

WildWings Limosa

**BIRDING DOWN UNDER:
The Subantarctic Islands of
New Zealand and Australia
6 – 22 December 2025**



Royal Penguins are an endemic breeder to Macquarie Island and were one of eight species of penguins which were seen on Birding Down Under in 2025 © Chris Collins

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Leader: Chris Collins

Introduction

Birding Down Under is widely considered one of the best pelagic voyages in the world and during the 15 days we were aboard the very comfortable *Heritage Adventurer*, we saw almost all the species we could reasonably have expected including eight species of penguins and over a dozen albatrosses, as well as a host of localised endemics including Magenta Petrel, Shore Plover and Antipodes Parakeet.

With generally favourable weather conditions for much of the expedition, we were able to make landings or zodiac cruises at almost all of the scheduled locations which added a good range of special species and the opportunity to see some of the pelagic species up close.

On a cruise that had so many highlights, it is difficult to single out even a handful of the experiences we shared, but the two landings at Sandy Bay were particularly memorable with not only amazing views of the Royal and King Penguins, but the added bonus of a pod of Orcas cruising just offshore.

Another special privilege was visiting the Sweetwater Reserve where we were able to see a Magenta Petrel in the hand. It was also a remarkable experience to meet Dave Boyle who has dedicated more than a decade of his life to save this critically endangered bird.

Whilst the voyage is rarely one with a long marine mammal list, nevertheless, we did very well with good numbers of New Zealand and Subantarctic Fur Seals, Hooker's Sea Lions and a decent range of cetaceans. With the WildWings group occupying the monkey deck for much of the voyage when we were transiting between island groups, many of the cetaceans which were found were initially spotted by the group and these included a pod of Hourglass Dolphins which showed well off the bow and a more distant group of Arnoux's Beaked Whales shortly after we left the Chatham Islands.

With the added bonus of a great Expedition Team, excellent restaurant and comfortable cabins, it was a highly memorable voyage which I doubt any of us will forget for a long time.

Chris Collins January 2026

Diary

6 December

With many of the group having spent time birding in New Zealand prior to the voyage, we met up at our comfortable lakeside hotel in Queenstown. There was time for some local exploring before a welcome dinner and everyone then headed off to bed in expectation of the voyage which would begin the following day.

7 December

We awoke to a beautiful morning with blue skies and clear views of the surrounding mountains.

With the departure from the hotel only scheduled for the early afternoon, many of the group took the opportunity to visit the Queenstown Botanical Gardens which is adjacent to Lake Wakatipu. Whilst the commonest birds were introduced species from Europe such as Blackbird, Song Thrush, Starling and House Sparrow, there were also a few native species with Little Pied Cormorant, New Zealand Scaup and Black-billed Gull all found, with a lucky few fellow passengers also seeing a distant New Zealand Falcon.

After an early lunch, we boarded the coaches for the ride to Bluff and our home for the next couple of weeks, *Heritage Adventurer*. The traffic out of Queenstown was awful but we were eventually on our way and drove along the side of Lake Wakatipu with fantastic views of the surrounding mountains.

Leaving the mountains, we spent a couple of hours heading south and whilst most of the birds were again introduced species, several native species were also recorded including South Island Pied Oystercatcher, Swamp Harrier and Masked Lapwing.

Arriving at the ship, everyone was soon aboard and after being shown to our cabins, most people headed outside for the sail away.

A little later, Expedition Leader Dan Brown and Hotel Manager Anthony gave us an introduction to the ship and there was also the mandatory safety drill.

After these had concluded, birding recommenced on the outer decks with our first pelagic species of the expedition which included Mottled and Cook's Petrels, Sooty and Fluttering Shearwaters and our first White-capped Albatrosses, a species we would see on a daily basis for the duration of the voyage.

8 December

For many of the group, the day began at first light with the ship approaching The Snares. Although these islands are only a few square kilometres, there are believed to be as many breeding seabirds as in the whole of the UK and as we got closer, the flocks of Sooty Shearwaters were incredible with tens of thousands of individuals, as well as good numbers of Pintado (Cape) Petrels, a few Brown Skuas and reasonable numbers of Salvin's Albatrosses.

Pintado Petrel © Chris Collins

Arriving at the spot where we hoped to disembark, it was clear that conditions were unsuitable with large swells passing through and crashing onto the rocky shore.

As a result, we cruised the coastline enjoying great views of the island. Plenty of Snares Penguins could be seen ashore, with some also in the water closer to the ship.

There were seabirds everywhere and whilst it was frustrating being unable to disembark and look for the endemic subspecies of Tomtit and Fernbird, the seabirds around the ship were very impressive.



Snares Penguins © Chris Collins

After cruising along the sheltered coastline for a while, we headed out to the Western Isles with some seeing a Chatham Albatross shortly before we left. Out at the islands, there were good numbers of nesting Salvin's Albatrosses.

Returning to the main island, the swells had reduced considerably so the Expedition Team began launching the zodiacs, however, the swells began to build again and whilst four boats were loaded, it soon became apparent that the conditions at the gangway were becoming very tricky and the cruise was aborted.

We continued cruising offshore until lunchtime seeing more large flocks of Sooty Shearwaters as well as Snares Penguins both in the water and on the land.



The Snares are believed to have as many breeding seabirds as in the whole of the U © Chris Collins

After lunch had concluded, this was followed by the first biosecurity session with everyone taking their outer gear to be inspected to ensure it had no seeds or other foreign materials on it which might threaten the fragile ecosystems on Enderby Island, our intended destination for the following day.

By mid-afternoon, it was time to set a course for the Auckland Islands and many of the group headed to the monkey deck where with the wind behind us, conditions were surprisingly pleasant. There was a constant stream of birds with Northern Royal, Southern Royal, Salvin's and White-capped Albatrosses, along with good numbers of Mottled Petrels and Common Diving Petrels. The prions proved to be a challenge but photos demonstrated that there were at least a couple of species including our first Fulmar Prions.

