

New Zealand North Island birding March 8-13, 2020

Kari Haataja

Prior to my WPO2020 (Western Pacific Odyssey) we ten Finns did five days birding on the northern island of New Zealand. We left Helsinki March 6th on Qatar Airways flight, changed the plane in Doha and had then 16 hours flight to Auckland. Early arrival (5am local time) in Auckland March 8th and after very fast border control we had our two vans ready to drive 6am in the darkness towards Miranda shorebird reserve. Erkki and Kim were our drivers during those five days.

It took only 90 minutes to drive Miranda and we were ready to explore this excellent shorebird site as a first target site to see a massive flock of 2000 Wrybills, 6000+ Bar-tailed Godwits, 1000+ Pied Stilts, 100+ Pacific Golden Plovers, 2000+ Pied Oystercatchers, 500+ Red Knots, 60+ Double-banded Plovers, 5 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, 3 Far-eastern Curlews and a single Eurasian Whimbrel. We heard that also a single Broad-billed Sandpiper and Lesser Sandplover were seen but we did not find them among huge wader flocks. The latter was hard to separate from winterplumage Double-banded Plovers among which it was supposed to stay. A week earlier a Pectoral Sandpiper was also seen.

New species to many were also White-faced Heron (25+), Royal Spoonbill (10+), 50+ Pied Cormorants, 5+ Masked Lapwings on nearby fields, 20+ Black-billed Gulls, 20+ Kelp (or Black-backed) Gulls, 50+ Paradise Shelducks and two fully black Varied Oystercatchers among Pied Oystercatchers. At least three Swamp Harriers were hunting in the area. Familiar to us was 40+ Caspian Terns.

After 3,5 hours watching period we were ready to drive a bit forward and find a bar to get something to eat. Before it we stopped shortly in Miranda Shorebird Center and made some shopping, like Wrybill t-shirts.

In Kaiaua village we did our brunch break and did some birding nearby where we found 4 New Zealand (or Red-breasted) Dotterels new to our trip.



New Zealand Dotterel is still mainly in non-breeding plumage but orange tinge on its belly shows a sign of its colorful plumage.



Pied Oystercatchers look like our Oystercatcher in Europe. Among them was a single almost full albino bird having few black feathers here and there (see upper photo).



Early morning after sunrise the visibility to the sea was bad against the sun though large number of waders were on the seaside. A bit later we focused more on waders on the pools though low tide had moved waders a bit too far away from the hides to take photos. Miranda shorebird site gave us an excellent selection of waders and other waterbirds.

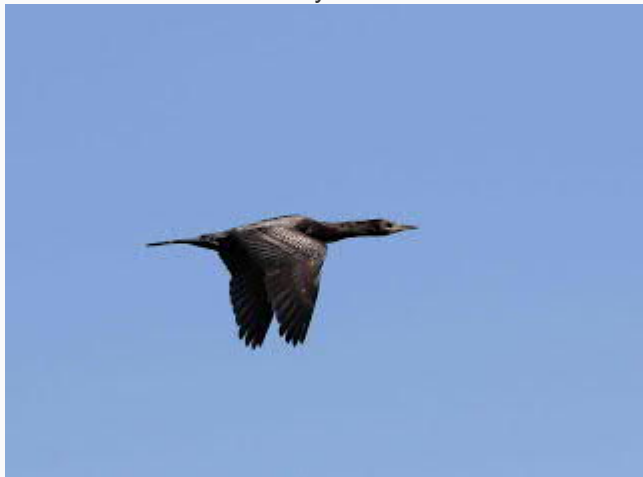
Then we had a long 300km drive south to Lake Taupo. On our way we had 30 minutes stop at a site by Waikato Dam where we saw hundreds of ducks and waterbirds. We added to our list Black Swan (10), Grey Teal (35), Grey Duck (1), New Zealand Scaup (2), Australian Shoveler (1), Little Black Cormorant (10+), Little Pied Cormorants (10).



