

Wild Japan in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 February - 3 March 2019



Baikal Teal



Copper Pheasant



Steller's Sea Eagle



Japanese Macaque

Report compiled by Philip Thompson
Images courtesy of Chris Hutchinson



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Pre Tour Extension Day 1

Sunday 17th February

Having travelled out on a mid-morning flight the previous day, due to the time difference the main pre-tour extension group arrived in the early morning of the following day into Tokyo. We then directly transferred on to a domestic flight to Kumamoto on the southern main island of Kyushu.

With everything running to schedule we were met by our local guide and interpreter and were soon on board our comfortable tour bus. Heading south we made our first stop on the Yatsushiro estuary where we took a walk out towards the sea alongside the river. Plentiful wildfowl were evident on the open water comprising a mix of familiar duck species, joined by numerous Eastern Spot-billed Duck. The abundant Black-eared Kites were joined by a couple of Western Ospreys hunting over the river that passed close by on a couple of occasions giving fabulous views.

As we made our slow progress we were able to familiarise ourselves with a number of common Japanese species such as the ever-present Brown-eared Bulbuls, Large-billed Crows and Oriental Turtle Doves. A good discovery was a small group of Black-crowned Night herons roosting in the trees on the slope of a small wooded rocky protrusion behind the harbour. Reaching the more open mouth of the estuary we were delighted to spot a small group of the rare and threatened Black-faced Spoonbills sleeping on a wooden jetty within the mudflats. One or two woke up sufficiently to allow us to confirm the black face! Feeding on the mud below were numerous waders mostly comprising Kentish Plovers but also including a Greenshank and Dunlins.

In view of our limited time here, in order to speed things along on the bus caught us up and drove us on towards the end of the seawall to check for interesting gulls. We were initially rather disappointed with only Vega Gulls on view. Then, whilst scanning far out into the open water, a couple of distant specks caught our attention. The slender wings and smaller size gradually became apparent, as fortunately the two birds continued approaching directly towards us, eventually flying over our heads. We were then able to clearly discern the diagnostic large black wedge on the under-side of the primaries of the rare Saunders's Gull. Excited by this fortunate success we scanned through the resting gulls in the harbour again, which produced a single smaller, darker backed individual that was identified as a Black-tailed Gull.

Time had now run out so we boarded the bus to continue our transfer to the town of Izumi where we were to be staying for the next three nights. Once checked in and after a short spell of relaxation we headed into town for the first of many elaborate traditional Japanese meals.

Pre Tour Extension Day 2

Monday 18th February

An early start found us having a private visit to the Arasaki Crane centre to witness the 7am feeding of the cranes. As we pulled up in the car park we could hear and glimpse numerous cranes but could not be prepared for the spectacle of massed throngs of thousands of Hooded Cranes joined by smaller numbers in the hundreds of White-naped Cranes. The field below the elevated visitor centre was a dark mass of bodies gathered for the regular feeding of grain. As the feed was distributed along the raised roadways the birds crushed ever closer with their heads down producing a solid grey mass. Wherever there is easy food other birds are sure to gather so

joining the cranes were numerous dabbling duck that mainly comprised Northern Pintail, plus large numbers of corvids. Getting over the initial spectacle we relaxed and began a more careful scan through the flocks. This produced a couple of vagrant Common Cranes picked out of the crowd and several Daurian Jackdaws on the sidelines. Great and Little Egrets were joined by several Grey Herons, all dwarfed by the stately cranes with which they mingled.

With our private visiting time at an end we headed out by road to explore the surrounding area. A couple of short stops were taken to observe birds sighted from the vehicle before we took a longer walk alongside the Takaono estuary and creek. Here an elusive Brown-cheeked Rail put in a couple of fleeting appearances on the reed edge at the creek side with most group members getting a view. Rather easier were a large party of Chinese Penduline Tits that put in a couple of appearances feeding actively and unconcernedly close by in the tall reed stems. A rather unexpected sighting was a Eurasian Wryneck that popped up on a willow among the reeds on a couple of occasions. Resting within the creeks we were also fortunate to find small numbers of both Black-faced and Eurasian Spoonbills that generally remained asleep, with only periodic wakefulness allowing their faces to be seen for a definitive ID.

