Eagle-Eye Tours



Birding Down Under Cruise Trip Report 2024

Link: Birding Down Under Cruise Trip Report 2024

This expedition cruise runs only once a year, and covers the Subantarctic Islands of New Zealand, the Australian territory of Macquarie Island, and Chatham Islands; but more than that, it is an unparalleled experience for those who love wild and rarely visited places, and their penguins and seabirds. In 2024, eight out of the eighteen species of penguins, often in huge colonies, were seen, along with no fewer than forty-one species on 'tubenose' – a higher proportion of the world's pelagic birds was on offer than on any other trip you can make. Many of those species were seen in seabird cities (often dominated by albatrosses – twelve species, or more for those with a more enlightened taxonomic outlook!) on breathtakingly beautiful islands very few people have visited. At other times, seabirds were observed far from land, in their true element: riding the wind over huge waves in the wild southern oceans. Among the smaller members of this group, many gadfly petrels were seen, the standout being Magenta Petrel, one of the rarest birds in the world. The breathtakingly beautiful places we found these species add to the experience: isolated specks of land with unique flora and fauna. Most islands had a small and sometimes incongruous set of endemics, star turns including Reischek's and Antipodes Parakeets on their treeless home, the rare and flightless Auckland and Campbell Teals, and furtive, almost rodent-like snipes. Non-avian highlights included flowering megaherbs on many islands, and a number of marine mammals. Subantarctic Fur Seal was the pick of the phocids, though we also saw New Zealand and Antarctic Fur Seals, Hooker's (or New Zealand) Sea Lion, and Southern Elephant Seal; cetaceans included Sperm, Sei, Fin, and Long-finned Pilot Whales, Dusky and Hourglass Dolphins, and the incomparable Orca.

4th December: Departure from Bluff.

The trip began in earnest as we boarded the Heritage Adventurer, home for the next two-and-a-half weeks, in the port of Bluff, at the southern tip of New Zealand. Both Foveaux (Stewart Island) and Spotted Shags were seen prior to departure, while in the evening the first seabird bonanza was had from the ship: the first albatrosses (White-capped, Salvin's and Southern Royal), Mottled, Cook's and Westland Petrel (the latter the only one of the trip) and thousands of Sooty Shearwaters.



Embarkation on Heritage Adventurer © Mike Hoit

5th December: The Snares.

We awoke to find the ship moored off Northeast Island, surrounded by vast numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and Pintado Petrels. Despite the swell, the superb expedition team conducted a series of zodiac cruises close inshore (landings are not permitted on The Snares), giving great views of masses of Snares Crested Penguins and accompanied by Hooker's Sea Lions. Other birds seen included Snares subspecies (or species) of Fernbird and Tomtit, and a few of us even glimpsed Snares Snipe! Sailing southwards in huge seas, many seabirds gave brilliant looks in the wake, with albatrosses including our first Light-mantled Sooties, and a bewildering blizzard of prions.



Snares Crested Penguin © Mike Hoit

6th December: Auckland Islands.

A full day on Enderby Island was pure subantarctic magic! Endemic Auckland Shag, Auckland Teal, and Auckland (Subantactic) Snipe all showed at close range, as did Yellow-eyed Penguin, with a supporting cast including Red-crowned Parakeet, 'Auckland' Double-banded Plover, and nesting Light-mantled Sooty and Southern Royal Albatrosses, Fulmar Prions and Northern Giant Petrels. All while admiring megaherbs like Macquarie Cabbage (Stilbocarpa polaris) and dodging the huge Hooker's Sea Lions! Sailing south in the evening we passed below the mountainous Adams Island, and were joined by some of the huge Gibson's Albatrosses which nest there, plus stunning White-headed Petrels and tens of thousands of Antarctic Prions.



Enderby Island © Mike Hoit



Enderby Island © Mike Hoit



Hooker's Sea Lion, Enderby Island © Mike Hoit

7th December: At sea.

Our first full day of seabirding as we headed towards Macquarie Island, seeing species both huge (Snowy, Gibson’s and Southern Royal Albatrosses), tiny (Gray-backed Storm-Petrel) and everything in between (including White-headed and Mottled Petrels, Short-tailed Shearwater and South Polar

Skua).

8th December: Macquarie Island.

One of the high points of the entire trip, as we cruised around the western coast and past the Gray-headed Albatross colony at southwestern point, before lingering off Lusitania Bay with its huge King Penguin colony. Almost the full day was spent at Sandy Bay, either aboard the ship, watching Eastern Rockhopper Penguins and displaying Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses from the zodiacs, or the main event: ashore among the Royal Penguins which are found nowhere else on earth! An elusive Orca pod was loitering offshore for most of the day, waiting for young, inexperienced Southern Elephant Seals to go to sea.



