

# **Australia & New Zealand 2017**

## **Including Hawaii**

(a trip by cars, RVs, airplanes, and ship)

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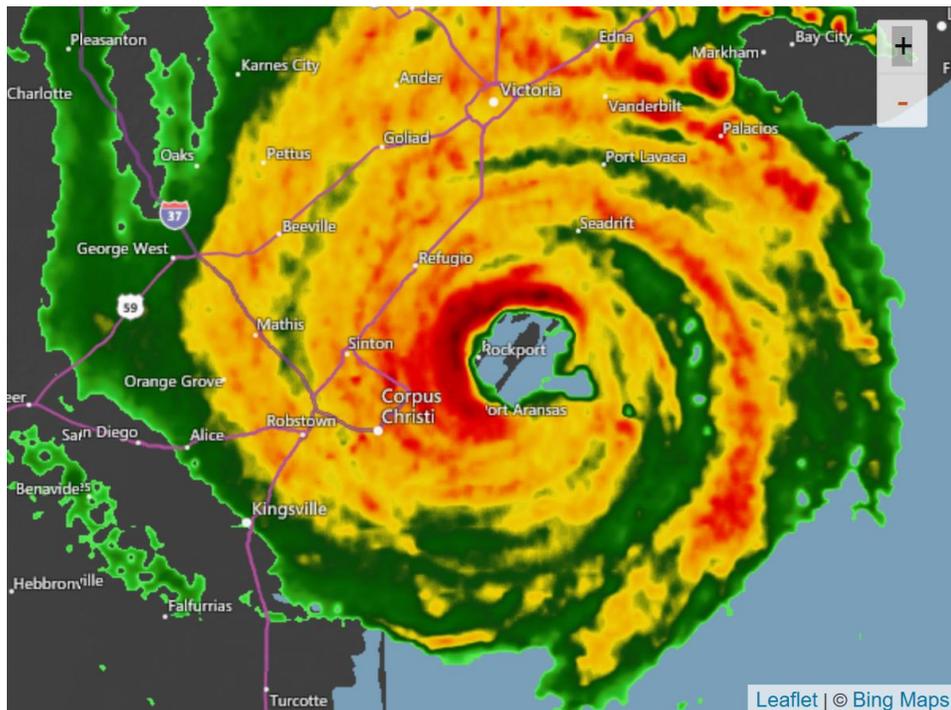
# Australia & New Zealand 2017

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## CHAPTER 1 – HAWAII

### Day 1 – Texas to Maui

(Bert) The perfectly circular crimson red orb balanced on the horizon over Houston. We left McAllen at the Mexico border in darkness, with only the streetlights of the Rio Grande Valley visible from the air and then blackness until a Houston sunrise. Below the red sun it will be another day of rescues even after the rain has stopped but the floodwaters continue to rise, powered by the Brazos unleashing upriver buildup. We had been watching Hurricane Harvey news for several days now. At first we were forecast for heavy rains and flooding, but the storm twisted north and we did not receive a raindrop. Instead, the eye of the hurricane aimed for Rockport and Port Aransas, where we own a lot in an RV resort on Mustang Island. That night, our eyes were glued to the TV as we watched the news when shortly after 10 PM, at a peak speed of 132 mph, the eye passed over the city of Port Aransas.



10:23 PM August 25

When we woke up early the next morning the hurricane had barely moved; it still swirled above the island.



6:35 AM 26 August 2017

Three hours later Port Aransas was in the rain belt, but clear skies were beginning to punch holes in the rain shield.



9:20 AM

Water surged over the island inundating everything in its path, floating boats from the harbor and dumping them in the middle of streets, ripping to shreds restaurants and shops we oft visited. We know, because within a couple of days first responders drove the flooded highway and city streets, videoing everything as they past and uploading to Facebook. While the devastation in town is severe, a few miles south our RV resort is mostly spared: a few overturned RVs that were not evacuated in time, shingles flipped from the roof of the reception building, flooded ponds, saltwater saturated lawns, sand strewn concrete pads, tilting palm trees, and tossed lawn furniture. Amazingly, the boardwalk over the dunes is intact as are the barrier dunes. And, since Port Aransas had a mandatory evacuation, no life was lost.



The photo shows our RV lot after the rains stop and the winds subside. The palm tree is on what is left of the lawn. The concrete table and benches remain intact. The chairs on the left are tipped over. Normally the pond is about 2-3 ft. lower than the concrete, which is now covered with sand.

Mightily, the hurricane pushed inland to College Station where we first lived when we moved to Texas. A daily rainfall record is broken and the rains continue for days. Total rainfall has been reported variably from 21-27 in. College Station is in Brazos County, named after the river flowing on its border. Much of the College Station rain is draining into the Brazos River and flowing toward Houston and is one of the reasons the reservoirs there are at maximum depth and the water had to be released, causing more flooding in Houston. Our daughter once lived in Sugarland, a suburb of Houston, and much in the news now. If she still lived there, she would have had to evacuate because homes there are in water. Rainfall total in Sugarland was reported at 36 in. Damage by winds has been pretty much restricted to Port Aransas and Rockport where the eye of the hurricane first hit land. Everywhere else, the problem is the rain and flooding. Final reports list the maximum rainfall at 51.88 in. and a total deluge of 27 trillion gallons, with 6800 homes destroyed.

But today all seems calm from the air as we pass high over the dry desert-like mountains of the western U.S. and then over the cloud covered Pacific Ocean until we see clear blue seas as we descend to Maui.



10,000-ft. Mt. Haleakala on Maui

(Shari) Where can you go leaving Dallas by 9 AM on American Airlines and reach your destination of palm trees, beaches, and island breezes by noon? Crazy, but that's all the time it takes to get Maui. Now, we are eating lunch overlooking the Pacific Ocean and feeling very blessed, but tired.



Lunch at Seascape

Early this morning, getting up at 3:30 AM is not my cup of tea. We drove to the McAllen airport, parked our car and I texted Harvey and Gail the car's location so they can pick it up later. After an uneventful first flight to Dallas, we took the sky train from terminal A to terminal C arriving in plenty of time for our 9 AM departure. Arriving at noon is really an 8 hr. flight because of the time change. The seats are uncomfortable, every person that walks by nudges me as the aisles are narrow, and I am bored. The two movies offered are not to my liking. Luckily I downloaded things I like from Netflix. Anyway, we make it, rent a car, eat a delicious lunch at Seascape and check into the rental condo at Papakea Resort just north of Lahaina on Maui. Unpack, take a nap, and grocery shop is all we can manage before hitting the sack at 8 PM local time.



View from the Maui condo

## Day 2 – Maui snorkeling

(Shari) Today is Shari's Comedy Show. I had tested my snorkeling gear before we left home. Adjusting the straps on the fins and breathing through the tube, I was set. Well .... first we get lost trying to find the calm beach the consignor told us about at the Maui information meeting this morning. We find it after doubling back twice. The beach is not crowded as it is already 4 PM.

Bert, who did not try out anything ahead of time, is in the water first. I, on the other hand, am still trying to strap on my first fin. It must have gotten smaller on the plane on the way over. The incoming waves are strong and the outgoing undertow is even stronger. I can barely stand. Then the snorkel tube does not want to stay attached to the mask. A nice woman takes pity on me and thinks I cannot get in so offers to walk me out. But I am not nearly ready for that as I am still fiddling with the mask. It crosses my mind many times to just give up. We ponder the dilemma a while with her suggesting I just use the mask. She goes back to her chair and I struggle some more. Bert says, “Stick the snorkel under the mask strap.” I do.

Now, no way can I walk forward with those fins on. Don't know how geese do it. The woman comes again, I give her my fins to carry back and I walk barefoot into the water. Bert says to just jump in and swim when I get to the drop off. My most comfortable position, in spite of Bert's disagreement, is straight up and down treading water. I can just lower my head and look. I see fish of varying shades of black, white, and gray before I have to raise my head to clear the snorkel of water. At least the mask holds. Bert points out a snake-like creature which scares me and I madly swim—should say tread—away. When I get tired I let the waves push me in to the sand beach and I quickly

stand up before a wave has a chance to push me back out. In the process I lose the snorkel tube. Driving back we miss our turn again this time by miles and miles. Snorkeling used to be one of my favorite activities. Today it is just a hassle. Nevertheless a hassle I'd do again ONCE.

We bought steaks at the grocery store this morning and after a Hawaiian pineapple passion rum cocktail on our balcony we walk to one of the ten gas grills surrounding two swimming pools to grill the steaks. I get a photo of Bert grilling that I call "fake news" since I'm the cook, while he watches. Lots of people have the same idea as all but two grills are occupied. While grilling, the sun begins to set. We retreat to our balcony and get some pretty great pictures. So ends day.





### **Day 3 – Maui birds and green turtles**

(Bert) I made a list of about ten bird species on Maui that I have not seen and then looked at 22 bird checklists for locations on the island. Today we plan on visiting the top three sites where these birds have been seen previously. The problem is I don't know how common the birds are at each site, so this may be hit and miss. As it turns out, the new ones are hard to find, so I settle for good views of birds I've seen before.



Keālia Coastal Boardwalk

We start at Keālia Coastal Boardwalk, an excellent coastal wetland. One species that I seem to find everywhere is flocks of Scaly-breasted Munia. I brought along the Hawaii bird book I used the last time I visited the state and that book calls it Nutmeg Mannikin. I've noticed that many of the Hawaii birds have changed names.



Scaly-breasted Munia, alias Nutmeg Mannikin

Another species that I see everywhere is Spotted Dove as well as Zebra Dove. They seem to be outnumbered only by the Common Mynas.



Spotted Dove

I am seeing other birds I've seen before in Hawaii, but this visit I have my camera so these are "photographed lifers" for me. One is Hawaiian Coot and I see many little chicks foraging with the adults.



Hawaiian Coot

A bird I've seen in Alaska, now wintering in Hawaii, is Wandering Tattler.



Wandering Tattler

No lifers here, so we move on to a spot high on Shari's list to visit. It is Iao Valley. I've heard they filmed fly-over shots for the Jurassic Park movie at Iao Valley. The location

is still nearly inaccessible from the ground. We barely get a parking spot at the congested National Park and tourists crowd the walkway. As we return I overhear one man say, “Well, what do you expect for \$6!” [the parking fee] A bit later another visitor behind me says, “That was worthwhile.”



Iao Valley

Birding site #2 is Waihe'e Beach Park. The gate is locked and it is getting hot, so Shari stays with the car in the shade and I walk into the park, heading toward the beach through tall shade trees. I'm only a few feet beyond the gate when a fluttering bird deep in the forest catches my attention. I get my binoculars on it and am amazed at its bright colors: yellow-orange throat and wing patch, olive green crown, and bright red bill. This one is a lifer, a Red-billed Leiothrix. It moves quickly, too quickly for me to get a photo.

Next stop is Kanaha Pond Wildlife Sanctuary. One of the “ponds” is just a bone dry sandflat, but it is covered with 55 Pacific Golden-Plovers, the most I've ever seen in one spot. These are Siberian and western Alaska birds that winter in Hawaii, arriving in August.



Pacific Golden-Plover

Finally, we head to a site on Shari's list, Ho'okipa Beach Park. Very popular for surfers and wind surfers, the highlight for us is the Green Sea Turtles that come ashore and share the beach with the multitude of beach goers. While the swimsuit crowds gawk at the turtles, the enormous turtles ignore them.





Green Sea Turtle

## Day 4 – Haleakala National Park

(Shari) We cannot remember how many times we were at Haleakala but we know it was at least once. That year, we left at 2 AM so we could see the sunrise over the crater. We also remember taking bicycles down. This time it's no bikes and a more leisurely drive up with stops for birding and hiking. At the top the temps are really cold. We are at 10,000 feet and I am surprised I do not get out of breath. I feel like I could be on the moon as the landscape is full of rocks with no vegetation except a lone endangered silver sword or two.

(Bert) We learned that visitors now need a pass to watch sunrise on Mt. Haleakala and reservations are booked weeks ahead of time. We'd also have to leave the condo by about 2 AM to reach the mountaintop. Since we've seen it before, it isn't hard to say "Been there, done that" and sleep in. On the way up the mountain, but already in the national park, we stop at Hosmer Grove. I expected a nice natural forest of native trees. Instead, I learn that years ago the native trees and vegetation were removed and replaced with pines, spruce, cedar and other trees imported from Australia, Japan, Europe, and elsewhere. It was a failed experiment, never profitable, and at the detriment to native plants and birds. We hike a trail through the grove and surrounding shrubbery, interesting, but almost devoid of birds. After nearly an hour on the trail my bird list consists of one distant flying I'iwi (an endemic), one heard-only Japanese White-eye (an import), one Hawaii Amakihi (native), and one House Sparrow (import). The Japanese White-eye was introduced to Hawaii in 1929, bringing with it avian disease and taking over the habitat of native birds. I see and hear them throughout our Maui stay. The Hawaii Amakihi is a new bird for me and not an easy identification as it closely resembles another native bird, the Maui Alauahio. Fortunately my photos clearly show the short curved bill, cinching the identification.



Hawaii Amakihi (female)



Hawaii Amakihi (male)

(Bert) Next stop is the Halemau'u Trail which turns out to be the best birding spot so far. The trail traverses the mountain slope. A group of five hikers ask me to photograph them as they just completed the 3-day hike. I settle for 0.2 mi. and return to the parking lot where the best birds have gathered. In fluttering butterfly flight, a Hawaiian Owl (Short-

eared Owl) canvases the distant mountainside. I see two more Hawaii Amakihi and at first think it is another species but then recognize the male and female are differently colored. A flock of Apapane are delightful to watch, flashing shades of red as they dart in and out of the native shrubs. Two Eurasian Skylarks bounce in hurried steps across the blacktop parking lot. And, I even see a male Ring-necked Pheasant. Shari honks the car horn, apparently finished with her morning nap and ready to move on.



Hawaiian Owl (Short-eared Owl)



Eurasian Skylark



Apapane

We continue our drive uphill until we reach the barren crest at 10,023 ft. Here the cold winds blow fiercely and I cling tightly to my shirt and hat, wishing I had brought along a sweatshirt. Everywhere is dry volcanic cinders except for a few strange plants called

Ahinahina or Haleakala Silversword. More like a glittering ornament than a plant, the spiny cactus-like spindles look like there were sprayed with silver paint.



At the 10,023-ft. peak of Haleakala



Observatory atop Haleakala



Ahinahina or Haleakala Silversword

(Shari) Our last stop is the Lavender farm where I want to check out the shopping. Surprising, Bert finds out to be more of a birding spot than a shopping one. I only buy a cappuccino, but Bert tells me he found photogenic Red-crested Cardinals and Japanese White-eyes, plus a lifer: Java Sparrows.



Female and male Red-crested Cardinals



Japanese White-eye

(Shari) There is not enough time to visit the winery and the distillery, to Bert's relief. We have to be ready to go at 6:30 as we won tickets to an Elvis impersonator. Actually

we won one ticket and paid for the second. First, we find a nice ocean side restaurant close to the theater for dinner, sunset, and live music. We both leave a bit hungry as we order off the bar menu because it is cheaper, but is basically an appetizer. It is still close to \$50 without alcohol. Gees!

It's time for Elvis. The show supposedly was voted number by Trip Advisor. I never liked Elvis when I was younger but free is free. The impersonator is very good: looks like Elvis and sounds like him. He entertains for 80 min. straight, singing all well-known Elvis songs. The backup dancers, however, would not make it on Dancing with the Stars. I, for one, do not see how this could be rated number one. I'd not go again for free. Oh well!

## **Day 5 – Northwestern shore of Maui**

(Bert) From our rental condo on West Maui we head north, rounding the northwest corner of Maui and driving along the unpopulated north coast, unpopulated that is by homes and hotels, but very populated by beach goers. Along the first dozen miles every pull-out and tiny parking lot is jammed with cars whose occupants walked to the beach. Then the countryside turns to nature viewed on both sides of a narrow serpentine road and crossing a few one-lane bridges. We take note of all the sites we want to visit, but do not stop until we reach the barricaded end of the road. The road actually continues, unpaved, but open only to local traffic and apparently much more dangerous passage than what we've driven so far.





We stop at the Papanalaho Point Shoreline, admiring the steep ragged lava rock cliffs lapped by Pacific waves. At another stop we hike to the cliffs to watch a blowhole. The seas are relatively calm, so not much water is forced up the volcanic hole. The spray reminds me of the fizz from a shaken Coke bottle.



Blow hole

Rounding another hairpin turn and looking skyward I see a tropicbird. Quickly, I pull off at the next opportunity, grab my camera and look over the cliff to a recessed bay. The long-tailed tropicbird twists like a kite in the uplifts and glides effortlessly along the cliffs below me.



White-tailed Tropicbird

We've reached the parking lots of beachgoers and I notice three chickens wandering among the cars. I stop for photos. You might wonder why I want to photograph a chicken. Hawaii is one of the few places where chickens are wild and considered "countable" by birders. In fact, these aren't called chickens by ornithologists, but rather Red Junglefowl. Originally introduced by the first visitors to Hawaii, perhaps the Tahitian explorers around 1200, I've been seeing junglefowl throughout Maui and often far from civilization.



Red Junglefowl

(Shari) Bert reminds me that I have not written about our Hawaiian luau. We almost missed it as I thought it was supposed to be Tuesday night and we went to see Elvis on Monday. Luckily they called me and we were able to get seats on Tuesday. I had researched the varying luaus at home and picked this one as it is billed as most authentic and with the best food. It also included a real flower lei not a cheaply plastic shell one. Drinks were included and the menu of them is interesting: Green Passion, Blue Hawaii, Lava Flow, Chi Chi, Mai Tai.



Pick your color: Lava Flow, Green Passion, Blue Hawaii

Luckily they were mostly sweet juices with a bit of vodka; they may have been watered down since I tasted four of them. The menu is as huge as are the plates they give us. I skip so much but still cannot finish all that I take. Fish, pork, steak, stir fry vegetables, crab salad, green salad, beet salad, seaweed stew, poi, banana bread rolls, meat wrapped in banana leaves, rice sweet potatoes, raw marinated ahi tuna, and I know I am missing other specialties. Dessert is dainty shortbread cookies of four varieties with a mini loaf of banana bread to take home. The dancers are good; the costumes colorful. I miss a segment showing us how to hula. I remember seeing that back in the 1970s when we went to Hawaii with my dad. As I told Bert if we are in Hawaii we have to go to a luau. But I may have enjoyed the free entertainment at the last night's restaurant even more.



## Day 6 – A restful day in Hawaii

(Bert) After days of sightseeing on Maui and a lot more coming up in Australia, we decide to relax for a day, just catching up on e-mail, travel journals, photos, and watching the blue waters and cascading surf from our balcony.

Last night at the luau the couple sitting next to us happened to be staying at the same condos we are and she said she saw puffins clinging to the lava rocks used as building siding. That perked up my ears – puffins in Hawaii? Inland? Clutching to wall siding? She said she took photos and looked up the identification. This I got to see! She flipped through photos on her iPhone and showed me a lovely photo of Java Sparrows. I asked what building she was in and this afternoon I take along my camera in search of Java Sparrows. After 20 min. I find three and a few minutes later nine more searching for food on the lush green lawn. Although named “sparrows” they are actually estrildid finches. The strikingly attractive birds are also called rice birds and are agricultural pests in their native Indonesia. Owing to habitat loss and hunting they have become uncommon. However, they are more easily found in Hawaii where they were introduced as cage birds.





Java Sparrow

## Day 7 – Maui to Sydney, via Honolulu

(Bert) The Kaanapali resort area is an hour’s drive from the airport, so we leave the condo in darkness. Scores of headlights face us as we circumscribe the island. We assume these are resort workers who live on the other side of the mountain in less expensive housing. A short domestic flight takes us from Maui to Honolulu for a long wait for the departure of our international flight. While eating breakfast at a table overlooking an inner courtyard I notice it includes large trees, colorful flowers, a short waterfall and stream, and a grass lawn surrounding a pagoda. It’s an oasis for birds. I tick off eight species including such oddities—at least for the heart of an airport terminal—as Mallard, Cattle Egret, Red-vented Bulbul, Spotted Dove, and Red-crested Cardinal.

(Shari) “This is my kind of flight,” I tell Bert as we land in Honolulu from Maui, “Short and smooth.” We have a 3 hour wait for our next flight to Sydney. I notice that Bert finds birds anywhere. Here we are eating breakfast and he already has a list of birds seen in the courtyard below. I was so uncomfortable on our flight from Dallas to Maui last week that we sprang for the upgraded more roomy seats at \$125 each, featuring more legroom, more amenities, and more entertainment. The legroom is more than worth it for this old body that tends to cramp. I watch two movies, sleep, eat two meals, and read many chapters of my book.

(Bert) The second flight crosses the South Pacific with only clouds and an unmodulated blue sea. Our flight is scheduled for 10 hr. 20 min. which seems like a tediously long time. However, I happen to be rereading James Mitchner’s *Hawaii* and have finished the chapters on the Polynesians transit northward from habited Bora Bora and Tahiti islands

to the unknown, uncharted Hawaiian Islands. In Mitchner's story the Polynesians use sails to propel them in a storm for the first part of the trip and then the rest of nearly a month voyage by paddling their outrigger. The daring of these first sea wanderers is simply amazing in light of the historical timing; centuries before European oceanic explorers tackled the Atlantic.

(Shari) Even with the movies, the flight is still boring, but finally we arrive at the airport. So much is now automated and maybe we don't clear customs faster but at least we are kept busy reading instructions and pushing buttons to answer questions and getting a ticket to use to pass through the gate. Our luggage is about the last to enter the baggage belt and that was where the wait time accumulated. I buy an Australia chip for my newly unlocked phone. For AUD\$30 per month I get unlimited call and text. Fantastic! We get some cash at the ATM and I text our Airbnb host that we are ready for pickup. He's a talkative fellow as he drives to his nearby third floor apartment. This is the first time I have ever stayed in one of these places and Bert calls it the UBER of bedroom rentals. After using this service I think I like hotels better. The bed was lumpy and only a foot from the ground. No new soap in the bathroom, no shampoo, no counter space, no TV, no place to set a suitcase. But at half or a third the price of an airport hotel maybe I'm expecting too much. I am so tired that I crash and don't have time to think about it.

## ***CHAPTER 2 – VICTORIA HIGHWAY TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA***

### **Day 8 – Sydney to Darwin**

(Bert) “Is this the right airport?” Shari asks as our Airbnb host pulls up to the departure terminal. “No,” he says, “I forgot you are flying to Darwin.” We are at the Sydney International Airport which is far beyond walking distance to the domestic airport. Although there are buses that could take us there, no way would we have enough time to make our flight. Our driver pulls back into snarled Sydney morning traffic and we arrive at the domestic airport in what should be enough time. Thank goodness tour operator Shari is alert.

(Shari) After a leisurely morning Joe takes us to the airport. Supposedly 60 min. before flight time is enough for Australian domestic flights. Worry wart that I am I want 90 min. The road near the airport is congested and we literally crawl along. Upon arriving I notice the word international. I know Sydney's international terminal is separated a good distance from domestic. Bert is stepping out of the car when I ask Joe if this is the right terminal. He realizes his mistake and we are off again. The traffic is horrendous. Joe drops us off and we print our boarding passes from the automated kiosk that airports now have. Lines and lines of people snake their way to the baggage drop off. Time is ticking away. I am wondering if we'll make it. Good news is the announcement that any one on our flight still in line should go to bench 1 or 2. Sweet, we will make it!

(Bert) When we get to the Virgin Australia luggage drop-off we stand in switchback lines with hundreds of others. Although numerous self-serve kiosks allow us to get

luggage tickets, only four or five agents process the bags. After 20 min. in line one of them announces that if we are departing to Darwin, we can shift to the two first class agents and about two dozen people shuffle under the ropes to get to the other lines. Another 10 min. and our check-in bags are processed and we head to the gates. One advantage of our older ages is that we no longer have to remove our shoes to get through security. Since I wear laced hiking shoes while flying—they are heavy and their weight does not add to my luggage limit—I save a lot of time and inconvenience through security.

We are soon aboard and I've got a window seat because I like taking photos from the air. Not today, however, as the Blue Mountains outside Sydney are hazy gray with fog or smog. We arrive a bit late in Darwin and Shari is concerned that we might get to the RV rental agency too late for pickup. Not to worry! At baggage claim Jeff and Barbara are waiting for us as they arrived in Darwin yesterday. We load our entire luggage into a van that takes us to the rental agency in plenty of time to process the paperwork, get an RV orientation, and we are off to the grocery store and then the Howard Springs campground. In spite of a few hiccups, everything worked smoothly.

(Shari) Barbara and Jeff are waiting for us when we arrive. We retrieve our luggage, hail a taxi, and make our way to the RV rental depot. A couple of hours of paperwork and instructions later we are off in our journey. But first, some groceries. Unlike other companies, this one furnished nothing. No toilet paper even. The IGA we find is small and gives us sticker shock. Nonetheless it is close to our campground. It feels good to relax outside our rig with a glass of wine before dinner. Ours is rotisserie chicken. Not as good as Costco. Shame Shari. quit comparing!

## **Day 9 – Darwin Timor Sea coastline**

(Bert) Years ago I commented that there were not enough “springs”, i.e., spring seasons, in my life. Well, there are and there were. Nonetheless, migrant birds solve that issue by celebrating spring in the north and again in the south four or five months later. We head to the Darwin coast to see the shorebirds about to start another spring season, having just left summer in Asia. A few that we find are Common Sandpiper, Greater Sand-Plover, Asian Whimbrel, and Far Eastern Curlew.



Common Sandpiper



Gathering at the shore of Timor Sea includes Lesser and Greater Crested Terns, and Greater Sand-Plovers

We find some locals too. Beach Thick-knee has my interest because I saw it over 30 years ago in Australia, but try as I might, I could not find one on our 6-month Australia trip in 2010. Now I photograph it for the first time.



Beach Thick-knee

Another one that really gets our interest is Red-headed Honeyeater. We identify the male quickly but try for the longest time to make the female into another species. Best of all, it's a lifer for me.



Red-headed Honeyeater (male)



Red-headed Honeyeater (female)

Another new bird is Australian Yellow White-eye.



(Shari) A pleasant day for sure, up early and out birding with Jeff and Barb, we visit places we have not been to on our previous trip. I am pleasantly surprised at the cool almost cold morning. Since its Sunday the roads are almost deserted but it is also early. Navigating to our first stop, I find a nice walking path to a bird blind. My three birders

are nowhere to be found. Walking back I find they had not even left the area near the parking lot. Oh my! Every bird is a lifer for the Jeff and Barb. So I read, I nap, I play a game and nap again. It is getting near noon and getting hot so I am delighted to hear them approach.