After a productive morning we returned to the Arasaki Centre for lunch and another (visual) feast of cranes. Refreshed we then headed out once more this time heading east to check the Eastern Polder protected area. Here were a similar profusion of Hooded and White-naped Cranes and other familiar hangers-on. Heading further east we called in at the Jabuchi estuary area where we took a short walk around some scrubby parkland fringing the estuary. The tide was high and views over the water were rather obscured but we did find plenty of smaller passerines in the bushes to keep us interested. A further move found us at the Komenotsu estuary where we took a decent walk out to the mouth and breakwater. Several Western Ospreys were quartering the river on the lookout for fish in the crystal clear waters. The familiar Vega Gulls were accompanied by a few Black-tailed Gulls flying past with one immature sitting out on the river. Otherwise the birdlife comprised several Little Egrets, Grey Herons and Eastern Spot-billed Duck.

Having enjoyed a great day we headed back to Izumi town where we still had time for a quick walk along the river at it's heart. The hoped for Long-billed Plover could not be found but we were satisfied with numerous wagtails that included a couple of the large and stunning Japanese species, plus Mandarin Duck and Asian House Martin among more common and familiar birds.

Pre Tour Extension Day 3

Tuesday 19th February

Despite the weather forecast being nothing less than horrible, another early start found us standing by an access road alongside the Eastern Polder awaiting the sunrise from behind the distant mountains. Things were almost going to plan, with just enough of a break in the clouds to glimpse a rising sun backdrop, as the assembled thousands of cranes attempted their morning commute to the Western polder early feed. This resulted in many hundreds of birds passing directly overhead calling excitedly as they passed. This amazing spectacle was only hindered by the raging cold wind making flight difficult and conditions testing for the gathered group. We were also fortunate in witnessing the vast flock of Northern Pintail passing just off the sea wall behind us. After braving the conditions for as long as our resistance to the lure of a warm coach could last and with the numbers of passing birds beginning to abate we drove a short distance to take an exploratory couple of walks in nearby areas. A stop alongside the polder further along the road produced, after prolonged careful scanning through the

abundant Hooded and White-naped Cranes, the discovery of a single Sandhill Crane deep within the crowds. Pipits were keeping their heads down with only very brief flight sightings of Buff-bellied Pipits shooting by in the strong winds being obtained. A more interesting and productive walk was taken alongside a reed-lined canal where we succeeded in finding several new birds for the trip as well as several large carp in the shallow water.

Timing was everything with our return to the bus just catching the beginning of the forecast rain. We then drove slowly through further potentially interesting spots on the way to the Arasaki Centre once more to relax over a coffee and to enjoy the birds on view. Here the forecast grim conditions proved accurate with a prolonged torrential downpour making us happy we had made the right call as we peered out from within the warm and dry glazed centre watching the polders rapidly fill with water before our eyes. With the rain forecast to stop sometime in the early afternoon we waited it out before taking a chance and moving on to continue our planned itinerary with a visit to Kogowa Dam inland among the forested hills. We stopped in transit to check out the handsome Falcated Duck on the river in Izumi, with only a keen (crazy) few venturing out of the bus to stand and peer down a telescope under an umbrella with the rain pouring down around us.

The journey up to Kogowa went smoothly despite the continual rain. On arrival we took a lunch and siesta within the vehicle as the forecast time approached for the cessation of rain! Amazingly the meteorologists had got it right and at the allotted time the rain did ease and then stopped, allowing us to take a few slightly curtailed walks along the forest roads that skirted the reservoir. Bird activity was unfortunately rather quiet with an initial dearth of sightings but we could at least enjoy the bamboo and Camellia clad slopes. After some time of not seeing much at all we finally connected with some birdlife and in a short space of time picked out several interesting species. Highlights included both Japanese and Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, Varied and Japanese Tits all crowned by the sighting of a pair of the large and impressive Mountain Hawk Eagles soaring nearby.

With our return to Izumi another walk was taken by a couple of group members to check the river for rare and elusive Plovers with a similar result to yesterday. The Falcated Ducks made up for our disappointment as we walked the remainder of the way back to the hotel.

Pre Tour Extension Day 4/Main Tour Day 1 Wednesday 20th February

With our pre-tour extension drawing to a close we undertook our transfer back to Tokyo with a number of interesting stops along the way. Our initial route took us east heading towards Lake Miike. At the midway point we stopped for a break at a delightful pleasure garden built around a natural spring of crystal clear water with several pools, ornamental bridges and buildings and, rather incongruously, a number of huge sculptures, made from a mix of natural materials, of various creatures including one massive Minion! During our leg-stretch taken around the grounds we luckily picked up a vocal flock of Japanese Grosbeaks flying among the treetops.

