



Dunedin

In 1967 when a young newly married couple, touring Dunedin, saw Larnach Castle their immediate impulse was to buy it. Abandoned for years, the sprawling castle had been looted of everything valuable. Their dream was to refurbish it, seek out and buy back the original contents, and open it for tourists. They did it and now we tour the castle.

Built for William Larnach as a private home, construction began in 1871, with additions through 1887. Larnach bought much of the construction materials from Europe and had them shipped as ballast to the Dunedin harbor immediately downhill from his hilltop property on Otago Peninsula. Two hundred workmen built the main structure.

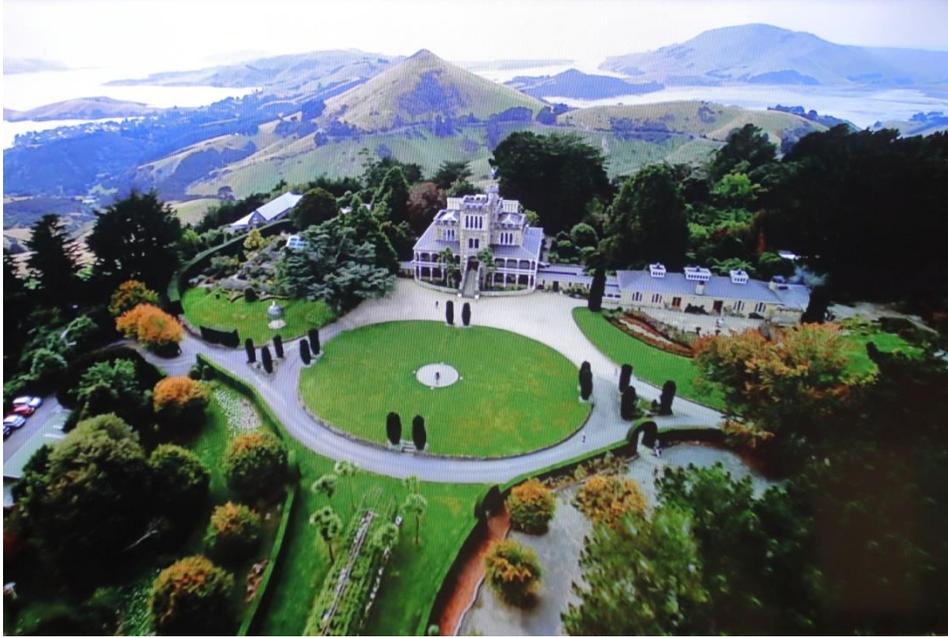


Larnach Castle

While still under construction, Larnach solicited a traveling photographer to photograph the home. The rare old photo even shows the workman's shovel lying on the bare earth in the foreground. I took a photograph of the photograph and also of an aerial view that shows the restored castle and surrounding gardens.



Circa 1870s photograph of Larnach's home



Photograph of photograph of aerial view

While the interior of Larnach Castle is impressive, I more enjoyed walking around the surrounding gardens. Impressive is the way lines of shrubbery draw attention to distant views of Dunedin and its harbors and islands.





Birds are everywhere, even on the rooftops where I photograph a colorful starling as I look down from the castle's pinnacle. In the gardens, I find a New Zealand Pigeon. Surprisingly, this is the first one I have seen on this visit to New Zealand, even though others in our group have reported them. I recall at one of our stops a guide told about the Maori and that they hunted the Moa to extinction. I knew that but what I did not know was that with the disappearance of Moa, the Maori started hunting New Zealand Pigeons for food. This pigeon is very big and fat, especially when compared to the White-winged Doves shot and eaten in Texas.



Eurasian Starling



New Zealand Pigeon

Moeraki Boulders

On our drive north from Dunedin, we stop at Moeraki Boulders. From the restaurant above the sandy beach, we can see the boulders lying in the surf. It is as if the gods were playing a game of marbles, but abandoned them for us to see.



