

# Voyagers make intriguing discovery

Kelly Deeks

Christchurch expedition cruise company Heritage Expeditions has a new feather in its cap with the discovery of an, as yet, unknown species of seabird – the Heritage Lava Petrel.

For more than 30 years, Heritage Expeditions has been operating voyages to some of the most remote and least-visited shores on the planet including seabird hot-spots located in the Pacific Ocean.

“Our company was founded with the ethos of taking people to these places that would otherwise be inaccessible,” says expedition leader and director Aaron Russ.

“It’s a nice consideration that after more than 30 years, our ship has been able to take people to find what is potentially a new species.”

One of its popular birding voyages, Western Pacific Odyssey, takes Heritage Expeditions’ vessel Spirit of Enderby from Tauranga to Japan, through areas rich in seabird life.

Due to the oil leak which occurred in the Solomon Islands in February, one of the islands normally visited during the voyage had been closed and as a result, Spirit of Enderby was sailing on different waters, further east.

Passengers and on-board expert ornithologists spotted a bird with prominent white markings on its upper and underwing, dark chocolate brown plumage, and a massive bill.

“After getting photos of them and watching their flight, our on-board experts have arrived at the opinion they are almost certainly a new species,” Aaron says.

He says the next step towards confirming it is a new species is to catch one, extract some DNA, and install a satellite tracker so the bird can be followed back to its breeding site, believed to be in the Solomon Islands or Vanuatu.

This isn’t the first time a new species has been

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discovered during the Western Pacific Odyssey, with the elusive New Caledonian Storm-Petrel discovered during a 2008 voyage.

“With the New Caledonian Storm-Petrel, a group of our staff and passengers funded a private expedition on a smaller vessel which managed to catch one, extract some DNA and prove it was different to what had been seen previously.

“Unfortunately, there is no one standing by to do that, but we have flagged the attention of the scientific community and the bird watching community with our discovery.”

Heritage Expeditions was founded by Aaron’s father Rodney Russ, who prior to that was involved in rare and endangered bird conservation, working with the Kakapo, the Black Robin, and the Campbell Island Teal.

“This is very much following in the line of what we’ve always been about,” Aaron says.

To demonstrate how little is known about the oceans, he recalls when the ship was sailing from Lyttelton to Tauranga and captured ground-breaking footage of a pod of 10 Shepherd’s Beaked Whales.

“These are the world’s most elusive whales, most of what we know about them has come from studying carcasses that have washed up on beaches. There’s so much to the ocean and we think that by now we must know all about it, but in reality we still don’t know much. In a confronting kind of way, there’s a lot more to learn about the world.”



Christchurch company, Heritage Expeditions, operates voyages to some of the planet’s most remote shores.



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