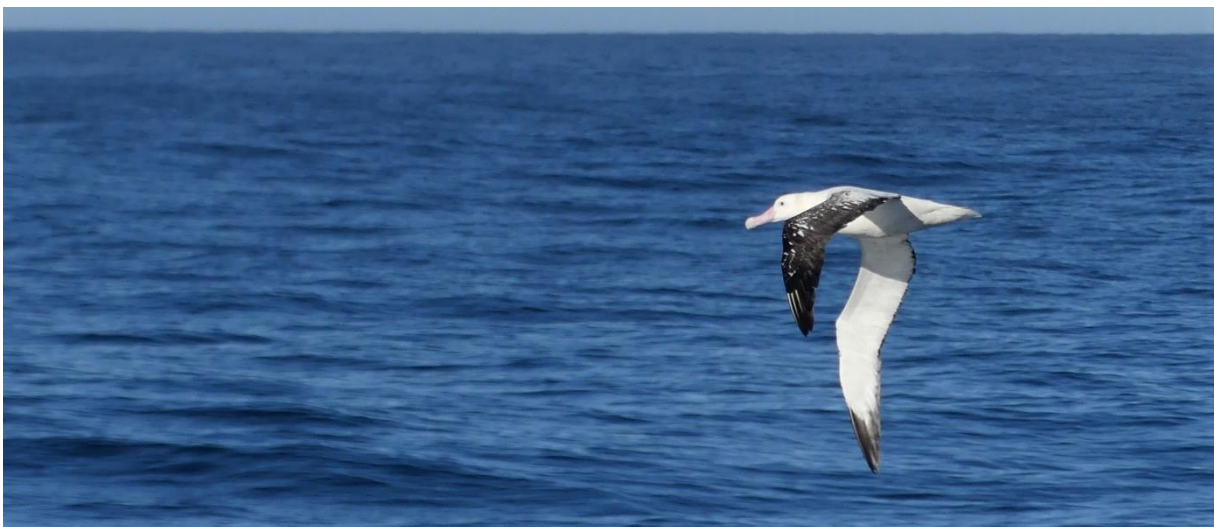




## South Island winter birding trip in New Zealand

Valentin Moser

*I visited New Zealand from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> (10 full days). It was rather short and involved a lot of driving (3000 km). Highlights included day-time observation of Kiwi, swimming with Hector's Dolphin and whale watching, as well as nice people and wonderful landscapes. I started and ended in Christchurch and followed the East Coast from Kaikoura to Stewart Island. It was cold – I even had to scrape ice an early morning, but generally the days were pleasant once the sun was out. You can find a commented species list at the end of the trip report.*



### Introduction

New Zealand deserves more than the 10 days I was there. Even on the South Island I was not able to visit some of the most interesting and beautiful places like Milford Sound and the Fiordland. Still I saw most of the possible birds (biggest dips Morepork and Falcon) and some nice mammals too. Much of the island is dominated by introduced species, but once there is native bush and ideally also some sort of mammal control, the beauty of the nature is stunning. I think New Zealand is a good place to go travelling with non-birders: The birds are concentrated in a few, often nice areas, they are quality not quantity and often approachable and “good-looking”.

Even if the weather was cold, I slept a few nights in the car to save some money: New Zealand is expensive, I spend almost 800 EUR on gas, food, accommodation and activities. The biggest part of that was gas and some sort of boat trips. It could have been even more expensive: Winter is off-

Saison, the car was cheap and the youth hostels mostly quite empty. For any comments/questions feel free to contact me on [valentinmoser@hotmail.com](mailto:valentinmoser@hotmail.com).

### The trip

My most northern destination was **Kaikoura**: Famous for its pelagics: The **Sperm whale** watching turned out to be great, as we were able to observe some great surface feeding behaviour! Unfortunately, Albatross Encounters were not running any tours in the limited days I would have had the chance to get on their boat, as the minimum number of people were not met. They also run trips targeting **Dusky Dolphin**. Make sure you contact them early. As well as the whale watching: Some trips were booked out a few days ahead already, even in winter! Birds seen on the Whale Watching trip include Fairy Prion, Fluttering Shearwater and 4 species of Albatross.



