

## **New Zealand trip report: October/November 2011**

*By Peter and Penny Williams*

Four years ago, we travelled to the Russian Far East and participated in a thrilling expedition cruise along the coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Kuril Islands. This was run by a New Zealand organisation called Heritage Expeditions, using a former oceanographic research ship leased from the Russian Navy called *Professor Kromhov*, but also known as *Spirit of Enderby* for those who prefer a more Western name. While on that trip, we heard for the first time about some mysterious islands to the south of New Zealand called the Sub-Antarctic Islands, which are the home to countless millions of seabirds and penguins. Heritage runs two or three expedition cruises every year to these islands, and it became clear that we would have to visit them some day. This is the story of how we finally achieved that ambition.

New Zealand is such a long way from the UK that a short holiday is unrealistic. The Heritage cruise that visits each one of the Sub-Antarctic Islands itself takes 18 days. So we worked out that with travelling time and a margin of error, the trip would take four weeks. The celebration of our 25th wedding anniversary in October 2011 seemed an appropriate opportunity to ask for such a lengthy break from work, and coincided with the cruise that we wanted to join.

Our trip started with a 14 hour overnight flight from London to Singapore on a Saturday. In Singapore we stopped for 24 hours to recover, and flew on to Invercargill at the foot of South Island, via Sydney and Christchurch. Although it was spring in New Zealand (October) and the daffodils and bluebells were flowering, the temperature was much the same as we had left at home.

In Invercargill we stayed at the Kelvin Hotel, where the expedition cruise was due to kick off in five days' time. My brother Andrew had tracked us down and arranged for a bottle of champagne to be put in our room to mark our anniversary which was both a very sweet gesture and a prompt to the hotel to give us an upgrade to their best room – which were lovely surprises on both counts.

We spent the following two days on Stewart Island. This small island lies to the south of South Island, and can be thought of as New Zealand's version of the Isle of Wight, although it is bigger and virtually undeveloped except for a small village that seems to consist almost entirely of tourist accommodation. Our B&B hosts, Peter and Iris Tait, took us to Ulva Island which is a tiny island nearby that is uninhabited and has had all introduced predators removed. Some endangered birds have been re-introduced including Saddlebacks. With no predators, the birds are generally extremely tame and we loved the close views of New Zealand Robin, Weka (a type of rail, like a larger version of a Coot, but flightless), Tomtit and Kaka (a species of parrot). Indeed, we enjoyed Ulva so much that we returned there on the afternoon of our second day as well.

We spent the following three days in Fjordland, on the SW coast of South Island. We hired a car and drove on virtually deserted roads from Invercargill to Te Anau, which lies in the Southern Alps and is a ludicrously pretty place with snowy mountains as a backdrop and a mirror-smooth lake in the foreground. On one day we took a cruise on Doubtful Sound, one of

the fjords, and on another we drove northwards, experiencing rain in New Zealand for the first time, to encounter the Keas (NZ mountain parrots) as they attempted to strip the rubber off our hire car, as they are well known to do (in the manner of monkeys in safari parks). On the final day we drove back to Invercargill and stopped for a coffee in the small town of Tuatapere. We can thoroughly recommend a stop at the Yesteryears Museum and Cafe to experience seriously good home-made food, brilliant ice-cream and the most elegant exhibit of old kitchen utensils, pots and pans imaginable.

### **The expedition kicks off**

It was now time to join the expedition. We met up in the Kelvin Hotel in Invercargill over a buffet dinner. There were about 48 travellers on the expedition, together with Rodney Russ (expedition leader), two naturalists (Adam and Katya), and the ship's hotel manager (Gemma). There was also a representative of the NZ Government (Alex) to make sure that Rodney kept to all the rules (Heritage Expeditions is the only organisation that is permitted to visit the Sub-Antarctic Islands, all of which are World Heritage sites). There were two NZ chefs on board (Bruce and Jeremy): food was of restaurant quality for most of the time which is a step above previous holidays on similar ships. The ship is owned and crewed by Russians, and leased to Heritage Expeditions, Rodney's company. It is about 70 metres long, which is only the length of three railway carriages (extremely small to be allowed out in such big seas on her own, we feel). She was built for the Russian Navy for oceanographic work (if the story is to be believed). Conspiracy theorists say that she – and five or six sister ships – were built for speedy delivery of Russian troops into Scandinavia in the event of a Cold War incursion. We don't know the truth, of course, but the troops would have had a fairly comfortable ride. The ship travels around the waters south of New Zealand (all the way to the Antarctic) in the Southern summer, and then moves to the Russian Far East in the southern winter (northern summer), where we previously met her.