King Penguin © Mike Hoit



King Penguins © Mike Hoit



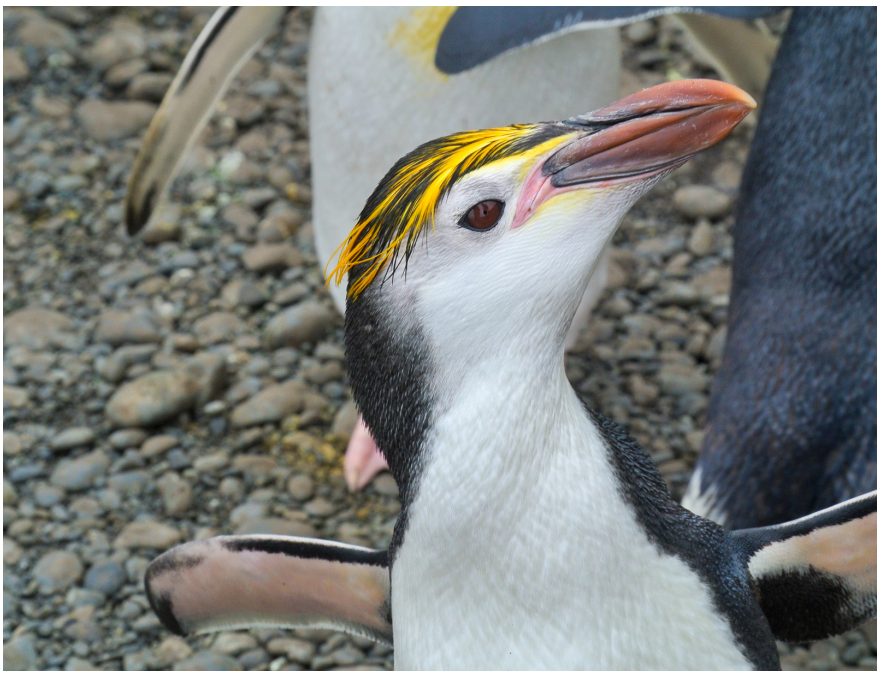
Macquarie King Penguins © Mike Hoit



Macquarie © Mike Hoit



Royal Penguin on Macquarie © Mike Hoit



Royal Penguin on Macquarie © Mike Hoit



Southern Elephant Seals © Mike Hoit



Southern Elephant Seal © Mike Hoit



Royals and onlookers © Mike Hoit

9th December: Macquarie Island and at sea.

In the morning we made a weather-constrained landing at the north end of Macquarie, with close views of Macquarie Shags, Gentoo Penguins at the nest (as well as more Royals, Eastern Rockhoppers, and Kings) and, for some, more Orca, Antarctic and Subantarctic Fur Seals. Sailing

east with a strong tailwind produced stellar seabirding throughout the afternoon, with twenty species of tubenoses seen! Soft-plumaged Petrels (including a rare dark morph) put on a show, and the only Blue Petrels of the trip were seen, along with Hourglass Dolphins.



Gentoo Penguin © Mike Hoit



Gentoo Penguin © Mike Hoit

10th December: At sea.

Steaming northeast across the “Furious Fifties”, with a constant accompaniment of several species of albatrosses, often at almost touching distance off the stern. Plenty of gadfly petrels and storm-petrels were also seen, and a pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales made a close pass in the afternoon.



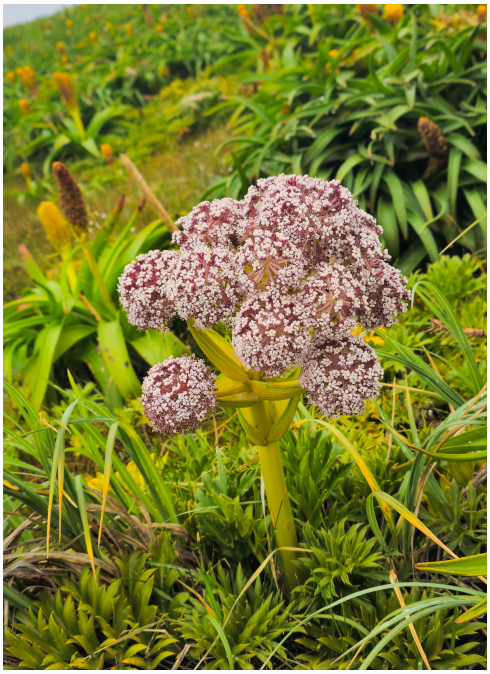
Seabirders and albatross © Mike Hoit

11th December: Campbell Island.