We find a nice breezy spot at East Point for a picnic lunch before heading back. But first I must stop at our rendezvous hotel and confirm our dinner. Much to my surprise my contact persons have departed and have left no forwarding information. I am given the names and numbers of their replacements. Looks like work will be starting early for me.

After a nap we walk about a mile to a pub and tavern for dinner. We wait a really long time and finally ask about who takes our order. Rule number one-while in Australia you may have to belly up to the bar to place your order. We fulfill our free beer coupon and I have a tasty lamb roast with gravy and delicious salad bar and Bert gets the huge seafood sampler. Good thing we walk back making sure our "torch" is lit watching for snakes.

## **Day 10 – Darwin to Katherine**

(Bert) We get an early start driving south from Darwin. The suburbs seem to stretch farther than I remember but we eventually break free of civilization and are driving through countryside that reminds me of The Outback. The next city of note is Katherine where we camp on the outskirts of town at Low Level. Adjacent to the RV resort is a park with Katherine River flowing through it. On its banks you can surmise how high the water gets when flooding. In fact, we see a rusty 50-gal drum that probably served as a trash can, but now is wedged in a tree 20 ft. above the ground. I ask a resident Aborigine how it got there and she says the floods put it there and one year the water flooded the town.



## Katherine Lower Level and one-lane bridge



Pied Heron at bridge supports

Jeff and Barbara are most fascinated with the Great Bowerbird, a bird you may see on National Geographic documentaries but not think you would see one in real life. Somewhere in the ancient past a male bowerbird presented a flower blossom to a female and she allowed him to mate. Their offspring expanded on the concept until it became an unbelievable rivalry among males to outdo each other, building elaborate stick castles, pebbled and adorned with carefully selected blossoms and gems at its dual entries. And not just any ornaments. They had to be the right color. For these Great Bowerbirds, the accepted colors are white and green. Tossing a red trinket on its entrance pad is high treason and the bowerbird will quickly toss out the intruding object.



Bower made of sticks, with dual pebbled entrances



Great Bowerbird at entrance to bower

Probably the most common bird we've seen today is Black Kite, a dark raptor distinctive by its forked triangular tail which it cocks at an angle while in flight, perhaps using it as a rudder to steer directionally. A flock of a dozen or so kites gather at the river on its banks and in its gum trees.



Black Kites



Black Kite



Barbara at flowered entrance to campground



Gray-crowned Babbler

(Shari) We take an early morning departure for Katherine. We were here in 2010 and loved it. It is one of the nicest campgrounds we stay at, complete with bistro by the pool and amenities block (think bathroom, laundry, and shower) that would fit in a really nice hotel. All are tiled marbled and clean and each an individual room. A funny sign is

posted on the door giving the telephone number of the local snake catcher. After naps and birding we decide to take a dip in the pool. It is surprisingly cold. Barbara heads for the hot tub. Jeff does one lap and heads for the hot tub. Bert does about five laps and heads for the hot tub. After waiting the longest to get submerged, I do about 10 min. of a water aerobics routine and head for the hot tub.

Nicely cooled down we are able to stay outside to grill dinner. Each loop of the camp is fitted with what Australians call gas "barbies". A big metal plate with a gas burner under it is set on a metal stand under a roof. A 20-gal propane tank rests about 15 ft. away. Turn on tank, lift cover, turn three levers to on position, light burner with match. Wallah, a grill! Lower cover and cook. Now, I had to ask to know how to do it. Also in 2010 I had used them before and got frustrated at cleaning it as it is just a metal plate about 36x36 in. Naysayer Bert who tells me I brought too much stuff and why am I bringing a grill mat, appreciates not having to clean the dumb grill. Well, he never cleaned it in 2010 as that was my job. This time he does not clean the grill mat either, as we loan it to Jeff and Barb who grill steaks after my veggie chicken stir fry is complete. It is getting hot so we forgo eating outside and dine in air-conditioned comfort.

## **Day 11 – Katherine to Victoria River**

(Bert) Barbara has a singular goal in Australia and that is to see a kookaburra. Well, she meets her target today when we get close looks of a pair of Blue-winged Kookaburras while they are preoccupied inspecting a potential tree cavity as a nesting site. One flies to ground a dozen feet from where we stand.



Blue-winged Kookaburra



Crested Pigeon

We head back to the park along the river where the Black Kites are just rising from their nighttime roost. An Aussie and his son are running three mangy dogs and stops riverside for a photo.



Low Level



We cross the one-lane bridge and follow a paved trail toward the hot springs but stop so often to watch birds that we do not reach the springs. Some, such as the colorful rosella, blend so well in the foliage that they could be missed. Others, like the lorikeets, are so raucous and boisterous that they cannot be missed.



Northern Rosella shyly hidden



Rainbow Lorikeets begging for attention

(Shari) Here comes new territory for us as we head west along the Top End to the unpopulated area of Western Australia. I have not heard it called The Outback but it is just as desolate. It may have more vegetation but just as few people. We drive for 200 mi. without a town. All we see are other RV's coming toward us. We stop at most rest areas for the folks to bird. I think all life is few and far between. It is hot by 10 AM. Bert records the time and temperature: 12:15 96.8°, 1:45 101.3°, 2:00 102.2°, 3:00 103.1°. Finally we make our stop for the night, a typical road house with rooms to rent, diesel to refuel, a restaurant and campground. We are getting into a pattern as we seem to be very sleepy after driving in the heat and end up napping. Then the small group of three go birding while I read.



Rainbow Bee-eater

I am disappointed that this place has no barbecue so Barbara invites us to share her spaghetti and I supply a salad and cookies. We eat outside on our table but the pesky nonbiting flies force me inside. I am in bed by 7:30.

## **Day 12 – Crossing into Western Australia**

(Bert) As I step outside at dawn, the boisterous Little Corellas adorn the gum tree towering over our motor home. They squawk in flight; they squawk in the tree tops; they squawk singly; they squawk louder in flocks. They're pretty, though.

Jeff and I watch a pair of Agile Wallabies. We've seen them along the road the past two days, but these are the first close enough for photos. After a birding walk we meet with Shari at the campground restaurant. I order one of those gigantic Aussie breakfasts, enough to tide me over until supper. Shari accepts tap water with her meal, but the clerk says she won't like it. She was right as the strong astringent sulfur taste makes it unappetizing. As we leave the restaurant I photograph the golden cliffs, the same formations shown from helicopter on the Netflix series we had been watching about a million-acre ranch a few miles from here.



Little Corella



Agile Wallaby



Cliffs viewed from Victoria River at sunrise

(Shari) I think I got up at 5 AM as it was just starting to get light. The temperature is perfect and I sit outside reading a book on my iPad, awaiting my little group of birders to come back so we can eat at the roadhouse restaurant. My egg and bacon sandwich is delicious but the water tastes like sulfur. Yuck!

As we drive through this desolate area I am enamored by the Boab tree, sometimes called the bottle tree as it does look like a bottle. I have started to take pictures of them as we pass. See what I mean?



(Shari) Gees, it is hot! Our dash reads outside temperature as 35°C and climbing. That is 95°F and its only 10 AM. I finally have to use my battery operated handheld mister fan.

We cross into the new state of Western Australia and must subject ourselves to an agricultural check. Luckily we were warned about that and had used up all our produce. When asked about having alcohol I was caught off guard. The inspector laughs and says he asks that question to see if we are listening. He looks in our fridge and notices the lettuce I told him about. He announces it is okay because it is washed. On we go arriving at the biggest manmade lake in Australia, Lake Argyle. True to form, we nap, go for a swim in their infinity pool before sharing a dinner of sausages and salad.



Western Australia border



Infinity pool with no visible edge, just the horizon

## Day 13 – Lake Argyle

(Bert) We are up at dawn, exploring the campground and surrounding areas, including great views of Lake Argyle. We find the Long-tailed Finches that Barbara saw yesterday but couldn't find when she tried to show me. They appear to be nesting in the cross arm of a steel utility pole. We walk up to a high point that overlooks the dam that blocked the Ord River and flooded half of Durack's million-acre ranch. On the way uphill we add Double-barred Finch to the list and on the return we find a small flock of Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos, a huge bird as long as its name.



Sunrise over hills surrounding Lake Argyle



Lake Argyle



Long-tailed Finch



Double-barred Finch



View of earthen dam holding back Lake Argyle



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo

We head to Dead Horse Springs, a small pond adjacent to an opening to Lake Argyle. We are in pursuit of Gouldian Finches, probably the most beautiful finch in the world, endangered and found in only a very small area of northern Australia. In addition, the species is sporadic. While we have heard many reports of where the birds have been,

they are not reproducible, as we soon find out. We search for them in mid-day heat, finding none, but satisfied with Spinifex Pigeon and Golden-headed Cisticola.



Spinifex Pigeon



Dead Horse Springs



Golden-headed Cisticola

At 2:30 a bus takes us the short drive to the boat dock where we join others in a sunset cruise around Lake Argyle. Mike, our boat captain and guide, is quite knowledgeable of the lake and its environs. He finds a spot where we can see Short-eared Rock Wallabies that live in caves on extremely steep rock cliffs extending to the water, a habitat that protects them from less agile predators such as dingoes. Then we cruise to another enclave where we see Wallaroos, including one with a joey in her pouch. While others are captivated by the large animals, my eyes focus on the small bird on the rock above the Wallaroos. It's a White-quilled Rock Pigeon, a new species for me.



Short-eared Rock Wallaby



Wallaroo



White-quilled Rock Pigeon

Skipper Mike also finds Freshwater Crocodiles lounging on the rock shores. When we get closer, they slyly slip into the lake and disappear below. Later he moors the boat on an anchored float about 75 yd. from shore and invites us to dive off the boat for a swim. Jeff is the first to take up the offer and many follow, including me. We swim to the shore and some of the kids climb up on a boulder and jump down into the lake. The water is quite refreshing, warmed by air temperatures in the 90's and above. After we are all back in the boat he tells about the crocodiles, including the surprising estimate that 25,000 crocs live in Lake Argyle. The sun is setting quickly, so quickly I barely get a sunset shot. Out come the champagne and the Emu-branded beer, with lots of cheese and crackers snacks.

(Shari) Jeff and Barb move their cold storage stuff to our refrigerator as theirs is getting warmer and warmer. Meanwhile we take a cruise on the big Lake Argyle, 75 km long by 34 km wide. Our captain is great and has a lot of knowledge about the area and can answer any question we throw at him. When realizing we had some interest in birds he starts pointing them out as well as the wallabies and crocodiles. At one point he stops to let others swim in the lake. Afterwards he informs us that 25,000 crocs live in the lake. That is one crocodile for every 1/2 mile for heaven's sake. I am glad I did not go swimming. We stop in the middle of the lake at sunset, some go swimming again (I notice Jeff and Bert do not) others enjoy beer, Champagne and nibbles. A good ending to a good day!



Freshwater Crocodile



Jeff, in for a swim in Lake Argyle



Champagne at sunset



Sunset on Lake Argyle

## Day 14 – Lake Argyle to Kununurra

(Bert) A day filled with more wonders, I'll isolate my report to a few. We return to Dead Horse Springs but still do not find Gouldian Finches. However, at the bridge we witness one kite attacking another and serendipitously I get a great photo of the one digging its claws into the kite's back. After moving to a campground in Kununurra we eat our dinner outside after dark when I notice a fluttering in the tree above us. It's a Tawny Frogmouth that looks quite white against the dark night.



Lake Argyle hills tower over our motor home



Barbara and Shari on a walk at Dead Horse Springs



Dead Horse Springs in foreground; Lake Argyle in background



Fighting kites



Tawny Frogmouth

(Shari) Change of plans as Jeff and Barb's refrigerator is kaput. We call the rental agency to get instructions on what to do. To my surprise they will send out a technician in Kununurra, our next stop. I call the technician as we fuel up and he is waiting for us across the street from the campground we are to stay at tomorrow. He diagnoses the problem as a fuse but wants to check it out later this afternoon. Here we change our plans, decide to stay in this town, and start our drive back one day early, with one additional stop. That is fine with me as it makes driving days shorter. It is fine with Bert as he can look at some bird he still wants to see. After a tasty dinner of an Australian meat pie that Barbara bought, we want to look for the Southern Cross. Now we are told NEVER TO WALK at night with open shoes and without a torch (flashlight) especially in areas of known crocodile sightings. Well, three out of three WRONGS for us! With Bert leading the way we head to water's edge—with me in sandals—where a croc was seen earlier. We are hanging around looking at the sky when I look down to read a sign about crocodiles here are 30 ft. long. I back up but Bert walks closer to the edge of the water. All of a sudden we hear a BIG SPLASH. I just know it was a crocodile and it just was not Bert's turn to go. That's my story and I am sticking to it.

## Day 15 – Kununurra to Timber Creek

(Bert) Whistling Kites are nest building. While one is rearranging sticks on the nest high in a eucalyptus tree, its partner is flying with an additional branch toward the nest. A Yellow-tinted Honeyeater has completed its nest, a tightly woven tiny construction resembling that of a hummingbird, and is already sitting on eggs. Although one of the dullest, the best bird of the morning is the one I have not seen before: an Australian Reed

Warbler. It springs in and out of tall reeds in a marshy area just offshore, usually eluding my camera lens, but I finally get a few good photos.



Two Whistling Kite nests



Whistling Kite carrying nesting material



Yellow-tinted Honeyeater sitting in its nest



Australian Reed Warbler

(Shari) After the birders depart at dawn I walk to the cute coffee shop at the campground and sip on a cappuccino and read e-mail and Facebook. I am still there when Barb and Bert join me. Our next campground is not far and is a lovely spot above a hill sloping down to Timber Creek. We are told to go to the river at 5 PM for crocodile feeding time.

The feeder man forgets to come until Bert reminds the office about it. A sorry looking old croc with missing teeth tries to jump up for some meat on a stick but really is too old to make the effort and he probably is not hungry anyway. The better show turns out to be the kites in flight grabbing the leftover meat in the air.



Freshwater Crocodile takes the bait

(Bert) While waiting for the crocodile feeding to take place Barbara spots an owl above us. Following her directions on where to aim our binoculars, the owl takes flight and disappears in the dense trees surrounding Timber Creek. A German birder—who coincidentally owns a copy of my Belize birding book—finds the owl again and after much effort I find a position to get a photo.



Barking Owl

## Day 16 – Timber Creek to Pine Creek

(Bert) We are still in pursuit of Gouldian Finches and the Pine Creek Chamber of Commerce claims it to be the “home of the Gouldian Finches.” The campground manager gives us clear directions and a map of the walking trail along the river that they are found. I am anxious to get started and get out of the RV while still in darkness. In the opening between the tree-covered RV parking and the river the sky is filled with silhouettes of Flying Foxes, pitch black shadowy wings gliding over a night sky barely brighter. There are dozens of them in the sky and I try a few flash photos, usually capturing them as blurred images. At my side I detect something landed on the steel cable connecting poles to form a fence. The object is fuzzy and indecipherable. Nonetheless I aim my camera at it and get a flash photo that perfectly illuminates a Barking Owl.



Flying Foxes at 6:03 AM, about 20 min. before first light



Barking Owl at 6:06 AM

(Bert) We begin our walk about 6:30 just as the sun breaks the horizon. In the long walk we encounter Crimson Finches, Long-tailed Finches, Double-barred Finches, but no Gouldian Finches. Much of the grassy areas have recently been burned off, so the grass

seeds the Gouldians seek are far and few between. We encounter other species that entertain us, however, including Crested Pigeons and several wallabies.



Double-barred Finch



Crested Pigeon

(Shari) My stint at driving today is rather boring. It is scenery already seen. I must say left side driving is much easier when you have an automatic transmission. I pass a huge herd of cattle penned beside the road and awaiting a truck to take them to slaughter. We watched an Australian reality TV show about rounding the cattle up with helicopters. Actually the show was filmed on a ranch called Coolibah Station and I drive within miles of it. Tonight's stop is the Lazy Lizard, a campground with a cute restaurant but Spartan facilities. As long as I have electricity for my A/C I am fine. We eat at the restaurant and I have my first taste of Australian barramundi. It won't be my last for sure.

(Bert) It's on the road again, with few stops, until we reach our next campground at Pine Creek. This town was not in our original plans but we added it when we heard it was one of the few reliable spots to find Hooded Parrots. We find them soon after we arrive and as they play with the water sprinkler heads trying to extract drops of water.



Hooded Parrot (female)



Hooded Parrot (male)

## Day 17 – Pine Creek to Howard Springs

(Bert) This is a catch-up day in preparation of the forthcoming caravan. We drive the last leg to Howard Springs, stopping at Coolalinga for groceries, photocopying schedules, and making arrangements for pizza delivery tomorrow. We stop at the caravan rental agency to see that things are in order for picking up 10 more RVs. There is enough time left at the end of the day for a swim in the delightful swimming pool with its waterfall. Very refreshing on hot days! I take only a few photos, notably the peacocks that we hear at night since it is mating season.



## CHAPTER 3 – THE OUTBACK

### Day 18 – Darwin rendezvous

(Shari) After making sure all the loose ends—rooms, meeting room, dinner, and shuttle—are tied for our stay in Darwin it is too late for a nap. I gather all my stuff for orientation and make sure I have the correct cables to project my iPhone on the screen and that it works. It is beyond me why I need so many cables. Bert's mom made a game I could use as a mixer while I gathered everyone's paperwork. Weeks ago I had requested that everyone download a mapping program I use but, of course, not everyone did for as many reasons as people present. It does not help that the hotels Wi-Fi is poor. Doing the best I can, I give a short training session on using the app. No one yet realizes how important this will become. For our rendezvous dinner, we sit at circular tables, lit with candles, around the illuminated pool and are served a choice of steak or the Australian barramundi topped with delicious sauces and ending with Australian Pavlova.

(Bert) Adding to Shari's comments on dinner, I'll note the fancy menu lying at each plate. It's not just barramundi, but "Lemon merrle dusted barramundi & Harissa prawn served with sweet pea puree, potato croquets, Dutch carrots, confit cherry & Enoki mushroom." And the steak is "300 Beef City block Scotch fillet (120-150 days grass fed) served with side sauce of mushroom, peppercorn & Siraj Jue." I have no idea what "Siraj Jue" is, but the whole meal was delicious.



Welcome Dinner

After dinner we have an uninvited surprise guest. It is prancing cautiously on all four legs on a ledge near the pool. Although it is in poor lighting, I get a few photos.



Probably a Common Brushtail Possum

## **Day 19 – Picking up our RVs**

(Shari) Two shuttle buses take us, plus the piles of luggage that do not fit goes in our rig, to the RV rental agency. Five staff people are waiting to check us in all at once. Paperwork, paperwork, and more paperwork! Finally we are off to the grocery store to fill our larders and then to the campground.



Motor homes lined up and ready to go



Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork

(Bert) Our RV pickup and orientation, plus shopping, goes more quickly than I expected, so some of us anxious birders have time to visit Howard Springs Nature Park. Three o'clock in the afternoon is poor timing with the 100+ deg. heat and most birds are hiding in shadows. After a half hour of no birds moving except the Orange-footed Scrubfowl,

things pick up at the edge of the dense paperbark forest and thinly treed savanna. Here we find a pair of Mistletoebirds, several Crimson Finch, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, and later at the pond, White-throated Honeyeaters and a pair of Shining Flycatchers. Not bad considering the time of day. We hustle back to camp in time for me to solve some setup problems.



Howard Springs Nature Center



Different stages of Cyad (*Cycas armstorgii*)



Sulphur-crested Cockatoo

(Shari) Problems pop up and soon we are calling the dealership who promises to send out someone later. Short hoses and cords, missing faucet connection, a door that does not want to open. A/C, refrigerator, and hot water issues are usually operator error. We were there last week so are ahead of the learning curve on fixing problems. The agency manager shows up and fixes the other problems. I have time for a swim in the big cool pool before our social and travel meeting. Bert talks about termites, our guide Denise arrives for introductions, and the pizza is delivered. I make a Caesar salad as that always goes over well and we eat at the picnic tables under the shelter of the camp kitchen. A good first travel day!

(Bert) My talk during our social get together is on Top End termites. I first became interested in them when we were here in 2010, then renewed my fascination in our South Africa tour earlier this year, and also when I read a book chapter on the single-cell protozoa in the gut of termites. While my talk covers their biological differences and similarities to ants, their life cycles and food sources, the most interesting part is the mounds they build and, in particular, the magnetic mounds we will see tomorrow at Litchfield National Park. More on that later.

## **Day 20 – Litchfield National Park**

(Bert) First stop is Batchelor Museum where we learn about the unsuccessful pioneer days at farming and the eventual discovery of uranium which was then mined in this area. It was the hub of WWII activity as was the whole area from Darwin south, with one airstrip after another, many still visible. An interesting documentary film describes

Australia's role in the war with many eye-witness accounts, especially of the Japanese bombing of Darwin which pretty much wiped out the city. Birders were distracted by the pair of Barking Owls in the spreading tree above the museum. The pair move from limb to limb, barking at the birds that are pestering them. In 2010 I never found a Barking Owl, but this trip I've now seen them three times.



Barking Owl

We enter Litchfield National Park and the first pullout is the best, the cemetery-like field of tombstones that are actually magnetic termite mounds. It is simply incredible that these north-south aligned mounds were created by termites that deliberately aligned them with the compass. Well, not exactly, there is a bit of deviation to allow for shade and wind, but the basic effect is to allow warm sunrise on the east wall and afternoon breezes to maintain an acceptable temperature while the termites are forced to stay in the mound during monsoon floods. Other differently shaped mounds nearby, built by a different species of termite, tower three times head height. I read that the process of termites building a large termite mound is the equivalent of a million blindfolded people constructing a building with a base of eight city blocks and a towering height of over a mile. Large mounds are over 50 years old and may be as old as 100 years. Continuing through the park we visit several waterfalls, below which are dozens of swimmers.



Magnetic Mounds built by *Amitermes meridionalis*



Magnetic mounds: narrow side view and broad facial view



Cathedral mound built by *Nasutitermes triodiae*



Swimmers below Florence Falls



Photo op below Wangi Falls

The day is far from done as we leave Litchfield National Park and head to Darwin for its famous Thursday Night Market at Mindil Beach. Set in a wooded park at the edge of a sandy beach along the Timor Sea, hundreds of booths offer a plethora of exotic foods represented by the many cultures resident in Darwin. I choose Japanese calamari on a

stick as an appetizer and a crocodile burger as my meal. Other vendors sell souvenirs from digeridoos to opals and bull whips. Hundreds of people cover the sandy beach in anticipation of sunset and soon it comes in all its glory.



Shari deciding what to eat – too many choices



Thursday Night Market at Mindil Beach



Mindil Beach



Sunset on Mindil Beach

## Day 21 – Fogg Dam, Window of the Wetlands, and Mamukala Wetlands

(Shari) Denise is waiting at the parking area of Fogg Dam to take us on a hike. The path is narrow and we are all strung out. Denise has a soft voice and those at the end of the line cannot hear her. We know we should be in front on the way back but it is too hot and boring to wait for the birders to identify a feather. Soon the group is all split up.

(Bert) We meet up with Denise and she leads us on a walk through a tall paperbark forest, pointing out trees, plants, and butterflies. She mentions birds we might see, but most of us birders are at the end of the single-file line and cannot hear her repertoire. But my ears perk up when she says Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, a species I've not seen. I continue watching the tall canopy and then see a dove moving in bright green leaves that match its feathers. I quickly aim my camera in that direction and hope for a clear shot. A few other birders see it moving through the canopy and then it is gone. But I got my shot.



Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove



Black-and-white Tiger Butterfly



Paperbark forest

Finally we break out of the dense forest and into the open at a marsh with several piers extending into the flowering floating lily pads. Birdlife is abundant and all the birders are calling out names and asking for identifications, but are looking in multiple directions: Wandering Whistling-Ducks, Radjah Shelducks, Green Pygmy-Geese, Australasian

Darters, Rufous Night-Herons, Australasian Swamphens. I'm ready to move on and Denise indicates more is to come, so we walk along the shore to the next pier.

(Shari) We are walking and standing for more than an hour and I notice many are getting antsy. I ask who wants to walk back to the rigs and I have 15 takers. As soon as I get to the RV I turn on the engine and let the cool air from the A/C blast my face.

(Bert) The next pier is better than the last and we are fascinated by the Comb-crested Jacanas walking with elongated toes across lily pads, many blooming with lotus flowers. We spot a Buff-banded Rail and creep in for closer photos before it ducks back into the dense swamp leaves. We spot an Agile Wallaby at shore. So much to see, but I get concerned about the others that did not follow us and suggest we need to get back. We walk slowly back, delayed by the many nature artifacts that Denise points out, often accompanied with stories.



Comb-crested Jacana



Lotus flower



Buff-banded Rail

(Shari) I do some caravan paperwork and notice Bert and his group are gone for a long time. I honk the horn in 5 min. intervals but no group. Usually he hears that and knows I've had enough. I go outside and see a group sitting on lawn chairs under a shade tree

eating Pam's cut up melon. I suggest they go on to the next stop which is a air-conditioned museum to wait for us. I sure did not have to say that twice. Off they go.

(Bert) We reach the RVs and move on across the single lane causeway to a widening enough for parking. Some of the RVs make a U-turn and head on to our next stop while others hop out and scan the marsh for wildlife. We can identify most of the larger birds like Brolga and Black-necked Stork (Jabiru), but Denise helps with the smaller shorebirds, including Red-kneed and Black-fronted Dotterels and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Concerned that some of the group have already left, we cut our birding short and head out to catch up with them at Windows to the Wetlands.

(Shari) Later when we arrive they are coolly watching a movie. I do not want to do anymore birding so I pack a bag and drive with Howard and Suzy, intending to wait at the pool for Bert. When we arrive at the campground Rob informs me they and two other rigs are not allowed to enter. Something about non-payment. Gees! I called in payment a few days ago and was assured anyone arriving early would be let in. Of course all my paperwork and notes are in the rig with Bert. I convince the desk to let the group in and hold me and my credit card hostage. I try to stay in the A/C store but there are no chairs. So I sit in the shade sweltering and dripping and getting angrier and angrier by the minute at my husband. He promised to be here at 4 and it is now 4:15.

(Bert) It's a long drive from Windows of the Wetlands to our next stop. After driving more than an hour we slow down when we see a helicopter parked in the middle of the highway and a flagman directing us to the gravel to avoid clipping the rotor blades. A couple dozen feet into the forest a jeep-like truck is smashed against a tree. We suspect the driver fell asleep at the wheel. Denise tells me the helicopter service is paid for by the government and invaluable for rescue from remote areas such as Kakadu National Park. I pull out at the next wayside, the entrance to Kakadu. We need a break so none of us fall asleep at the wheel. Finally, we reach our next destination, Mamukala Billabong. Here the wildlife is even more amazing. In addition to the many birds we find a monitor and several wallabies. I know we are running late and Shari expects me by 4 PM but I have trouble getting the birders moving after only a half-hour stop. We are out by 3:45 so maybe we will make it to camp in time.