During the afternoon, we also had our first White-chinned Petrels of the trip along with a lone White-headed Petrel and three species of storm petrel – Black-bellied, White-faced and Grey-backed.

At 18:00, everyone assembled in the lounge for the welcome aboard cocktails and a briefing from Expedition Leader Dan about the options available the following day on Enderby Island in the Auckland Islands. With strong winds and rain forecast, we would have to hope that the weather was better than predicted.

9 December

With the group choosing the option of a morning zodiac cruise and afternoon landing (due to the weather forecast), it was a relatively leisurely start and after an 08:00 breakfast, we boarded the WildWings/Limosaholidays zodiac and headed for the coastline. There were the endemic Auckland Shags on the cliffs and it did not take long for us to locate our first Auckland Teal. These flightless ducks blended in perfectly with the colour of the rocks and kelp and at times could be tricky to spot but everyone had, however, soon had some nice views.



Auckland Teal and Auckland Shag are both endemic to the archipelago © Chris Collins

There were also Yellow-eyed Penguins on the rocks and Tomtits and New Zealand Pipits feeding on the wave cut platform (both of which were endemic subspecies) and a few Red-crowned Parakeets along the top of the cliff face.

With several Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses and the occasional Southern Royal Albatrosses flying by, it was a phenomenal morning and the two hours we were on the water flew passed extremely quickly.

Returning to *Heritage Adventurer* for lunch, we then set off at 13:30 for our afternoon ashore. Unfortunately, the weather forecast from the previous evening proved to be accurate and it was blowing hard and rain was falling as we set off.



We were all soon ashore and after a briefing from Expedition Leader Dan, we began to explore. Initially, our goal was to look for Subantarctic Snipe along the edge of a grassy area not far from the landing site but with no sign, we followed the boardwalk into the Rata Forest. Some had brief views of another teal on a small creek and we continued along the boardwalk enjoying the impressive trees with their twisted limbs.

After a couple of hundred metres, we emerged out of the forest and as we were walking directly into the wind and rain, it was not particularly pleasant. The vegetation gradually morphed from Rata Forest into vast areas of *bulbinella*, a beautiful yellow flower which is also sometimes known as the Maori Onion.



Double-banded Plover © Chris Collins

Whilst this was an area where Chris had previously seen Subantarctic Snipe, the weather was clearly making the birds hunker down and very tricky to find but we persevered and although we were unsuccessful with the snipe, we had some nice views of several Double-banded Dotterels with these being another subspecies which is endemic to the Auckland Islands.

Southern Royal Albatross © Chris Collins

Reaching the northern cliffs, the wind was gusting at up to 80 knots making it extremely difficult to even stand upright so we retreated back down the boardwalk, stopping to enjoy the



Southern Royal Albatrosses, with two birds in particular giving us fantastic views as their nests were only 20 metres or so from the path.

More birding in the Rata Forest resulted in nice views of Tomtit and Bellbird plus several Redpolls which had reached the island having been introduced to mainland New Zealand.

A final search of the open area near the landing site was unsuccessful for snipe so we headed for the Hooker's Sea Lion viewing area and watched these for a while before returning to the beach for the short ride back to the ship.



Hooker's Sea Lions is endemic to New Zealand © Chris Collins

After the evening recap and dinner, many of the group headed back outside and as the ship headed down the eastern side of the main Auckland Island, the number of seabirds was truly incredible, with literally thousands upon thousands of birds. There were impressive numbers of White-headed Petrels, both Black-bellied and Grey-backed Storm Petrels, White-chinned Petrels, Common Diving Petrels, the occasional Subantarctic Shearwater, White-capped Albatrosses and vast numbers of prions. Whilst the majority of these appeared to be Antarctic and Fairies, some Fulmars were also picked out, albeit by reviewing photographs of them.

It was a fantastic end to an extremely memorable day !!

10 December

As Expedition Leader Dan had predicted, it was a relatively lumpy night and we awoke to swells that were around 5 metres or so. Most of the group headed onto the outer decks well before breakfast and whilst the number of seabirds was lower than the previous evening, nevertheless, there was a good range of species with Snowy (Wandering), Southern Royal, Campbell, White-capped and Grey-headed Albatrosses all being recorded.

Campbell Albatross has been lumped with Black-browed Albatross by AviList although it seems possible that this decision may be reversed at some point
© Chris Collins

With a full day at sea, some attended the lecture programme which included a well-received presentation by Matt Jones (one of the Heritage Expeditions bird guides) about seabirds.

