

A detailed painting of a white egret standing in shallow water. The bird is shown in profile, facing left, with its long neck elegantly curved. Its feathers are meticulously rendered, showing soft textures and subtle variations in white. The water is calm, creating a clear reflection of the bird. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with a light sky and a distant horizon line.

NICOLAS DILLON

Drawn to
the wild

Paintings of
New Zealand birds

New Zealand Falcon

KAREAREA

For me the sighting of a New Zealand Falcon will always raise the pulse rate. As a teenager I had a view of the hills behind home from my little bedroom studio. There was a series of rocky outcrops that attracted falcons as a hunting perch. If one showed up, I would drop everything grab my binoculars and run to get a little closer. More often than not it was Autumn and they were almost always juvenile birds, pushed out of the nesting area to find their own territory. They sat like dark sculptures on the lichen encrusted rocks.

Higher up on the farm I would occasionally see adult birds. Bold and fearless they would often approach remarkably closely. On one occasion a small male bird took advantage of my wanderings and followed me plucking flying grasshoppers from the air as I disturbed them. A fully plumaged adult always has an electrifying intensity and a presence that can leave you feeling truly alive.



Royal Spoonbill

KOTUKU-NGUTUPAPA

On a calm September evening the low coastal landscape is transformed by a magical light. Three Royal Spoonbills rest and preen in the lagoon's shallow water, a zephyr of breeze stirs their head plumes. The white plumage is transformed by light, the last rays sculpting their breast's and bellies with a warm rose gold while the wings and back, which are in shadow, reflect the cerulean blue sky beyond. A little wind ripple breaks the water's surface capturing these same colours. One bird, a large male, turns his bill directly towards me and commands my attention, I'm captivated by his presence. The black bill is like an ornate tribal artefact, its wide spatulate blade is inlaid with wavy lines that peter out towards the tip. Above his eyes are bright yellow wax-like eyebrows and right in the middle of the forehead a patch of warm red skin. This spot of colour is like a Bindi, the circular dot worn by Indians, the mystical third eye of Hindu culture. As if lead by this notion I'm transported into another world and taken on a journey beyond the physical reality before me. I sit as if in meditation on this tranquil spring evening. The water reflects the sky and they merge as one adding to the spiritual quality. I open myself to the moment, absorb all I can and almost lose contact with reality. Feeling an urge to capture

these sensations, I take out my brush mix a few colour tones and try to interpret something of the atmosphere.

The Royal Spoonbill in breeding plumage is both exotic and elegant they are full of character with a certain other worldly appearance. To my eyes they look like ancient spirits from a long-lost tribe. In recent years they have become one of my favourite models and I feel an increasing desire to paint them. In Marlborough there is a breeding population on the Wairau Lagoons not far from my studio and numbers have increased substantially since my first encounters with them in the early 1980's. The Spoonbill, like so many of our native birds, arrived here from Australia, wind-blown across the Tasman Sea. They were first observed breeding in south Westland amongst the White Heron colony near Okarito in the late 1940's. Since then they have slowly spread throughout New Zealand and are often seen in small flocks on wetlands and estuaries. Here they feed with a distinctive scything motion capturing little fish and other aquatic morsels with their giant bills. I have been entertained on numerous occasions watching them taking small flounder in the shallows, a flock will career around like crazed madmen trying to scoop up the scuttling flat fish. They are always a joy to watch.





Takahe

This large flightless rail has a somewhat ancient and almost prehistoric appearance. Takahe however can also seem quite exotic in their colouring. Their plumage, like so many birds is an expression of the environment. In the deep resonant blues, I can read elements of the shadowy mountains, across the back fragments of forest and a little cerulean blue copied from the lower part of the sky. In the huge beak, I see a reflection of the blood red dawn mixed with the soft pink of late evening cloud. My imagination can perhaps run a little wild in trying to interpret these colours.

In 2016 I made a large watercolour of a Takahe in a snowstorm. I imagined it to be somewhere deep in the Murchison Mountains, west of Lake Te Anau, their last natural stronghold. The title 'Alone in the Wilderness' perhaps refers as much to where I wish to be as it does to the Takahe itself



Nicklas Dillen 2016

Fairy Tern

TARA ITI

They sit hunkered down against the prevailing westerly. Three tiny Tara iti, New Zealand's rarest bird. Gleaming like jewels they add their colours and forms to the tapestry of sand and shell on this vast sandspit. It's a perilous existence as gusts barrel out across the dunes constantly shifting the sand. This is a landscape that changes by the hour as the terns wait out the tide until they can return again to fish the estuary. I make some quick sketches get out my watercolours but soon realise it is a futile idea, the fine silica ends up in everything. I will have to wait until I get back home and complete my study indoors. I quietly sit and observe, make a few quick pencil sketches and try to absorb everything I can. I will return again in the morning, at first light before the wind gets up.

Numbering less than 40 birds the Tara iti teeters on the brink of extinction. They nest in this fragile environment of sand, open to storm tides, predation and human disturbance.





Bar tailed Godwit

KUAKA

They arrive from the north-east out of a leaden sky lit with shafts of the morning sun. I catch sight of them as they hurtle low across the molten sea, swinging down the beach to pitch in and land just meters from me. Eighteen Bar tailed Godwits, all of them juveniles, silhouetted against the wave washed sand, their pale buffy upperparts notched with dark sepia markings. Gaunt and unable to put their wings away they start feeding voraciously as if they have never eaten. Instantly I realise what I'm witnessing, a 'first landing', these birds have just touched down after eight or nine days of non-stop flight across the great glistening belly of the Pacific. It's astounding and even more so considering they are just a few months old and have made the journey unaccompanied by adults. I marvel at this innate sense of navigation and their ability to traverse the giant tract-less ocean. Focusing in with my scope I seek out their eyes in order to make some form of contact with their indomitable spirit. Small dark eyes that shine with vitality, like the ripened berries of the tundra they have left far behind. They look trusting as if they wish to confide something of their remarkable journey.

For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated by shorebirds and their extraordinary migrations. The Bar tailed Godwit arrives on our shores in September, an elegant bird in subtle greys, browns and beige. They disperse amongst the large tidal harbours and smaller estuaries. Our dazzling light seems to vanish them in these vast arenas of watery ooze. Around the end of January, I feel a strong urge to seek out Godwits, driven

by a desire to study their plumage, to watch nature paint her way into their costume. Through thousands of years of evolution, the breeding grounds have been copied into their DNA. As they moult into new plumage through the summer a complex array of patterns and colours emerge in their feathers, forming a tapestry of the arctic vegetation. It is like watching the slow ripening of fruit or the colouring up of deciduous trees in the autumn. They start to fatten, building up reserves for the return flight. The subtle colours of the females become even more beautiful, the flanks becoming flecked with wavy patterning moving into rows of arrows towards the rear where the tail area takes on the distinctive barred feathering. The males gather warmer notes of burnt sienna in varying degrees and I'm always on the lookout for smaller males that become almost completely dark rufous. There is a never-ending variation on the theme. As migration approaches, I'm not sure if it is the aesthetic pleasure I'm acquiring or the palpable excitement emanating from birds that are close to migration. I can begin to feel very attached to these beautiful birds and I start to worry for them on their long journey north to breed in the Alaskan tundra.