Goanna



Agile Wallaby

(Shari) Steam is boiling up. Bert arrives, I try to keep my explosion quiet, and retrieve my notes. I talked to a Cameron three days ago. We call the sister caravan park in Cooina and yes a Cameron works there but is not in today. The manager looks up the account and sure enough my payment was credited to that campground. He graciously says he will refund my credit card. I am to come back to the office in the morning to pay. When we are alone in the rig I let out all my heat exhaustion and frustration on Bert. I gather my papers to go out to conduct a travel meeting with my eyes still full of tears. After the meeting I head to the pool to cool off. It is a life saver and by the end of my swim all is well.

## **Day 22 – Kakadu National Park**

(Bert) Fascinating rock formations wall the Bardedjilidji Sandstone Walk: strange shapes, mysterious gaps, tall towers, black fill-ins built by termites oozing like liquid cement. It's an area inundated annually in the summer rainy season.





Bardedjilidji Sandstone formations



Bardedjilidji Sandstone formations and termite mounds



We pass through a gap in the rocks and walk to a shallow high-roofed cave with a smoke charred ceiling. Sixty-five thousand years ago, Aboriginal Australians migrated from New Guinea when an ice age lowered sea levels. Kakadu was one of their territories and this cave was one of their homes, safe from annual floods. A boulder on the floor has a deep rounded hole, part of a mortar-and-pestle tool for grinding food. On the cave walls are a few drawings, including a true-to-life hand painting made with red ochre. Although yellow and white were also used, these colors have mostly faded away, but the ochre permeates the rock and lasts for centuries. No one knows with certainty the age of the rock art, but 5,000 years is often given as an estimate for the oldest.



Hole in rock for grinding food



Hand painting with red ochre

(Shari) After paying the campground bill, we head out with Denise and group for an hour walk to see Aboriginal rock art. I arrange the group with non-birders in front with Denise and birders in the back (because they are so slow) with Bert. Denise tells us about our surroundings: what the plants are, what they are used for, how the land formed, etc. We get to the rock art and are told to be quiet out of respect for the animals that live there. It is a cave and relatively cool. Denise has all our attention. She has another site to show us but I miss it as I am too hot. I head to the RV and turn on the engine for the air conditioning.

(Bert) Denise leads us to another enclave in the rock mountain and here the paintings are stunningly dramatic, showing intricate detail of food items including a wallaby at top center in the collage.



Rock Art at Bardedjilidji

We drive to Ubirr, a location well known to tourists for its rock art. Here we see dozens of ochre drawings depicting fish, turtles, wallaby, birds, hunters, and more. Intricate details show the entails of fish and the tools of the hunter. The details on the fish are sufficient to identify catfish, barramundi, and mullet.



Rock art depicting a long-necked turtle



Details of a large drawing of a hunter, here showing his spear thrower and dilly bag on the left and goosewing fan and barbed spears on the right

A descriptive sign tells us that Aboriginal people have lived in Ubirr for 20,000 years. My favorite rock art is very high on the rocks, so high it makes me wonder how the artist did the work. It depicts a now-extinct Thylacine, sometimes called Tasmanian Tiger.



Thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger)

(Shari) We make an unscheduled stop to see huge crocodiles on the East Alligator River and then I suggest we stop for ice cream. That is a big hit especially when I pay for it. In my opinion the best site is Ubirr but by now it is too hot for me. I depart from the group with some others and head for the A/C. I pack a bag and drive back with Ruth, Suzy, and Howard. This time I can enjoy the pool.

(Bert) The heat of the morning has finally defeated most of the group, but the birders decide to continue on as long as they find birds. Denise suggests a monsoon trail along the South Alligator River. We walk below a dense forest of tall trees, each holding 100+ flying foxes, calling noisily and fanning their wings to cool their bodies. Tree after tree is filled with the macro bats. Our first estimates are of a thousand or two, but after walking farther, we up the estimate to 20,000. Whether it is the heat of the day or the disruption of the flying foxes, we see or hear not a single bird.

We move on to a site I remember as good birding in 2010, to the Merl campground. Here we find birds and especially concentrate on a tricky identification we eventually decide is a Sandstone Shrikethrush, a new species for me. Finally at 2 PM we decide the heat and humidity has even exhausted us birders and we retreat to camp and its attractive swimming pool.



Sandstone Shrikethrush

## **Day 23 – Cooina, Kakadu National Park**

(Bert) It's only a short drive to our next campground, but my drive is extended by transporting Denise to the South Alligator River at a roadhouse where her husband will pick her up. While we wait for him to arrive I photograph a Straw-necked Ibis high in a

tree and Paul and I watch Little Coreellas playing in the sprinklers and trying to drink water from the sprinkler heads.



Straw-necked Ibis

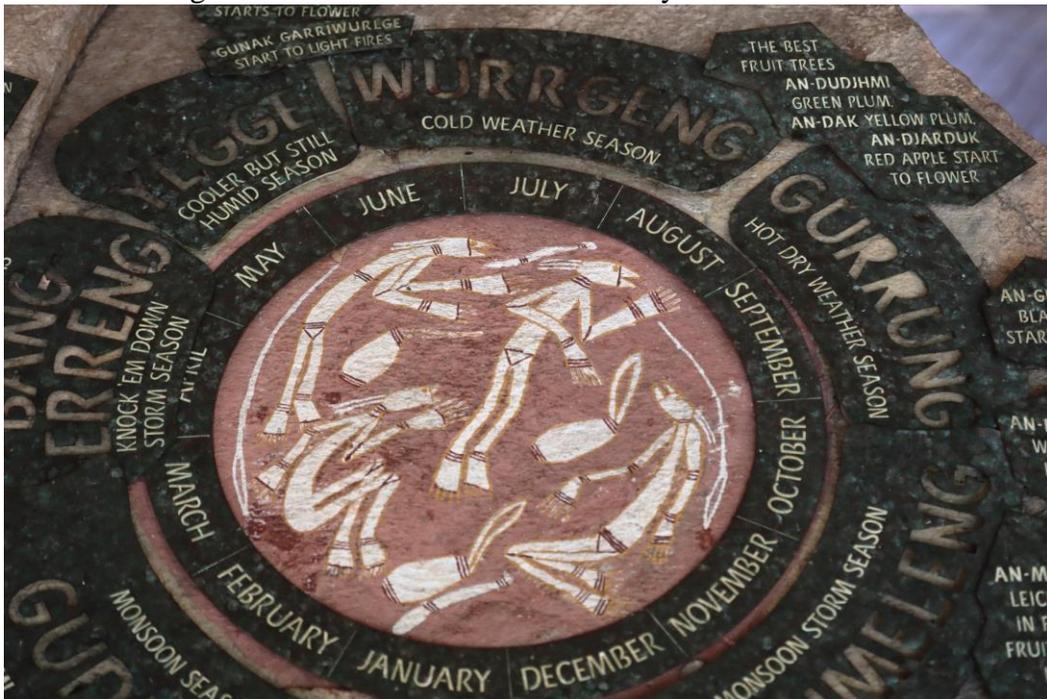


Little Coreellas

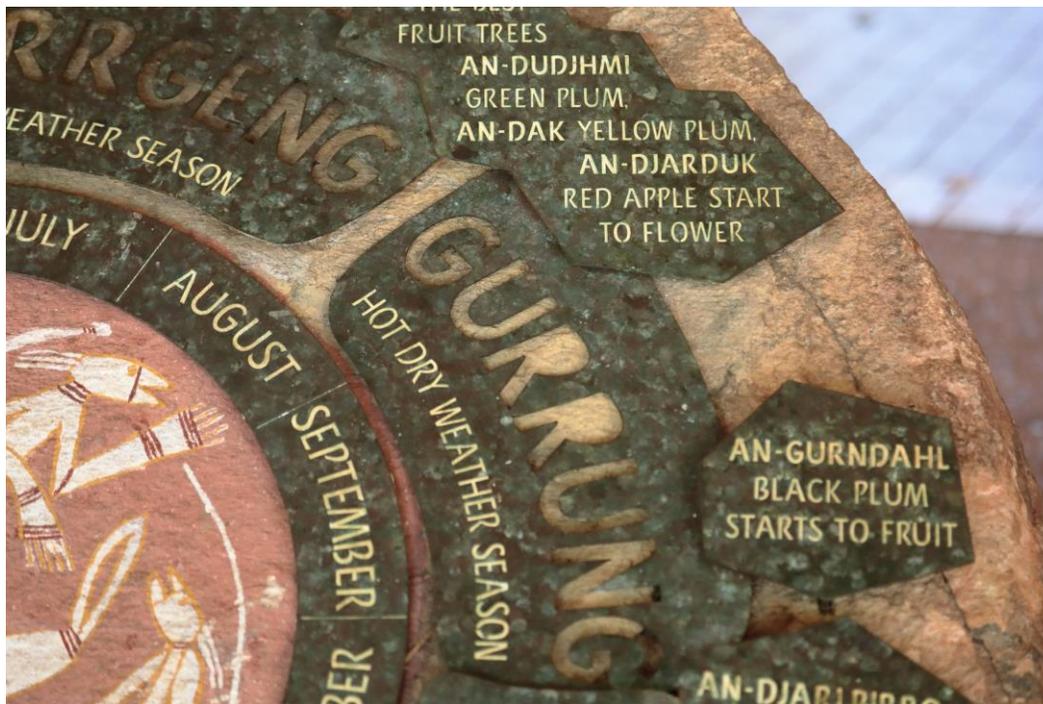


Little Corella drinking from sprinkler head

We drive to our next campsite, check in, and backtrack a kilometer to the Warradjan Aboriginal Culture Centre. At its entrance a stone mural depicts the seasons. We are here in the hot dry weather season when the trees are just beginning to flower and the birds are building nests. Had we come a month earlier it would have been cooler and even cold at night. If we came later it would be very hot with monsoon rains.



Weather calendar



Hot dry weather season

I wish I were allowed to take photos of the many interesting exhibits. Most educational to me is the one on Aboriginal moieties. Denise was adopted by an Aboriginal lady of the Yirridja group or moiety. Her main dreaming is Ginga, i.e., saltwater crocodile, because in order to be initiated into the group she had to prove her bravery by catching a python in croc-infested waters. Denise's minor dreaming is Marrawuddi, i.e., White-breasted Sea-Eagle. A child adopts its moiety from its father. The Yirridja group combined with the Duma group comprise the Bininj people of the Kakadu region.

## Day 24 – Yellow Water, Kakadu National Park

(Bert) A short shuttle bus trip takes us to Yellow Water just as the rising sun is casting a yellow glow to a cloudless sky and still water. We board a comfortable boat for a river cruise that is my favorite activity in Kakadu. The boat glides past birds along the river shore, birds perched in overhanging trees, and birds scattered across the marshes. I swing my camera back and forth trying to capture them. On the river swims estuarine crocodiles including the one that “owns” these waters and protects his territory from intruders, all except his harem of females. He swims casually past the boat only a few feet from where we stand. We see a Water Buffalo close to shore, but well hidden in the dense understory. Introduced Water Buffalo are well established in the Top End and are dangerous and an ecological nuisance. My photograph is mostly branches though later we see two distant buffalo in the marsh and a better photo opportunity. Perhaps the cutest animal we see is a tiny Comb-crested Jacana chick with outlandishly large feet and fending for itself while walking on lily pads.



6:43 sunrise at Yellow Water



Australasian Darter



Plumed Whistling-Duck



Forest Kingfisher



Cruising Yellow Water



Pandanus trees



Lotus plants in Yellow Water swamps



Lotus flowers



Estuarine crocodile



Reptilian eye-to-eye



Azure Kingfisher



Little Pied Cormorant



White-bellied Sea-Eagle



Water Buffalo



Comb-crested Jacana chick

Our boat cruise includes a hearty all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet back at the campground restaurant. Then we head to our next campground in Katherine. I found out where there is a nesting Tawny Frogmouth, a strangely shaped night bird with a mouth stretching from ear to ear and I already know where two bowers are for Great Bowerbirds, so I tell stories about these unusual birds during our travel meeting. Almost everyone, including our non-birders are interested enough to follow me to the nest sites. Jeff aligns his spotting scope on the frogmouth for non-birders to get an amazingly close-up view of the sleeping bird. We also visit one of the bowers where we can see the green and white adornments outside the bower stick works.



Tawny Frogmouth

## **Day 25 – Nitmiluk National Park and Daly Waters**

(Bert) For hundreds of miles the underlying landscape is a thick pile of compacted conglomerate with some mudstone and volcanic rock, sometimes 2000 ft. deep. At Nitmiluk National Park we see where rivers and streams have eroded the conglomerate into gorges, most recently by the Katherine River. Several of us walk along the river, avoiding numerous water sprinklers attempting to keep sparse grass alive and then hike up the steep cliff where a pipe railing helps us keep balance. Most enthusiastic in the climb is Ruth, happy to have legs and hips that function properly. From near the top of the cliff we have a clear view of the first of a series of gaps eroded by the Katherine River far below us, on which a river boat carries tourists for a bottom up view.



One side of Katherine Gap



Ruth and Jim climbing to the gap viewpoint



Boat cruises on Katherine River at Nitmiluk National Park

At the visitor's center we have a balcony view of trees filled with flying foxes. The flying foxes are making quite a racket and constantly fanning their broad wings in the heat. They are a mixture of Black Flying Foxes and Little Red Flying Foxes. I try to estimate the vast number in front of me, counting by tens to 150 in an average sized tree, and then counting trees in view. Twenty times 150 yields 3000, but later when we walk beneath the trees and continue along the river it is clear I am underestimating the trees by a factor ten. So there must be at least 30,000 flying foxes. Later I see a sign that says the national park's estimate this year is 50,000.



How many Flying Foxes are hanging in these trees?



Little Red Flying Fox

Shari and I are driving alone when we pull off at a wayside. While Shari is making lunch, I walk outside and notice that termite mounds have taken on a different shape, suggesting a different species. These rounded mounds resemble rotund people, perhaps a

buddha or a sumo wrestler. In a tree above me rests a raptor avoiding the heat of midday. I photograph it and later recognize it as a Brown Goshawk.



Termite mound



Brown Goshawk

After a stop at Larrimah and its Pink Panther artifacts, we reach Daly Waters. Greeting Paul and me is a flock of Galahs, a very colorful pink parrot. Galahs are quite animated, often making strange twists of their heads, raising their crested crowns, and doing silly things. In Australia, if you call someone a galah you are referring to him as a fool or idiot.



Paul adds a hat to the Pink Panther



Galahs

(Shari) Daly Waters is a special place. Ever since we were here seven years ago I have wanted to return and have their "world famous" beef and barra. I arranged the meal for the caravan and it does not disappoint. We even have excellent entertainment with optional dancing. Unfortunately I more or less had to retire my dancing shoes when I married Bert as he does not dance. So when Howard taps me on the shoulder as he walks up to the dancing floor and I see that Suzi is not with him and he was alone, I do not have to be asked twice. I get up with a couple of others from our group and a whole lot of Aussies to dance. What fun!



Preparing our Beef & Barra at Daly Waters Pub



Sam entertains us with song and jokes at Daly Waters Pub

## Day 26 – Daly Waters to Tennant Creek

(Bert) I haven't talked about the road trains as yet. We have been seeing them ever since we arrived in Darwin. On these straight, well-paved highways stretching for hundreds of miles, with few settlements of any sort, transportation moves by trucks stringing three or four trailers up to a total length of 176 ft. They are so long it is hard to get good photos of them in action. Today at a fuel station is a tanker truck pulling four tank trailers. Later a road train with three trailers passes Shari as she is driving the Stuart Highway.



Road train pulling tank trailers



Stuart Highway, almost a straight line from Darwin to Alice Springs: 1500 km



Road train passes Shari

## Day 27 – Tennant Creek to Alice Springs

(Bert) A few of us get an early start out of Tennant Creek, intent to reach Devil's Marbles while the sunrise illuminates the unusually shaped rocks. We cover the 97 km, arriving at 7:10 AM when the glow is still strong. The marbles are remnants of a solid mass of granite. Pressure cracks produced right-angled joints. Groundwater filtered down along the joints, reacting with minerals in the granite and forming clays that eroded. Weathering was more effective at the corners, turning blocks into marbles.



Devil's Marbles



Paul demonstrates the size of the marble rocks



Jeff attempts to pry apart a marble cracked down the middle



Balancing marbles towering above trees

While walking among the marbles we scare up a flock of birds that dazzle the eyes in a blur of green wings. At least 75 and likely more fly in formation, making radical turns, and zigzagging across the dry brown grass. Too fast to focus on with binoculars or even eyes, I see flashes of red rumps and blue primaries consistent with Mulga Parrots. They quickly fly off, too fast to get a camera shot. Almost immediately another flock appears. These remain airborne long enough to photograph, although most shots are a blur of winged action. Jeff thinks they are Budgerigars (“budgies” to the caged bird enthusiasts) and later my computer-examined photos show that he is right. Again the flock size is many dozens. They land in the dry grass and virtually disappear, only to spring up again, circle a few times, and hide again in another patch of grass.



Camera-frozen wings of Budgerigars





Portion of flock of Budgerigars descending into brown grass

We continue south on the Stuart Highway, stopping at the Tropic of Capricorn for photos. Jim and Ruth pose in front of the elaborate marker and Jim tells me they have a similar photo when they crossed the Tropic of Cancer in Mexico.



Tropic of Capricorn

When we reach our Alice Springs campground we have a colorful visitor that first catches Jeff's attention when the parrot alights right in front of him on a fork in a tree. It's a new one for us, an Australian Ring-neck.



Jeff watches an Australian Ring-neck



Australian Ring-neck

## Day 28 – Alice Springs and Simpson’s Gap

(Bert) I’m surprised when we divide the group into those that want to visit local Alice Springs attractions with Shari and those that want to see a gap in the mountains that is a wildlife oasis. I expected only the birders to follow me, but we have a number of new recruits. On the road entering the park we see our first kangaroo. Many had expected to see one sooner, but their range does not extend far north where we had been traveling. This one is a Red Kangaroo and it stays just long enough for two photos.



Red Kangaroo

The beauty of Simpson’s Gap does not disappoint. The MacDonnell Range towers above us, split down the middle by a tiny stream that is mostly a dry sandy bed leaving just a small pond of clear water that prevents us from walking through the gap. The cool morning air and the early sunrise illumination on the granite mountain are a delight. The spot is known for its Black-footed Rock-wallabies, so we scan the steep rockslide for animals. I walk to a sign that describes this species of wallaby and then look up about a hundred feet into the jumbled rocks. Quietly resting atop a rock is a wallaby. I call the others to my spot and the wallaby cooperates for multiple photographs.



Simpson's Gap



Black-footed Rock-wallaby

Walking back away from the gap and toward the picnic area we notice many birds gathered around a few trees, but few birds elsewhere. Howard questions why one of the

trees shows two different leaf shapes. I mention that it is mistletoe growing from the tree branches. On closer examination it is hard to differentiate the tree branches from the mistletoe branches, they blend so well together. I also notice that the mistletoe is blooming and its nectar is the attractant to the birds poking their bills into the tiny flowers.



Mistletoe flowers



White-plumed Honeyeater probing mistletoe flowers



Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater at mistletoe



Mistletoebird



Red-capped Robin



Marty & Pat pose beside "fake" black-footed rock-wallaby

We arrive at Desert Springs Desert Park where eventually we meet up with the rest of the group who toured various Alice Springs highlights. Right at the entrance we meet one of Shari's favorite birds, a Splendid Fairy-Wren. In fact, we even use its image on our business cards.



Splendid Fairy-Wren

The park is filled with birds and animals both inside and outside cages. Inside, the bird “cages” are so designed that it seems you are in the wild and it is difficult to find all the birds in the enclosure. Zebra Finches are everywhere, mostly in free flying flocks. I find it easy to locate them because I recognize their sweet song from when I used to raise the birds. Signage tells us what we are looking for inside the enclosures and eventually we find each of the species. Some of these I have not seen in the wild, notably Princess Parrot which I would love to find. Later we meet for the raptor show at 3:30. Some of the “actors” are not surprising, such as the Black Kite and Whistling Kite, but the appearance of two nocturnal owls—Barn Owl and Boobook—are not expected.



Free flying Zebra Finch



Princess Parrot



Southern Boobook

## **Day 29 – Alice Springs to Uluru**

(Shari) One of our favorite things to do is stop for breakfast at a restaurant about an hour after departing camp. We are the second to depart and think we have plenty of time. At the first roadhouse we come to we get fuel for the RV and our stomachs. We pick a cute place with good food and good cappuccino. Bert orders the big breakfast. I wish I had taken a picture as it is humongous. I order my same old: one egg, bacon on toast. Bert is still eating long after I finish so I take care of a future ferry payment. Since the ferry is in New Zealand I have to use Skype and the Internet. Skype is a wonderful app allowing cheap long distance calling. I've used it a lot. By the time we are ready to leave, I think all the group has visited.



Breakfast at Stuarts Well



Emu at Stuarts Well – through the fence

(Bert) This area is often called the Red Centre and with good reason. There is little that I would call soil. Instead it is either finely pebbled red gravel or even more finely ground red sand. You would think the surprise rain that is falling would seep immediately into

the gravel. Instead it pools up on the surface as I suspect the gravel is merely a cover for the hard rock below.

We've left the Stuart Highway and are now heading north on the Lasseter Highway. In the last hundred miles before Uluru I notice a change in tree life and later learn about the unusual growth pattern of these Desert Oaks. While they call them "oak" trees, they are *Allocasuarina decaisneana*, unrelated to our North American oaks. The leaves are long needles drooping down. Young trees are erect shafts without spreading branches. After 25 years the taproot reaches the water table and the trees transform to a more traditional rounded lollipop shape with disseminated branches.



Desert Oaks (*Allocasuarina decaisneana*), young tree (left), mature tree (right)

(Shari) We are driving in rain today. Yes, I said rain. I heard it is the first rain in these parts since January. And it spoils our champagne sunset viewing of Uluru. We go to Plan B and have our party under shelter at the campground. Jim has picked up one of the little ball like things we saw and wondered about along the drive. He borrows a knife and cuts it open. It is full of seeds and looks like a lemon. I'll have to find out what it is as there we thousands of them alongside the road.

### Day 30 – Uluru and Kata Tjuta

(Bert) I get my first photo of Uluru (pronounced ooh la roo) from atop Naninga Lookout, a small sand hill next to our camping spot. It's 9:30 AM and we are still 10 mi. from the

rock. I take a few more photos from the sunset viewing parking lot, about 2 mi. from Uluru.



Uluru viewed from Naninga Lookout



Uluru viewed from the sunset parking lot at 10:15 AM. The desert oaks are in the foreground; Uluru is two miles distant.

We spent a lot of time at Uluru in 2010, so this time I want to look more closely at Kata Tjuta, a chain of similar rocks about 30 mi. away. Our first good view of the rocks is from the Kata Tjuta Dune Walk, a trail through the sandy desert to a dune rising above. The desert has a distinct vibrancy after yesterday's heavy rains. The greens are brighter; the yellows glow golden. The browns and greens of spinifex contrast with the deep red gravely sand dunes.



Honey grevillea glistening with nectar





Kata Tjuta with a foreground of sturdy spinifex grass and a forest of desert oaks



Spinifex on sand dune

While watching Kata Tjuta I notice a large raptor flying near the mountains. Even from a distance I recognize the wide white bar stretching crosswise across each wing, a good field mark for Black-breasted Buzzard, now called Black-breasted Kite. We saw this

species performing at the Alice Springs Desert Park raptor show. That one had learned the trick—on its own, not taught—to pick up a rock and drop it on an emu egg to break it open and eat the contents. In the show the bird actually demonstrated the remarkable trick, an animal using a tool.



Portion of Kata Tjuta with Black-breasted Buzzard soaring at center top



Black-breasted Buzzard



Uluru at midday (south end)



Uluru at midday (north end)

In the early evening a bus transports our group and others to a remote sand dune in the desert. While enjoying glasses of Champaign and tasty canopies we view the sun setting on Uluru in one direction and the sunset outlining Kata Tjuta in another. We walk a short distance to candle-lit linen-covered round tables where we are served wine while waiting

for our table to be called up to the buffet line of a generous variety of known and unknown dishes, including crocodile canopy, sautéed kangaroo, baked barramundi. Digeridoo music serves as accompaniment. As our scrumptious meal draws to a close the staff dim the table lights and the dinner organizer asks for silence. Quietly beneath the stars, isolated in the desert, we witness the Sounds of Silence. Then a man in a baritone actor's voice describes the night sky, more particularly the Southern Cross and how the constellation can be used to point to south.

## **Day 31 – Back to Alice Springs**

(Bert) Today we backtrack from Uluru to Alice Springs, though stopping at a few places we missed two days ago. There's not much to write home about, but I do add a bird to the trip list, a Little Crow, distinguished from the Torresian Crow by its nasal monotone call compared to the comical cacophony of strange calls of the Torresian. At the same roadhouse, Curtin Springs, I find a plethora of Galahs ornamenting a tree like oversized pink flowers. Yellow Miners seem to be at every stop, so I'll add their photo too.

We reach Alice Springs and share a potluck dinner of leftovers. My anticipation is that it would be sparse pickings, certainly the case if we had to eat only the salad ingredients that Shari has left. But with everyone contributing something, the smorgasbord is varied and plentiful. In fact, we have lots left over to take to the campground kitchens for other campers to pick up for their continuing journeys. We leave for Cairns tomorrow by plane.



Little Crow



Some of 80 Galahs gathered at Curtin Springs



Yellow-throated Miner

## Day 32 – Alice Springs to Cairns by air

(Bert) By distance, Australia spans about the same dimensions as the Lower 48 of the United States. So, traveling from mid-continent to east coast is best handled by air. The timing is inconvenient. We need to be out of the Alice Springs campground by 10 AM, over to the RV rental agency by 1:30 or 2 PM and transported to the airport at 3:30 PM for our 5:45 flight and then a shuttle from the airport to the Cairns hotel. Thus the whole day is consumed by travel with large waiting gaps between. One of the advantages of traveling by RV is not lugging luggage, unpacking and packing, constantly. But today it is necessary. Yet, our fellow passengers are all smiles as they pass my camera in the airplane.



Suitcases packed



Returned RVs waiting for inspection for any damage



Waiting ...