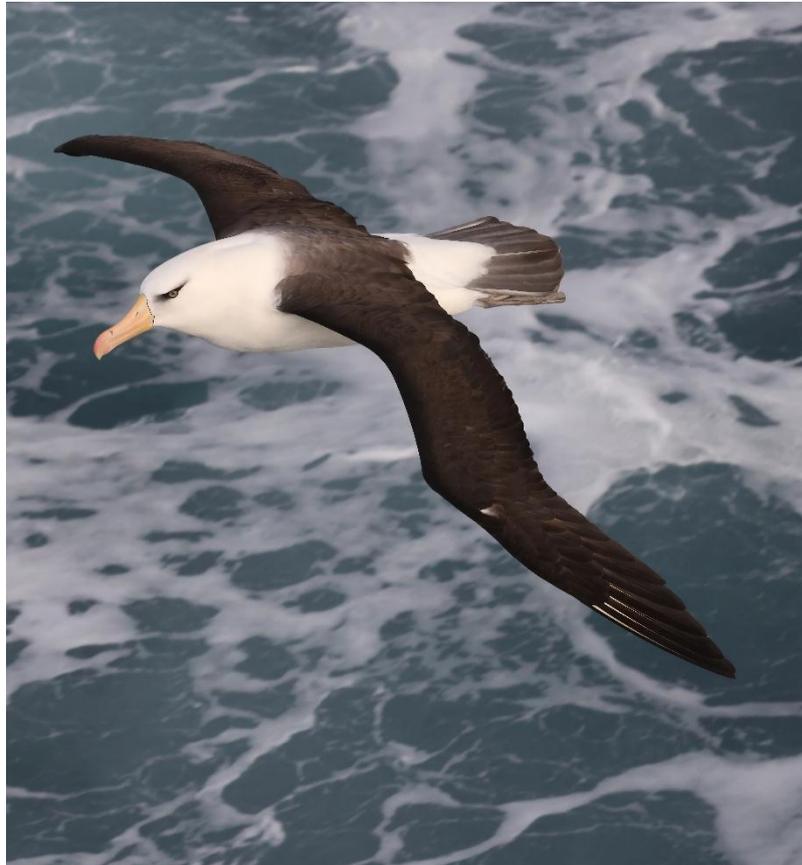
After lunch, there was another biosecurity session (in readiness for our planned landings on Macquarie Island) and everyone had to take their outer gear to the lounge for another inspection.

As the day continued, the seas moderated somewhat but with significant amounts of spray towards the bow, most viewing was from the stern where the steady passage of birds made for more photographic opportunities. As well as the albatrosses, there were good numbers of White-headed and Pintado Petrels plus the challenge of identifying the prions, albeit the majority were undoubtedly Antarctic.

After another tasty dinner and the bird list, many of the group continued looking from the outer decks for an hour or so before heading off to bed with high expectations for our time on Macquarie Island.

11 December

During the night, the ship continued in a south-westerly direction and we awoke to smooth seas and at anchor in the bay offshore from the Macquarie Island research station. For those



who were not already up, there was an announcement shortly after 06:30 to advise everyone that there were two pods of Orca (Killer Whales) not far from the ship. These included a large male with a substantial dorsal fin and some smaller animals which undoubtedly comprised females and immature individuals.

Having had a quick breakfast in the bistro, everyone was ready well in advance and lined up outside the mudrooms and at 09:00 we headed ashore in the first zodiac of the morning. It was only a few hundred metres to the landing site and after a short briefing, we set off to explore with one of the Expedition Team as our guide.

The path took us close to literally dozens of moulting Southern Elephant Seals, many of which were utterly unconcerned by our presence, with the majority remaining asleep or occasional glancing unperturbed in our direction. With nice light, the photographic opportunities were stunning making progress a little slow.

We then climbed up to a viewpoint which offered a 360° vista of the northern end of the island. The research station was below us towards the northern end of the island, whilst out to our left and on the western shore, there were several hundred more Southern Elephant Seals. Whilst most were huddled together in small groups, some of the males were involved in short fights but these were soon over and they would then settle down for a snooze.

Descending the boardwalk, we encountered more Redpolls, an important bird for anyone keeping an Australian list as Macquarie Island is the only place in Australia (except for the



occasional vagrant which occurs on Norfolk Island) where this species can be found.

Southern Elephant Seal @ Chris Collins

Our route then took us down onto the beach where there were yet more seals but also a reasonable number of King Penguins, with

this being our first opportunity to enjoy and photograph these stunning birds.

Passing the research station, our next goal was to visit a small colony of Gentoo Penguins which already had some good sized chicks. Unlike the birds which some of the group had seen around the Antarctic Peninsula, these birds had more white spotting on their heads and with

a recent scientific paper suggesting that Gentoo Penguin should be split into multiple species, it was good to have seen them so well.



King and Gentoo Penguins © Chris Collins

Another species we could see from the western beach was a colony of shags which had, until recently, been regarded as an endemic species, the Macquarie Shag. Multiple island forms had, however, been lumped into Blue-eyed Shag with the Macquarie Island birds now regarded as part of this species.

All too soon, it was time to head back to the landing site and everyone returned to the ship having enjoyed a stunning morning ashore. Although we had experienced four seasons within a couple of hours with everything from blue skies to snow, our time on the island had been extremely memorable.



As many of the group were enjoying burgers and chips in the Bistro, an announcement came over the PA system that there were more Orca outside, so we hurried to the outer decks to see three animals transiting south down the coast. Rather surprisingly, it seemed all three individuals were males which was a rather surprising pod composition, as usually pods contain both females and immatures.

Returning to the Bistro to continue our lunch, an excellent chocolate mousse, the ship then moved a few miles to the south to Sandy Bay and shortly after 14:00, we were ashore.

To describe this location as a wildlife wonderland would not be an understatement, as the beach was packed with wildlife and thousands upon thousands of birds and hundreds of seals. We started with some fantastic views of King Penguins, before heading along the beach to where there was a large concentration of Royal Penguins. These were so packed onto the beach that the Expedition Team had set up monitors at either end of the main group and we had to pass along at the surf line to ensure we did not disturb the birds.



Royal Penguin © Chris Collins

Another option was to follow a boardwalk which ultimately did go to a viewpoint overlooking the Royal Penguin rookery, however, the latter part of this was closed as we were told some Giant Petrels had decided to nest too close to the path for it to be possible to pass by without disturbing them.

With so much to enjoy, the time truly raced by and after a couple of hours and hundreds of photos, the group reassembled at the landing site and we had a zodiac ride over to a colony of Eastern Rockhopper Penguins. With only a minimal swell, it was possible to take the zodiac down a channel between the rocks to allow us to enjoy some nice views of the birds.