Around **Christchurch**, there are the first few interesting places, most of them require a daytrip. Arthurs pass is the place to see Kea, a very charismatic species. One was flying over the road, one later in the Otira valley (which I visited as a kind of desperate attempt at Rockwren), but the best views I got at the Otira Gorge Rock Shelter lookout (-42.880982, 171.555413). With two additional days I could have tried for the Blue Duck: On the way to Edward's hut they are apparently visible in winter. Ask at the National park center in Arthurs pass village about current access. In another desperate attempt I tried to find Orange-fronted parakeet in the Hawdon valley, unsuccessfully, as soon I would have had to cross a river, besides that the parakeet is incredibly rare now in this valley. At least I had a very nice encounter with a New Zealand Robin and as it was getting late I hoped for Great Spotted Kiwi. Just as I was about to leave, one hour after sunset, I heard some calls! Unfortunately no Morepork (again), I was walking around in the dark in a few places, but they seem to be pretty quiet in winter.

Akaroa Harbour is another place of interest. Unfortunately, the **Hector's dolphin** trip on my "planned day" was cancelled due to strong winds. I tried to find the dolphins from land with my scope: It was not successful, and I think it is very hard: They are tiny! In the winter they are usually outside of the harbour as well, so the best way is to take a trip. In the summer it is apparently possible to rent a kayak and see the dolphins inside the harbour. Luckily on last day I managed to find the time to visit this spectacular place again and get on one of the trips: Besides the dolphins, we saw a couple of Blue Penguins and Albatrosses. If you have an extra 30min, take the tourist drive, it's worth it, spectacular scenery!

I spend a lot of time (unsuccessfully) looking for Wrybill. There is a few winter records and I hoped I would come across one. Best place seems to be the huge wetlands around Lake Ellesmere. Best places I found for access were from Wolfes road (-43.716673, 172.462012) and Embankment Road (-43.719605, 172.495613). It always involved quite some walking, and even then, many birds were still distant. However, in high tide, some areas might not be accessible anymore. There is a lot of hunters

in the area as well, so the birds are rather shy. Highlights were a few Red-necked Stints as well as a Glossy Ibis associated with Royal Spoonbill (-43.797525, 172.665529) along the road to Akaroa.



On the way from Christchurch to **Dunedin**, there is a few interesting points of interest, breaking up the rather boring drive: "European" landscape with European birds. First of all, Geraldine, where I was unsuccessfully looking for Long-tailed bats. Not much seems to be known, I was not even able to find out if they are going into torpor for the winter. They are reported from Talbot forest right next to Geraldine ([doc.govt.nz/longtailedbat](http://doc.govt.nz/longtailedbat)). Further down is Timaru, which has a nice lagoon with many waterbirds and Pipit, best scanned from here (-44.370537, 171.249159).

**New Zealand Fur Seals** are common, but if you are sick of driving and want to see some cute seals up close, the Shag Point colony (-45.473560, 170.830407 as well as further south) is very close to the highway.

Almost in Dunedin is the Orokonui Ecosanctuary which has some (uncountable) Takahe. It was also the best place to see many of the more common native birds like Tui, Bellbird, Rifleman and Brown Creeper.

The most interesting area around Dunedin is the Otago Peninsula with the Royal Albatross Colony at the Taiaroa Head, as well as the recently split Otago Shag and the usual **New Zealand Fur Seals**. At the Sandfly Bay (-45.895966, 170.643219) I saw **New Zealand Sea Lion** (or Hooker's Sea Lions). It is also a possibility to see Yellow-eyed penguin there, however, the remaining colony is very small and one of the main reasons for that is apparently disturbance: The penguins will not go on land, if there are people standing on the beach. The best way to see the Penguins is with at the Penguin Place (-45.796403, 170.730613), check when they run tours, best time is sunset. I also did the harbour cruise: Always good to be out on the water, but it's very touristy and very short. The last place I visited in the Dunedin region was Sinclair Wetlands Education Centre (-45.984649, 170.078546) on my way to Stewart Island, here I heard Fernbird.



**Steward Island** is one of the places I regret not having more time: Beautiful and full of nice birds, especially Ulva Island. The easiest place to see any kiwi, Southern Brown Kiwi occurs right to the edge and sometimes within Urban. I found two birds with not much effort spotlighting my first night. The next day, I had a daytime sighting at Ulva Islands. Brilliant! Ask at the Stewart Island Backpackers for recent sightings. Ulva Island is also great for many of the specialities: Weka, Kaka, Yellowhead, Red/Yellow-fronted Parakeet, South Island Saddleback and some of the more Common species like Tomtit and Fantail are easy to observe and approachable.