Shari is ready to board



Alice Springs to Cairns



All smiles



Even forced smiles



And perpetual smiles

If one flies across the sparsely populated areas of the U.S., one still sees evidence of civilization including rural highways in a checkboard pattern. Not so, when viewing The Outback from the air. Although fascinating from the ground, the landscape from the air is dismally flat, sparsely peppered with trees or shrubs, and almost completely devoid of even dirt roads. Nightfall creeps across the scene, blanketing the ground in blackness but leaving a bright rainbow splash across the horizon. We arrive in Cairns airport with a friendly reminder of the Great Barrier Reef, a forthcoming highlight.



The Outback from the air





Sunset across The Outback



Cairns airport

## **CHAPTER 4 – QUEENSLAND**

### **Day 33 – Cairns**

(Shari) After our long day yesterday, most everyone gets a chance to rest. Bert and I meet David and Susan at the hotel restaurant for breakfast. They will be joining us for the Queensland tour and we hold an orientation session for them. Afterwards Bert and I walk to the marina to get our boat tickets for tomorrow and walk to our restaurant for our dinner tonight. Alas they are not open yet so we walk back. I make phone calls and Bert does the budget. The pool looks so inviting with its one end of sandy "beach" and a poolside bar. Bert leads a group for an Esplanade walk and I head back to the restaurant, this time making contact with the manager.



Our hotel swimming pool has a sandy beach

(Bert) The tide is far from the Esplanade walkway so mostly we study the mudflats. With some difficulty we find the small species of mud skippers but no giant mud skippers. Mud skippers are fish that walk on land with their fins, moving between mud puddles. A variety of crabs also entertain us, especially a giant crab that stands erect on its legs over bubbly foam. Among the shore birds we find are Lesser Sand Plovers, Gray-tailed Tattler, Black-fronted Dotterel, Far Eastern Curlew, and Bar-tailed Godwit.



Mud skipper



Gray-tailed Tattler



Studying the mud flats from the Esplanade



Sand-Plover



Strange crab atop bubbles

(Shari) At 5 PM the whole group meets at the outside bar for a travel meeting before heading out to watch the flying foxes take off. The moon is almost full and we get some terrific pictures of bats in front of the moon just in time for Halloween. Dinner too is a success especially with beer or wine included 😊.

(Bert) A highlight in early evening, beginning at twilight and increasing in darkness, is the flight of the Spectacled Flying Foxes. Shari and I had seen them earlier in the day filling two gigantic trees with more dark bats than green leaves. Now, a few flying foxes alight from the trees, take a tentative aerial loop and tumble back to the tree branches. The pattern increases in frequency and then some continue in flight without returning. More and more flying foxes fill the darkening sky, some backlit by the bright moon. Shari recognizes some are ready for dinner and leads them to the restaurant. I and others remain for the second half of the bat show. The darker the skies the more flying foxes take to the air until they seem to be everywhere around us. I keep taking photo shots, trying to get sharp outlines of the bats surrounding the moon and when I'm confident I got a few good photos we too head to the restaurant.



Spectacled Flying Foxes surround the moon

### **Day 34 – Great Barrier Reef**

(Shari) Based on comments, today is the best day of the trip so far. I must admit it will be hard to beat for sure. Starting at 7:30 we walk six blocks to the marina and board our catamaran that will take us to the Great Barrier Reef for snorkeling. Greeted with muffins, tea, and coffee we settle in seats either inside or outside. After the safety briefing we listen to a naturalist talk about all the fish and coral we will see. Within two hours we are at the island and boat tenders running every 15 min. take us to it. Some go right away. Some want to take the semi-submersible and some go birding around the island. The whole day is filled with activities and a delicious lunch on board including an array of desserts. On the way back we are served champagne, cheese, and crackers and I hear everyone chatter about the neat things they saw. A few had never snorkeled before. Two went diving and I think only two did not go in the water. It was a fun day for all.



The catamaran that took us to the Great Barrier Reef



Shari is ready for snorkeling



A shuttle transports us from the catamaran to the island beach



Fish gather at side of boat for feeding time



After snorkeling



Semi-submersible, a dry way to see the underwater reef



Giant clam viewed from windows of semi-submersible

(Bert) Shari pretty much covered the day's activities. Not surprisingly, I'll include some of the bird photos taken as we rode a small boat around the small sand island, Michaelmas Cay, and then landed on the beach next to the breeding colony. I got a few unusual photos, such as a frigatebird attacking a booby, a pair of boobies caught in the act of copulation, and an adorable booby chick with its parent. At one point something scared the resting birds and about 2000 birds took flight and circled above me. Four scientists were doing a bird survey of Michaelmas Cay while we were snorkeling and later aboard ship I asked them for their results: 17 Brown Booby nests with 2 chicks and 57 adults, 27 Crested Terns, 36 Lesser Crested Terns, 36 Silver Gulls, 1 Great Frigatebird, 18 Ruddy Turnstones, Sooty Terns and Black-naped Terns not yet tabulated, and over 2000 Common Noddies.



Great Frigatebird



Common Noddy



At least four bird species are in this flock



Black-naped Tern



Great Frigatebird clashing bills with Brown Booby



Great Frigatebird continues fighting with Brown Booby



Copulating Brown Boobies



Adult and chick Brown Boobies



Uproar on Michaelmas Cay

### **Day 35 – Getting our motor homes**

(Bert) As has become a pattern and doubtless will continue, while many in the group are having a leisurely morning, rising late, lounging over breakfast, and getting ready for the day, the birders are up before dawn and out birding. As we step out of the hotel entrance the Torresian Imperial-Pigeons are out in force and I get a nice photo of one in morning sunlight. We walk to the Esplanade, this time with a better tide that has pushed shorebirds close to the elevated concrete walkway. We see a nice variety of birds, but three species stand out. A large flock of plump shorebirds remind me of Surfbirds, though actually they are Great Knots. Getting a good photo, though, is challenging since I am shooting into sunrise. Two birders, a couple, join us and he points out a few species we might have missed. Notably, one is Little Tern and a better one is Black-tailed Godwit in the midst of a dozen Bar-tailed Godwits. The birder couple looks familiar to me and I ask the man if he is John so-and-so, a Cairns birder I met seven years ago. No, he isn't, but knows John. The lady birder notices I'm American with a name badge as "staff" and asks if we travel in motor homes. When I say yes, we make the connection. The couple used to own an RV park we stayed at seven years ago, but have since sold and I, in fact, had e-mailed her about the ownership change. They don't live in Cairns, but are just visiting. Small world!



Torresian Imperial-Pigeon



Great Knots with two Bar-tailed Godwits



Little Tern



Black-tailed Godwit (center) with Bar-tailed Godwit and Great Knot

After birding, we eat a quick breakfast at a nearby outdoor restaurant and cross the street to the hotel, pick up our luggage from the room, and wait for the bus to take us to the RV rental agency. At the agency we complete paperwork—quicker because we know what we are doing—and get the RV orientation. Since we are familiar now with the RVs, we are

very picky on what items are included and especially items missing from a few of the Darwin rentals: sink stoppers, ice cube trays, bucket, clothes pins, etc. We also start air-conditioners and stoves to make sure they are functioning. David and Susan ask to have a front tire replaced because it is bald on the outside. The branch manager says he has not had a rental of 13 vehicles before, and especially experienced renters, which may explain some of the vehicles shortcomings. One-by-one the RVs are ready and the renters take off to the grocery store. We are the last to leave, without six ice cube trays and a frying pan we will try to find in a store and get reimbursed for the missing items.



Shari had arranged for a bus to transport us and our luggage to the RV rental agency



We've got lots of luggage stacked up, waiting for our RVs



Paperwork again!

(Shari) At camp, we celebrate a surprise birthday for all those born in October and one September with chocolate cake and ice cream. That and wine and cheese make a happy gathering.



Happy Birthday

## Day 36 – Cairns Botanic Garden

(Bert) To some, it may seem a strange place for tourists to visit. Perhaps we would not either, but Cairns Cemetery is directly on the walking route to Cairns Botanic Gardens and, besides, it is a great birding spot. Judging by my photo, William's tombstone is a popular resting spot for Welcome Swallows. Repeatedly, a pair of adult swallows swoop in to feed two nearly full-grown youngsters. The juxtaposition of bird names with tombstones may be either fitting or bad taste: Welcome Swallows on William's tombstone, Laughing Kookaburra atop a cross, Peaceful Doves cooing throughout the cemetery.

A flock of Rainbow Lorikeets stop briefly at the crowns of very tall gum trees and our binoculars rise to study them. The lorikeets move on but something very small attracts us to the same spot. A couple of very tiny parrots weave in and out of the leaves. Although they are brightly colored, the leaves and sunlight make them nearly invisible. With patience we finally get a look at the Double-eyed Fig-Parrots and I get a partial photo of one. Just as we are exiting the cemetery we spot a bird high in another tree. I take photos and we study them on the camera but cannot find anything to match. Later, after talking to an expert local birder, we are told it is a Barred Cuckoo-shrike and our bird identification books inaccurately depict the species.



Juvenile Welcome Swallows



Laughing Kookaburra



Trees containing Double-eyed Fig-Parrot



Double-eyed Fig-Parrot



Barred Cuckoo-shrike

We are now passing through Centennial Lakes, but finding little of interest, so we continue to the Cairns Botanic Gardens. Here the flower and tree collection is amazing in its diversity, abundance, and colors. We've been walking for hours now, tired and hungry. So we stop at the gardens restaurant. The rest of the group, the non-birders, will be here at 10:30 for lunch. We will have ours now. Refreshed, we continue to explore the gardens.



Strange flowers at Cairns Botanic Gardens



Double beauty: female Cruiser on Anthurium

On the walk back to the campground we again pass through the cemetery. We find another bird we cannot identify. It resembles an Australian Pipit though the behavior and field marks do not fit. Later I learn it is a Rufous Songlark, a life bird for me.



Rufous Songlark

### **Day 37 – Tjapukai and Daintree**

(Bert) Birders again start early; non-birders sleep in and then leave for Tjapukai Cultural Center. We'll meet them there later, but for now we visit the mangrove swamp north of the Esplanade. Kay and Ruth find one of our target birds, a Mangrove Robin, though the rest of us miss it since we are birding elsewhere. We double back to get the bird and this time Barbara finds it deep in the swamp and all of us get a look. We continue through the mangrove swamp on a boardwalk suspended on poles buried 26 ft. into the muck. We find strange creatures: Giant Mud Skippers, crabs submerged in mud holes and with bright red eye stalks. Although birdlife is mostly absent except for songs emanating from the hidden sites in the canopy, one Australian White Ibis prowls from one mangrove root to another.



Mangrove Robin deep in mangrove swamp



Boardwalk through mangrove swamp



Small crabs living in holes in swamp mud



Eyes on red stalks



Giant Mud Skipper



Entangled mangrove roots



Australian White Ibis on mangrove roots

We meet the others at Tjapukai and just after I take a photo of the building my camera battery dies. When I switch to my backup battery the camera shows a message that the battery is not a genuine Canon battery and turns itself off. Well, it is a genuine Canon battery and I've used it for a year now. Turning the camera on/off, taking the battery in/out, does not solve the issue. So, I have only photos from my iPhone of the traditional Aboriginal dancing, the demonstration on how to play a didgeridoo, traditional foods, spear throwing, and boomerang throwing. Nonetheless, it was a good tour and we gained knowledge of traditional ways of the Aboriginal people.



Tjapukai Cultural Centre

In late afternoon, the first part of our group departs on a boat trip along the Daintree River. We see some Brahma cows on a sandy beach and Murray tells us about crocodiles and cows. The crocs can only attack animals that are close to the water and the medium-sized crocodiles in the river could not handle a full-grown cow, but they would take a calf if they had the chance. He explains that the likelihood of seeing a crocodile is slim because the water temperature is unusually warm for this time of year and the crocs prefer to stay unseen in the river. If it were colder, they would climb out onto the banks to warm in the sunlight. We continue downstream until we come to the border of the Daintree World Heritage Site. This rainforest is considered the oldest in the world, even far predating the Amazon. It was active at the time of dinosaurs and about the same time as birds evolved. In the distance we can see Thornton Peak, the highest in Queensland, where annual rainfall is 10 m. I wish I had a few photos to show. Later, back in our RV, I plug the offensive battery into the charger for 1 min. and then back into the camera and everything works okay. All ready for tomorrow.

## **Day 38 – Daintree and Mount Lewis**

(Bert) Back on the Daintree River again, this time with mostly birders, we have an early morning start when birding is best. We begin with a great, though distant, sighting of a rare bird, a Great-billed Heron. Ironically, this is the third time this year I have seen the Great-billed: once in flight at Yellow Water, last night downstream on the Daintree boat trip, and now today in an upstream location. Another surprise is White-browed Crake which our guide Murray recognizes by call. Since I've never seen one and I know rails and crakes are notorious for remaining hidden in marsh foliage, I ask Murray what our

chances are to see the bird. I'm not surprised when he says "little to none." I think it is Jeff who first spots the bird and we get a quick glimpse. It disappears again and this time I see it farther downstream and it stays out for a couple dozen photos. Amazing! We see lots more birds including a fishing Black-necked Stork (often called Jabiru), a nesting Wompoo Fruit-Dove, and a nesting Papuan Frogmouth. I'm getting behind in photo-editing, so will keep the textual report short. Here are a few of the best photos:



Great-billed Heron



Australasian Darter



Black-necked Stork



White-browed Crake



Pastures on hillsides bordering Daintree River



The only crocodile, a female hidden below shrubbery with only its eyes above water



It's nearly impossible to see this well-hidden Wompoo Fruit-Dove sitting on its nest



Shining Flycatcher



An Olive-backed Sunbird scratching its breast with its long curved bill



Mangrove Lily



Papuan Frogmouth



Green Tree Snake in Native Hibiscus



Striated Heron



Chestnut-backed Munia

## Day 39 – Mount Lewis to Atherton

(Bert) Only a few miles from our campground is West Mary Road, one of the best places in Australia to find bustards. A highly sought-after species by birders, it is an amazingly large bird, with males weighting up to 28 lb. More amazing is that it is a swift, buoyant flyer, a characteristic I have not witnessed previously. In fact, it is the largest flying bird in Australia. And, a second amazing fact this morning is that we see 21 bustards; my previous high was only about four.



Single-lane West Mary Road, Mount Carbine



Australian Bustard



Flying Australian Bustards, largest flying bird in Australia



Five of the 21 Bustards we saw on Mary Rd.

From Mt. Carbine we head south toward Atherton, still in the Tablelands. We stop at a place noted for Mareba Rock Wallabies. Here they have become tame, begging for handouts of appropriate and nutritious food. Photo ops are plentiful and I include just a few.



Mareba Rock Wallaby



Mareba Rock Wallaby follows close behind, hoping for another handout



Mareba Rock Wallaby



Yet another Mareba Rock Wallaby

While I'm interested in the wallabies, I am more interested in finding Squatter Pigeons since this might be the only place to find them on our itinerary. It doesn't take me long to find ten of them with their harlequin faces. I'll add a photo of a Pied Butcherbird too. In behavior it resembles our shrikes with its wicked bill for hunting small reptiles, rodents, and frogs. After a few en route stops for lunch at Mt. Uncle Distillery, peanuts at the Peanut Place, and groceries in Atherton, we reach one of our best campgrounds. Tonight it is pizza for all.



Squatter Pigeon



Pied Butcherbird



Pizza Party!

## Day 40 – Atherton Tablelands

(Bert) “A survey of Australians revealed that 95% of the population has never seen a platypus in the wild,” our guide Jonathan informs us. Well, as of this morning, we have. Our morning starts out less hopeful. At the first likely spot on the slow moving muddy yellow-green creek, banked by forest on all sides, only Jonathan spots a quickly disappearing platypus. We move to a second possible site on the creek, again a bend in the narrow creek. This time I see one, as does Marty, before it submerges, perhaps to its streamside burrow. It stays at the surface just long enough for me to get a few photos. We move to a third location and this time we get multiple views as it slowly churns along the surface. Jonathan tells us that although scientists have always thought of the platypus as an egg-laying, duck-billed, beaver tailed, spur-legged mammal, current thought is that it is a reptile. Either way, it is strange. Another weird characteristic is that it senses its prey by sending electrical pulses from its bill. Its spurs carry enough venom to kill a person should he/she be so unfortunate to actually catch this shy nocturnal beast and carry it bare handed.



Platypus



Note the eyes, nose, and duck bill on this close-up

At this third location, I notice Australian Figbirds choking down large berries. I photograph a pair as they pop them into their bills, position them carefully, open their bills, and let the fruit slide down.



Australian Figbirds

Next stop is Cathedral Fig, a giant and very old (>1000 years) fig tree with tendrils of fig vines descending from the canopy to the rainforest floor. My high-power camera lens only captures pieces of the tall vines. Later in the day, at Lake Eachem, we see tall plants I recognize as a schefflera similar to those I used to grow as house plants in Texas, only these are in full bloom, a feature Jonathan tells us doesn't happen if brought out of the forest.



Curtain Fig, top and bottom



Blooming schefflera



Whistling-Ducks at Hasties Swamp



Bromfield Swamp

At the bookstore at Malanda Falls, Jonathan points out a book on the shelf with his photograph of a very rare marsupial on the cover. He sells many of his excellent photos, but says they haven't paid him for this one yet. On a hike at the falls we see terrapins. Jonathan says that one of the differences between turtles and terrapins is the way they

swim, terrapins moving with the breast stroke, turtles doing the dog paddle. Many of the best birds are just below the canopy, far above us. In deep shade too distant for my flash to reach and backlit by sparkles of bright sunlight, I find it difficult to photograph. I get a recognizable photo of a Spotted Catbird, though absent of its bright colors.



Jonathan's photo on the book cover



Softshell Terrapin doing the breast stroke



Spotted Catbird

## Day 41 – Atherton Tablelands

(Bert) So much happened today that I am going to divide Day 41 into daylight hours and nighttime hours. We start at Curtain Fig Tree, another rainforest oasis in the middle of cattle-grazing treeless green pastures and, again, it is centered by a giant tree encumbered with curtains of fig tree vines drooping from the canopy. This time our group is almost all birders so we concentrate on finding birds. Just on the outskirts of the forest we stop to watch White-cheeked Honeyeaters and I capture an interesting pose of one preening, fortunately at eye-level. Such is not the case once we enter the dark rainforest, as almost all of the interesting birds are very high in the canopy, 30-50 ft. above me. One of these, and a highly sought species in a very small range in Australia, is Pied Monarch. I've only seen this species once before.

Most of my photos of the fruit-doves are mere silhouettes against a backlit bright morning sky. I manage to photo-edit the best shot of a Wompoo Fruit-Dove but its bright colors—emerald green, deep purple, brilliant yellow, and baby blue—are a wash of obliterated mud. I fare better with Yellow-breasted Boatbill and show two views here, one of which clearly shows why it is called boatbill. The White-throated Treecreeper is reminiscent of our Brown Creeper, though very much larger.



White-cheeked Honeyeater



Pied Monarch



Wompoo Fruit-Dove



Yellow-breasted Boatbill



Yellow-breasted Boatbill



White-throated Treecreeper

On the forest floor is a pair of Australian Brush-Turkeys that we can much more easily watch while looking directly down from our elevated boardwalk. The male brush-turkey is furiously busy scratching a hole in its large 10-ft. diameter mound of leaves and twigs. The female stands nearby, showing little interest in what its mate is doing. After much effort the hole is sufficiently deep to please the female. She moves over the hole and quicker than we could see, she drops an egg in the hole. Immediately, the male scratches forest debris over the egg and fills in the hole. If you don't know the rest of the story, here's what will happen. The heat of the mound will incubate the egg and the male will add or remove debris to keep the temperature of the mound within the bounds necessary for incubation. Additional eggs will be deposited and temperature controlled by the male. When the eggs hatch, the young will fight their selves out of the mound, perhaps over a period of days. When they reach the surface they will immediately begin foraging on their own without aid from the adults.



Male Australian Brush-Turkey digging hole in mound



Female Australian Brush-Turkey on left pays little attention to working male on right

As we leave Curtain Fig Tree and pass through the pastureland we watch a male Brolga prancing about, raising its wings, and dancing in front of a female. It's part of his mating ritual and perhaps they will mate.



Brolga dancing

One of the animals we really wanted to see yesterday was a tree kangaroo. The timing was not right, so this morning Jonathan heads to a spot where he has often found them. If less than 5% of Australians have seen the wide-ranging platypus in the wild, even fewer have seen a tree-kangaroo in its limited range. Jonathan tells the story of a tourist that asks a waitress where he can see a tree-kangaroo. The waitress replies, “You mean a koala. Kangaroos don’t go up trees.” In fact, there are a dozen species of kangaroos that spend most of their lives in trees, leaving them only briefly to hop over to another tree. Once we get to the expected site, it takes Barbara only a minute to spot the first Lumholtz’s Tree-kangaroo. It’s a big fat male sitting in the wide crotch of a tree. Higher up on the same tree we see the female stretched out on a limb, this one with a well-hidden joey.



Lumholtz’s Tree-kangaroo



Lumholtz's Tree-kangaroo



Photographing Lumholtz's Tree-kangaroo



Gray Fantail fanning its tail



A splash of color: Rainbow Lorikeet feeding on red fruit

## Day 41 evening – Atherton Tablelands

(Bert) At 4:30 PM we leave the campground again, this time headed to Jonathan’s private 300-acre property, a wildlife preserve worthy of national park status. His property is near Ravenshoe, the highest town in Queensland at 992 m. Along with us this evening is many of the “non-birders” because our goal is to see nocturnal marsupials. Jonathan reaches his property adjacent to a national park after the sun has set but still a bit of twilight. He drives a long, narrow, very bumpy, path that separates the two properties. It’s a wild ride worthy of carnival joy-ride status. We reach a turnaround, park, and then hike a thin trail into the rainforest using flashlights to illuminate our path. We reach the Golden Bowerbird bower in darkness at 6:13 PM. The bowerbird sleeps unseen in a nearby tree while we inspect the bower. Compared to the Great Bowerbird bowers we saw earlier in our tours, this bower is gigantic. For prospective, Marty kneels between the two mounted halves of woven branches and leaves. Just in front of him are the greenish trinkets the bowerbird has gathered, a further enticement to attract a mate.



Golden Bowerbird bower

We double-back on the trail and then the vehicle pathway to the main highway, drive to another spot on Jonathan’s property, and again hike into the rainforest. This time we reach an enormous tree that biologists have estimated to be about 2500 years old. Local Aboriginal people revere this tree, but Jonathan cannot get an explanation. He has been told it is not a death or burial tree, but its real significance is considered a secret by the Aboriginals. In their stories, the Aboriginals use a big fig tree to store weapons when they have a multi-tribe gathering. Perhaps that is its significance. Jonathan shines his powerful beam mid-story on the tree and I snap a photo.



2500-year-old tree at 7PM in pitch dark rainforest

We move once again to another part of the rainforest, this time walking along a gravel road flanked by very tall trees. Swinging the flashlight left and right, up and down, Jonathan shines the upper branches of the trees, searching for eyes attached to furry bodies. His rainforest is home to 12 species of marsupials, some of them common although rarely seen owing to their strictly nocturnal habits, and some truly rare anywhere in Australia. They include all of the relic species, i.e., the primitive rainforest species, like the Lemuroid Ringtail Possum.



Coppery Brushtail Possum



Coppery Brushtail Possum



Lemuroid Ringtail Possum



Lemuroid Ringtail Possum



Lemuroid Ringtail Possum



Herbert River Ringtail Possum

## Day 42 – Lake Barrine to Etty Bay

(Bert) After many unsuccessful attempts I finally photograph two fruit dove species in good lighting. It is impressive how these large colorful birds can be nearly invisible in the canopy.



Woopoo Fruit-Dove



Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove

Numerous Tooth-billed Catbirds make the Lake Barrine forest the site for their bowers. However, unlike the other bowerbirds, the Tooth-billed only scratches bare a small patch of the forest floor and then carefully places a scattering of single leaves pale side up.



Tooth-billed Catbird



Bower of Tooth-billed Catbird

We spot a Rat-kangaroo at the side of the hiking trail just as it darts across the path and jumps into the forest. I happen to have my camera on rapid-fire mode and catch the action. This marsupial is not a rat, but rather a very small relative of the kangaroo. The misleading “rat” name has caused many to kill them thinking they are vermin.



Musky Rat-kangaroo

I've always found cuckoos to be evasive. Jonathan hears a Fan-tailed Cuckoo high in the canopy and finding the location I try for photos but take 15 shots before I get this one unobscured by foliage. It is much easier to photograph my next bird, a Gray-headed Robin, when it obligingly lands on the railing next to me.



Fan-tailed Cuckoo



Gray-headed Robin

After our early morning walk around the lake, we eat a hearty breakfast at the lakeside restaurant. We say goodbye to Jonathan and we drive to the coast where we camp near the beach. Many test the water, but few swim. Instead, they relax in lawn chairs on the beach until our social, followed by Shari's sausages on the grill. We were expecting a guest, but it was still a surprise when the enormous Southern Cassowary strolls past our chairs. We remain calm, not wanting to excite this dangerous bird, and it just continues its stroll along the sandy beach. This flightless bird is almost the size of an emu, has massive legs, and a tall casque on its crown that serves as a bumper when it trashes through dense rainforest.



Floral gardens at Lake Barrine



Beach at Etty Bay



Southern Cassowary visits our picnic gathering

### **Day 43 – Tyto Wetlands**

(Bert) While many in the group visited Paronella Park, a house often called a castle built in the 1930s, the birders go to Tyto Wetlands. Birding is a bit slow, yet we see 33 species in about 2 hr. of mid-day walking. Here are the best photos.



Tyto Wetlands



Red-backed Fairywren (female) gathering nesting material



Red-backed Fairywren (male)



Yellow Honeyeater



Crimson Finch



Northern Fantail



Little Pied Cormorant



Australasian Figbird

## Day 44 – Tyto Wetlands and Magnetic Island

(Bert) We heard a story that local horse owners objected to the large number of wallabies at Tyto Wetlands because they consumed adjacent pasturelands. Therefore, it is said, the horse owners had many of the wallabies exterminated. When we visited yesterday we saw only two wallabies, compared to 40+ I saw seven years ago. So perhaps the story is true. Yet when we visit very early this morning—hoping to find a Grass Owl—we see dozens of Agile Wallabies and no indication of a diminished population. We strike out on the owl, although we do find the marsh grass field where they occur. Our best find is a shy White-browed Crake very close to the boardwalk and frequently in good photographic view.



Agile Wallaby



Grass Owl habitat, though no Grass Owl



White-browed Crake

We continue south towards Townsville and after checking into the campground we drive to the boat dock and board the ferry to Magnetic Island. On the ferry we meet David and Susan and they join us when we rent a Topless Car, a very small vehicle that just barely fits four people and is boarded by climbing in from the top as there are no doors. It's

perfect for island sightseeing. We head across the small island to Horseshoe Bay and have lunch at a seaside restaurant. At the adjacent park a young lady is feeding the Rainbow Lorikeets and even gets one to perch on her hand.