Eastern Rockhopper Penguins © Chris Collins

It had been a magical day but there was more to come, as once we were back on the ship the three male Orcas from the morning were spotted again and a little later, another pod were sighted tracking along the shoreline. These were clearly on the lookout for something to eat, in all likely a weaner Elephant Seal, and we saw the adult male go in amongst the rocks just off the beach clearly searching for a meal. The pod also had a female with a young calf and whilst this was not always easy to spot (as it was staying very close to its mother), it could clearly be seen in photos.

After another tasty dinner in the restaurant, many headed off to their cabins as the following day was due to start comparatively early.

12 December

At the recap the previous evening, Expedition Leader Dan had announced that with the weather forecast looking very promising, he planned to head for Lusitania Bay where the largest King Penguin colony on Macquarie Island was located. Dan added that assuming the conditions were as predicted, he planned to offer a zodiac cruise and when we awoke, the swells were as anticipated and shortly after 07:00 we set off from the ship.

Heading south down the coast on the eastern side of the island, our first stop was at a good sized Eastern Rockhopper Penguin colony. Once again, with the huge bonus of calm seas, it was possible to get comparatively close inshore to get some nice views of the birds.

Up on the cliffs, there were several Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses on nests and whilst these were not particularly close, nevertheless, it was fantastic to see more of these gorgeous birds.

Tracking back north along the shoreline, we soon came to the main part of the King Penguin colony. It was impossible to even accurately guess at the number of birds which were present but it was unquestionably somewhere in six figures and once again it was an amazing photo opportunity.

There were good numbers of brown fluffy youngsters in amongst the adult birds, and we could only wonder how the parent birds were able to find their chicks in such a melee.



A small part of the King Penguin colony at Lusitania Bay © Chris Collins

Further along, we saw the carcass of a large Elephant Seal which was being eaten by Giant Petrels with the birds acting in a very similar manner to vultures in Africa.

All too soon, it was time to head back to the ship for a hot breakfast but before we reached the gangway, we had some great views of more King Penguins which had congregated in the water around the ship. Some of these came within inches of the zodiac providing some unbelievably close looks.

Back aboard, we had more food and there was then the opportunity to relax for a few hours, with the WildWings group part of the afternoon landing.

With several hours aboard, many took the opportunity to download photos or catch up on notes or lost sleep and it was soon time for lunch which was immediately followed by the option of three hours ashore at Sandy Bay.

The majority of the group decided to take up the opportunity and we were soon back at this special location with Royal and King Penguins in abundance and good numbers of Elephant Seals on the beach. As had been the case yesterday, many of the seals were weaners which spent most of their time sleeping, with the odd one occasionally glancing up before it returned to slumbering.



King Penguin © Chris Collins

Another option which some had not done the previous day was to walk a short distance north up the beach to a King Penguin colony. Here, there were both adult birds and good numbers of immatures, some of which had begun moulting into their first coat of adult feathers, whilst a few were still covered in their fluffy brown down.



Royal Penguins © Chris Collins

Midway through our time ashore, a pod of Orca was spotted and much to our delight, these headed into Sandy Bay providing opportunities to see the animals up close. There was at least one adult male with a substantial vertical dorsal fin, as well as a mixture of females and younger individuals.



Orca © Chris Collins

Having cruised up and down Sandy Bay and presumably not found anything to catch, the pod headed round the rocks at the north end of the bay, with several then coming into the narrow gaps between the rocks presumably in the hope of catching a weaner unawares. Although there were some suggestions that something may have been caught, the pod were soon on their way to the north suggesting that this hunt had ultimately been unsuccessful.

Another highlight of the afternoon was the discovery of a sub-adult Eastern Rockhopper Penguin. This was stood on the beach amongst the Royal Penguins and its significantly smaller size was very evident; indeed, some of the Royals were seen pecking it on occasions.

It was another truly incredible afternoon and we knew we had been extremely fortunate with the weather and had achieved all our goals at Macquarie Island, with visits to the area around the research station, a zodiac cruise at Lusitania Bay and two landings at Sandy Bay. To have been able to spend a total of over five hours ashore at the latter location allowed those who wanted to truly maximise their experience more than enough time to soak up all the wildlife this amazing location could offer.

By 16:30 it was time to return to the ship which remained at anchor for a further couple of hours to allow us to enjoy the sheltered conditions in the lee of Macquarie Island for the recap and the beginning of dinner before the Captain set a course for our next destination, Campbell Island.

13 December

After two amazing days at what was likely to be one of the best of the islands on the voyage, a day at sea a long way from land was always likely to feel a little anticlimactic but despite this, many of the group were out on deck for much of the day as the ship headed in a north-eastern direction towards Campbell Island.

During the morning, we were in Australian waters so it was an opportunity for anyone wanting to look for birds for their Australian list and there were a selection of species including Grey-headed Albatross, a lone Gibson's Wandering Albatross and the regular mix of prions. Whilst the majority of these were Antarctic Prions, other species were undoubtedly present but without looking at photos, it was a challenge to confidently identify them.

With the entire day at sea, a series of lectures were offered by the Expedition Team with the morning presentation being about the eradication of introduced mammalian pests on Macquarie Island which had made a devastating impact on the seabirds on the island. Millions of dollars were spent to remove the cats, rabbits, mice and rats and it was already clear that the number of birds was increasing.

The afternoon presentation was by two of the bird guides, Oscar Thomas and Kate Sunderland, about citizen science and focused on some of the work which had been done on Heritage Expeditions' cruises.

After lunch, we had our final biosecurity session of the voyage and with everyone now very familiar with the process, this was relatively quick and many of the group spent the second half of the afternoon back on the monkey deck looking for wildlife.

Whilst we hoped for some cetaceans in the moderating seas, sadly nothing was found but these was enough to keep us looking, with the occasional Light-mantled Sooty Albatross, Sooty Shearwater, White-headed Petrel, Mottled Petrel and the seemingly never-ending prions.