Moving on we were soon to arrive at the volcanic caldera Lake Miike. We had plenty of available time to wander around the lodge and campsite area on the shore with the more open canopy here allowing easier birding. The surrounding forest elsewhere being dense and difficult to work with a group, we confined our walks to close proximity to the holiday chalets. This however was still hard work with birds hard to find and pin down. Our best success was finding a small number of Elegant or Yellow-throated Buntings among the shoreline vegetation that included at least one full breeding plumage adult. Other highlights were a scattering of Olive-backed Pipits, Eurasian Nuthatch and Daurian Redstart. We contented ourselves with a relaxing lunch on the tables by the lake

before trying a final walk along the access road high up that allowed an easier view down into the tree canopy below. We still struggled to find much but enjoyed a pleasant walk among the evergreen semi-tropical forest that would provide a stark contrast to that found on the northern island of Hokkaido later in the trip.

Continuing our journey we headed south towards the vast flooded caldera lagoon of Kagoshima Bay with it's very active volcano sitting in the middle. Another short stop was taken next to an attractive waterfall before our final approach to the airport where we caught our domestic flight into Tokyo Haneda airport. We arrived in the early evening to be met by a coach to transfer us to our hotel in central Tokyo where we would await the arrival of the rest of the group at the start of the main tour.

Main Tour Day 2

Thursday 21st February

Unfortunately the group members joining the tour experienced a four hour delay leaving the UK due to aircraft problems, meaning that the planned group excursion into Tokyo's Kasai Rinkai park had to be moved forward to compensate. They eventually arrived safely to be met and escorted to the hotel where they valiantly only rested a short time before joining the main group for our trip out.

After a trouble free navigation of the busy rail network we arrived at the park to enjoy a pleasant walk picking up a number of exciting birds, not only for the recent arrivals, but the group as a whole. The waters of Tokyo Bay held a huge flock of Great Crested Grebes and Greater Scaup with a scattering of other duck and a couple of Black-necked Grebes also. A distant Western Osprey was feeding on a fish on one of the islands. Moving from the coast into the park shrubberies and wildlife lagoons we found an abundance of duck of a familiar composition to home. Skulking among the fringing reeds we picked up what proved to be our only Japanese Bush Warbler of the tour. As we slowly walked the paths through this attractive park we were to encounter a number of the common birds of Japan generally giving excellent close views in this popular area. After a pleasant afternoon we headed back to allow the recent arrivals time to rest before dinner and in order to be ready for an early start the next day!

Main Tour Day 3

Friday 22nd February

With the aforementioned early start we had a hotel breakfast before transferring back to Haneda Airport for our domestic flight north to Kushiro on the island of Hokkaido. After being met by our local guide and loading onto the bus excitement was high as we set out into a very different environment of snow and crystal clear skies, heading north towards our first stop at the feeding centre of Tsurumidai. Here we were amazed by the beauty and elegance of the Red-crowned Cranes sedately parading around the field near the roadside completely unfazed by the crowds of admiring human photographers! Rather out of place and completely blowing their cue and scheduled appearance due later in the day, were a small party of Whooper Swans strolling among the cranes on the lookout for a free meal. Having spent an extended time in their presence, and having enjoyed the bugling calls, dancing and parading of the cranes we moved on to the town of Tsurui where we stopped at a restaurant to enjoy a splendid Bento box lunch of typical Japanese fare.

From here it was a short drive to the second crane-feeding site of Tsurui-Ito in time for their meal. Here we were met with a similar spectacle of unconcerned cranes looking their best and going about their day with a bit of dancing, a bit of calling and bugling, a bit of domestic bickering and plenty of just parading about looking

amazing! Several small family parties flew in to join the display before the grain was distributed by a local who wandered through the crowding cranes spreading the feed evenly about. The gathered mass of photographers gave ample warning of anything occurring with the instant machine-gun fire of multiple shutters. What the cranes make of us humans is anyone's guess. They rather literally seem to look down their noses at us and refuse to dignify any disturbance with a response and proceed to ignore the crowds.