Ferry to Magnetic Island



Shari and Susan aboard ferry



Magnetic Island



Topless Car



Horseshoe Bay



Rainbow Lorikeets

After lunch we climb back into the Topless Car and try to find koalas at two locations the locals say they see them. At the first we see none, although a soaring Wedge-tailed Eagle is a nice find. We try the other site and walk along a mountain path with beautiful sea views. The day is very hot and after a quarter mile we double back without seeing a

koala. We travel to another side of the island and stop for ice cream. Nearby I photograph an obliging Laughing Kookaburra. When we return to the ferry dock we meet Rob and Pam who tell us they saw koalas at both of the locations we visited. Good for them, bad for us.



Wedge-tailed Eagle



Koala signs, but no koalas



View from known koala site



Laughing Kookaburra

## Day 45 – Billabong Sanctuary

(Bert) Heavy rain fell all night and a light drizzle continues after daybreak. Sublimely lying on a bed of colorful leaves, the Bush Thick-knee covers her eggs, enduring her limited cover of wet bedraggled feathers, not twitching a muscle. She completely ignores us as we step forward for closer photos. Perhaps she's confident that her frozen stance is sufficient camouflage.



Bush Thick-knee

At the Billabong Sanctuary we get to see and touch some of the animals we haven't found in the wild and some that we did. Most loved is the koalas, so docile, so fuzzy, so toy like. When it comes time to hold a struggling crocodile, Pat quickly switches emotions from fright to joy. With the python around his neck, Marty mimics its tongue action. Suzi wraps the python around her neck like a boa. Jeff and Barbara hold the wombat like a new child.



Koala



Everyone wants to pet the koala





## Day 46 – Back to Cairns

(Bert) We are nearly done visiting this part of Queensland. Today, we return north to Cairns to turn in our motorhomes. Shari and I make few stops. Most notably for Shari is a stop for ice cream at Frosty Mango in Mutarnee. I insist we have stopped there seven years ago. She has no memory of it. So, I'll mention it in these journals so I can prove it to her next time.

Most notably for me is a stop at Cardwell, a coastal town neither of us remember visiting before. While Shari takes a nap, I walk through a nicely wooded park along the coast. Surprisingly, I find a life bird, a finch that looks like a tiny parrot and appropriately is named Blue-faced Parrot-Finch. Cardwell is the extreme southern point of its range, in which it is considered rare. It perches like an upright parrot, shows its blue face, and sings a high-pitched trill that matches the recording on my iPhone. I wish I were carrying my camera, as my only photo is using my cell phone. Fortunately, my binoculars give a larger view than my cell phone.



Coastal park in Cardwell



The tiny bird at the top of a bare branch at the center of the photo is a Blue-faced Parrot-Finch.

### **Day 47 – Flight to Brisbane**

(Bert) Each time we have traveled on a bus, the driver has struggled to pack in our entire luggage. Sometimes the company brings two small buses, each towing a trailer. This time we have a larger bus and the manager of the bus company is the driver. He carefully arranges the luggage, large pieces first, closely packed to the compartment ceiling, and he gets it all in, though it is a struggle.



Bus transport to the airport



Cairns from the air on a cloudy overcast day

From Cairns we fly south to Brisbane, also a coastal city in Queensland. Here we are picked up by two buses, each pulling a trailer. Shari had some trouble booking these buses as road damage up the mountain we will travel has put a load limit on the partially repaired road, but these two busses fit the limits. The uphill road is littered with warning

signs. It is narrow, winding, damaged, and a bit of a carnival thrill ride. When we arrive we enter our luxurious apartments, 2-3 bedrooms each with private showers, sharing a very large living room and open kitchen, and a grand deck overlooking the mountain valley. David finds a friendly Crimson Rosella that perches on his hand. After a scrumptious dinner at the lodge, we sleep early following a long travel day.



Brisbane from the air on a cloudy overcast day



Signs and barriers along the winding, steep uphill road to Lamington National Park



Crimson Rosella begging for handouts

## Day 48 – Lamington National Park

(Bert) This place is for the birds! Literally! Birds (and pademelons) are everywhere, even on people’s heads and iPhones. These are the first of our pademelons, a kangaroo relative smaller than wallabies, which in turn are smaller than kangaroos and wallaroos.

I’ve often wondered how the whipbird makes its strange call. It sounds like cracking a bullwhip and is so loud it reverberates through the rainforest. We hear them most everywhere in appropriate habitat, which almost always means dense cover. Although the whip crack sounds like it is coming from mid story, it really is close to the ground. Here at Lamington National Park the Eastern Whipbird seems tamer and on several occasions I get close enough to witness it calling. Sometimes immediately after the whiplash I hear a quieter “ca-choo” which I later learn is the response of the female to the male’s call.

One of the birds I photograph is an Albert’s Lyrebird, a very localized endemic species rarely seen because it hides in dense rainforest. I recall trying to see this bird here seven years ago. We formed a search party of about eight of us birders and canvassed a wooded area where it was known to be resident. After much effort we caught a few glimpses of the bird, though I could not get a focused photo. This morning one is right out in the open and easy for me to photograph.



Red-necked Pademelon



Eastern Yellow Robin



White-browed Scrubwren



Eastern Whipbird calling its whiplash sound



Australian King-Parrot



It's hard to take a photo when the subject jumps on the camera



The elusive Albert's Lyrebird



Red-browed Finch, seen by the dozens



Brown Cuckoo-Dove



Carpet Python



Morans Falls

## **Day 49 – Lamington National Park**

(Bert) From the balcony of our villa we have a grand view of Lamington National Park and the mountains beyond. Morning sunlight has not yet hit the dense rainforest directly below us, but it is white bright beyond, making for a photo of sharp contrasts; Happily, the rains have stopped and we look forward to a clear day.



Morning view from our villa balcony



Balcony of villa

Birds again dominate my photos as there are just so many and they are so colorful, most notably the bowerbirds and parrots.



Lewin's Honeyeater gathering nectar



Gray Goshawk



Regent Bowerbird (male)



Regent Bowerbird (female)



Regent Bowerbird (subadult)



Yellow-throated Scrubwren

The highlight of the day is a nature walk with Glen, the same guide we had seven years ago and who has been serving as a guide here for 30 years. He is so well known to the local birds that when they hear his voice they come to him. He has taught birds to feed from his hand. These include Eastern Yellow Robin, Satin Bowerbird, Australian King-

Parrot, Yellow-throated Scrubwren, and most famously, Eastern Whipbird. The latter, which he calls Mr. Whippy, is the only handfed whipbird in the world. I remember meeting that specific bird seven years ago and Glen says the bird is 25 years old, learned to be hand fed over a three year period. Mr. Whippy lost his mate three years ago and acquired another with which he will share the treats that he gets from Glen.



Glen, our guide, holding an Eastern Yellow Robin



Mr. Whippy feeds from Kay's hand



Mr. Whippy in Kay's hand

Glen shows us the bower of his friendly Satin Bowerbird. This bower has many more blue trinkets than most bowers because this bird steals items from its neighbors. Glen is also friends with the Red-legged Pademelon that inhabits this part of the rainforest. Most of the pademelons we have seen are Red-necked and prefer forest edges or openings. This one hides deep in the forest.



Satin Bowerbird



Bower of Satin Bowerbird



Red-legged Pademelon

A Rose Robin has been reported in the area, an infrequent visitor to Lamington National Park. Glen leads us to several likely spots that prove unsuccessful. Then we try the entrance road to the villas when Glen hears one nearby. The robin prefers the high canopy, so we struggle to find it above us. Glen suggests playing its song and I turn on

my recording. Immediately it descends from the canopy, stops briefly directly in front of us and then alights on a low nearby branch. Paul and I have our cameras at the ready and we both get excellent results. Glen is so impressed with my photos, including one perfectly showing the glint in its eye, that he wants me to e-mail him a copy of this difficult-to-photograph species.



Rose Robin

## **CHAPTER 5 – SYDNEY**

### **Day 50 – Brisbane to Sydney**

(Bert) What goes up must come down! And so, we drive down from the mountaintop resort to Brisbane. At least that was the plan. Two minibuses with trailers are supposed to meet me at the reception area at 6:30 AM. I put on my raingear and carrying my umbrella I hike uphill the near-mile to pick up a boom gate magnetic card and wait for the drivers' arrival. The time passes but no minibus. Twenty minutes later I see one minibus, but the driver turns around before I can wave him down. I walk back to the villas and in the direction he drove. Finally when I reach the turn to the villas I see the vehicle coming toward me. He is surprised the other driver is not already here and has no idea where he is. I lead him down to the villas to begin loading half of our group and then I head back uphill, still in the rain, to try to find the other minibus. Ten minutes later the other driver shows up and tells me, "Don't blame me." Apparently, communication between the drivers failed and they did not meet up at a previously arranged location. In the rain we load up both minibuses and the luggage and slide downhill on the slick mountain road. Both drivers are in a hurry as they are way behind schedule. Fortunately, Shari always plans for mishaps and we still have plenty of time to reach the Brisbane airport. And, in fact, we do arrive early with plenty of idle time waiting for the plane to depart.

Our flight is uneventful. Fortunately, I have a window seat when we descend to Sydney and I am able to get photos of the city's famous sites. Buses again take us downtown and I am glad I'm not doing the driving in the snarled traffic. We have leisurely time to check into our hotel and walk along Darling Harbour, eventually stopping at a harbor side restaurant for dinner.



Sydney from the air: Sydney Bridge and Opera House



Sydney from the air: Darling Harbour



Sydney city traffic



Restaurant overlooking Darling Harbour

## Day 51 – Sydney

(Bert) We've taken Hop On Hop Off Bus tours in Miami, Funchal, Barcelona, and Cape Town and always enjoyed the comfort, commentary, and overall introduction to a city. So today we are doing the tour of Sydney, a city jam-packed with interesting sites. Warm weather and clear skies adds to the enjoyment, especially since we are sitting on the open-air top of the bus. I take lots of photos of the modern architectural designs of the skyscrapers and photograph the famous Sydney Bridge from many angles. We bypass the Sydney Opera House today as that will be on tomorrow's agenda. Instead, we head out of the city, past enormous Centennial Park to Bondi Beach. It's Sunday and everyone is at the beach. Circling back into the city we get off the bus at the Chinese Market. Inside are hundreds of small booths with vendors selling Chinese and Asian wares, mostly clothes, toys, jewelry, and everything "Made in China." I buy a knit shirt with a Australian Outback embossment. What we couldn't find was Chinese food, so we cross the street to a string of restaurants and choose one with outdoor seating. From the marketplace it is only about a mile to our hotel, so we walk back. On the way we stumble upon a Turkish Festival with live performances and many tents selling Turkish ware. In the evening we dine at Beer DeLuxe, an open air restaurant at Darling Harbour that we tried to go to last night but the Saturday crowd was overwhelming, though considerably fewer people tonight. The stupendous hamburgers and dark beer are great tasting, although the price at \$61 (after conversion to U.S. dollars) seems high by our standards.



Sydney city center



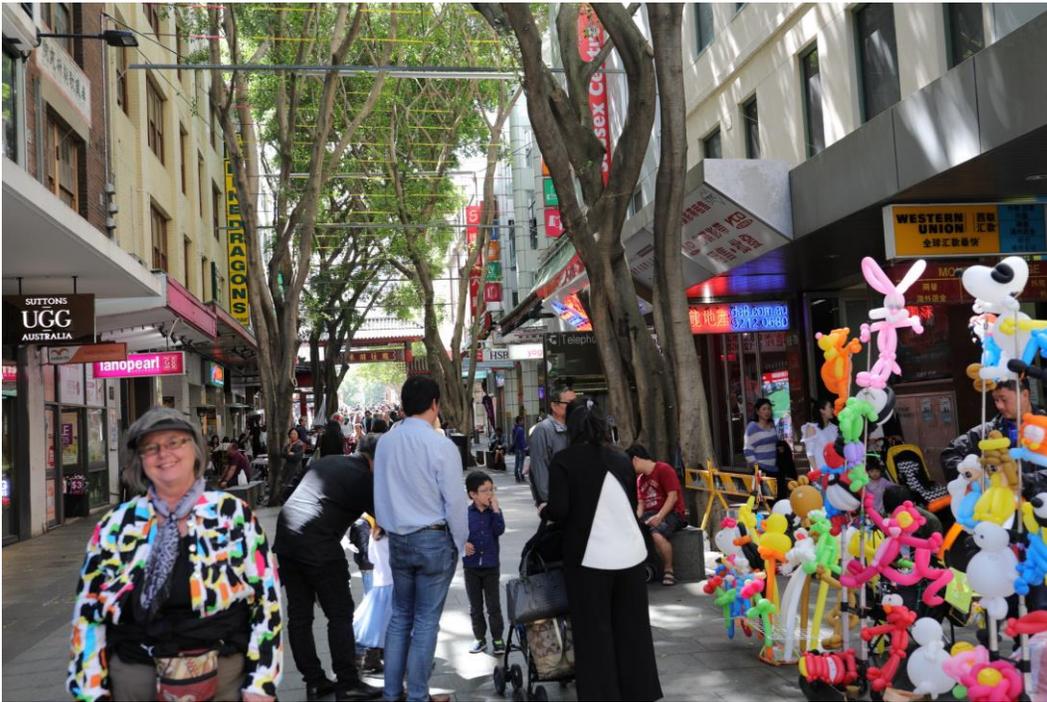
Sydney Bridge viewed from On Off Bus



Bondi Beach



Chinese Market



Chinatown



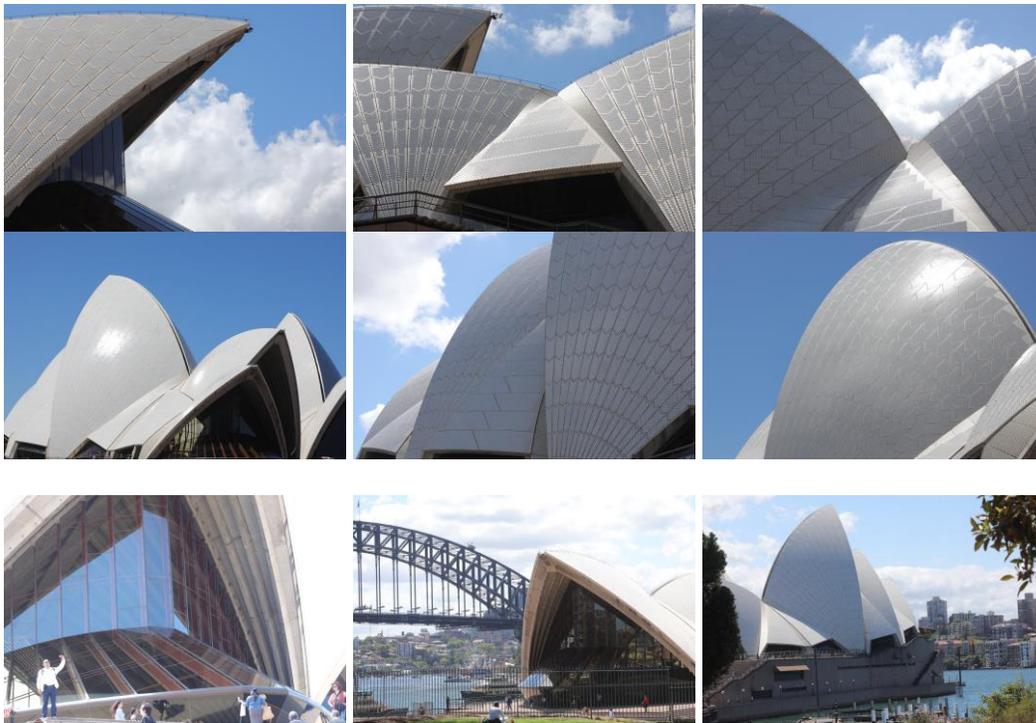
Turkish Festival, Darling Harbour



Beer DeLuxe, Darling Harbour

## Day 52 – Sydney

(Bert) Highlighting today is a tour of the Sydney Opera House followed by a gourmet lunch served on its patio. When bids went out for the design of the opera house, the unanimous winner, Jørn Utzon, offered an uplifting design far ahead of its time, but with no engineering plan to see if it was possible to build. Final plans were stalled until Utzon came upon the idea of making the shells part of a sphere. It is the largest building in the world without columns, with only concrete on the outside and wood inside. Utilities such as air conditioning are all hidden from exterior or interior view in the gap between concrete and wood. Construction stretched from 1959 to 1973 and at an expense ten times original estimates. The building we view looks different from each perspective, as my photos illustrate.





While waiting for our inside tour to begin, we have a grand view of the Sydney Bridge and the harbor view of the city, including a docked cruise ship. For a price, able-bodied people can climb the arch of Sydney Bridge. A few of the younger ones in our group are up to the challenge, but no one is willing to pay the high price. It takes binoculars or a long camera lens to see people atop the bridge.



Sydney Harbor



Cruise ship and Sydney Bridge



Selfie with Sydney Bridge

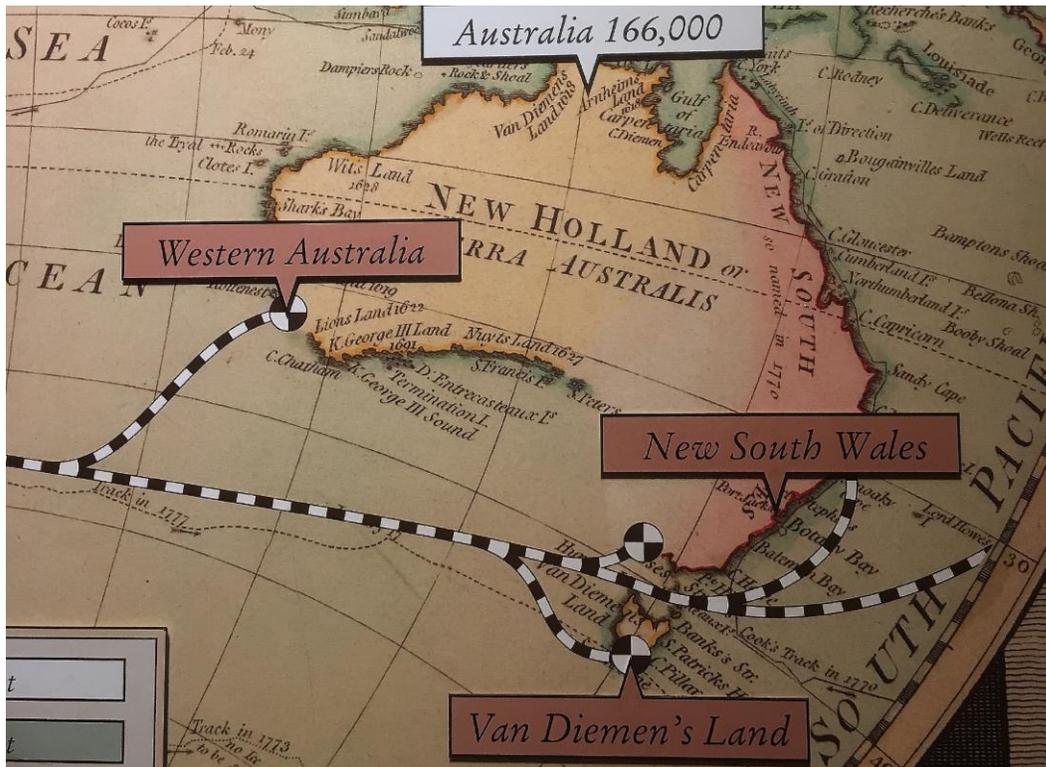


Walking across the top of the Sydney Bridge

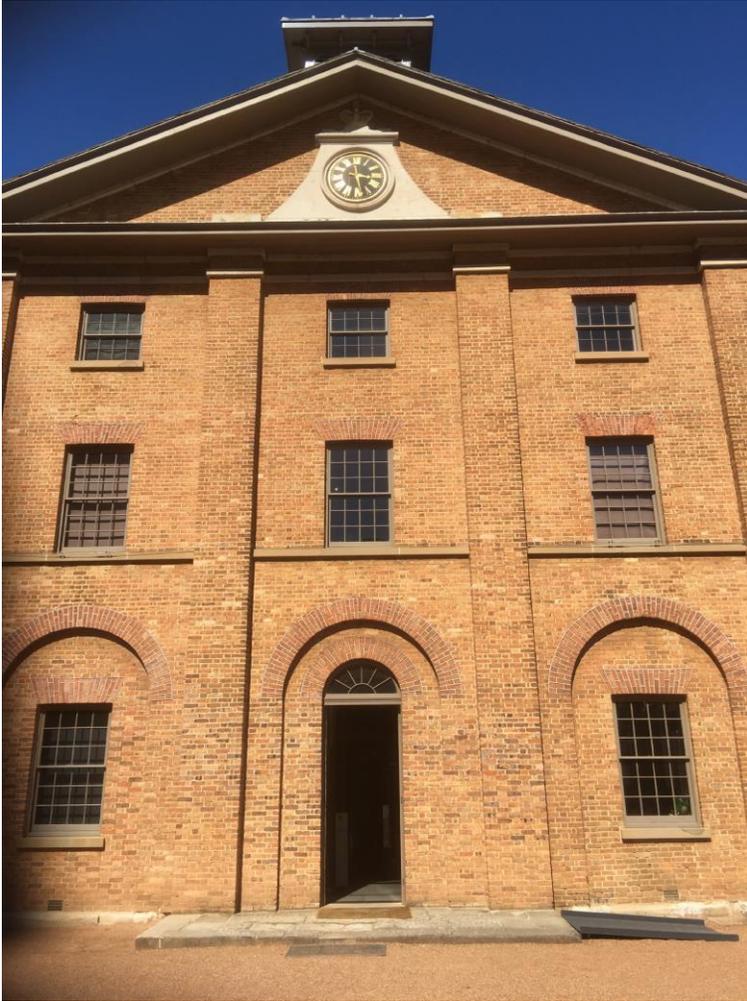
In the afternoon I make too brief a visit to the Sydney Botanic Gardens and then meet up with Shari and we take the Hop On Hop Off Bus to the Hyde Park Barracks Museum, housed in the original building constructed by convicts 1817-19. Through its gates passed 50,000 convicts from 1819-48, a portion of the 166,000 convicts sent to Australia by Britain. Thereafter, the barracks became an immigration depot and an asylum for destitute women. The success of the convicts depended on their skills at carpentry, masonry, nursing, farming, or as servants, and not on their crimes, which may have been relatively minor, such as pickpocketing and political protest. The convicts were transported for day jobs to local residents and then returned each night to the dormitories. In our self-guided tour, using a handheld recorder held up to our ear, we see the artifacts of the times and hear the history of this beginning of New South Wales. For many years, Australians did not want to admit they were descendants of these convicts, but now with the renewed interest in ancestry more is being made known. It is estimated that 1 in 10 current Australians are descended from these convicts.



Sydney Botanic Gardens



Of the 166,000 convicts sent by Britain to Australia 50,000 landed in New South Wales



Hyde Park Barracks Museum

## CHAPTER 6 – NEW ZEALAND – NORTH ISLAND

### Day 53 – Sydney to Auckland

(Bert) We carry our luggage down the elevators and store it in a locked room and then walk to an early breakfast at a harbor side restaurant. Back at the hotel, two mini-buses transport us to the airport for our flight to Auckland. Early morning traffic and street construction delays us again, but Shari has that expectation built into the schedule. Because of the time difference, we don't arrive in Auckland until 4:30. Our bus shuttle drivers to downtown are waiting for us, though it takes a long time for everyone to get through customs. New Zealand customs regulations are particularly fussy about food items. Shari declares an apple and some packaged food. They take the apple and let her keep the packaged food. One couple in our group forgets they have an apple packed inside their luggage and is fined \$400, a severe penalty for forgetfulness. In Auckland we meet Mark and go out for a beer at a Japanese restaurant. He is one of four who are joining us for this leg of the journey and we fill him in on some of the rental RV procedures. Then it's off to bed in preparation of an early start tomorrow.



A photograph of an airport flight information board for International Arrivals. The board is tilted and shows flight details including flight number, origin, ETA, and status. The time 18:36 is displayed in the top right corner. The board lists several flights from Sydney, Nadi, Brisbane, Apia, Melbourne, Shanghai, and Beijing.

Flight	From/Via	ETA	Status
EK9822	Sydney	18:30	Landed
SQ4311	Nadi	16:58	Dikevi ni pasidia ena Kasitaba
CZ7575	Sydney	17:39	Processing
VA7436	Brisbane	17:23	Processing
SQ4301	Apia	17:24	O lo'o fa'asolo le siakiina ole pasese
VA7424	Melbourne	17:27	Processing
MU779	上海	18:13	已降落
NZ3888	北京	18:16	已降落



Sparse Auckland traffic to downtown



Auckland's Sky Tower

## Day 54 – Auckland and Tiri Tiri Matangi

(Shari) I have been remiss in writing. So sorry. I'll try harder from now on. Today the birders go off to an island and, as has been our custom, I have another activity scheduled for the rest of us. After breakfast I lead the group two blocks to the famous Auckland landmark of Sky Tower. There I hand out my previously purchased Hop On Hop Off bus tickets and wave the group off. I feel sort of like waving my children goodbye on their first day of school. I am unable to accompany the group as I have phone calls to make as it is the first day I have my New Zealand phone number. The first place I call is Kaikoura to confirm our boat trip. I ask how long the drive is from Picton. I am told eight hours by car using the inland detour route since the regular route was destroyed by the earthquake. Oh no, we will never make it, since our ferry does not arrive until the afternoon. Our intention was to take the coastal road, a journey of only three hours. I have some rearranging to do. I cancel one of the nights at the Kaikoura campground, book another on the detour route, and change departure times on our two boat trips.

(Bert) To explain why we are visiting an island off the coast of Auckland requires a bit of New Zealand history. New Zealand has the dubious distinction of being one of the worst nations in destroying its native bird life. Only Hawaii is worse. Since prehistoric times, the islands contained no mammals except a few species of bats. Birds evolved without mammalian predators. The change started 800 years ago when the Maori were the first men to reach the islands. In their hunting practices they exterminated the giant Moas and giant eagle. They introduced rats and dogs which killed off defenseless ground-nesting birds. The onslaught continued when Europeans arrived and introduced possums, ferrets, and other four-legged mammals that are predators of birds. They

introduced rabbits to hunt and when they multiplied exponentially, they introduced stoats to control the rabbits, not recognizing the ineffectiveness of that strategy. Many bird species became extinct; others were extirpated from the main islands while remaining on a few small islands where the predators had not been introduced.