Another desperate attempt I had at New Zealand dotterel: All winter sightings are around Awarua Bay east of Bluff (-46.572187, 168.463500), which is largely inaccessible. I parked at the Aluminium plant and walked to the beach. After sunset small groups of New Zealand Dotterels started arriving at the sandbank (-46.581364, 168.368837), very distant, but clearly identifiable in the scope in direct comparison with the Double-banded Plovers!



## Birds

Southern Brown Kiwi	Steward Island, Ulva Island
Great Spotted Kiwi	Arthur's pass: heard from -42.986805, 171.748595
Canada Goose	common
Black Swan	common
Paradise Shelduck	common
Mallard	common
Australian Shoveler	several places
Gray Teal	common
New Zealand Scaup	several places
California Quail	Akaroa
Yellow-eyed Penguin	Otago Peninsula
Little Penguin	Akaroa Hector's dolphin trip
Buller's Albatross	most common Mollymawk
Salvin's Albatross	a few
Black-browed Albatross	Kaikoura
Royal Albatross	Southern at the colony in Otago, Northern in Kaikoura
Northern Giant-Petrel	several
Cape Petrel	Kaikoura
Fairy Prion	Kaikoura
Fluttering Shearwater	Kaikoura
Australasian Gannet	Kaikoura
Little Black Cormorant	several
Great Cormorant	common
Pied Cormorant	common
Stewart Island Shag	Ulva Island
Otago Shag	Otago Peninsula
Spotted Shag	common
Little Pied Cormorant	common
White-faced Heron	common
Glossy Ibis	Lake Ellesmere
Royal Spoonbill	Lake Ellesmere
Australasian Harrier	common
Weka	Ulva Island
Australasian Swamphen	common
Eurasian Coot	common
Pied Stilt	common
South Island Oystercatcher	common
Variable Oystercatcher	common
Masked Lapwing	common
Red-breasted Dotterel	Awarua Bay east of Bluff
Double-banded Plover	common
Red-necked Stint	Lake Ellesmere
Black-billed Gull	several places, easy in Timaru
Red-billed Gull	common
Kelp Gull	common

Caspian Tern	a few
Black-fronted Tern	Otago Peninsula
White-fronted Tern	Kaikoura
Rock Pigeon	common
New Zealand Pigeon	a few
Little Owl	near Christchurch airport
Sacred Kingfisher	common
Kea	Arthur's pass
New Zealand Kaka	Ulva Island
Eastern Rosella	Dunedin
Red-crowned Parrot	Ulva Island
Yellow-crowned Parrot	Ulva Island
Rifleman	a few places, best in Orokonui Ecosanctuary
Tui	a few places, best in Orokonui Ecosanctuary
New Zealand Bellbird	a few places, best in Orokonui Ecosanctuary
Yellowhead	Ulva Island
Pipipi	a few places
South Island Saddleback	Ulva Island
Australian Magpie	common
New Zealand Fantail	common
Tomtit	Ulva Island, Orokonui Ecosanctuary
New Zealand Robin	Ulva Island, Orokonui Ecosanctuary, Arthur's pass
Welcome Swallow	common
Fernbird	heard only in Sinclair wetlands
Silver-eye	common
Gray Gerygone	common
Eurasian Blackbird	common
Song Thrush	common
European Starling	common
Common Myna	common
Dunnock	common
Australasian Pipit	Lake Ellesmere, Timaru
Yellowhammer	common
Common Chaffinch	common
European Greenfinch	common
Common Redpoll	a few
European Goldfinch	common
House Sparrow	common



### Mammals

Hector's Dolphin	Akaroa harbour
New Zealand Sea Lions	Otago Peninsoula: Sandfly Bay
New Zealand Fur Seal	common
Sperm whale	Kaikoura
Brushtail Possum	extremely common roadkill
Hedgehog	roadkill
Feral cat	Awarua Bay
European rabbit	a few around Dunedin
not observed: Dusky dolphin, bats	Tips in trip report