



Year of the twitcher

Primed for a birding adventure? Join the club, as what used to be niche becomes mainstream, writes **Jacqui Gibson**.

Soaring seabirds, fluttering forest birds, mind-blowing migratory birds – these are the rising stars of bucket-list holidays.

Birding getaways are set to be hot in 2026, as New Zealanders take breaks focused on the simple joy of scanning the sky.

"New Zealanders love our native birds," says Forest & Bird group manager Rebecca Hatch. Last year's Bird of the Year poll proves the point, she says, with voting and engagement by Kiwis at record highs, making it one of the most successful campaigns yet.

"For many New Zealanders, birds are part of our national identity," she says.

But such affection for birds is not unique to New Zealanders. New data from Tourism New Zealand shows 83% of future visitors want a wildlife experience such as birdwatching when they arrive here, with tourists from Germany and the United States among those ranking wildlife experiences most highly.

Over the pond, Australian birdwatchers spent nearly A\$636 million (NZ\$735m) on birdwatching-related travel in 2024 – a 53% increase since 2021, according to Tourism Research Australia.

International spend in Australia, meanwhile, totalled nearly NZ\$3 billion in 2024.

In the US, the National Audubon Society

reports more than one in three adults now enjoys birding, with numbers rising following Covid. The demographic of birders, typically older men, is changing too.

Counted among North America's estimated 96 million birders are more women, people from a broader range of ethnicities and the young and tech-savvy.

Social media, more affordable gear and birding apps such as Ebird are reportedly attracting new audiences and contributing to a worldwide birding boom.

The good news is there are plenty of ways to get in on the trend in 2026. And you won't have to travel far to do it.

From penguin watching in Oamaru to an airboat safari in Australia's Top End, there's a birding experience for everyone.

Try these twitching hot spots

Two coastal sites near Auckland offer some of the country's best no-cost, self-guided birdwatching, particularly in summer when migratory birds arrive here to feed and breed.

An hour's drive from Auckland city, you'll find Muriwai's nesting gannet colony. Take the short walking track from the car park to a viewing platform above the colony to see the incredible seabirds and their chicks.

South of Auckland, on the east coast, is the Pūkorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre (shorebirds.org.nz), open from 9am



Heritage Expeditions offers a Birding Down Under voyage in the subantarctic. CATHY FINCH

to 5pm daily. Visit the centre two hours either side of high tide from January to March for best views of the resident and migratory shorebirds (including the kuaka or bar-tailed godwit) that gather on the tidal flats and shellbanks.

Peek out from bird hides about half an hour's walk from the centre, where you can rent binoculars and basic accommodation

if you want to stay overnight and make a weekend of it.

Let little blues charm you

In the North Otago settlement of Oamaru, about five minutes' drive from town, little blue penguins (korora) come ashore every night at dusk. Book an evening tour of the Oamaru blue penguin colony (*penguins*.

A magpie goose in Australia's Bamurru Plains.
RICHARD I'ANSON



Birdwatch by airboat safari, hide or on an open-top game drive at Bamurru Plains.



Spot kiwi on Rakiura/Stewart Island or Ulva Island.



GREAT SOUTH A photo-ready guest travelling with Heritage Expeditions.

starting inside the discovery centre. About 8pm, head outside to viewing platforms to watch hundreds of the little blue seabirds returning to the colony.

Note, photography and filming aren't allowed to avoid disturbing these sensitive wee souls.

Make friends at a birding festival

A short boat ride from Hobart is Tasmania's Bruny Island, where the three-day biannual Bruny Island Bird Festival (brunybirdfestival.org) is held. In 2026, it runs from March 20 to 22.

Open to all birders, regardless of skill or knowledge level, it features lectures, birding tours, bird ID training, a market, art workshops and more.

Being part of a like-minded community is the main draw of this festival, with people coming together to celebrate birding and generously share what they know. Children are welcome.

Stay in a remote bird sanctuary

Back in the day, it was thrilling enough to overnight in a Department of Conservation (DOC) hut in the hope of spotting our national bird on the lawn outside.

Now, you can camp in a wilderness sanctuary in total luxury surrounded by wandering kiwi.

On Rakiura/Stewart Island, PurePods (purepods.com) have built two off-grid cabins within regenerating bush and the kiwi breeding grounds of Mamaku Point Conservation Reserve.

Staying in a glass pod means kiwi-spotting from the comfort of your bed is possible.

But your best bet is to take a night tour of

the reserve with Emma Jenkinson, a sixth-generation islander and kiwi spotting guide for Ulva Guided Walks (ulva.co.nz).

Australia's Lord Howe Island has long been a magnet for bird lovers. Filming his documentary series *The Life of Birds*, Sir David Attenborough remarked how awed he was by the island.

Be impressed too by basing yourself at Lord Howe Island's Capella Lodge (capellalodge.com.au).

Arrive between March and November to see the aerial courtship display of the rare Providence petrel.

Get the best views from Little Island track, but also look out for the many birds that roost in the island's cliffs and on its beaches throughout the year.

Tucked away in tropical Top End, one of Australia's most remote regions, Bamurru Plains (bamurruplains.com) puts you on the coastal floodplains of the Mary River wetlands near Kakadu National Park and, as such, in a prime spot to enjoy the region's birdlife.

Between March and October, stay in the lodge's safari bungalows or larger kingfisher suite and take your pick of birdwatching by airboat safari, open-top game drive or from the lodge's hide.

Go on a birding cruise or small group tour

In 2025, the remote subantarctic featured in Conde Nast Traveler's 25 Best Places to Go, reflecting growing interest in the world's lesser-known birding destinations.

This summer, you can cruise there with Heritage Expeditions (heritage-expeditions.com), a New Zealand expedition company that travels to the subantarctic, as well as the Chatham Islands and its outlying islands, on the Birding Down Under tour.

Seeing rare penguins and albatross is a major highlight of this trip, as is travelling with a lineup of knowledgeable and experienced guides.

The natural and historic wonders of Lake Mungo in Australia's Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area are reasons enough to visit.

But to the many birders who go there, the real stars are its brilliant parrots and cockatoos. A six-day small group tour with Echidna Walkabout Nature Tours by Australian Geographic Travel (australiangeographictravel.com) runs throughout the year from March until October and will introduce you to the many birds that inhabit the outback's ancient landscape – an invitation to escape to another time and different world.

Plan your trip

As a newbie birder, start by paying attention to neighbourhood birds. Grab a sunhat, borrow some binoculars and head to the nearest forest park, bird colony or native bird sanctuary for a couple of hours.

Summer is great for birding: it's breeding season and seabirds are closer to shore.

Before you go, familiarise yourself with the birdsong of 10 New Zealand forest birds by completing DOC's online bird identification course (doc.govt.nz).

Another great bird identification resource is the digital encyclopedia of New Zealand birds (nzbirdsonline.org.nz).

Carbon footprint:

Flying generates carbon emissions. To reduce your impact, consider other ways of travelling, amalgamate your trips, and when you need to fly, consider offsetting carbon emissions.