There is no need to tell the story of the holiday day by day. Such a report will shortly be available on the Heritage Expeditions website, and in any event there were only three sorts of days on the holiday. The first kind was ashore, exploring an island. There were few of these days, as we were not permitted to land on many of the islands that we visited. Where we did land, we spent about 4-6 hours ashore. The second kind was cruising by rubber inflatable boat (zodiacs) along the shoreline of one of the islands on which we were not permitted to land. Such cruises lasted for a couple of hours.

The third kind was days at sea, moving between islands. In all we travelled some 2,600 miles in the ship. The ship travels at only ten knots (11 mph) and islands were often 300-400 miles apart, so the journeys took a couple of days. At the end of the holiday, we left the Chatham islands on Tuesday lunchtime and did not dock in Dunedin until 7 am on the Friday morning – 2½ days at sea. Days at sea were not wasted. There were birds and whales to look out for and photograph, meals to eat, occasional lectures to attend (when it was not too rough), books to read and photographs to sort (and sleeping tablets to sleep off – there was some pretty rough weather, particularly in the first week). On two occasions the ship's naturalist attracted albatrosses to the ship by flinging "chum" (the parts of fish discarded by fishing boats) into the water. It produced impressive results, attracting hundreds of birds on each occasion.

## **Where we went on the cruise**

Again, exactly where we went does not need to be addressed in huge detail, and there is more information available on the web about each island. Most of the islands are volcanic in origin, although Macquarie Island is actually part of the Earth's mantle, pushed up to the surface (the only place on earth where this is known to have occurred, which resulted in its World Heritage Site status). In order we visited:

**Snares Islands** – this entailed a zodiac cruise for two hours . The islands are home to millions of burrowing petrels and shearwaters and people are not allowed to visit as they will crush the burrows.

**Auckland Islands** – we spent one fantastic day circumnavigating (on foot) a small island called Enderby Island in the north of the archipelago. This was a walk of five or six miles, which took about six hours as the second half of the terrain was very rough and there was a full-blown blizzard for an hour or so during that time. On the second day we were meant to visit an albatross colony on the main island but the strength of the wind prevented us even approaching it, let alone landing there.

**Macquarie Island** – this is the only island not owned by New Zealand, instead being Australian. It is a long two-day trip to the south of the Auckland Islands, and they are remote enough! A small community of scientists lives permanently on the island. We were given a splendid four-hour tour of a tiny part of the island, which was littered with vast elephant seals. We also saw a small King Penguin colony and a solitary Royal Penguin (important for the reason explained below). There are vast (half-million strong) colonies of both types of penguin elsewhere on the island, which we were scheduled to visit. However a big north-easterly swell – unexpected as it was coming from the “wrong” direction – prevented us landing at the penguin colonies. These islands are in the Southern Ocean, in the Furious Fifties , so extreme weather is not unusual. But even Rodney was surprised by how often the wind was blowing from the East on this trip.

**Campbell Island** – just one small uninhabited island in the middle of nowhere. It has an inlet that acts as a harbour so one can land with zodiacs in most weathers. There is a boardwalk across the island which enables scientists and the few visitors to keep off the fragile soil. We spent about four hours on this island and were able to see courting, and even mating, Royal Albatrosses (which have a wingspan of some 11 feet). A splendid day.

**Antipodes Islands** – so named because they are (virtually) “beneath the feet” of people in London ie on the exact opposite spot on the globe. You cannot land on these islands. Once again the weather here was unfriendly (with gale-force winds and spray blowing everywhere) but against all odds, Rodney managed to take us on a short zodiac ride where we saw the Erect Crested Penguin – Penny's 17th and last penguin species. Huge relief all round. This was of course why seeing the one Royal Penguin on Macquarie Island had been so important.

**Bounty Islands** – these are a few isolated lumps of rock on which tens of thousands of fur seals and seabirds nest. We viewed them by zodiac cruise, again following a somewhat tricky transfer from the ship in strong winds and a noticeable swell. The islands were first discovered by Captain Bligh of *The Bounty*, hence their name.

**Chatham Islands** – these islands were different from the others, as about 600 people live on them, mostly farming sheep. The islands used to be forested but are now mostly fields with rather an alarming amount of gorse. The islands lie to the East of the 180 degree meridian (ie in the Western hemisphere) but the International Date Line has been bent around them to ensure that they are in the same day as NZ (although 45 minutes earlier in time). We spent half a day on the islands and visited (by school bus) a reserve set up by an enterprising couple who have fenced off a valley (looking remarkably like a Cornish valley) to keep out the predators, and are now seeing the vegetation re-growing and the birdlife recovering. They call their organisation the Taiko Trust, after the endemic Magenta Petrel (“taiko” in Maori) which nests on the islands. We did not see the Taiko on the Chatham Islands as they are very rare and only fly near land at night, but three were seen from the ship on the previous day – probably a record, as they are so rare (Penny saw one of them). In the reserve we were able to see fine specimens of the endemic Chatham Island forget-me-not (*Myosotidium hortensia*) – now in many gardens around the world – and some fantastic ferns and tree ferns.