At the evening recap, Expedition Leader Dan outlined the options for the following day on Campbell Island.

As dinner concluded, there was an announcement that Orca had been spotted by the bridge team and everyone rushed outside but sadly nothing was seen.

Although it had been a relatively quiet day, nevertheless, it had been a good opportunity to relax after Macquarie and look forwards to Campbell Island the following day.

14 December

During the night, the ship arrived in Perseverance Harbour, the incredibly sheltered bay on the eastern side of Campbell Island and we awoke at anchor after a comfortable night aboard.

With the group following Chris's recommendation and opting for a morning zodiac ride rather than either the North West Bay or Mount Honey walks, we assembled a little before 09:00 for two hours out exploring this amazing natural harbour.

Conditions were initially somewhat blustery with some rain but our experienced zodiac driver (and Heritage Expeditions bird guide), Matt Jones, got us over to the more sheltered northern coastline without anyone getting too wet.

Hugging the shoreline, our first target, Campbell Shag, was soon located with a lone bird soon spotted sitting on shore side rocks. It was very distinctive and very different to the Macquarie Shags with bare orange skin on the face.

Continuing onwards and passing the landing site we would use later in the day, we soon found a lone male Campbell Teal. Initially, this was feeding along the rocky shore and, as with the ducks on Enderby Island, it blended in perfectly with the colour of the rocks and kelp but everyone had soon seen and photographed the bird.



Campbell Teal © Chris Collins

Matt and Chris told the story about the rediscovery of this species which it had been believed was extinct until Rodney Russ, one of the founders of Heritage Expeditions, had visited the small offshore island of Dent where a tiny relict population had been discovered. These had been taken into captivity but once the main island had been cleared of introduced mammalian pests, the birds had been reintroduced and were now doing very well, with several hundred pairs believed to be present.

Further on, we saw what is known as the 'loneliest tree in the world', as it is the only tree on the island and had been planted by some of the settlers who had made Campbell Island their home decades earlier. Given it was only a week from Midsummer's Day and we were all dressed up as if it was mid-winter in the UK, it must have been a tough existence for those hardy settlers.



Campbell Shags © Chris Collins

Next, we visited a couple of spots where cormorants were sitting on rocks just up from the shore providing more chances to enjoy and photograph this special endemic. At one of these stops, a pipit was seen looking for food on the rocky beach and we were left bemused how this bird had once been considered the same as Richard's Pipit.

All too soon our time was up, and we headed back to the ship for an opportunity to warm up and enjoy a hot lunch aboard. Although there was the option to head ashore almost immediately, with a strong wind and damp chilly conditions outside, many were glad they had opted for a short period of downtime.

As soon as lunch had concluded, we were back in our wet weather gear and it was only a short ride to shore where Expedition Leader Dan gave everyone a short briefing before we headed off along the 4+ kilometre boardwalk. We had barely reached the unoccupied research buildings when we heard a Subantarctic Snipe calling but it was not in an area where it was likely to show, so we pressed on a bit further along the boardwalk finding a group of birders who had found a spot where a snipe was showing from time to time. Some of the group got a brief view but with people backing up on the narrow trail, we continued on hoping for another opportunity.

In places, the boardwalk climbed up the hillside with some fairly steep steps and in places it was relatively hard going with some deciding it was not for them. The majority, however, pressed on and after half a mile or so, we emerged from the wooded area into more stunted vegetation.



The view from the boardwalk on Campbell Island with Heritage Adventurer in Perseverance Harbour © Chris Collins

With the wind blowing fairly strongly, it was not ideal conditions for searching for snipe but it was still a fantastic walk, with great scenic views and the occasional Southern Royal Albatross sitting on a nest. Whilst the majority of these were somewhat distant, from time to time, we came across one which was within a matter of metres of the boardwalk and these provided yet more fantastic photographic opportunities.



Southern Royal Albatross © Chris Collins

Climbing onwards, we started to reach the area where the 'mega herbs' were flowering and the carpet of yellows and pinks was spectacular and well worth the walk.

At the end of the boardwalk, the mist somewhat obscured the view but we could just about see Dent Island where the teal had survived (and then been rediscovered) having been lost from the main island.

New Zealand Pipit © Chris Collins

With the snipe the only remaining bird to be seen, some of the group made their way back to the spot where we had glimpsed a bird earlier and the return visit was much more successful, with one bird showing very well as it scurried back and forth across the trail. After failing to see this species on Auckland Island earlier in the trip due to the inclement weather, it was fantastic to finally catch up with it.



Returning to the landing site, luck was definitely on our side as a pair of teal had been found feeding on the rocks a matter of metres from where everyone was congregating. These were completely unperturbed by our presence and we could clearly see the difference between the male and female, with the former having a green gloss to his head.

At 17:30 the last zodiac returned to the ship and with many of the group having walked five miles or so, it was time for a refreshing shower prior to the evening briefing and recap. Chris had, however, advised everyone that the exit from Perseverance Harbour was a great place for seabirds so most departed the lounge as soon as the briefing had concluded and before the recap started.

This proved to be a smart move, as there were impressive numbers of birds flying around and we had only been scanning for a matter of minutes when a male Orca was spotted and this was soon followed by a female.

Later, we sailed by the main colony of Campbell Albatrosses and whilst the colony was somewhat distant, the sheer number of birds on the cliffs and up onto the surrounding hillsides made for a very impressive sight.

15 December

It was another full day at sea as we headed northeast towards the Antipodes Island and it started very quietly with only modest numbers of seabirds with all being species we were now familiar with.

Although it is hard to ever tire of watching albatrosses, many people took the opportunity to catch up on sleep and generally relax until mid-afternoon, when an announcement came over the PA system that a Magenta Petrel had been spotted in the wake. To put it mildly, there

was a mass stampede to the stern of the ship and for those who moved quickly, the bird was still there, giving some amazing views less than 100 metres off the back of the ship.