A further move was then taken heading north and visiting the frozen Lake Kussharo. Here there are a couple of geothermal hot springs at the lakeside that feed in to the lake and keep an area of water ice free. This pleasant bath water temperature proves irresistible to visiting Whooper Swans coming south from their breeding grounds in the wilds of Eastern Siberia and Lake Baikal. These birds then placidly, with only an occasional squabble, loaf about keeping up a constant chatter among themselves as the group and many passing human admirers can approach within feet. The first stop at Kotan has its own outdoor hot pool for brave Japanese to take the waters whilst admiring the stunning surrounding scenery and curious voyeuristic swans alongside. Our second stop at Sunayu had, as well as numerous swans, a single Goldeneye and a tourist shop where a purchased bag of natural popcorn went down a treat with the swans. Quite a thrill to hand feed these large and beautiful birds.

From here it was then a short final transfer to our hotel, a traditional Onsen, complete with geothermal hot baths and tatami mats and futons in the rooms. We concluded the day with a stunning elaborate Japanese meal of a multitude of small dishes containing an array of often unknown, to our western palate, foods. The entire group happily engaged with what was on offer, with only a few understandable culinary question marks!

Main Tour Day 4

Saturday 23rd February

Yet another customary early start (the time difference making this rather less of a hardship) found us out and about and arriving at the famous Otowa Bridge viewing site at 7:30am. It is from here that the iconic image of roosting Red-crowned Cranes in the steaming backlit waters of the geothermal warmed waters of the river are taken. We were not disappointed despite it being 'not cold' with the waters giving of a pleasing misty vapour in the cold morning air, whilst numerous cranes rested in comfort before heading out to their feeding areas. We were able to spend a good amount of time here enjoying the spectacle as a few small parties of birds lifted off, although not on this occasion over us, choosing due to the prevailing wind to vanish away beyond us behind the screening trees. Also seen on the river were a small number of Goldeneye, Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser. As we had begun to head off for our next destination the group were hastily brought back by the amazing sight of three large Sika Deer stags wading into the river among the unconcerned cranes, to pause 'Monarch-of-the-Glen-like' midstream. A mental image to live long in the memory!

A short drive from here found us stopped by the roadside where we took a short walk into the thin leafless snowy forest. Arriving at the path end a large tree with obvious hole in its trunk was centre-stage, as sleepily peering from its centre was a stunning Ural Owl. With optimum lighting conditions we were able to enjoy prolonged views of this bird as it dozed, with a periodic perusal of the area, before closing its eyes once more.

We next returned to Tsurui-Ito for a further fix of crane observation. Prolonged time spent alongside these iconic birds proved fruitful with much interesting behaviour, interactions and activity observed that an otherwise cursory visit might miss.

After our enjoyable and productive morning we moved on to visit the quirky Heart'n Tree Restaurant set on a lonely hillside where we enjoyed another lovely meal whilst being entertained by the birds visiting the feeders outside the windows. With plenty more to see and do we headed out next to visit the smaller frozen caldera lake of Lake Mashu. The rather James Bond villain's lair-like lake was scenically stunning with the attendant highlights of three or four Sika Deer resting in the snow beneath the observation platforms and both White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles cruising by.

Our final stop of the day was at the fascinating volcanic sulphur vents on the flanks of Mount Io. The ground nearby was snow free from the warmth produced from below whilst the striking yellow sulphur accumulated around the vents stood out creating an unearthly looking environment. A couple of small pools boiled merrily away at our feet. Passing over along the mountain slopes a couple more Steller's Sea Eagles rounded off the day.

Main Tour Day 5

Sunday 24th February

Today we undertook our first hotel transfer as we headed to the north-eastern coast and the port of Rausu. We began by travelling east to reach the coast at Shibetsu where we stopped to have a look around the sheltered waters of the harbour. A colourful mix of sea duck were present with highlights including Black Scoter, Harlequin Duck and Greater Scaup. The gulls present were now dominated by the abundant Slaty-backed Gull with a smaller number of Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls adding a little spice to the normally rather purist world of gull obsessives.

As we now headed north along the coast we were able to periodically spot rafts of Black Scoter just offshore with smaller groups of Harlequin Ducks close to the shore. We took another stop at Kunbetsu Harbour where we found only a small number of duck and gulls present resulting only a short stay.

