

## **New Zealand's South Island, March 2025**

A visit to the South Island with my wife (who loves seeing mammals providing she doesn't have to walk too far or stay more than one night away from civilization) produced a nice little set of lifers for me.

Flew into Christchurch and collected our hire car. The next day we drove across Banks Peninsula to Akaroa where we took a harbour cruise to find the endemic **Hector's Dolphin**, a beautiful little cetacean with a rounded dorsal fin and a lot of white coloration on its body.



Hector's Dolphin

We also saw **New Zealand Fur Seals** near the mouth of the harbour but more about them later.

A day spent exploring Christchurch and learning about its recovery after the earthquakes, then south to Oamaru for a must-see stop at the Steampunk Museum, then on to Dunedin. From here we drove out to Otago Peninsula to visit Lanarch Castle, then across to Allan's Beach Reserve on the southern coast for **New Zealand Sea Lions**. Parking is only two minutes' walk from the beach where we found 5 sea lions hauled out and sleeping on the

sand, in the open and along the foot of the nearby cliffs. Sea Lions haul out at various beaches on this peninsula but this was a convenient road to drive for us.



New Zealand Sea Lion

After exploring some of the second-hand bookshops in Dunedin we drove south to the Catlins, a pretty area on the south west corner of the South island. We were trying for Yellow-eyed Penguin but the hide we visited at Roaring Bay had reported only two birds this season which did not nest, and did not come ashore on the evening we were there. More **NZ Sea-Lions** nearby however 😊 at Nugget Point.

Stopping at Invercargill's lovely central park to walk around in the wildlife section where there was a marvellous opportunity to see captive Tuatara (the only remaining species of the Reptilian order Rhynchocephalia)

Tuatara



Then on to the East Coast and the spectacular mountain and fjord country. We had booked a cruise on Doubtful Sound which was a boat and bus trip just to reach the jetty. Some hours relaxing on the water were just about coming to a close when we got mid-distant views of Oceanic or **Common Bottlenose Dolphin** which was my first unexpected surprise mammal obviously I didn't do enough research as these normally offshore dolphins are semi-resident here)

From here to Queenstown the extreme sport capital of NZ where my aim was to spotlight the backstreets looking for European Hedgehog, a feral introduction from the 1870s when Englishmen were homesick and wanted familiar things around them. In a land of ground dwelling birds, hedgehogs (along with weasels, stoats, foxes and Australian brushtail possums have become a big threat). Lots of hedgehog roadkill everywhere we drove.

iNaturalist has a hedgehog sighting behind our hotel out near the airport so with my trusty thermal I walked out in search. Quite literally hundreds of European rabbits everywhere and ... yes, one hedgehog. Difficult to photograph even in the short grass.

An unscheduled return to Christchurch left us with time on our hands so we visited the excellent Willowbank Wildlife Reserve primarily to see some of the endemic birds like brown kiwi and kea, albeit in captivity. I was not in mammalwatching mode so the rat I saw scavenging fruit in the lemur enclosure did not register in my consciousness until the next morning. Back to Willowbank to stake out the lemur displays and yes, **Brown Rat!** How convenient! Talking to the staff I found out that they are regular interlopers especially after local rain. Another two in the Black and White Lemur enclosure were busy running back and forth gathering nesting materials.