Magenta Petrel © Chris Collins

After a few passes back and forth, it headed off over the waves and away. Whilst many of the group had managed to get outside in time, unfortunately, there were some who had missed it. We would have to hope for another opportunity to see this critically endangered bird.

16 December

We awoke with the ship anchored in the lee of the Antipodes Island and the conditions were clearly calm enough for a zodiac cruise and once breakfast had concluded, we lined up and were soon heading towards the shore with Expedition Team bird guide Kate Sunderland as our driver.

The first target was to get some good views of the Erect-crested Penguins and there was a small colony of maybe one hundred or so individuals on some of the first rocks we came to. These were the last of the four species of crested penguins we could expect on the expedition and, once again, the views were fantastic, with some of the birds being very close to the shoreline. With their distinctive crests, these were undoubtedly the punk rockers of the penguin world !!



Erect-crested Penguin © Chris Collins



Erect-crested Penguins © Chris Collins

Next up were the two species of parrot which could be found on the island and we soon heard that two Reischek's Parakeets (recently lumped with Red-crowned) had been spotted. Initially, these proved tricky to see, as finding a relatively small green parrot in green tussocks was never going to be easy but the birds flew around a bit allowing everyone to get some reasonable looks.



Reischek's Parakeets © Chris Collins

Our second parrot species was the Antipodes Parakeet, a larger bird which we had learnt the night before was occasionally carnivorous and, like with the smaller Reischek's, we soon got lucky and saw a bird that was fully out in the open.

With the three key species seen, we were then able to relax for the remainder of the cruise and slowly explored up and down the sheltered side of the island. At one point, we watched a pair of Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses which appeared to have a nest in the tussock way up above us. Another bird we wanted to see was the pipit which may one day be elevated to species status given it is very different to the birds on islands such as Campbell and we were able to get some decent looks at one bird in particular which fed ridiculously close to the breaking swells and was surely risking its life in a quest for a meal.



Antipodes Parakeet © Chris Collins

As well as the birds, the Antipodes were also our best opportunity to see Subantarctic Fur Seal and whilst several individuals had been seen through telescopes from the ship before breakfast, getting much closer to them in the zodiacs was very much a key goal for some of the group. Fortunately, some were close to the shore and at much closer range, we could more readily pick out their distinctive features from the more numerous New Zealand Fur Seals.



Subantarctic Fur Seal © Chris Collins

It was, however, also impossible not to take in the sheer grandeur of this amazing island with huge cliffs, towering slopes of tussock and some impressive geology.

From time-to-time, a huge Antipodean Albatross would fly high overhead presumably on its way to a nest way above us on this rugged, but majestic, island.

Initially, we made our way northwards but the seas soon became lumpy and splashy so we turned about and headed south again hugging the shoreline. Rounding a promontory, we were soon back in calm water with close penguins in the water, jellyfish adjacent to the zodiac and yet more stunning scenery.

Returning to where we had started the cruise, we saw a young Erect-crested Penguin in the colony and were also able to get some nice views and photographs of the endemic subspecies of pipit which surely requires more taxonomic work.

It was hard to believe we had been out on the water for over three hours and as soon as lunch had concluded, we began a circumnavigation of the main island and two of the larger isles off the northern side. One of these was Bollons Island where high up on the cliffs, we could see a mixed colony of Black-browed and Shy Albatrosses.

After a slow cruise, we began heading northeast towards the Bounty Islands and the afternoon was very productive from the monkey deck with good numbers of Soft-plumaged and White-headed Petrels, smaller numbers of Subantarctic Shearwaters and a selection of albatrosses, however, the highlight for many was a pod of Hourglass Dolphins which showed really well for several minutes. Rarely an easy species to see, this was a new cetacean for many of the group and with the dolphins regularly clearing the water, there were good opportunities to get some nice photos.

At the evening briefing and recap, Expedition Leader Dan advised everyone that the conditions at the Bounty Island were looking best at dawn, although the odds of being able to get in the zodiacs were probably 50:50 at best.

Hourglass Dolphin © Chris Collins



17 December

Many of the group were awake before 05:00, however, even without leaving our cabins or looking outside, it was obvious that there was a fairly significant swell and as the light improved, we could see large waves crashing ashore onto islands which were in reality not much more than large rocks in some cases.



Bounty Islands © Chris Collins

As we got closer, we could see the vast numbers of Erect-crested Penguins and Salvin's Albatrosses which breed on the thirty or so islands which make up the archipelago. Mixed in amongst these were the endemic Bounty Shags which undoubtedly have the smallest range of any species of cormorant or shag in the world.

With the waves smashing tens of feet up the side of the islands, getting into a zodiac was clearly going to be impossible so we cruised around the archipelago enjoying not only the impressive scenery but the vast numbers of birds.

Another species which was seen in good numbers was Fulmar Prion with plenty flying close to the ship with several good-sized flocks sitting on the water.

As breakfast concluded, the ship sailed away with Dan announcing that we would make a minor diversion to investigate some underwater canyons where he was hopefully we might encounter some cetaceans.

Whilst it took a couple of hours to reach the area, it was well worthwhile with first a distant pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales being spotted which was followed by a closer pod of the same species which also included a number of Bottlenose Dolphins. At the same time, several beaked whales were also seen and although the views were not good enough to be certain of the species, photos showed they were indeed Grey's Beaked Whales.

As the ship moved further away from the islands, the number of birds dropped off but there was still a range of species to see. Whilst some of these were birds we were now very familiar with such as Salvin's and Northern Royal Albatross, we also had multiple sightings of Grey-

headed Petrel, Subantarctic Shearwater and really good numbers of White-faced Storm Petrels, with some of these doing their distinctive back-and-forth flight pattern just in front of the bow.

