

Birds New Zealand Youth Camp - 2017 (by Eleanor Gunby)



Photo taken by Oscar Thomas

During the April school holidays, I was lucky enough to attend my third Birds NZ Youth Camp, which this year was held in the Bay of Islands. Having never been further north than Auckland, I felt sure there would be many new and interesting birds to see, and I was definitely not disappointed.

On day one, we all met up at Auckland airport before starting the drive to Russell. To break up all the driving, we made three birding stops – one to find Fairy Tern, and two to search for Australasian Little Grebes. We found a Fairy Tern at Waipu, getting good views of the roosting bird. We searched for the grebes but, despite our best efforts, they were nowhere to be seen. Sadly there wasn't any extra time to be spent searching, so we carried on and arrived in Russell just in time for dinner. Before bed, we were given a talk about Urupukapuka Island and Project Island Song (you can read about it at <https://www.projectislandsong.co.nz/>) in preparation for our visit to the island the following day.

Day two, and our trip to Urupukapuka Island was at hand. We took the ferry over, and split up into our groups to practise five minute birds counts. These are hard enough in Canterbury where I'm actually familiar with the birds, but on the island with calls like Saddleback and Myna to interpret, it was really tricky at first. The different dialects didn't help either. Still, I found myself becoming more confident with them the more counts we did. The highlight of the morning was spotting a Whitehead as my group was walking back to meet up with the others. After a quick lunch, we had some free time to wander around before the ferry came at two thirty. Since there was nothing in particular I wanted to search for, I hung around where we'd eaten and was rewarded by spotting a couple of Saddleback, the first I'd seen that day. The rest of the afternoon was spent in Russell, exploring our camp ground and the mangrove swamp across the road. That evening, it was time for our North Island Brown Kiwi survey. In four teams, we each went to a site nearby and sat for an hour, recording all the Kiwi calls we heard, including the sex of the bird, what time it called, and the compass bearing of the call. The group I was in only heard one Kiwi, so we also recorded the Weka calls for practise.

A bit of breakfast-time birding on day three allowed us views of a Brown Teal and brief glimpses of a Fernbird around the pond in front of the holiday camp. We spent the rest of the day entirely away from Russell, starting with a drive out to Ninety Mile Beach to participate in a beach patrol. On the way, we made two quick stops, one of which turned up a Reef Heron, while the other finally yielded an Australasian Little Grebe. Upon arriving at Ninety Mile Beach, we split up again, with each team starting at a different location. We found the bodies of a Little Blue Penguin, a Fluttering Shearwater, and an Arctic Skua. While it wasn't a lot, this

was the first beach patrol I've done and I really enjoyed it. Next up was a stop at Awanui Wharf to see the nearly five hundred Royal Spoonbills, a very impressive sight. While we were watching them, five other white birds flew over – Cattle Egrets! Our last bit of birding that afternoon was at the Kaitaia Sewage Ponds, but we only spent a little time there and I personally didn't see much. After yet another delicious dinner, and half of a talk on seabird identification, we headed out to see...Barn Owl! This was my favourite bird of the trip, and I was really excited to get such good views as one landed, flew to another tree, and then flew off. Our final activity was the other half of the seabird talk, which made sure we were all prepared for the pelagic the next day.

The main activity on day four was a pelagic out to the Poor Knights Islands. Since I get seasick, it had been a hard decision as to whether I should risk it or not. In the end I decided I couldn't stand missing out on all those seabirds, even if I did feel awful. Still, I was slightly apprehensive when we reached Tutukaka and boarded the boat, ready to head out. On the way out, we saw some Gannets, Fluttering Shearwaters and Common Diving Petrels. But it was when we stopped the boat and threw out some fish that the real excitement began. Two Campbell Island Mollymawks landed beside the boat, along with Flesh-footed Shearwaters. Black Petrels, Fairy Prions and Buller's Shearwaters flew by, allowing us good views. And, right before we started the journey back, we even managed to see some New Zealand Storm Petrels. As the motor started up again and the land began drawing slowly nearer, I blithely assumed we'd seen all the seabirds we were going to see. But as we were moving past Sugar Loaf Rock, what did we find but some Grey Ternlets – twenty six of them, in fact! If I'd doubted it before (which I hadn't), the birds definitely made the sickness worth it, and I was pleased to note that I didn't feel quite as bad as I had done on my first pelagic.

Before I knew it, it was day five already – our last day of camp. We decided to make the most of the time we had left by getting up early and walking around the mangrove swamp across the road to look for Banded Rail. Some people had seen them there on previous mornings, but I'm not exactly what you'd call a morning person. So it was a nice reward for the 5am start to catch glimpses of a rail amongst the mangroves. Maybe getting up early sometimes is worth it, after all! After that, there was just time to practise five minute bird counts at four stations around the holiday camp before we had to leave. On the way back to Auckland, we only made one stop, looking for Bittern on Marsden Point Road. While the views weren't brilliant, I managed a quick glimpse of its head amongst the reeds. Bitterns certainly are secretive and well camouflaged.

After that, it seemed like barely any time at all before we had reached the airport and were all going separate ways. All three of the teen camps I've attended have been very different, but they have all been really amazing experiences and I've enjoyed each and every one. So thanks everyone for yet another brilliant camp!



Photo taken by Les Feasey

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