The day started with a cruise along the east coast of this stunning island, culminating with the spectacle of a huge Campbell Albatross colony. In the sheltered Perseverance Harbour we found endemic Campbell Teals and Campbell Shag, before landing on a typically-rainy day. Despite the conditions we eventually tracked down Campbell (Subantarctic) Snipe, while the nesting Southern Royal Albatrosses were a special experience. The wind-loving albatrosses gave a great performance as we departed late in the day, along with amazing numbers of Black-bellied and Gray-backed Storm-Petrels.



Zodiac ride to Campbell Island © Mike Hoit



Campbell Island carrot © Mike Hoit



Southern Royal Albatross on Campbell Island © Mike Hoit

12th December: At sea.

Another full day to admire the albatrosses!



Campbell Albatross © Mike Hoit

13th December: Antipodes Island.

Dense fog first thing cleared to reveal the spectacular Antipodes Islands, on what was another

incredible day. Zodiac cruising close to the coast gave great sightings of Antipodes and Reischek's Parakeets, Erect-crested Penguins and even an Antipodes (Subantarctic) Snipe, while a few Subantarctic Fur Seals among the abundant New Zealands. Seabirds included many displaying Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses, "Greater Fulmar" Prions attending nesting caves, and spectacular Antipodes Albatrosses. Another vigil from the deck in the evening produced another abundance of tubenoses – particularly storm-petrels and Subantarctic Shearwaters – and close Sperm and Sei Whales.



Zodiacs going to Antipodes Island © Mike Hoit



New Zealand Fur Seal and Erect-crested Penguins © Mike Hoit

14th December: Bounty Islands and at sea.

We were very lucky that conditions allowed morning zodiac cruises around a collection of improbably-named rocks, the only specks of land where Bounty Shags and Salvin's Albatrosses nest. The sight, sound and smell of perhaps 45,000 of the latter were a mind-blowing experience, combined with more Erect-crested Penguins and Greater Fulmar Prions. Concerted seabirding efforts as we continued our journey northeast saw huge numbers of Salvin's Albatrosses following the ship, and Gray-faced and Cook's Petrels joining the more regular species.



Salvin's Albatross © Mike Hoit



Erect-crested Penguins © Mike Hoit



Salvin's Albatross © Mike Hoit



Southern Royal and Salvin's Albatrosses © Mike Hoit

15th December: Chatham Islands – The Pyramid, South East Island/Rangatira, Little Mangere Island.

An action-packed day began with some very exciting pelagic wildlife-watching! Norther Buller's, Northern and Southern Royal Albatrosses, large numbers of Broad-billed and some "Pyramid Prions" (a local cryptic species currently included under Fulmar Prion), masses of White-faced Storm-petrels, and a selection of pterodroma petrels, and sightings of Shortfin Mako and several Fin or Sei Whales. As we got closer to The Pyramid, increasing numbers of Chatham Albatrosses appeared and a very close cruise around their sole nesting island also allowed us to see the Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross nest. Zodiac cruising at South East Island gave close views of Chatham Islands Oystercatcher and the delightful Shore Plover, plus glimpses of some of the land birds; and a second ship cruise – and incredibly skilful work from the captain! – allowed us the rare chance to scope Forbes's (or Chatham Islands) Parakeet at Little Mangere Island.



Parakeet watchers, Little Mangere © Mike Hoit



The Pyramid and birders © Mike Hoit

16th December: Chatham Island – Main Island.

Seeing the township of Waitangi was quite a shock having seen so little evidence of modern human life for a while! We were able to visit the Sweetwater Reserve to see the inspiring conservation work of the Taiko Trust, and the rare privilege of seeing an unpaired male Taiko – AKA Magenta Petrel –

at the nest burrow. The patches of native vegetation provided sightings of cute Chatham Islands Gerygone and hulking Chatham Islands Pigeon, with two endemic shags (Chatham Islands and Pitt) from the ship.



Tuku Reserve © Mike Hoit



Magenta Petrel © Mike Hoit

17th December: At sea.

A long journey back towards Bluff, and more time to observe seabirds in their element. In fact, on both of these at-sea days, the only birds seen were tubenoses! Among the species seen were Gibson's, Northern and Southern Royal Albatrosses, Mottled, Soft-plumaged and Cook's Petrels, the trip's only Flesh-footed Shearwater and White-faced Storm-Petrel.



Chatham signs © Mike Hoit

18th December: At sea.

The final full day was a last chance to get to try to grips with 'cookilaria' petrel and prion identification, or just enjoy the seabird spectacle! Photos taken revealed several Pycroft's Petrels (considered rare in these waters), and Dusky Dolphins made several appearances late in the day.

19th December: Arrival back to Bluff.

At daybreak we were already within the natural harbour, with a last chance to look for coastal birds. After disembarkation it was back to the real world, after a true trip of a lifetime. Birding Down Under 2024 species list (eBird)