Black Swan



Grey Teal



Little Black Cormorant



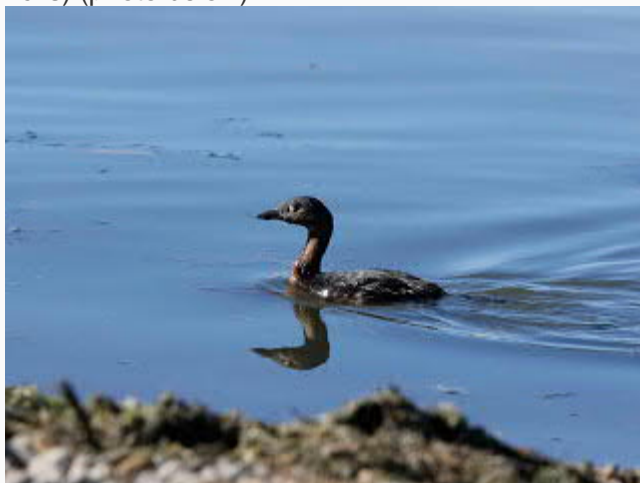
New Zealand Scaup



Paradise Shelduck pair

We had short stop by the road just before arriving on the southern shores of Lake Taupo. Few New Zealand Bellbirds were singing close to us.

We arrived on the southern shores of Taupo Lake and scanned through the lake near Tokaanu. We counted at least 700 Black Swans, few Australian Shovelers, hundreds of NZ Scaups and a few New Zealand Grebes (or Dubchicks) (photo below).



It was time to drive to our motel in Turangi for two nights and enjoy well-deserved evening meal.

March 9th we left our motel immediately on the first light to search Blue Duck on a nearby river. We found it upstream far away on the stream where a pair was swimming (photos below)



On our return I saw New Zealand Falcon flying high over our cars when others had selected slower way by the river to return to the cars. During the morning we saw around 10 New Zealand Fantails.

We bought some sandwiches and drinks from a gasoline station in Turangi and then drove towards mountains, to Tongariro National Park. We walked a trail to the smaller Lake Roropounamu return and after it drove with few stops around the large Lake Rotoaira prior to returning to Turangi for our lunch. Just when we arrived in Turangi began raining and it lasted the whole afternoon and evening.

By the trail we saw few nice target species, photos below.



New Zealand Bellbird was rather common in the forest.



New Zealand Pigeon was also rather common during the morning.



Few North Island Robins were very tame by the trail.



Few Tomtits we saw close to the lake Roropounamu shores but it was hard to photograph due to short of light and bird's very active movements.



Tens of Grey Ducks were on Lake Roropounamu.



Nice hiking trail was running through a protected forest giving a good experience what the forest has been in the past on the island. Nowadays only national parks have untouched forests. New Zealand is also a wellknown forest industry country.



From the southern side of Lake Rotoaira is a nice view towards north over the lake.

March 10th we woke up very early in the darkness. Rain had stopped sometimes during the night. It was foggy, when we left our motel already 6.30am. We had a very long drive to the northern side of Auckland, to Warkworth where we were supposed to be by 1pm. We had close to 500km drive, mainly motorways but through some larger towns and also Auckland which took some time to pass by. We checked in our hotel, took a lunch and were ready to meet our guide (Tristan Gullen) for the afternoon and evening birding. We had bought a guided package from him. We aimed to have birding tour in Tawharanui Reserve.

Prior to meeting our guide we had some time to look nearby stream where I was photographing gulls.



Silver Gulls were pathing on a stream in Warkworth...



... as well as Black-backed (Kelp) Gulls. Here a young bird.

Near Warkworth we visited in a park where Tristan showed us one of the oldest kauri trees, over 600 years old.



On those nearby trees we saw several Grey Gerygones which is like Phylloscopus Warblers in the old world.



Very common Silvereye was now rather easy to photograph.