Having had a distinct dearth of prions on our previous sea day, there were reasonable numbers across the afternoon with several Broad-billed Prions amongst those which were identified.

Although a couple of Chatham Albatrosses were seen, sadly these did not hang around but with this species all but guaranteed during our time in the Chathams, this was not one to be overly concerned about missing.

At 18:30, Expedition Leader Dan outlined the plans for our time around the Chatham Islands and just as the recap concluded and everyone was filtering down to dinner and to sign up for the multiple options which were available, there was a PA announcement to advise everyone that a Magenta Petrel had been spotted flying down the starboard side of the ship. Unfortunately, the timing and speed of it passing the ship were far from ideal, with only a handful of people seeing it. A frustrating end to the day especially for those who had also missed the previous individual.

18 December

We awoke to a subtle difference in the seabirds with both Buller's and Chatham Albatrosses around the ship and as we got closer to Pyramid Rock, there were more and more Chatham Albatrosses.

Pyramid Rock – the breeding island for Chatham Albatross and also home to the occasional Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross © Chris Collins



As we arrived offshore, there were hundreds of albatrosses flying around the island and there were thousands more ashore. It really was (yet another) incredible sight!!

We knew that there had been a couple of pairs of Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses in previous years but the odds of picking these out was not exactly high, however, as we slowly circumnavigated the island, Expedition Leader Dan made a PA announcement to inform

everyone that one of the birds had been spotted amongst the mass of Chatham Albatrosses. It took a while for everyone to see it but some were even able to view it through a telescope.



Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross on Pyramid Rock © Chris Collins

After a couple of circumnavigations, we headed off towards Southeast Island. As we approached the island, we could see that there were large swells so we cruised around the coast looking for somewhere with some shelter. Looking ashore, some saw a couple of distant Chatham Oystercatchers but the views were brief and far from ideal.

Eventually, we found a spot where the swells were not too bad and everyone boarded the zodiacs. It was tricky to get close with plenty of white water smashing onto the beaches and cliffs. We were, however, fortunate to have a highly experienced zodiac driver, the Zodiac Master Kosta, and his skill allowed us to get very close to the rocks.

First up were several Pitt Island Shags and we were able to get some good views of this Chatham endemic.

After watching a couple of Shore Plovers at quite a distance, we found a couple of birds which were much close to the shoreline and, as a result of Kosta's expertise, enjoyed some exceptional views of a couple of individuals.



Shore Plover © Chris Collins

Continuing onwards, we found two Little Penguins in the water and whilst these would dive from time to time, we were able to get reasonably close for photos, although it was somewhat challenging with the zodiac going up and down in the swells.

As we continued our circumnavigation of the island, we saw more Shore Plovers and then came across a lone Erect-crested Penguin. This species is fairly uncommon away from the Bounty and Antipodes Islands, so it was a genuine surprise to come across one of these here.

A little later, we spotted a fishing boat with several albatrosses following it and whilst most flew off in the opposite direction to us, a Chatham Albatross flew right passed us giving some phenomenal views.



Chatham Albatross © Chris Collins

Despite much searching, our attempts to see more oystercatchers were unsuccessful and having circumnavigated the island, we returned to the ship to find it rolling quite considerably. As a result, re-embarking was somewhat challenging with the gangway going up and down by at least a couple of metres, but eventually everyone was aboard and we set a course for the islands of Mangere and Little Mangere.

The latter was where Black Robin had survived before the last birds had temporarily been taken into captivity and looking at the steep slopes and cliffs, we could only be impressed how anyone had managed to get on and off the island given the lack of an obvious landing site and the waves which were crashing ashore.

Cruising passed Mangere Island, we were on the lookout for the endemic Chatham Islands (Forbe's) Parakeet but given the inclement (windy) weather, we knew it would be a real surprise to see one, especially as the more widespread Red-crowned Parakeets was also present on the island and to add to the challenge, the two species are known to hybridise.

With the plan to spend the evening offshore from Sweetwater, one of the breeding sites for Magenta and Chatham Islands Petrels, the hotel team had organised another 'grab and go' dinner for those who wanted to spend as long as possible on the outer decks and many of the

group took the opportunity to have a quick burger before returning outside to continue our search for these highly endangered species.

Cruising back and forth in front of Sweetwater was the plan, however, as the sun got lower and lower in the sky, it looked like our chances of success were gone, until Chris yelled out that he had spotted a Magenta Petrel crossing the bow. The bird was barely a hundred metres away and those who were on the monkey deck soon got onto it and with an almost instant PA announcement to alert those elsewhere that the bird was tracking down the starboard side, most people were able to see it.

It was a huge relief to have had another opportunity to see this species and although this was the third at sea individual of the voyage, many had missed the first bird and only a handful had seen the second so to have another chance was fantastic.

Once the bird had disappeared and with the light fading fast, many headed off to bed in expectation of our forthcoming day on the main island in the Chatham archipelago.

19 December

With Chris having arranged for the WildWings group to be part of the first scheduled departure to the Sweetwater Reserve, we were amongst the first to leave the ship and once ashore at the wharf in the small town of Waitangi, we set off in a fleet of five pickup trucks.

The original plan had been to go directly to the reserve but the local organisers had additional vehicles waiting at the Awatotara Reserve where we briefly stopped (to swap transportation) before continuing onwards to Sweetwater.

The journey took over 45 minutes and we were glad that all the vehicles were 4WDs, as part of the gravel track were very steep in places.

Arriving at the predator proof fence, we were met by Dave Boyle who was essentially the ranger at the reserve. Originally from the UK, Dave had worked at a couple of birds observatories before moving to New Zealand and at least one of the group had met him before he had emigrated to the Chatham Islands.