Continuing north we were stunned to see as we approached Rausu that the pack ice was clearly visible from shore, so much so that as we reached the harbour it formed a solid sheet of corrugated and crumpled ice from the horizon to almost fully engulf the harbour! This made our planned boat trip a rather interesting proposition. We took a quick coffee break at a nearby restaurant and shopping/visitor centre before driving down to the boat jetty. Once aboard the boat was slowly pushed and manoeuvred through the large broken chunks of ice within the harbour. Making slow progress alongside a couple of other tourist boats we reached the grand distance of 200m from the harbour where the boat was paused alongside the ice sheet. It was then a case of 'it isn't the size, or in our case distance, that counts, its what you do with it!' Being within throwing distance of the shore we were presented with the stunning sight of 40-50 each of both White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles resting on the ice and constantly flying past and over us. After an hour or more of mind-blowing close encounters with these magnificent eagles at the closest of ranges we began the slow, careful and incremental trip back through the abundant mini icebergs.

Elated after this wonderful experience we headed to our hotel to check in followed by a very early dinner. The rather pre-emptive timing of our meal was necessitated by the need to get out to our next stop of the Wash-no-Yado viewing hides before dusk. Here we were ushered into a rather chaotic and ramshackle establishment into a bunkhouse above the main hide, due to the large numbers of people booked in, all in the hope of seeing the much sought-after and totemic Blakiston's Fish Owl. Our viewing spot was not the best but at least we had the room to ourselves away from any territorial bickering for tripod space in the main hide below. The light gradually

faded when suddenly a large broad-winged raptor swept in to settle within the arena setting pulses racing and adrenalin levels soaring! A false alarm, as this turned out to be a White-tailed Eagle, a species ordinarily we would probably have gone mental over!

With calm restored after its departure the floodlights were lit and we settled down once more for a possible long wait. Luck, happily, was with us as at the relatively early time of 6:30pm the owl appeared settling in a tree overlooking the stream just within the gloom. After a brief time it then swept down and caught a fish from the stream and settled for it's admirers concealed in the various huts overlooking this spot. Allowing plentiful time for all to get a photo it then flew off upstream on broad barred wings, away back into the gloom. Since we were due to head back to the bus at 6:45 this couldn't have been timed any better. We then made as quiet a departure as possible leaving the many other photographers there hoping for a second appearance. Not a bad end to the day!

Main Tour Day 6

Monday 25th February

Our now accustomed early start found the group standing on the waterfront of Rausu harbour at 5am! There we boarded a boat for our second sea voyage that would last for two to three hours with the aim of watching the sunrise over the pack ice with numerous accompanying eagles.

All was looking good, as during the night the pack ice had retreated some distance out to sea, although it was still visible from the harbour. The worry was that the amount of ice which had broken off and packed into the harbour not only made our exit somewhat tortuous, but our Captain was concerned that it could easily close up and prevent our re-entry at the end of the cruise. After another slow and steady exit, relying on the much larger and powerful fishing fleet boats to break up the ice as the whole fleet made its way out to sea, ours and a small number of other tourist boats tentatively made it clear to open water. Over the next couple of hours we then enjoyed a spellbinding 'sea cruise' 300 metres from the harbour as we once more acquainted ourselves with the large numbers of Sea Eagles of both species attracted to this coast in winter. Crew on the boat kept the birds interested with regular meals of fish cast from the boat. In our case this was by a diminutive Japanese girl who turned out to be a baseball pitcher, who played in the boys' leagues, who certainly went through her thorough training schedule putting her male crewmate to shame with his rather casual approach to eagle feeding! Joining the eagles were the ever-present wily Large-billed Crows that were canny enough to spot an opportunity when it presented itself. Gulls were made to look rather slow on the uptake when it came to stealing a meal from under the nose of the impressive bulk of a Steller's Sea Eagle. After many hundreds of photos had been taken of this unique gathering we headed back in following the broken route through the ice made by a returning fishing boat.