## **Wildlife**

Wildlife was the main reason for the trip, and we were not disappointed by what we saw.

**Seabirds** – We saw hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of birds over the holiday including albatrosses, shearwaters, petrels, prions, terns and gulls. Many species were endemic to the particular places we visited (for example, the Chatham Island Albatross nests only on Pyramid Rock, an isolated rock off the Chatham Islands). For birders who are aiming to see every bird species on earth (and there were a few on board), this type of trip is essential. Many islands had their own endemic versions of common birds such as shags – which had clearly evolved slightly differently (as in the Galapagos Islands). There were four species of penguins, and if you count the two penguin colonies we saw (from a distance) from the ship on Macquarie Island we must have seen at least a million penguins. Not quite in the manner we had hoped for, however.

**Other birds** – the highlight was a Stewart Island Kiwi, which we saw late at night on a beach on Stewart Island (having gone out with a guide to look for one). The Tui (also known as the Parsonbird) for its white throat feathers was amazing (with its amazingly varied calls) and the parrots (on the NZ main islands), including the mischievous Kea (mountain parrot) and the Kaka. . There were some re-introduced NZ birds on isolated islands, such as the Saddlebacks. Also endemic passerines (songbirds) such as pipits, plovers and dotterels on the islands. Again each island tended to have its own version of these birds. The mainland was full of European songbirds taken out to NZ by the original settlers to remind them of the old country, such as blackbirds, thrushes and finches. We saw more Yellowhammers and Redpolls in NZ than we have even seen in the UK.

**Whales and dolphins** – disappointingly few although we had a fantastic encounter with bottle-nosed dolphins in the Chatham Islands, where they played around the zodiacs on one of the excursions.

**Seals and sea lions** – loads of them. Fur seals are actually sea lions, not seals. The difference is that sea lions have ears and can walk on all fours, and seals can't.

**Land animals** – very few, which is not surprising given that NZ had no indigenous mammals before Europeans arrived (with the exception of a couple of bats). We saw a few hares and rabbits on the mainland, and we did see a staggering number of sheep there as well. Efforts are being made to poison or trap the rats, rabbits and other introduced animals on some of the Sub-Antarctic Islands, to protect the populations of ground-nesting birds. Some of the islands were originally inhabited for short periods in the nineteenth century, while animals such as pigs were originally introduced on others to provide food for shipwrecked sailors. Rats have colonised nearly all the islands at some time, although they have been removed from many of them now – a massively expensive task requiring the dropping of bait from helicopters.

**Plants** – New Zealand flax (*phormium tenax*) was everywhere, just beginning to flower in the Chatham Islands (in the same way as the daffodils flower first in the Scilly Islands). On the mainland and on Stewart Island and the Chatham Islands there were fantastic ferns of all shapes and sizes including tree ferns. On the Sub-Antarctic Islands there were grasses and many varieties of shrubs, and also herbaceous plants known as “megaherbs” because of their size. Most of them were only just beginning to grow at the beginning of the season, but we did see some extraordinary yellow lily-type flowers called *Bulbinella rossii* and the cauliflower-like flowers of *Anisotomi latifolia* (Campbell Island carrot). Later in the southern summer the flora of the Sub-Antarctic islands must be simply stunning. For us it was “You should have come here next month”.

### **Ending the holiday**

The holiday ended at Dunedin at breakfast time on a very wet day. A change of flight time after our original booking meant that we were not able to fly all the way to Singapore that day. We therefore had arranged to spend a night at the opulent Arthur’s Pass Wildlife Lodge about two hours’ drive from Christchurch, high in the Southern Alps. The glaciated scenery was magnificent. Before dinner we enjoyed a nature walk with Nicky, the local guide, where we found two rare Long-Tailed Cuckoos, and the following morning we spent a wonderful couple of hours before breakfast walking along a braided river in the glaciated valley below the hotel with Skylarks singing above us and Yellowhammers and Redpolls singing around us, before driving back to Christchurch – to fly back to Sydney and Singapore. We had another 24 hour break in Singapore before flying back to London – and back to work.

A wonderful way to celebrate 25 years of marriage.

*Internet links to relevant websites can be found at*

[www.blue-whale.co.uk/newzealand/html/new\\_zealand\\_2011\\_links.html](http://www.blue-whale.co.uk/newzealand/html/new_zealand_2011_links.html)