Once the briefing was complete, a gate in the fence was opened and we walked for a 100 metres or so through the lush forest to a small clearing by the burrow of a Magenta Petrel. Dave explained that this bird was not sitting on eggs as it had lost its mate and, as if by magic, he opened a trapdoor and then had it in his hands.

It was a very special moment to be so close to such an incredibly rare seabird and over the course of the next few minutes hundreds of photos were taken. We knew we were very privileged to see this individual and once everyone had taken their photos, Dave returned it to its burrow and then happily answered questions. It was easy to see his passion for this

species and he told us about the work that he and others had done over the years to help boost the number of birds.



Magenta Petrel in the hand at Sweetwater Reserve © Chris Collins

All too soon, it was time to leave and as we awaited the arrival of the next group (and our transport back to Awatotara), we could look out across the rolling countryside which was now dominated by cattle and sheep pastures and only wonder how the island must have been before the arrival of people, pests and the clearance of the native bush.

As we waited for the vehicles to arrive, a Chatham Pigeon obligingly flew in and perched in a nearby tree allowing everyone to have some decent views of this species which has very similar plumage to the endemic New Zealand Pigeon on the mainland.

Once at the Awatotara Reserve, we set about looking for the remaining endemic species and subspecies we had not yet seen, and whilst the endemic subspecies of Tui and New Zealand Fantail were soon found, the Chatham Gerygone remained frustratingly elusive.

Eventually, most of the group had some fleeting looks from the road but these were far from ideal and when we heard that an individual was showing along one of the forest trails, we headed down to look for it. By the time we arrived, this was also somewhat elusive but it had a chick that had seemingly only recently fledged and this remained rooted to its preferred perch allowing everyone to see it.

With all the key forest birds successfully seen, we took the decision to return to the coast in the hope of finding a Chatham Oystercatcher, and with a couple of hours available, we were quietly confident of success. Unfortunately, however, the main beach was being used to exercise a group of horses and we learnt that at least one oystercatcher had been flushed. This had apparently been seen flying over a headland so we searched there but viewing was

tricky and Expedition Leader Dan took a zodiac around the coast in an attempt to find it but he too was unsuccessful.

At this point, some opted for the highly renowned blue cod and chips in the town hotel, whilst others continued the search, even hitching a ride in a bus with the non-birding group but this too proved unsuccessful.

After a couple of hours in and around Waitangi, unfortunately, it was time to return to the ship and many headed for the top deck to continue searching as the ship sailed away. Whilst no oystercatchers could be found, fortunately, there were several Chatham Shags on a cliff enabling us to add this critically endangered species to our impressive list of special birds.

Whilst it was certainly disappointing to miss the oystercatchers, this frustration was soon extinguished, at least for some, when a pod of beaked whales were spotted on the starboard side of the ship. With the majority of the Expedition Team down in the mudrooms tidying the boots, unfortunately, there was no announcement but those on the monkey deck had some decent views.

Careful inspection of the photos and the behaviour of the pod, there were around a dozen animals and they were swimming extremely close to each other, confirmed that these were Arnoux's Beaked Whales and a new species for pretty much everyone who saw them.



Arnoux's Beaked Whales © Chris Collins

20 December

During the night, the ship headed in a westerly direction as the Captain was keen to avoid a large storm which was to our south and we awoke to significantly more movement than we had become used to and fairly heavy seas with swells of around five metres or so.

The conditions and our location meant that birding was somewhat challenging on the monkey deck (by now, the regular haunt for many of the group) so we alternated between various locations around the ship over the course of the day.

Not unexpectedly, no new species were seen and as we were a long way from land, there were not vast numbers of birds, although when we crossed a rise there were more seabirds to see.

For those not wanting to spend the day out on deck, the lecture programme continued with talks on various topics but there was no denying it was a relatively quiet day at sea albeit with this partly caused by the weather.

21 December

After the moderately lumpy start to the previous day, we awoke to somewhat smoother seas and the last full day of the expedition.

The Captain had selected a route that took us relatively close to the New Zealand coastline and for much of the day, we tracked southwards along the eastern coast of South Island and with the water being fairly shallow, the range of seabirds was limited but these did include some shags as we passed the Otago Peninsula. Until relatively recently, these had been regarded as a very localised endemic, the Otago Shag, but were now lumped with Foveaux Shag with the name reverting to the rather inappropriate Stewart Island Shag.

During the morning, we crossed a canyon where it was known that Shepherd's Beaked Whale could occasionally be found but the sea conditions meant it was tricky to look for species such as this.

Nevertheless, the morning was fairly productive with good numbers of Cook's Petrels and Sooty Shearwaters and a decent selection of albatrosses including both Northern and Southern Royals.



Northern Royal Albatross © Chris Collins

Several presentations were also offered with one of these featuring one of the WildWings group, Helena Jefferson, who spoke eloquently about her involvement with Hookpod, a clever device which reduced albatross by-catch in longline fishing to zero.

Later everyone gathered in the lounge for the farewell cocktail party. Both Expedition Leader Dan and the Captain spoke about the trip and there was also an opportunity to thank the crew who had looked after us.

The reception then concluded with the expedition slideshow which gave us an opportunity to reflect on what had been a fantastically successfully voyage.

After a final dinner, many of the group headed back outside and those on the monkey deck were able to see the green flash as the sun sank below the horizon.

22 December

We awoke to the ship tied up at the wharf in Bluff and after breakfast and immigration controls in the lounge, the time for departure had arrived. With some of the group choosing to take the bus to Queenstown rather than the more popular option of Invercargill Airport, farewells to some were said aboard, before the rest of the group disembarked and headed for the airport and the beginning of journeys home.

It had been a fantastically successfully voyage, with generally good weather (given we were in the Southern Ocean) and a spectacular range of special birds. Truly a trip of a lifetime and one we would all remember for a long time.