On the positive side, New Zealand is perhaps the most noteworthy country to bring back species from the verge of extinction. Tiri Tiri Matangi is one such example of the comeback. First, aerial flights over the small island sprayed poison that exterminated all the rats in one fell swoop. Traps were set to capture any other four-legged mammals and continue to be set in case any arrive by water. Then thousands of trees and shrubs were planted on the island denuded by grazing. Rare birds from a few of the unaffected small islands were transported to Tiri Tiri.

So, we are here today to see these rare endemic birds in a habitat that is beginning to look like the original. Yet, it is far from the original. When Capt. James Cook sailed along the coast of New Zealand the bird life was so prolific that his crew asked him to moor the ship away from the shore because the sound of the singing birds was so loud they could not sleep at night.



Tiri Tiri Matangi



Red-crowned Parakeet



North Island New Zealand Robin



North Island Kokako



New Zealand Bellbird



New Zealand Bellbird



Whitehead



Brown Quail



Grassy top of Tiri Tiri Matangi



Tui



Tui



North Island Saddleback

(Shari) Three hours later, I am finish with my work and decide to take the Hop On Hop Off bus tour by myself. I get a glimpse of Auckland and decide it reminds me of Duluth: about the same age, on the water, and built on hillsides. Bert and I meet for dinner. We are starved for Mexican food and walk to a Mexican Cafe. The chips are terrible, my mussels taste fishy, but the beer is good.



Auckland harbor and city

## Day 55 – Miranda

(Shari) One of the three shuttle vans is late. Bert leaves with nine people in the first van. I send another ten in the second and call about the third. I am told it is stuck in traffic. Flexibility is the word. As we get closer to the outlet, I notice new construction and mention it to the driver. He says it is a mess and changes every day. Today the construction blocks easy access to the grocery store we intended to send everyone. The driver gives me an alternative grocery store that I will mention to all and show in the maps.me app. Finally all are transported to the RV rental facility and we again fill out paperwork. This outlet is extremely pushy on selling superfluous vehicle packages but most of us are seasoned to it. After groceries we make our way to the shorebird center. Here we are entertained by Keith who gives us a funny talk on the habits of two species of birds. Afterwards some head to the shore to bird and others head to the campground where a hot spring pool awaits. Marylee mentions that she wants to stay here a week. It is a very nice campground and we are having good weather.

(Bert) Our veterans of two tours in Australia know the procedure when we pick up RVs in Auckland. Shari and I spend more time with Mark and Joanie and with Jack and Gail, new to this tour though both couples have traveled with us on previous caravans. We are the last to leave the dealership and head to the grocery store. Then it is off to Miranda on the Firth of Thames.

Here we meet at the Miranda Shorebird Centre and are privileged to hear Keith Woodley, author of *Godwits – Long-haul Champions*, tell us about trans Pacific bird migration and especially about the incredible journey of the Bar-tailed Godwits. I've seen these birds in Western Alaska where they breed. At the end of the breeding season they gather in great numbers at the Alaska's southwestern coast, waiting for the right wind conditions to jump off and head south, non-stop across the Pacific Ocean to this northern coast of New Zealand, a distance of 11,500 km. Keith tells us some of the secrets of the incredible journey discovered through banding and radio transmitters attached to a few of them. The southward trip takes eight days; the northward migration via a different route because of wind conditions is via China. The round trip is a minimum of 30,000 km and some godwits have made the round trip for 26 years. I've heard much of this before on our previous visit. At that time the major threat to the species was the northward return flight that takes a different route with a stopover in China's Yellow Sea and North Korea. In the past seven years much progress has been made in working with the Chinese and Koreans on conservation issues that may prove fruitful in preserving the species. Since we Americans know so little about the North Koreans, I ask Keith the question, "Are North Koreans conservation minded?" He assures me they are and are taking measures to protect the stop-over beach areas for the godwits.

In the last few days the number of Bar-tailed Godwits on the Miranda shores has been estimated at 6000. I try a few photos but the tide is out and the distance to the birds

negates good views or photos. After viewing the godwits and other shorebirds, we head to the campground. The highlight is swimming in the pool fed by hot volcanic springs.



Migration path of Bar-tailed Godwit



Pied Stilt



Distant view of a few of the thousands of Bar-tailed Godwits



Black-billed Gull



Skylark in flight



Miranda Hot Springs

## Day 56 – Miranda to Waitomo

(Bert) While the non-birders sleep in, the birders leave very early to revisit the ponds and seashore at Miranda. As we walk toward a bird blind overlooking the vast sandflats a flock of Bar-tailed Godwits takes flight and, independently, both Joanie and I estimate we are seeing 1000 of these large shorebirds in flight. I take a photo of part of the flock, shown below. I counted a portion of the black dots and it seems our estimate is fairly good, though maybe too conservative.



Flock of Bar-tailed Godwits estimated to be 1000+ birds



Welcome Swallow resembles our Barn Swallow

The tide is out and the sandflats too broad to pick out the distant birds, so we concentrate on the marsh and ponds. Even here the birds are far away and we need to rely on spotting scopes. Gray overcast skies and long distances make for poor photography. One species we are most interested in is the Wrybill, the only bird in the world with a bill bent sideways, always to the right. Yesterday in his talk, Keith presented several theories on why Wrybills have bent bills. 1. Soon after learning to fly, the whole flock flies into a rock wall and bend their bills. 2. During incubation the egg shell is too small and the bills are forced to bend. 3. Bent bills are useful for uncovering pebbles and gravel while feeding. Which theory do you think is correct?

Owing to the distance to the shorebirds, it takes us a while to decide which are Wrybills and which are Sharp-tailed Sandpipers until we notice the Wrybills have dark chest bands and the Sharp-taileds have red caps.



Very distant Wrybill



Is it a Wrybill or a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper?



Bar-tailed Godwit and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper



Australian Shoveler, an uncommon duck



Black Swans

A tiny bird easily heard singing a beautiful song, but very hard to find is the Gray Gerygone, known locally as Grey Warbler. Joanie's sharp ears and Mark's sharp eyes zero in on one in the hedge bushes between the ponds and the sea. Fortunately, this one is close enough for photos.



Gray Gerygone or Grey Warbler



Colorful snails by the hundreds on the walking path

By 10 AM we join others and head to Waitomo, winding slowly on the narrow roads through vibrantly green hills, the grass shorn short by cattle and sheep. Shortly after reaching our campground a shuttle bus carries us to Waitomo Caves, a famous tourist site for 125 years. First discovered in 1887 by Tane Tinorau and Fred Mace below the property of Tinorau, a Maori chief, the site remains in the Maori family and all of the workers are descendants of Tinorau. Access to the cave was recently upgraded, making it easy for us to walk through the vast chambers and see the stunning limestone formations. Undoubtedly the most curious feature is the glowworms. In spite of the name, the tiny creatures are actually maggots, the larvae stage of flies, which attach themselves to the ceiling of the cave. The larvae emit bioluminescence that glows in the pitch dark cave and they extend long sticky threads. Insect larvae float into the cave on the stream and hatch into hungry adults that are immediately attracted to the glowworms. After snarling themselves in the sticky threads they are devoured by the glowworms.

(Shari) We arrive at Waitomo just in time for the bus to transport us to our tour. This is a tour I have always wanted to do. Actually it is two tours, first a walk through a cave and then a boat trip through a cave in total darkness. We first have to walk down a spiral ramp forever. I mean forever. It is dark, lit only by small lamps attached to the spiral. Our Maori guide leads the way and creepily sings along the way. I use the flashlight on my iPhone to illuminate the way for Joyce. We reach the bottom and see the typical calcium stalactite and stalagmite formations. In addition we see glowworms. I never knew they were oversexed maggots that excrete bioluminescent poop. No kidding, that is what our guide says. Who knew? No one would come to see maggots. But market it as glow worms and people come by the droves. We get in a boat that floats along the river and is pulled by ropes through the dark cave. Here we see thousands of pinpoint

lights on the ceilings of the cave. We walk about a mile back to the campground and then the adjacent restaurant I chose for our L.E.O. Everyone enjoys their meal I think.



Looking down from ground level to cave level with lights outlining the spiral walkway



Stunning formations of stalactites and stalagmites



Threads dropped by glowworms



Glowworm threads beaded with water droplets



Glow of glowworms when all lights are turned off look like stars in a dark sky



Limestone cave shows seashore fossils from the ancient sea that once covered this area



Exit from the cave boat ride

## Day 57 – Hobbiton and Wings of Prey

(Shari) Months ago Bill and Pat asked us if our route took us close to Hobbiton in New Zealand. Bert did not know what that was, but I did. It is the location where Lord of the Rings was filmed. They wanted, if possible, to deviate from the exiting plan to visit the area on their own. Bert found it was not far out of our way, so we added it to the tour. Today, it is a big hit as even died-in-the-wool birders enjoy it. It is a magical fairyland place just constructed for the movies. You really are transported to another world where houses have round doors and are itty bitty sized for Hobbits. Quite charming!

(Bert) I'm surprised that some in our group have never seen any of the Lord of the Rings movies. Well, after today they plan on doing so. Hidden in the interior of the North Island of New Zealand, amid thousands of acres of sheep pastures, is Hobbiton, the fictitious town where Frodo and the Hobbits live. When Sir Peter Jackson was looking for the location to film his movies, he flew by helicopter over North Island and settled on a very hilly, picturesque sheep farm owned by Russell Alexander. After the movies were filmed the set of Hobbiton remained and became a fascinating tourist site. Walking through the village, one is challenged to figure out what is real and what is fake. Except for one dwelling, all buildings are a façade with a door that fronts on earthen hillside. For one of the dwellings the door opens into shadows of nothing. A wooden wheelbarrow is loaded with garden vegetables, but they are plastic. A realistic huge tree at the top of the hillside is completely fabricated. Ornamental plantings abound and pathways meander between the Hobbiton homes. A still lake with floating Black Swans

and New Zealand Scaup sports a mill waterwheel and an adjacent restaurant where we dine on a broad spread of delicious food.



Sheep still move through the pastures and along the entrance road to Hobbiton



Unlike most sheep farms, this one has remnant trees in the hollows



Movie characters Frodo Baggins and Gandalf



Impromptu group photo as we listen to our guide tell us about Lord of the Rings movies



Hobbiton



Hobbiton home, a façade against a hillside



Hobbiton is vibrantly green



With me usually holding the camera, this is a rare photo of Shari and me together



Marty lifting his bride at the threshold of a Hobbiton home



Jeff is too tall to enter this Hobbiton home



Huge tree on hillside is completely fabricated



Hobbiton mill on the lake

(Bert) After a filling lunch we drive to Wingspan, a rehabilitation and educational facility for raptors. Most notable is the critically threatened New Zealand Falcon. The \$20 bill depicts a drawing made of one of the New Zealand Falcons that lived here. In fact, it might have been the falcon we saw seven years ago. Since the one we see today

in aerial demonstrations is a younger falcon, I ask the manager what happened to the older one. She told me that one day the falcon simply flew away and did not return. Again, today, the one we watch is free to leave at any time but usually returns because it wants a chunk of chicken attached to the lure swinging from the rope handled by the trainer. During the demonstration we learn about the characteristics of the bird and the threats it faces in the wild. After the flying show, several people including Joanie and Howard get a chance to hold the falcon as it snatches a bit of chicken.

(Shari) After our tour we have a delicious lunch at the Green Dragon before taking off for Wingspan. It drizzles all the way and umbrellas are needed to watch the show. The rare wild falcon does not seem to mind the rain as long as it gets fed. Joanie and Howard are privileged to hold the bird. We continue on to Rotorua in the rain.



New Zealand Falcon



Joanie holds a New Zealand Falcon



Howard holds a New Zealand Falcon

## Day 58 – Cape Kidnappers

(Bert) Although we have only a 150 mi. drive from Rotorua to Napier, we take an early 7 AM start because there is so much to see on the way south. Our first stop is Huka Falls where a turquoise river is churned to white turbulence as it plunges down a narrow channel. First we view the falls from above and then drive below. Looking up to our previous viewpoint I see many of our caravan group looking my way. Next stop is Waipunga Falls. I like the way my photo blurs the tall thin strands of the waterfall while leaving the adjacent deep green forest in sharp focus and the midstream black boulders glossy with waterfall spillage. It looks more like a vivid painting than a photograph. Elsewhere along our twisting road the hilly landscape is vividly green: grass pastures clipped uniformly short to an inch or two tall by the hundreds of sheep.



Huka Falls from above



Huka Falls



Folded landscape of vivid green sheep pastures with patches of deep green forests



Waipunga Falls

In Napier we stop at Ahuriri Estuary Wildlife Reserve where I had hoped to find many birds feeding in its shallow shores. I find only a few White-faced Herons, though I am pleasantly pleased with the abundance of Silvereyes and my first good chance to photograph one singing. This tiny acrobatic bird is always on the move in dense foliage. It is a self-introduced species to New Zealand, first recorded in 1832.



Female Silvereye



Cabbage Tree

(Shari) There are a lot of things to see en route today. This is a route of hot springs and waterfalls. One of the most interesting places could have been the hot springs at Waimangu Volcanic Valley Park, but those that left early to visit the nearby site were disappointed to find it didn't open until 9 AM. Huka Falls is beautiful too having a

number of overlooks to catch it from varying angles. One of Bert's favorite stops is an estuary in Napier. While he birds I make sandwiches for our picnic tonight. Then I walk to the Sheepskins store I suggested everyone visit. Prices for wool products are cheaper here at the factory. I buy a sweater for myself and gloves for Bert.

(Bert) While I've been hiking around a portion of the estuary, Shari has been shopping at Classic Sheepskins. When we meet up she shows me the angora-possum gloves she bought for me. I had a similar pair from our 2010 visit, but they are much worn out now. The warm gloves have exposed fingertips, useful for camera and binocular manipulation.

After checking in at our next campground in Napier we drive to Cape Kidnappers. The cape got its name from Capt. James Cook. When his ship touched at this point of the North Island, the native Maori kidnapped a young crew member. In the scuffle to return the captive, the young man managed to escape.



Cape Kidnappers

We climb aboard a wagon pulled by a tractor that will take us along the rocky, gravelly shore with the sea rolling in on our left and a steep walled cliff on our right. Our travel does not start until late afternoon when the tide is low enough to allow us passage. Our ebullient tractor operator is constantly getting stuck in soft spots. He asks half of us to jump off the wagon, reducing the weight and allowing his huge tractor tires more traction. By repeatedly shifting gears, forward and reverse, he works the tractor out of the hole. If not, then more have to get off the wagon until he gets out of the rut. It is a curious, though fun, ride. Along the way our driver halts and jumps off the tractor to show us a colorful jellyfish, or the thin line of coal deposit in the rock wall, or the

dramatic vertical shift in the mudstone and limestone that marks various earthquake history, perhaps 2000 years ago. We see several vertical shifts along our route, the most dramatic being 11 meters.

(Shari) We carpool to the beach for a senior version of a hayride: climbing onto a wagon pulled by a tractor along the shoreline. Getting stuck at least four times, many of us have to get off the wagon to lighten the load. We learn of the fault line in the cliffs and see the beautiful gannets on their nests. We return at sunset. The picnic lunch I prepared is well received as we are very hungry by now.



All aboard!



Stuck in soft gravel



Colorful jellyfish



Half our group is walking beside the wagon as the tractor pulls out of a hole



Vertical shift in rock layers marks earthquake

A highlight of the wagon ride is visiting the colonies of White-fronted Terns and Australasian Gannets. While the birds sit on nests and fly overhead we get remarkably close to birds usually only seen at a distance. This being mating season, we see signs of

courtship. A tern offers a minnow to his mate and a pair of gannets cross saber bills with heads raised skywards.



White-fronted Tern male offering minnow to its mate



Australasian Gannets nesting sites



Crossing bills, a sign of courtship



The black vertical feathering along its throat distinguishes Australasian Gannet from the nearly identical Northern Gannet we see in Newfoundland and Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula

## **Day 59 – Tui Brewery and Pukaha Mount Bruce**

(Shari) We have our travel meeting this morning in the cool air. My new sweater feels and looks good according to me. I tell the group how to get into the parking lot at Tui Brewery where we will have our lunch. I do caution them on not drinking alcohol and driving. I also mention a place to get wool along the route. Our lunch is delicious but takes too long even though I was assured the establishment could handle our crowd. At least it is a pretty day and we can look at the self-guided brewery museum. I notice everyone is in conversation at the outside picnic tables so that is good.

(Bert) We all leave the campground about the same time so that we can meet up for lunch at Tui Brewery. It's an old brewery with a nice exhibit of its history, but what most attracts us is that it is named after a bird, the Tui. When we arrive, the bartender explains the many brews they produce, most of which are not sold in stores but only available at the company store. Howard can't decide which one to try, so he orders a sampler and tries them all. As shown in another of my photos, Shari decides to join the advertising ladies in a pinup poster.



Tui Brewery\



Getting an explanation of the brews available from Tui Brewery



Howard chooses them all



Newest edition to the advertising ladies is in the upper right, holding bottle of Tui beer

(Shari) The schedule is now tight and as soon as we finish lunch we must not dawdle to get to Mt. Bruce in time to see the sanctuary. Here we catch our first glimpse of the Kaka at bird feeding time. It seems to know the time as the birds start gathering right before the 3 PM feeding, swooping around and very close to our heads. We in the USA are not

used to seeing such big parrots in the wild. After the feeding we depart to finish our drive to Wellington. The scenery is majestic mountains, though the narrow highway is very twisty as it winds down to sea level, beautiful that is for the passenger while the driver keeps eyes glued to the turns. We arrive in time for happy hour at Kay and David's. She bought a growler of the delicious dark beer to share with us. It is one of the many kinds that the brewery does not bottle, only selling it as draft in growlers at the factory.

(Bert) After lunch we drive to Pukaha Mount Bruce, a facility that raises kiwis to be released in the wild as well as offer an educational program about New Zealand wildlife and a podocarp forest reserve with over a thousand predator traps. The attraction I most want to see is the white North Island Brown Kiwi. Although completely white, suggesting an albino, actually she has a rare recessive white feather gene. Photographing the bird, though, is difficult. To protect the nocturnal birds, the room is lite only with dim red lights. Not only is it challenging for us to see the birds, but my camera captures very little light. I show here my "best" photo which certainly lacks detail. The kiwi is much larger than most would expect. It looks like a white basketball on pencil legs with a thick pencil bill attached to a tiny neckless head.



White North Island Brown Kiwi

Besides birds, Pukaha Mount Bruce has a captive Tuatara, a reptile that looks like a lizard, but is not. The Tuatara is the only representative of its order and is estimated to have been around for an incredible 200 million years. It is still found on outer islands, but is extant on the main islands owing to predation and habitat loss. A strange creature, it has a third photoreceptive eye and no external ear, although it can hear. It retains some features of fish and is of interest to scientists studying the evolution of snakes and lizards.



Tuatara

Looking down from a short bridge to a clear freshwater stream, I can see Long-fin Eels mostly at rest as they are nocturnal feeders. These large eels can live over a hundred years but breed only once, at the end of their lives, when they migrate thousands of kilometers to spawning grounds near Tonga.



Long-finned Eel

Shortly before 3 PM we gather at the Kaka Circus where wild Kakas will descend from the forest to be fed. Because of habitat protection and restoration efforts, this threatened parrot has increased dramatically. Anticipating the feeding, some have already gathered and at 3 PM a couple more appear. They fly from feeder to feeder as if the seed is always better at another feeder.



Waiting for Kaka feeding



Kaka



Kaka flying from one feeder to the next

## Day 60 – Zealandia

(Bert) In 1770, Sir Joseph Banks wrote, “This morn I was awakd by the singing of the birds ashore ... the numbers of them were certainly very great who seemd to strain their throats with emulation perhaps; their voices were certainly the most melodious wild musick I have ever heard, almost imitating small bells but with the most tuneable silver sound imaginable.”

My favorite place to visit in the North Island is Zealandia. As I described before, almost all ground-nesting birds on the main islands were eradicated by stoats, rats, possums, and other introduced predators. An exception is Zealandia, but that didn't happen by chance. Starting with farmland stripped of trees, a predator proof fence both very high and very deep into the ground was built to surround 556 acres that included two small lakes. Native trees and shrubs were planted and, in time, endangered birds from remote small islands were introduced into the exclosure. Now, 18 years later, the plan is an incredible success as evidenced by the abundant wildlife we find while walking the paved path and the dirt hiking trails. While the sound many not match Banks description, we certainly hear and see many, including the Bellbird he describes.



Perimeter fence at Zealandia



The forest returned

Traveling through the North Island and certainly here at Zealandia, I have noticed an increase in the number of sightings I have had compared to seven years ago. Predator

control is now widespread across New Zealand, so some species such as the New Zealand Pigeon are often seen in cities and people's yards. Here at Zealandia I repeatedly hear the swish of their wings and follow their flight across the treetops. I counted ten Grey Gerygones and don't recall seeing more than one on my last visit. Also common are New Zealand Kakas, Whiteheads, North Island Saddlebacks, Stitchbirds, and New Zealand Robins. A surprise is a California Quail, a widespread introduced species that flew over the fence to enjoy the suitable habitat. Photographing the birds is much easier here than elsewhere as they have become accustomed to people that do not harm them.



New Zealand Pigeon



New Zealand Robin



New Zealand Fantail



Dunnoek



North Island Saddleback



Stitchbird



Bellbird



California Quail, an introduced species to New Zealand



Gray Gerygone

One of the most sought after birds is the Brown Teal, the most endangered waterfowl on the mainland and fewer than 1000 birds left, mostly on Great Barrier Island. Unlike the predator issue, this teal was decimated by the drainage of wetlands. I find one to

photograph in daylight and another in the evening when, surprisingly, it is easier to find since it is a nocturnal feeder.

The park closes at 5 PM, but we get the wonderful opportunity for a guided night walk after a full dinner served at the Zealandia exhibition building. I'd seen two Tuataras in daylight, but at night they are more active and our guide uses her red light to illuminate several. We hear, but do not see, three Southern Boobooks, a small owl often called Morepork because that is exactly how their call sounds. Our guide stops beside a small stream and tosses in a bit of food. We hear splashing as a Long-finned Eel gulps the food.



Brown Teal in daylight



Tuatara in daylight



Tuatara at night, illuminated by red light

Our most sought after bird, however, is the kiwi. Even though this is the country bird and New Zealanders are called kiwis, this bird is very hard to find because it is strictly nocturnal and prowls in dense shrubbery. Our guide clues us in on its call and also tells us to listen for scratching in leaf litter as the kiwi feeds. In spite of a very long pencil

bill, the kiwi has the shortest nose because its nose is attached to the end of its bill. The kiwi uses its nose to smell food in the earth. We hear kiwis call a few times, but too distant for us to track. After a half hour, our guide hears one moving in the darkness and shines her red light on the sloped densely covered hillside. I shoot a dozen photos, two of which are recognizable. We feel pretty good about ourselves, having actually seen a kiwi. When we return to the Zealandia building we meet the other two groups—our caravan was split into three groups—and find out the group returning just before us had a kiwi walk right through their feet and their photos show both the kiwi and their shoes. Amazing! However, on the downside, the third group saw no kiwis. Such is the luck of birding.



Little Spotted Kiwi

## **CHAPTER 7 – NEW ZEALAND – SOUTH ISLAND**

### **Day 61 – Cook Strait**

(Shari) It's another early morning as we make our way the short distance to the ferry staging terminal. Although a convoluted run, the maps.me app and Bert's road log and signage are accurate and the routes agree. Hurrah! At the ferry dock, most of us are all in a line and some drink coffee to wake up, others walk and others sleep, namely me (after I confirm all my chicks are in place, however). Boarding the ferry has no issues and as I walk around the three public decks I find the whole group scattered. Some are playing cards, at least six are sitting in the middle room looking at electronic devices, another eight to ten are out on the calm side of the ship enjoying the scenery, some are sleeping (not me this time), and others are reading near a window.

(Bert) It looks like today we are in for a beautiful ride on the Interislander ferry across Cook Strait. We have our RVs lined up by 7 AM and sailing by 9 AM. Some are getting breakfast at the cafeteria or lounging on comfortable chairs inside. Others of us are outside on the decks that surround the seventh floor. It's mostly gulls we are seeing, so I go inside and soon fall asleep.



Motorhomes lined up to board ferry across Cook Strait

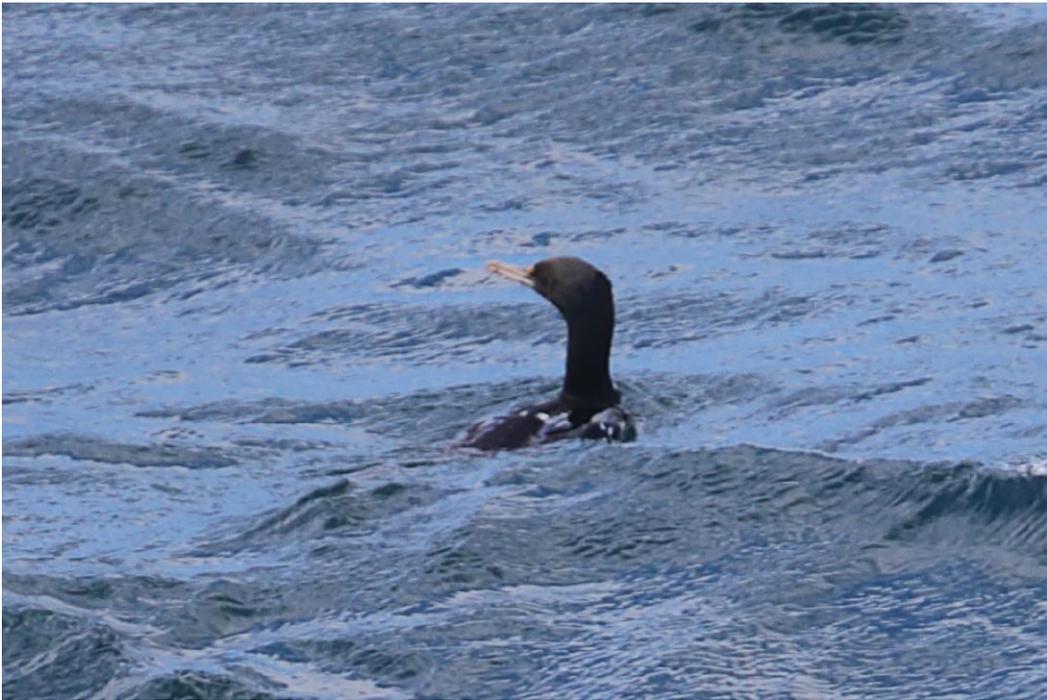


Interislander ferry

(Bert) We are across the strait and nearing Tory Channel on the South Island when I recognize I'm missing the pelagic bird action. Mark and Joanie are anxiously trying to identify the new birds and I'm photographing them. The huge black seabird is a Southern Giant-Petrel, separated from the Northern version only by the tip of its bill. My photo shows markings under the wing of shearwater, making it a Fluttering Shearwater. Spotted Shag is another new bird for the trip and a particularly pretty one with its long white racing strip down its black neck and the bright turquoise patch around its eye. My photo even shows the spots on its back. The best bird though is not nearly as pretty, but it is much rarer. I would have missed it, but Joanie has done her homework and she read that this New Zealand King Shag is best found at Queen Charlotte Sound. An aerial survey in 2015 counted only 839 in the world. From the angle of my photo it is hard to tell that this is a dramatic black and white cormorant as only the white spots on its back and the yellow-orange caruncle at the base of its pink bill give us the identification.