We drove to Matakana where we photographed Brown Teal pair among Mallards when Tristan was picking up few equipments for the evening.



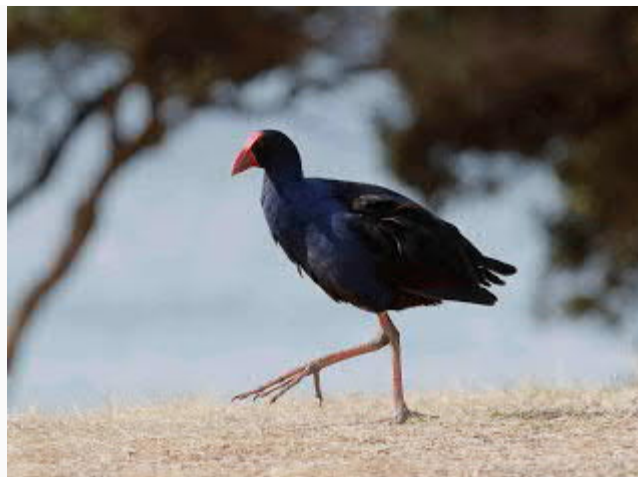


Finally we drove to Tawharanui Reserve where we arrived 4.30pm and stayed until 10pm to see Brown Kiwi in darkness.

Tawharanui Reserve is rat, cat and predator free area which is a fenced peninsula. This way landbirds have good success to breed. We walked on a trail 2-3 hours and then went to have a picnic lunch near a lagoon. Tristan's mother had prepared delicious meal to us. We waited darkness until we began to walk trails and road to see Brown Kiwi. Few of us (like I) saw one in the forest trail but finally all saw well another one on the road we had walked in the afternoon. Unfortunately Brown Kiwi could not be photographed.

In nightwalk I managed to see Morepork which probably had already flying young ones around. We heard their calls in several places by the forest trail. At our picnic site we saw 5-10 Eastern Rosellas flying around. They were harder to photograph. Higher in the sky we saw few Kakas flying.

During afternoon walk we saw good number of target species which I show in photos below.



Australian Gallinule was very common in the area. It looks very much the same as we have in Europa.



Close to ten New Zealand Fantails were actively moving around all the time.



Saddleback population is individually followed in the area and having currently healthy population.



Tui is also rather common in the area.



Few California Quail groups were feeding on the lawn by the trail.



Tawharanui Reserve seashore scenery on the peninsula.



Our group was enjoying watching Saddlebacks, Tuis, NZ Fantails and North Island Robins.



Local people were walking trails in the area.



2-3 Banded Rails were feeding on the shores of a lagoon.



Few young Black-billed Gulls were actively looking our picnic meal and possible leftovers.

Very late we returned in our hotel just in Warkworth to have a short sleep prior our next morning early drive to Gulf Harbor from where a ferry is leaving to Tiritiri Matangi Island.

March 11th we arrived in Gulf Harbor already 8am in less than an hour drive. A bar was open and we decided to have small breakfast while waiting the ferry. We were advised that we need to be in the harbor one hour before the ferry leaving time. Actually it was leaving from Auckland first and picking up people from Gulf Harbor before heading to Tiritiri Matangi Island. Erkki had bought us ferry tickets well in advance. While waiting the ferry I photographed few birds on lawn.



Finally I managed to take few photos from Masked Lapwing.



Tens of Variable Oystercatchers were resting on the harbor lawn.

It took one hour by the ferry to arrive in Tiritiri Matangi Island. During this ride we certainly watched birds on the sea.



Somebody noticed a Little Penguin swimming quite close to the ferry route.



Huge number of Fluttering Shearwaters were on the sea by the route.

We saw also several Arctic Skuas, several Buller's Shearwaters, hundreds of White-fronted Terns and few Australian Gannets.