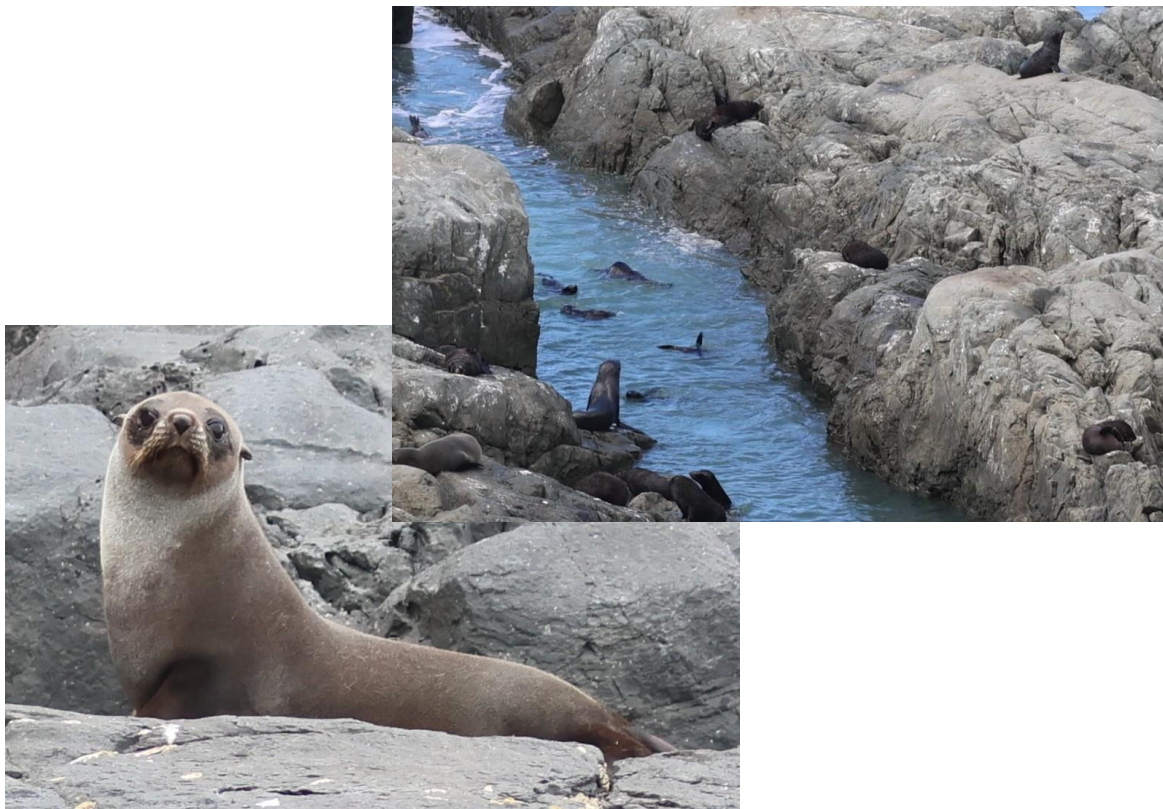
Brown Rat

Now it was time for the Grand Finale – up the highway to Kaikoura. As we neared the town, there were cars parked on the beachside road and a glance out to sea instantly revealed a pod of at least a hundred **Dusky Dolphins**, cavorting and leaping, doing front and back flips, and

multiple side leaps. Magical! They stay close to shore when they have young to avoid the occasional Orca which skirt around New Zealand waters.



Kaikoura is also very good for **New Zealand Fur Seals**, with a haulout on the peninsula at the edge of town, and a rookery a few km north of the town (no coordinates but there is a very large car park on the ocean side of the road with views directly down)



I did two boat trips for **Sperm Whale**, being successful twice on the first and once on the second. Deep water trenches are close to land here so you can reach Sperm Whale territory in about 20 minutes. I also saw a pair of **Blue Whales** (and other species had been sighted during the week including Long-finned Pilot Whales). I couldn't get my wife to come on the boat tours but she did enjoy a 30 minute flight from where we got amazing aerial views of a Sperm Whale to finish our trip.



### **Mammal list summary**

Hector's Dolphin - Akaroa

Common Bottlenose Dolphin - Doubtful Sound

Dusky Dolphin - Kaikoura

Sperm Whale - Kaikoura

Blue Whale - Kaikoura

New Zealand Fur Seal – Otago Peninsula, The Catlins

New Zealand Sea Lion – Evans Peninsula, Kaikoura

European Hedgehog – Queenstown (and roadkill everywhere)

Brown Rat - Christchurch

European Rabbit - Queenstown

Domestic Goat (feral) – The Catlins