After lunch, we walk down stairs to the beach and see the boulders up close. Some of the boulders are over 6 ft. in diameter, amazingly spherical. I could find no posted information on how these strange objects formed in nature, so I looked it up on Wikipedia. They are the result of the precipitation of mineral cement within the spaces of marine mud during the Paleocene period. The calcium deposited in the mud entered by mass diffusion, rather than fluid flow as you would see in most minerals and this resulted in their spherical shapes. Scientists estimate the larger boulders formed over a period of 4 to 5.5 million years in the sea floor.





Cracks formed in the boulders, causing them to look like dinosaur eggs about to hatch. A few have broken open to expose hollow interiors.





Penguins and Shags

Tonight is the penguin show. On the way to the stage from which we will watch the penguins is an old dilapidated wharf, blocked off from access. Shags have adopted the wharf as a roost area and hundreds rest there closely together. Occasionally, they fly in from and out to the sea when I can photograph them in flight. The Stewart Island Shag is unusual in that it has two forms, one almost totally black and the other black-and-white. Another species of shag is also on the wharf. This one, the Spotted Shag, has a conspicuous crest and attractive facial coloring.



Sumpter Wharf



Stewart Island Shag (black form)



Stewart Island Shag (pied form)



Adult and juvenile Spotted Shag



Spotted Shag

Of the three penguin species most often seen in New Zealand, the Little Penguin (alternatively, Blue Penguin, Little Blue Penguin, or Fairy Penguin) is by far the most common. Like all penguins, though, it is at risk. At Omaru, the species is in a protected area and efforts are made to increase the population. Those efforts have been quite successful and the numbers have been increasing, so much so that the penguins are regular visitors to the campground where we are staying. They spend nights under the bushes and under the deck of the raised kitchen area.

The best show, however, is viewing them from seats surrounding a fenced area open to the sea. At dusk we can see a group collecting between tossing waves, bobbing up and down, sometimes visible, sometimes obscured. They reach the boulder beach and walk up between the rocks, jumping from one to another. They are timid at first, perhaps checking for threats, but they also stand for a long time as they cool off. One of them will probe farther ashore, followed by a few others. Then they suddenly race across the grassy area, duck into the enclosure, and slowly make their way to their nesting boxes.

Unfortunately for me, but not the penguins, photography is not allowed. Lights and loud noise would threaten the penguins and discourage them from proceeding to their nest boxes. My camera does not have a built-in flash and would not pose a threat, but many amateur photographers do not know how to turn off their flashes, or forget to do so. Thus the ban.

We leave the show after I have counted 285 penguins and no more appear to be coming ashore. On the walk back to the campground, I see other penguins in the rocks along the shoreline, crossing the road, or in the grassy areas beyond. One of them is just below a sodium streetlamp and I have my chance to

take a photo using ambient light. When I get back to the campground, Shari, who had walked faster than me, tells me I just missed seeing a penguin under our RV.



Little Penguin

Christchurch

The Penguin Express picks us up at our hotel—we have turned in the RVs—and takes us to the Antarctic Centre. The facility is the staging area for many countries for their explorations of the Antarctic and it is also a showplace for us to learn more about the continent. We ride on a Hagglund, the specifically designed vehicle for Antarctic travel, taking them across steep hills, water traps, tilted slopes, and several hazards.



Bus to Antarctic Centre



Hagglund



One of the hazards we drive over with a Hagglund

We don insulated coats and enter a room where a wind storm brings the temperature down to 32 deg. below zero, a summer storm temperature in the Antarctic. We also watch injured Little Penguins being fed.



What does 32 deg. below freezing feel like?



Swimming Little Penguin



Little Penguins



Feeding time

In the evening we tour a nature center that includes a Kiwi in a dark room. Then we watch a traditional Maori performance. At one of the spots where we hear about Maori music, weapons, and food, my attention is drawn to a pair of Eurasian Blackbirds that are feeding young in a nest. I notice that both male and female adults feed the young.



Female Eurasian Blackbird



Male Eurasian Blackbird