Tiritiri Matangi Island is also a predator free island. It has strict rules to maintain the island clean and safe breeding site to many endemic species in the country. It has the same role as Tawharanui Reserve to save the population of many endemic species of New Zealand. Some species are

transferred between different protected sites to ensure gene flow among each population. Many endangered species are individually marked with color ring to follow their movements and territories.

We walked four hours on the island. Below some photos of our key target species.



We heard that the island has now 15 pairs of Kokakos. They have got only 6 young ones this breeding season. All birds are color marked. One pair was feeding close to a bird's feeding station. Otherwise it can be hard to see.





Massive Takahes were our absolute target species but rather easy to find. One family was near the lighthouse. Another family was by the trail we walked.



Stichbirds were easy to find near feeding stations. However, those dark forest sites were challenging photographing sites due to short of light. Here colorful male and less colorful female. We counted tens of birds during our walk.



Several Red-crowned Parakeets were rather tame and easy to photograph.



We saw Whiteheads already in the forests of Tawharanui Reserve but now finally I managed get just a documentary shot. They were constantly inside bushes and on the move.



NZ Bellbirds were very common on the island, especially close to feeding sites.



Brown Quail we saw briefly already yesterday in Tawharanui Reserve but now two birds were very cooperative and showing well by a trail.

The island is also a home of Little Spotted Kiwi which can be seen only in darkness. When we had only day trip, we did not have any chance to see the species. On the same ferry arrived also Josk Beck who I met first in the harbor but later also near the lighthouse. He stayed the night in a cabin and saw the bird during the night. Josk was part of WPO2020 Cruise participants.

Anyhow, we were pretty satisfied for our 4 hours walk and returned on the afternoon ferry to Gulf Harbor. On our return the wind had picked up and shearwaters showed well by the route.



A group of Fluttering Shearwaters were passing the ferry very close.



Very contrastic Buller's Shearwaters were few tens on our return.



Auckland seen distant from the ferry.

From Gulf Harbor we had quite short but slow drive in traffic jams to our hotel in Auckland. Evening meal in a Korean restaurant near our hotel was well deserved. Now we were in the bed in reasonable time to have a good sleep.

March 12 we left again 7am and managed to avoid worst traffic jams when we were driving to south and again to Miranga shorebird reserve. Traffic towards Auckland from south was rather show.

This time in Miranda we were in ideal time when the tide was already high and birds closer to hides.



Miranda shorebird reserve and the birds on the pools, here mainly Pied Oystercatchers and Bar-tailed Godwits, among them smaller number of Red Knots. Behind was number of Pied Stilts.





Wrybills were now close enough to take some photos. This case we counted 2300 birds.

Among Wrybills we found a single Red-necked Stint and Broad-billed Sandpiper. Number of Double-banded Plovers had lowered since our first visit. The same group of 5 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers we found again more or less at the same place as in our previous visit.

After 3-4 hours stay in Miranda we drove again a bit north to Kaiaua to buy icecream, coffee, beer, etc. On the wet fields we counted this case 20 NZ Dotterels and 11 Turnstones.

Gradually we were ready to drive to Tauranga from where our Cruise ship was leaving next day afternoon. Later in the afternoon in Mt Mauntagain in our hotel we finally met 4 other Finns who had arrived different time to New Zealand and did not participate to our North Island birding tour.

Early next morning (March 13) we looked few seaside places close to our hotel but we noticed soon that the place is a popular seaside holiday area with densed built vacation houses. Kim and Erkki dropped us and our luckages to the meeting place of other WPO participants and returned our vans to Tauranga airport. Our North Island tour had finished with 92 species seen, 50 of them were lifers to me.



Mt Mauntagai shores have nice sandy beaches what for I can expect that weekends and holidays they are packed with holidays makers.



Team Finns having lunch prior to meeting the rest of cruise participants. Our adventure trip is going to begin after few hours.

Thanks Erkki and Kim for your safe drive. Big thanks to Erkki who had planned our five days tour, did all reservations and needed payments in advance. We had very nice five days to experience this pleasant country and its interesting nature as well as birds.