Southern Giant-Petrel



New Zealand King Shag



Spotted Shag



Fluttering Shearwater

The ferry smoothly churns through the channel amid panoramic views of ragged raw rock islands, green velvet hills, and densely forested mountains. This passageway has been described as one of the most scenic in the world and we could not have picked a prettier day to view it.



Entrance to Tory Channel, South Island



Tory Channel



Tory Channel



Picton, South Island

(Shari) The four hours pass quickly and soon we are departing by RV to travel a new route. The Kaikoura earthquake a year ago did heavy damage to the roads in this area.

We want to go to Kaikoura and you guessed it, the nice leisurely road along the coast is closed for at least another four months. We were to stop for lunch at a restaurant on the coast and see live seals swimming and playing in the river, so close we could almost touch them. But it is not to be. Instead, we have a two-day detour and must stop midway at an unvisited campground at least four hours from the ferry. The travel time is longer than expected because there is sooooo much construction. First you see a “Temporary 30 KPH” sign, then a “Stop when requested” sign, and invariably you have to stop. The road is one lane at this point. But soooo many of them it gets tedious. It is a nice campground, however, and we have a pleasant travel meeting and social outside. There is not much to do in the area, unless you like to hike and look at the beautiful scenery that here abounds.

(Bert) As we disembark, here is where our route changes from our original plan. The short route along the coast was damaged by the November 2016 earthquake which measured 7.8 magnitude. It centered about 37 mi. southwest of Kaikoura, our destination. We had thought the highway would have been repaired by now, but it is not. The reroute through the mountains is so much longer that we had to change our plans and stop midway at a campground Shari arranged a few days ago. On the plus side, the new route is incredibly scenic, but as driver I have to pay attention to the narrow, hilly road and have no time to stop for photos.

## **Day 62 – Kaikoura**

(Bert) I already mentioned my favorite site on the North Island and today it is my favorite on the South Island: a pelagic boat trip off the coast of Kaikoura. We planned on taking the boat trips in early morning, but our rerouting means we first have to drive from the mountains to the coast. An incredible amount of road construction occupying hundreds of workers delays our movement. Yet the scenery is fantastic and I wish I had stopped for photos. One highlight is seeing the rare New Zealand Falcon swoop past my windshield.

(Shari) “I don’t think we are going to make it in time,” I tell Bert as we wind and wind down the mountain, stopping way too much for construction. As we near Kaikoura I tell him to drop me off at the Encounter place and he should go on and drive the group instead of walk. I let the vendor know that I have arrived and soon my group starts showing up. Pam asks about swimming with the dolphins and when Howard and David hear about that, they want to do it also. This is another of those times when we have split the group. Most are going with Bert to see albatrosses and the rest are going with me to see and/or swim with the dolphins.

(Bert) I drop Shari off at the tour headquarters and head to the campground to pick up those that arrived earlier. We are on a tight schedule because it took longer than expected to get through the road construction. We arrive at the newly completed boat dock and we will be the first to use it since the earthquake. Tourism has been slashed to half because Kaikoura has been so inaccessible until recently and even now it is a tedious road drive.

As the boat pulls out of the harbor we are treated to a stunning view of snow-capped mountains—they were visible from yesterday’s Cook Strait ferry—the coastal tree-covered lowlands, and the calm blue ocean.



Construction of new dock at Kaikoura since the earthquake



Snow-capped mountains flank coastal town of Kaikoura

(Shari) Our three swimmers get fitted with wet suits and I am told that the water is 53°. Yikes, that is a shock! It does not take long and two dolphins are spotted but the captain says they don't want to play today. He says they will follow the boat if they do want to play. Soon afterwards we find a pod of dolphins leaping and swimming around before our three swimmers can even get ready. Finally the captain gives the okay sign and the three plunge off the back of the boat. They are to make noise to let the dolphins know they want to play. From on the boat, the swimmers sound like clucking chickens. It is hilarious yet the dolphins come in and give all of us a good show. Since it is only our group on the boat, we have the dolphins all to ourselves and can stay as long as we want.

We learn about the devastation from the earthquake. Kaikoura was cut off from the outside for two weeks and its beach changed a dramatic six meters. They are still rebuilding the harbor and only are able to take small boats out. The road to Christchurch is only open on weekends. Lucky for us tomorrow is Friday or we would have to take the horrible road that we came in on.

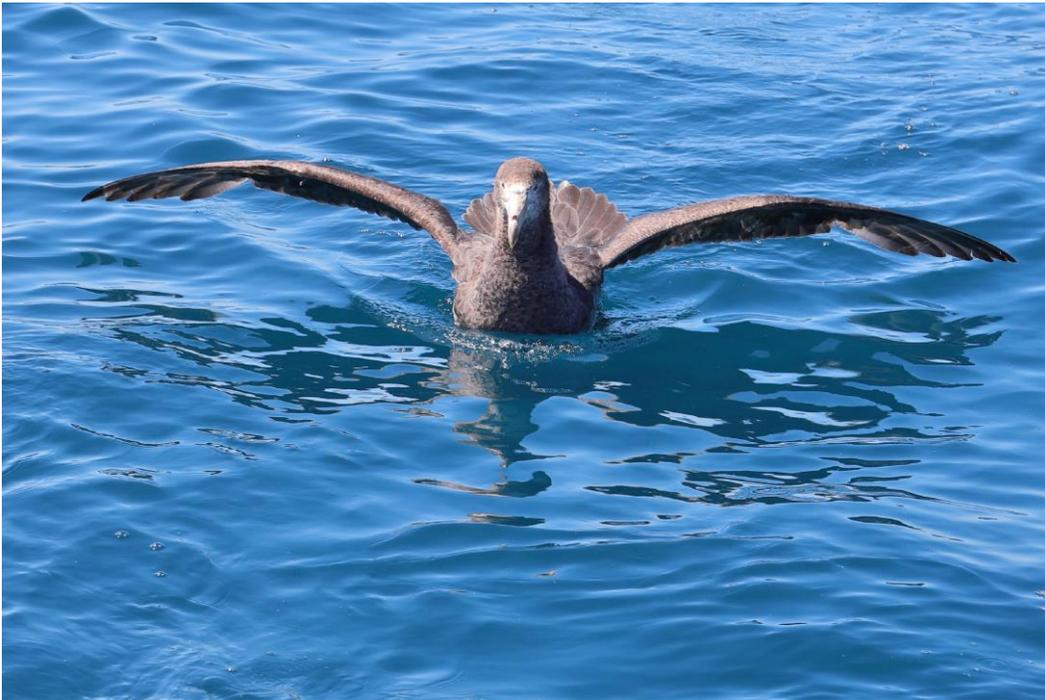
(Bert) Our boat captain and expert pelagic bird guide is Gary, the same person who took us out seven years ago. His assistant today is Fiona. I have the misfortune that my long lens no longer communicates electronically with my camera body and gives Err01 with every attempt. My first photos are taken with my 24-70 mm lens. On the Salvin's Albatross photo, note the size difference between an albatross and the Red-billed Gull.



Hutton's Shearwater (photo taken with 24-70 mm lens)



Cape Pigeon, now called Cape Petrel



Southern Giant-Petrel



Salvin's Albatross and Red-billed Gull



Northern Giant-Petrel



Wandering Albatross, Gibson's subspecies

Then I have the good fortune that Fiona has the newer version of my long 100-400 mm lens and agrees to swap lens today. The first one I photograph with the long lens is a Westland Petrel. Note its tubenose which filters saltwater, removing the salt. The longer lens gives me better advantage of photographing the more distant flying birds. The nearly 10.7 ft. wingspan of the Royal Albatross is simply amazing. Another photo of the albatross shows the surprising reflection of the waves on the underside of its wings.



Westland Petrel



Northern Royal Albatross



Northern Royal Albatross – note the reflection on the undersides of the wings

Gary and Fiona have tossed out an open mesh basket with frozen chicken parts and it attracts the seabirds close to the stern of the boat. Frequently, squabbles erupt between the birds with the largest the winner, but when two equal-sized Wandering Albatrosses go at it, it can be a fierce battle of bills and wings.



Fighting Wandering Albatrosses

A Buller's Shearwater lands close enough to photograph. This species nests on Poor Knights Islands where it was threatened by pigs, though its numbers have increased since the removal of the pigs in 1936.



Buller's Shearwater

Our captain took his boat out 7.5 mi. and now we return toward land. We soon encounter a pod of Dusky Dolphins that I'd call frisky dolphins because they love to jump high out of the water and swim just in front of the boat. It's delightful to watch their playful antics and I'll bet the other half of our group that went on the dolphin boat, including swimming with dolphins, had a great time.



Dusky Dolphin



Dusky Dolphin



Dusky Dolphins swimming below the surface in front of our boat



Dusky Dolphins underwater, blurred by movement and the depth of water

(Shari) I wait for Bert's group to return and join most of them for a L.E.O. at a recommended restaurant about one mile walk. It is a beautiful day so we eat outside. Since Bert is the only one with a vehicle we make two trips to the campground shuttling the group the three and half miles back.



Kaikoura restaurant with a view

## Day 63 – Kaikoura to Christchurch

(Bert) Strange, a day when not much happened! Shari took a few photos through the windshield. We took the coastal road, passing much construction, and ran errands when we arrived at the Christchurch campground.

(Shari) What is needed every once in a while is a nice leisurely day with no pressures. For us that meant getting a late start, enjoying the scenery on the coastal road, and getting to camp early to do the laundry.



Highway 1 to Christchurch





Construction en route





## Day 64 – Mt. Cook

(Bert) We drive from coastal Christchurch up high into the Southern Alps, stopping first at the Church of the Good Shepherd, built in 1935 in memory of the pioneers of the Mackenzie Country. From the congregation, looking toward the altar and pulpit, a large picture window displays beautiful Lake Tekapo and snowcapped mountains beyond, certainly a distraction for listening to a sermon.

(Shari) Snow, rain, sunshine, cold, warmth, clouds, and blue sky, we experience it all today during our drive to Mt. Cook. The morning starts out sunny and our stop at the Church of the Good Shepherd is beautiful. The small church on the shores of a glacier fed lake is stunning and lots of tourists unloading from buses join us in viewing it.



Church of the Good Shepherd



Lupine at Lake Tekapo

(Shari) All tourists to New Zealand talk about Mt. Cook, the highest peak in the country. And it is beautiful when you see it, but not today. By the time we get to the Mt. Cook Visitor Centre, it is raining. Not much to see in terms of scenery.

(Bert) Up until now it has been a clear, cool day, but as we continue to Lake Pukaki the sky darkens and rain begins. We follow the highway along the lake to the base of Mt. Cook, the highest mountain in New Zealand. By the time we reach the end of the road the rain is intense and cold. Shari wants to see the visitor's center but has trouble finding it for lack of signage. After a long wait, I leave the RV too, carrying an umbrella and trying to find her. By the time I return without her I find her back in the RV, both of us wet from the downpour. And, because of the black clouds, we can't see the mountain either, a disappointment.

We head back downhill and I stop at the Tasman Delta, an alluvial deposit that spreads nearly three miles wide across the valley before it drains into Lake Pukaki. In spite of the cold rain and pounding wind, I venture out into the delta, first through a fence gate, then following a thin stream, and into the gravel wash. Not a pleasant hike, but I am anxious to find Black Stilts, the rarest shorebirds in the world. I saw a few hybrids in 2010, hybridized with Pied Stilts, but only saw pure black ones at the Black Stilt Hide, a center for raising chicks in captivity and releasing them into the wild. That facility is now closed to the public.

I should have worn my hiking shoes as the street shoes I have on now are getting soaked through to the socks. I use an umbrella to protect my camera from the persistent rain as well as enveloping it in a plastic bag. It is a struggle. Just as I'm wondering whether this is a fool's errand, a flock of stilts erupts from the delta and through binoculars I see two or three Black Stilts mixed with Pied Stilts and hybrids. Juggling with the plastic bag, the umbrella, my binoculars, and encumbered with a raincoat, I can't get the camera aligned on the flock until the Black Stilts descend out of sight. I get a few photos of what I thought are Pied Stilts, but upon examination they are hybrids. Well, not a complete success, but good anyway. I trudge back the way I came, this time facing the wind and getting still wetter. As we leave the Tasman Delta, the rain suspends and the skies clear, allowing for a colorful photo of the Lake Pukaki.

(Shari) Bert wants to see a bird so we have to stop on the side of the road. He gets his rain gear on and I shiver in the RV waiting for him. Thank goodness he sees the bird. Now snowflakes are mixed in the rain. But by the time we get to the campground, the sun is out.



Tasman Delta drains into Lake Pukaki



Hybrid Black Stilt x Pied Stilt



Lake Pukaki

(Shari) From the office we get two gas grills for our steak cookout and set up near the small camp kitchen. It starts to rain for our travel meeting and continues during our barbecue. We eat standing up in the camp kitchen or sitting under the eaves. The steaks are delicious and by the time we finish eating the sun comes out and many take a stroll to nearby Lake Ruataniwha.

(Bert) We continue to Twizel and tonight's campground. In on-again off-again drizzle I set up facilities for our cookout, keeping most everything under the building's overhang. Shari calls our meal Twizel Sizzle until someone points out that two words do not rhyme. Twizel is pronounced "t-why zil." After appetizers and a travel meeting, Shari, with help from Rob, starts cooking 28 steaks on the grills. We keep the accompanying salads and desserts inside the kitchen and our people find a seat anywhere out of the rain. As we often say, there is no such thing as bad weather, just poor preparation, wrong equipment, and bad attitude. We were prepared, had the right equipment, and everyone's attitude is positive.



Steaks sizzling on grills, getting ready for our cookout.

## Day 65 – Queenstown

(Bert) From Twizel we continue along a mountain valley and slowly climb to Lindis Pass at an elevation of 3155 ft. That height does not sound like much, yet the pass is above tree line and the mountains are carpeted in a thin blanket of brown grass. Strong cold winds blow, tossing the higher tufts of grass. From the pass we slowly descend to a thousand feet at Queenstown, a ski resort town that reminds me of Breckenridge, Colorado.



Landscape near Omarama



Lindis Pass



View from Lindis Pass, elevation 3155 ft.

(Shari) Rain, rain again! New Zealand is so beautiful that the rain does not spoil the view. The road skirts a long lake wedged between two mountains. We drive to the TSS Earnslaw, the steamship we are to board later. I want to check the availability of parking. There is none so we will have to walk the half mile. The town is congested with cars and people. It reminds me of a big Breckenridge built on hills. At the campground I ask about a meeting place and the management is gracious enough to let us use the room upstairs filled with antique furniture. We have our travel meeting and then walk to the dock where I get our tickets and hand them out. The ship is more crowded than I anticipated, maybe because it is so cold and rainy. While I sip my beer, the views from the cozy inside are fantastic. Snow-capped mountain peaks rise from the lake. The ride is about 45 min. long and en route we are entertained by a pianist.

(Bert) We check in at our campground in light rain. Shari finds an upstairs room above the office where we can hold our travel meeting and I notify our group of the change of plans. The rain has almost stopped by the time we walk to the boat dock and board the vintage steamship TSS Earnslaw. Although I've seen steamships before, I've never ridden in an operational one. First installed on Lake Wakatipu in 1912, the steamer is fueled by hand shoveled coal at the rate of one tonne per hour. Steam, provided by two locomotive type fire tube boilers, propels two 220 hp steam engines. We glide across Lake Wakatipu at the speed of 20 kph, the blue-black water looks foreboding and cold under overcast late afternoon skies. I'm sitting outside the cabins with Jeff and Barbara on a long plank seat warmed by the boilers. In front of us moves a stout cable that controls the ships rudder. I doubt the mechanism would meet today's OSHA standards.



1912 TSS Earnslaw steamship



Steamship boiler room of TSS Earnslaw



Exposed cable controlling steering



Lake Wakatipu



View from our seats on the outer hallway

(Bert) In 45 min. we reach our destination: Walter Peak High Country Farm. Though I was expecting an old farmhouse, instead we see a palatial estate more closely resembling a luxurious golf clubhouse. From the dock we are led inside the building and seated at reserved tables and then dine on an enormous variety of foods with far more choices than the few I could possibly sample.

(Shari) Disembarking we are led to a big mansion. Dinner will be inside tonight because of weather, making it seem more crowded. The outdoor patio overlooking the lake would have been a stunning place to eat. I can't tell you enough about this food. It lives up to its advertising as a gourmet BBQ with emphasis on gourmet. Salads, meats, sides, sauces, desserts are all a delight to the palate.



Walter Peak High Country Farm



Disembarking from the steamship at Walter Peak High Country Farm



Too many choices to choose

(Bert) After dinner we walk to an amphitheater where on stage we learn about sheep and sheep shearing. We've been seeing sheep every day and I've read there are 60 million sheep in New Zealand, compared to a population of about 3 million. New Zealand has basically two types of sheep: those raised for food and those raised for wool. Here at Walter Peak they raise Merino sheep for wool. The handler brings out a sheep, pulling it by its front feet and dragging it on its back. He explains that the sheep is docile when handled on its back, but if it was on its feet it would fight dangerously. We watch as he skillfully shears the sheep in a few minutes, removing the pelt in one piece. Then we move outside and watch two of his sheep dogs, following his whistled commands, move a flock of sheep into a pen. We board the steamship and return to Queenstown in darkness.

(Shari) After dinner we walk to the outdoor auditorium for a sheep shearing demonstration and then a sheep herding show where dogs steer a group of unruly sheep into a pen. It has stopped raining but still is cold and we welcome the indoor rooms on the ship upon our return. It could be worse, like pouring cats and dogs, on our walk back. But it does not rain.



Sheep shearing at Walter Peak High Country Farm





## Day 66 – Fiordland National Park

(Bert) They call it a “wilding” pine and until I read the sign I didn’t understand what a wilding pine was. In North America we call it lodgepole pine. The difference is that for us it is a native tree and a good one for timber. Here at Mid Dome it was introduced 1950-80 to control soil erosion. But like many manmade corrections to nature, the plan backfired and the light winged seeds spread widely and interfered with native species, threatening productive farmland. Now the plan is to kill the rogue wilding pines.



Mid Dome. The dark gray areas are dead wilding pines.

(Shari) When we get to the gas station in Te Anau, Bert hops out and joins Joannie and Mark. A whole bunch left very early this morning with us so they would have enough time to bird along the highway to Milford Sound. I, instead, decide to go to camp and fry bacon for our breakfast coming up. Unfortunately, the camp kitchen's electric fry pan is broken. I try the oven and it works, but takes forever. At ten slices a pan and 30 min. per pan I will be here 3 hr. I mention my frustration to the cleaning lady and all of a sudden a new electric fry pan shows up. How nice! After I fry the bacon, I decide to walk to town. I pass the restaurant where we are to eat tonight and notice that the menu outside is not the one I was e-mailed. Oh, oh! I walk to the sister restaurant, owned by the same person, and that menu is the same. I find out that the group is expected at the sister restaurant. Good thing I looked. I eat a bowl of soup at a German restaurant and buy some souvenirs before returning.

(Bert) Mid Dome is just a rest area on our way to Fiordland National Park and is an illustrative contrast to the ecology of the national park. Of the places we've visited thus far, with the exception of the artificially created Tiri Tiri Matangi island and the enclosure at Zealandia, Fiordland National Park strikes me as the best "native" habitat. And, a case in point is the native bird species that can be found there. Anxious to get started, the birders started out this morning at 6 AM so that we are on the outskirts of the park by 9:30. Our first stop is Te Anau Downs Rest Area where our best bird here is Grey Duck. This too is an example of an introduced species going awry. Although Grey Duck is a native species, once common, it interbred with introduced Mallards. Finding a pure Grey Duck is a rare occurrence, as almost all throughout New Zealand are hybridized. So, here at Lake Te Anau we see one that matches the pure bred specifications. I use Jeff's spotting scope to take a photo with my iPhone.



Grey Duck, iPhone photo through the spotting scope

We are on the Milford Road now, a slow-moving, winding, hilly road flanked by the magnificent scenery of the national park. The road follows a route carved from a glacier that spread out at Eglinton Valley, our next stop. The valley is grasslands flanked by high mountains. The thin creek flowing through the valley sports Black-fronted Terns that nest in these mountain valleys.



Eglinton Valley



Eglinton Valley and tern flying over creek



Black-fronted Tern

Perhaps the most picturesque spot along the Milford Road is Mirror Lakes. It could be a placid scene with still reflections of the mountains, but to get my photo I have to wedge myself between hundreds of non-English speaking tourists unloaded for a 10-min. stop

from four buses. While the tourists are clicking selfies of themselves with the mirrored lake as backdrop, I turn the other direction and photograph a browsing Bellbird undisturbed by the chatter and shuffling.

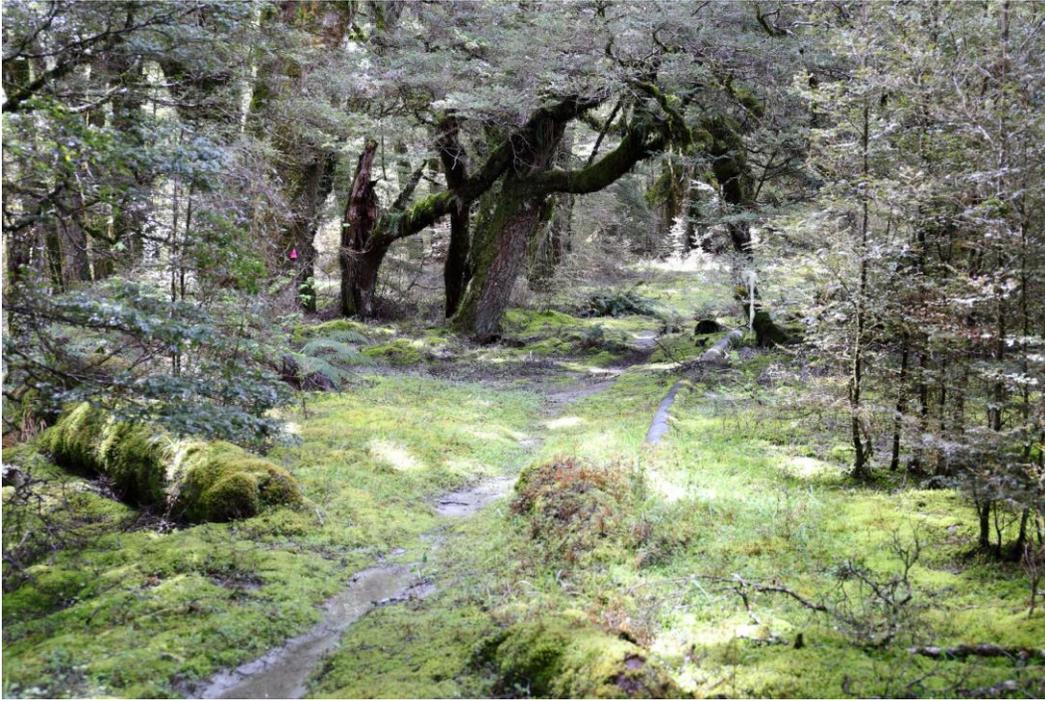


Mirror Lakes



Bellbird at Mirror Lakes

The tourist busloads bypass the quiet forest paths at Knobs Flat. Even after a long search we do not find the Yellowhead we seek, though we do find a South Island Tomtit.



Trails at Knobs Flat



South Island Tomtit

Upper Eglinton is more of the broad valley edged in forest. It's one of those places where Mark is anxious to move on to another site, but Joanie and Barbara are out

“beating the bushes” for a new bird. Joanie discovers a South Island Robin and Barbara calls us to another spot to show us a Brown Creeper (called Pipipi, the Maori name, by Americans to avoid the confusion with our Brown Creeper). It’s a life bird for me and even though my photo is poor without my long lens, I’ll show it here.



Brown Creeper or Pipipi



South Island Robin

Our vehicles have been climbing steadily. By now the temperature has plummeted and the cold rain encourages us to don raincoats and carry umbrellas. We cross The Divide, the birthplace of the glacier that carved the valley we drove through, and stop again at Monkey Creek where Joanie says is our best chance for Blue Duck. I lead a few of our group upstream while Mark and Joanie head downstream. Soon Joanie is calling to us as they have found a pair of Blue Ducks. The location is blocked by the river, so Jeff sets up his spotting scope for a better view of two ducks sleeping on a midstream rock in the shadows of overhanging trees. I digiscope the ducks with my iPhone. Blue Duck has been a nemesis bird for me, having tried at two expected locations during our 2010 tour. Endemic to New Zealand, it is estimated there are less than a thousand breeding pairs of Blue Ducks. Now I've finally added this to my life list. Two lifers in one day! Whoop! Chilled and wet, but excited at today's birding, we head back on Milford Road to Te Anau for the night.



Digiscoped Blue Ducks: iPhone through spotting scope



Blue Ducks sleeping at Monkey Creek



Cropped photo of Blue Ducks

## Day 67 – Milford Sound

(Shari) The road to Milford Sound was closed overnight due to snow. Thankfully it opens by 7:30 and our boat trip is a go. Tourists flock to this fiord in New Zealand. It is a wonder even in bad weather. Statistics say it rains there 300 days a year. This is one of those 300. The drive to reach the fiord is rather interesting to say the least and on a pretty day would take four hours. We would all want to stop for pictures of scenery. We do stop at Mirror Lake and take the short walk on the boardwalk. We stop to see the Keas, the birds with attitude at the entrance to the tunnel. We make our way through the one-lane tunnel when it is our turn and look in wonder at the switchback road ahead. We arrive at least an hour before our cruise begins.

(Bert) Two days ago the fiord boat tours at Milford Sound were canceled because the Milford Road was blocked by snow at Homer Tunnel, so Shari has been monitoring the weather forecast. The tunnel has been closed in the evenings, but it should be open this morning by the time we drive that far. Leaving Te Anau at 6:30 AM, we reach Monkey Creek by 8 AM and take a break. As happened yesterday too, a Kea swoops in and lands on our parked motor home. Everyone grabs their cameras to photograph this odd parrot that likes eating rubber parts on vehicles: windshield wipers, antenna bases, tires. When you think of a parrot, you imagine a bright multi-colored bird that lives in warm, tropical rainforests with abundant trees. The rather drab Kea is the only alpine parrot in the world that lives in near-treeless icy mountains. There aren't many of them, but they are easily found at alpine car parks and show little fear of man. I find one at Monkey Creek, two in slush and ice at the east end parking lot of Homer Tunnel, and four at the west end.



Kea on roof of motor home at Monkey Creek



Kea in slosy ice at parking lot of snow-covered Homer Tunnel



Kea at Homer Tunnel



Homer Tunnel, elevation 3030 ft. descending to 2630 ft.



A traffic light controls passageway through one-way Homer Tunnel



Curvy road descends from west end of Homer Tunnel

(Bert) We arrive at the Milford Sound boat harbor in plenty of time for me to explore the area. Through a mix-up on where we will meet, the other birders are birding at the opposite end of the several parking lots and there Jeff finds a Weka which I've not seen this year yet. My best sighting is a pair of Grey Duck x Mallard hybrids.



Grey Duck x Mallard hybrids



Estuary at Milford Sound with mile-high Mitre Peak in the background



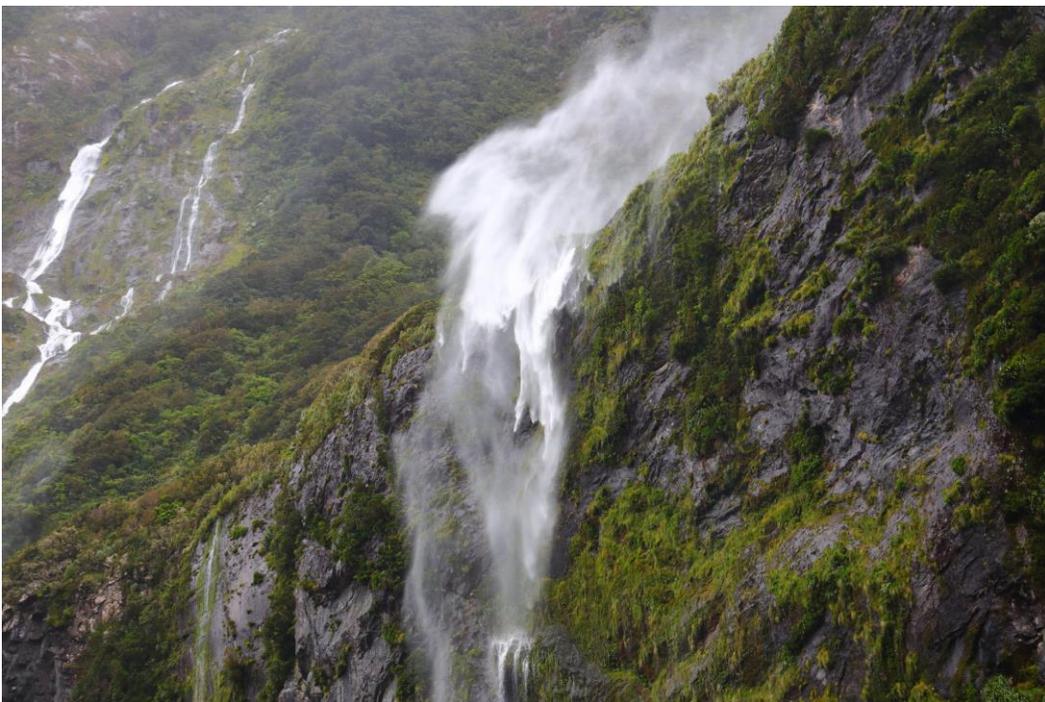
Milford Wanderer, the boat we take through Milford Sound

(Shari) We are on a beautiful ship and our group is 28 out of maybe 36 passengers. It feels like a private cruise. Though it is cold and rainy outside, some brave the weather and watch for seals, penguins, waterfalls, and Mitre Peak, one of the icons advertised in tourist brochures. The wedge-shaped peak is an amazing 5325 ft. high, rising right from

the water's edge. I stay indoors and sip tea watching the scenery through the windows. Inside it is cozy. Wouldn't you know, after our cruise the rain stops.

(Bert) As we depart from the dock, a low cloud ceiling hangs from the vertical cliffs, blending white clouds with white snow-covered peaks. Cold rain limits where we can stand on the boat, although most stay inside the warm wood-paneled cabin and watch through windows. I mostly stay outside so I can photograph the dozens of waterfalls. Rain and snow the last few days has enhanced the number and ferocity of the tall waterfalls and every photo offers a different perspective. Strong wind gusts create waterfalls that go up before they find an alternative downpour, often spreading the water in a veil of mist.





Few birds struggle in the high winds, although we do stop to see some Fiordland Penguins standing on wet boulders at shoreline and watch a dozen gulls and terns brave the winds over the water. When we reach the end of the fiord and enter the Tasman Sea, the winds and rain are even more forceful. An albatross glides in the distance, but too far away to see its features. On the return trip we glide past New Zealand fur seals lounging on rocks. Our ship captain makes a very close approach to one of the tallest waterfalls

that plunges directly into the sound. The boat biologist tells us it is a fountain of youth and those that are sprayed by the waterfall will become younger. Dozens work their way out on the deck for photos but only Sheila braves the worst of the downpour for her photo and baptismal spray. She returns inside with drenched youthfulness.



Milford Sound opens to Tasman Sea



New Zealand Fur Seals



Sheila in the fountain of youth

(Shari) Later we walk to our L.E.O. restaurant and I have a simply wonderful meal of grouper. Bert has venison and we share Baked Alaska for desert. As we walk back to the campground, it rains again.

## **Day 68 – Te Anau to Dunedin**

(Bert) At 5:30 AM, when I walk in darkness to the campground bathrooms to take a shower, my flip-flops crunch on ice crystals. Later Shari checks the forecast and reads travel advisories to avoid the roads until the plows have cleared the snow accumulated overnight. One town along our route has canceled school today. Shari and I go door-to-door advising the caravaners to wait until 8 AM before departing.

(Shari) Ice on the ground crunches under my feet as I walk to the bathroom this morning. The sidewalk is slippery too. I had better check road conditions for our travels today. After searching the web and determining what highway we will be using, I find that the road is open but caution is advised. I see that Jim and Ruth are starting their engine already before 7 AM so madly dash out and tell them the news. I think waiting an hour should be okay. I go around to other rigs and let them know what I found and then I go back into the warm rig and eat breakfast. When we do finally depart, the scene is a winter wonderland. It is just so beautiful with snow covering everything but the roads. It has melted on the blacktop, probably with the help of the New Zealand road crew, snowplows, and salt. The sky is blue and the sun dazzles the snow. I can hardly find the sheep grazing in the pastures.

(Bert) When we leave, it is passage through a winter wonderland: mountains snow-covered, meadows of white sheep nosing through white snow to hidden grass, towns with a foot of snow piled on the street sides. Hundreds of domesticated Red Deer are dark bodies on distant white blanketed hillsides; they might have gone unnoticed but for the black-on-white contrast. By 10 AM only the mountain peaks have snow, the fields have returned to lush, vibrant green.





(Bert) We stop at Sinclair Wetlands, once a private farm but now a preserve surrounded by sheep and cattle pastures. Mr. Sinclair resisted pressure to drain the wetlands and convert it to farmland. Instead, over concern for the steady loss of wetland wildlife in the country, he decided to preserve the special habitat. As we make the turn off the main road I see a flock of at least 15 Yellowhammers, more in one flock than I've seen cumulatively in my life. When we arrive at Sinclair Wetlands, the fierce winds are so

strong, no bird escapes cover. I walk along the grassy paths with Jeff and Barbara, seeing very few birds. The best are 21 Black Swans on one of the lakes and the two Australian Shovelers on the first pond. Later, after Shari and I leave and others arrive, I hear they found and photographed a Baillon's Crake adult with two chicks. That would have been a life bird for me, but I missed it. Shari is anxious to leave because we have to pick supplies at the grocery store for tomorrow's French toast breakfast.



Sinclair Wetlands



Grassy path surrounded by Scotch Broom

(Shari) We arrive in Dunedin and learn that they have a lodge with kitchen as well as two camp kitchens. I mention to the staff that I would like to have a dinner tonight for the group, and am told they will give me the key to the lodge kitchen. About an hour later, I am told that someone else is using it, but I can have the key to camp kitchen number two. Since we had already told everyone about the lodge kitchen, we have to go around and tell them the change. Meanwhile I get the lasagna cooking. The kitchen is very nice and big with two ovens and two microwaves and lots of stovetops for tomorrow's breakfast. About a half an hour into the cooking I find that one of the ovens is not doing its job. I then have to take the lasagna out of its aluminum container and plop it into a microwave-safe plate and nuke it to get it cooked. Then it can go back into its container and into the oven to keep warm. It doesn't seem like much, but I have to do that six times. This dinner was supposed to be easy. I am beginning to wish I had ordered pizza. In spite of the troubles, all tastes good and, with the sides everyone brings, we have a good meal.

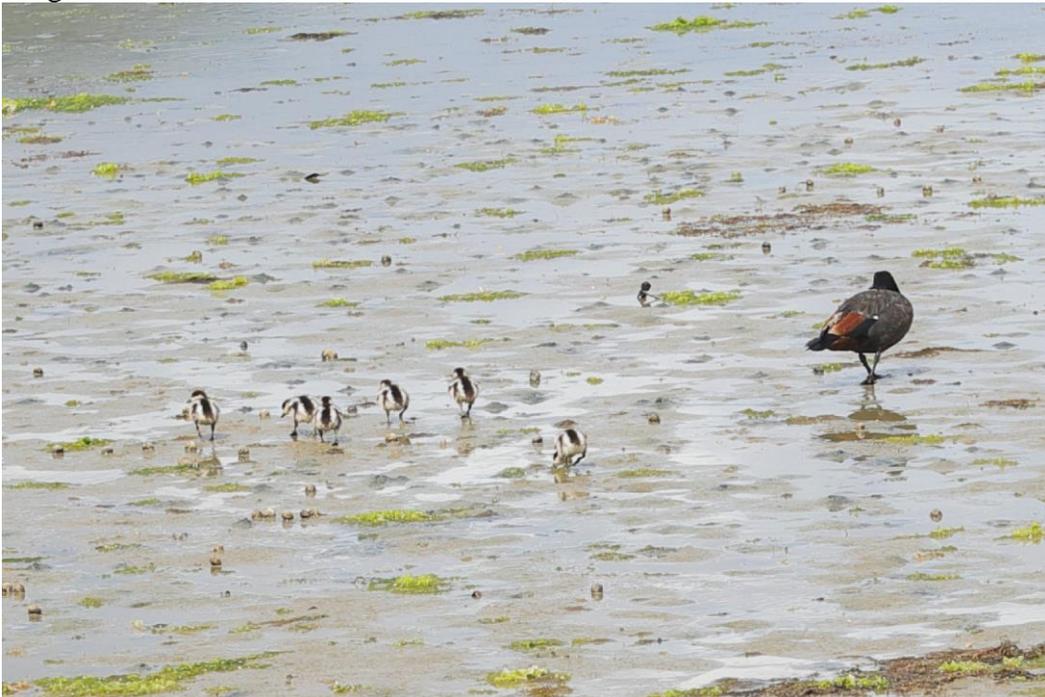
## **Day 69 – Dunedin and the Otago Peninsula**

(Shari) It is a cold and drizzly morning and the camp kitchen seems cozy after I get the oven and heater started. I am serving breakfast to the group and Pam generously offered to help. She too has to get up early. I could not sleep last night so I have the sausages done by the time she arrives at 7 AM. She helps with the French toast and by 8 AM we are ready for our first diners. By 9 everyone is fed and now we wait until this afternoon when the bus picks us up for our penguin outing. Some do wash. Some people visit the chocolate factory, others drive around to look at the scenery and others bird of course.

(Bert) After a leisurely morning that included a delicious breakfast Shari, with the help of Pam, prepared for the whole group, we are picked up at 3 PM for a very special nature adventure. The two vans follow a route along the Otago Peninsula, leaving the city of Dunedin behind, and then skirting the estuary at Hooper's Inlet where Black Swans, Paradise Shelducks, Bar-tailed Godwits, and both species of New Zealand oystercatchers feed on the mudflats.



Otago Peninsula



Paradise Shelduck with chicks

(Shari) At 3 PM two buses pick us up and we put 14 in one bus and the rest in the other. In my opinion we spend too much time along the shore looking at birds as I am anxious to get to the penguins. We visit the Royal Albatross Centre and see a couple of the huge birds soaring above us. I watch a movie about how the fishing industry had hurt the birds by using nets and hooks and how now they have changed their methods. They fish at night when the albatross is not out looking for food and they put pieces of fabric on the hooks that flutters in the breeze to scare the birds away.

(Bert) Our first stop is the Royal Albatross Centre built on a grassy promontory projecting out from the extreme tip of Otago Peninsula. Here is the only mainland nesting site for Royal Albatrosses and we are fortunate to see several flying above us. I say “flying” though “gliding” might be more appropriate. Their incredibly long, thin wings are ideally designed for gliding and here at the point, the albatrosses simply use the wind uplift to keep them airborne without flapping.



Royal Albatross Centre on Harington Point, Otago Peninsula



Harington Point, Otago Peninsula



Royal Albatross above its nesting site at the tip of Otago Peninsula

(Bert) We drive beside Papanui Inlet, another estuary, pausing to watch Royal Spoonbills and stopping to photograph the native Pohutukawa or Rata, often called the New Zealand Christmas tree because its bright red blooms are used to decorate the tree.



Rata, the New Zealand Christmas tree

(Bert) One of our guides hops from the van to unlock the gate to a private farm and we continue on a rough road, riding at the crest of a hill and surrounded by sheep in their green pastures. At the end of the road we climb out of the warm vehicle and into severely strong winds and down steep stairs to get a close view of New Zealand Fur Seals, including young pups, lounging on the rocks. We have an excellent viewpoint of the sea surrounding us on three sides. Stretching far enough out to make them appear as dark dots on a silvery sea is a vast mass of Sooty Shearwaters slowly progressing south, parallel to the shoreline. I'm curious how many birds I am watching, so I take a photo of part of the mass and later count 396 in the photo, so the whole mass most have been well over 1000 shearwaters.

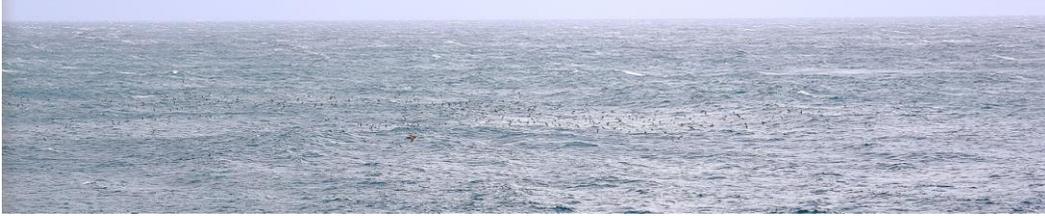
(Shari) Finally we reach the penguin area but first we walk down 131 steps to see a fur seal colony that is breeding. We have to walk the steps back up and the wind is ferocious. Someone looks up the wind speed and it is 70 knots per hour; that is close to 80 mph gusts. No wonder I was pushed forward by the wind.



New Zealand Fur Seal colony and the Pacific Ocean



New Zealand Fur Seal



396 Sooty Shearwaters



Swirling colors of the sea

(Bert) We leave the promontory, switch to a 4-wheel drive van and, on a path that feels like it slopes 45°, we ride most of the way down to the nearby sandy beach. Last time we hiked this steep path so Shari and others are relieved that a van is carrying us over the strenuous part. Our guide stops to explain how the stoat trap electrically kills predators at the boundary of the Yellow-eyed Penguin preserve. It is part of an extensive program within the Dunedin community to eliminate introduced predators and restore natural wildlife.



Yellow-eyed Penguin beach



Electrical trap to eradicate introduced predators of Yellow-eyed Penguins

(Shari) The tour company decides our group is not one that would like to walk the big hill down to the blind and back up again. I agree with that because in this weather I would not go. So they get a 4-wheel-drive bus to take us down the hill in three groups. Unfortunately, I find out that the penguins have diminished since my last visit and now

only 10 to 12 penguins come in from the sea at dusk. So my group only sees one penguin march from the sea. It is cute but not as dramatic as I explained earlier to the group. We are to leave the blind and hike uphill to another blind, but I decide to stay and watch for more penguins. I have it in my mind that more penguins will come in later just before dark. I do see two more come in, but not like the 20 or more I saw last time. Needless to say, what was to be a National Geographic moment was not to be. So goes wildlife watching, I guess. I think those that did not know better, enjoyed what they did see.

(Bert) We walk the rest of the way downhill and when we reach the beach we see a Blue Penguin sleeping inside a nest box. On the sandy beach we walk up to lounging New Zealand Sea Lions. These are all males that have started returning to New Zealand after the population was wiped out by the Maori. Recently, and since the time of our last visit, a female has also returned to mate, so there is hope the colony can be reestablished.



Blue Penguin sleeping in nest box



New Zealand Sea Lions



From the Yellow-eyed Penguin beach looking back toward the fur seal colony

(Bert) Now we get our first look at the Yellow-eyed Penguins. Several have already emerged from the sea and are standing in lush grass, slowly making their way uphill to nighttime roosts. I join others and climb rough-hewn stairs to a nesting site while Shari remains at the beach hoping to see a penguin come out of the sea. Inside a crude shelter

from the wind, we can see, through a remote camera, a penguin sitting on a nest. I can also maneuver myself to take a direct photo of the penguin.



Yellow-eyed Penguins



TV screen for remote camera focused on a nesting Yellow-eyed Penguin



Yellow-eyed Penguin on nest



Yellow-eyed Penguin on nest

## Day 70 – Oamaru and Christchurch

(Bert) We are on the last leg of our New Zealand journey. One place I missed before is Oamaru where there is a famous Blue Penguin colony. We stop there, but the penguins are out to sea and the nesting boxes are empty. Nonetheless, birdlife is abundant. Most impressive is a dilapidated wooden pier where shags are standing side-by-side. The two species of shags (cormorants) are clearly segregated by color. I count 1081 cormorants, very likely underestimated because not all cormorants are visible in the photo as some block others. Based on proportion I estimate 795 Spotted Shag and 325 Steward Island Shags. Walking down another pier, this one concrete, a find a nesting colony of about 120 Red-billed Gulls.



Oamaru pier packed with 1081 shags



364 cormorants in this view, about half Spotted Shags and half Stewart Island Shags



Oamaru



Nesting Red-billed Gulls

(Bert) At the Christchurch campground, we have the last potluck of leftovers. We can't take leftover food with us on the airplane, so our potluck is everything that is left. Again, surprisingly, it makes for a very good meal. Afterwards, as we clean up, anything left is set aside for other campers still traveling. It's a good plan and nothing goes to waste.

(Shari) It always amazes me how we can get a tasty potluck from leftovers. Today is the last day in our motorhomes and much of the afternoon after arriving to Christchurch is spent cleaning, packing, and doing the laundry. Our potluck leftover table in the camp kitchen is laden with food: spaghetti, sandwiches, meat pies, salads, deviled eggs, cookies and cakes, crackers, dips and cheeses, and bottles of beer and wine. Anything left over from this meal is deposited in the large refrigerator in a container marked free. After dinner, I show the movie, a collection of photos and videos I had taken so far on the trip, accompanied by music.



Leftovers potluck

## Day 71 – Christchurch farewell

(Shari) Since checkout at the campground is 10 AM and check-in at the hotel is 2 PM, we have a few hours to “kill”. Bert and I go to the arboretum, which is a free activity if you don’t count the cappuccino I buy at the cute café and gift store. The grounds are pretty but navigating it is hard. So many attractions, whether in USA or abroad, hand out what I call cartoon maps, not drawn to scale. The signage in the park itself is spotty so things I went looking for I missed but then I’d stumble on something else.

(Bert) We have a bit of free time this morning after packing our suitcases and cleaning the RV, so we drive to Christchurch Botanic Gardens and walk the floral gardens and see the duck ponds in sunny warm weather. We take the RV back to the rental agency at the appointed time. Shari leaves for the hotel in the first shuttle and I stay until everyone in our group has finished their returns. Before another bus shuttle carries us to our farewell party, I ask the bus driver to take a group photo on the lawn outside the hotel.



Female and male Paradise Shelducks at Christchurch Botanic Gardens



Christchurch Botanic Gardens

(Shari) We arrive at the RV dealership about 1 PM and wait for others to get checked out. Good thing we waited, as Marty and Pat have an issue with their insurance. Someone hit them while they were parked in Wellington. They purchased zero-deductible insurance, but they are charged a \$75 processing fee anyway. That does not seem fair and Bert argues it but the charges stand anyway. We settle into the hotel with no time for a nap as our bus picks us up at 3 to take us to our last function. First we get a tour of the wildlife area. It is well done but our guide is so soft spoken that I have to stand in front to hear him and then walk back to translate to others who could not hear him. People give up in disgust when that happens. It is nice to see all the wildlife we saw on our travels up close and personal, especially the kiwi.

(Bert) I was looking forward to the tour of at Willowbank Wildlife Reserve. However, the staff puts all of us in one group and leads us single file through the reserve, led by a young man who is unable to project his voice. Only a few can hear his commentary and

I, at the end of the line, most often hear the group behind us, pushing at our heels. Fortunately, signs explain much of what we are seeing and a good description of the reserve's work on rearing kiwis. In the wild without predator protection, the survival rate of a kiwi under six months is less than 5%. From eggs hatched and young reared in captivity, the survival rate soars to over 90%. These birds are then released into the wild.

I take a few photos of the captive birds, though I don't have enough time at the kiwi house. So, after the tour ends, I go back to the kiwi house. I've been trying to figure out how to photograph birds under dim red lights and now, alone, I take lots of photos and later experiment with my photo editing software to remove the red and replace it with more suitable night shades. The results are the best I've gotten so far.



Brown Kiwi in Kiwi raising house, photo-edited to remove red light illumination





(Shari) After our tour we are led to the Maori presentation, where we learn about the tools and weapons of those people. Our greeting by the Maori chief is very personal as Howard is picked as our group's chief. Inside the structure again we are educated to the Maori ways and shown tradition dances. Some in our group even volunteer to "learn" the varying dances.

(Bert) I join the traditional Maori performance just as the singing and dancing gets started. While the Polynesian style guitar accompaniment and some of the songs are a bit like Hawaiian music, little else resembles it. We learn that guitars were introduced into Maori music when men served in World War II and saw the instruments for the first time. The only other accompaniment is loud drumming. Some of the songs include game like actions involving swinging a pair of white balls, called poi, tethered by a string or rhythmic stick throwing between participants. The women in our group test their skills at the tethered ball swinging. Some of the chanting music is warlike, especially when combined with actions of the men. Accentuating the fierce nature is the women's black lipstick and trailing black lines extending to the chin. Songs are punctuated with a frozen stance and a frozen mean-looking face with eyes opened wide to show huge white eyeballs centered by black pupils. The men further enhance the effect by sticking out their tongues and holding their spears in a strike-ready position. I'd not want to meet this tribe in the jungle and it makes me wonder what the crew of Capt. James Cook's ship thought when they were the first Europeans to encounter the Maori.



Maori narrator and history teller



Maori singers and dancers



Some in our group try to swing the poi, a performance art



Maori stick throwing, accompanied by music

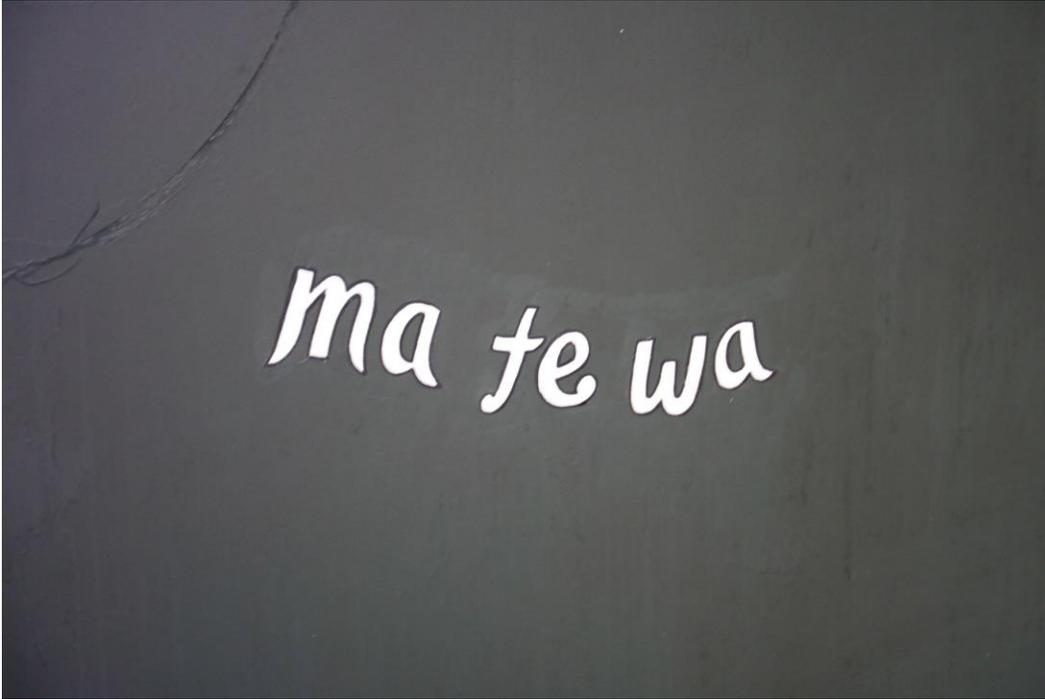


Warlike appearance in dances



(Bert) The performance is followed by a 5-course dinner with lots of choices, including seafood chowder, traditional Hangi cooked meats (chicken, pork, lamb), and assorted Hangi vegetables. For desert I can't resist the "traditional Pavlova with berry Couli topped with cream and kiwifruit." The taste lives up to the name.

(Shari) Our farewell dinner is presented in the restaurant and all is delicious. I am pleased to end our trip with Pavlova, a traditional dessert of the area made with egg whites, fruit, and whipped cream. Our bus takes us back to the hotel and all linger in the lobby saying goodbye and hugging. This is always a bittersweet time for me, as in some ways I am relieved the trip finished well and the work is over, but in others ways I will miss all the activity and people.



“Goodbye for now”