Back at the jetty we boarded the bus to head back to the hotel for a late breakfast and to warm up the extremities. There was time before we headed out after breakfast to check the Brown Dippers on the river behind the hotel. Our lunchtime destination was the Notsuke peninsular just south of Shibetsu. Here we were soon to encounter some of the very many Sika Deer that find refuge here during the winter, presumably due to the winds sweeping over the low-lying shingle keeping the snow cover to a minimum and allowing grazing to be reached. A number of Red Foxes were also seen, seeming as casual as an urban fox from home to the presence of people. Birdlife on the rather bleak and windswept land with numerous seemingly abandoned fishing huts was thin so our attention was primarily focused onto the calm waters of the Straits of Nemuro at the southern end of the Sea of Okhotsk with the distant Kuril Islands on the horizon. Taking a couple of stops to scan we picked

through the rather distant birds to ID both Spectacled and Pigeon Guillemots, Black Scoter, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser and Long-tailed Duck.

We stopped to eat our lunch at the visitor centre then climbed the tall observation tower to continue our scanning of the large numbers of birds offshore. Next we drove on to the end of the access road where we took a walk out to the shore with little new discovered. On our return journey we stopped at a convenient car park to scan the scoters seen during passing on our previous arrival. The weather had by now begun to deteriorate and the scoter flock had dispersed curtailing our search for any White-winged individuals, leading to the observation that perhaps we missed our chance earlier.

Time was now getting on, as we were once more required to get to the hotel for an early dinner before heading out in search of the Blakiston's Fish Owl once more. This time we had been promised a better viewing spot in the lower hide with an uninterrupted view of the floodlit pool. Having settled in our wait began once more. Luck was still kind to us as not long after our arrival the owl returned to give a prolonged excellent view before catching two or three fish with consummate ease, swallowing them and carrying one off. The group were on the point of packing up before it was suggested we hang on longer as we still had ample time till our 6:45 arranged pick-up. Settling back once more not in any great anticipation of a repeat viewing, we were stunned when the bird returned 20 minutes later for an even better sighting!

Main Tour Day 7

Tuesday 26th February

Our final transfer on Hokkaido found us taking a route to ultimately arrive at our Onsen in Yoroushi with a number of stops on the way.

We began with an exploration of the coast north of Rausu along which a multitude of large blocks of sea ice had been deposited by the retreating pack ice. Most of the small harbours along the way were iced up but we did pay a quick visit to one where we were able to have a little gull ID masterclass as the sea wall had a representative spread of species lined up for comparison. On the outer edge of this harbour in a small bay a fresh water stream was spilling down the beach to some large craggy rocks. We were delighted to find a large number of handsome Harlequin Ducks feeding within feet of the waters edge giving some great views. Joining them were several Red-breasted Merganser with their punky headdress. We drove on to the end of the road enjoying the spectacular coastal scenery along the way.

Retracing our steps we returned to Shibetsu harbour in the south where we had time for a quick check of the sea duck in the harbour before our lunch appointment in a nearby restaurant.

Heading on we cut inland to arrive at our Onsen in the early afternoon allowing the group plenty of time to relax after checking in and watch the bird feeders outside the large viewing windows overlooking the small river. Numerous Eurasian Jays were attracted here of the subspecies *brandtii* with their dark russet heads alongside several Eurasian Nuthatch of the very white *asiatica/clara* subspecies, Japanese and Marsh Tits and Japanese Pygmy and Great Spotted Woodpeckers.

We now had the difficult decision of what time to have our dinner so as not to miss the hoped for arrival of the Blakiston's Fish Owl to the small pond beneath the feeders. Having checked the calendar of timed recent arrivals

we plumped for a 7pm dinner with the assurance that the staff would alert us to an appearance of the owl whilst we were eating. We therefore sat down to another wonderfully elaborate multi-dish meal confident we wouldn't miss anything. The meal went without interruption, so having finished the group drifted into the lounge area to patiently wait in hope. Over time the group gradually diminished as members drifted off to bed leaving only a single client with the leader and guide left! The owl then made a spectacular appearance at the not-too-unreasonable time of 10:15pm! To be able to watch this spectacular species from only a couple of metres distance is a rare treat to be savoured and enjoyed.

Main Tour Day 8

Wednesday 27th February

After our string of early starts we had the luxury of a mid-morning departure today, allowing plenty of time to pack, relax and watch the birds at the feeders with a few taking a wander along the road outside to the river bridge.

Once underway we took a scenic route passing to the east of the Kushiro Marsh National Park where the Red-crowned Cranes breed. As we were approaching the northern tip of the marsh we spotted a group of cranes in the fields alongside the road necessitating a stop. It was great to view some of these iconic birds away from the feeding stations in a rather more natural setting. Moving on we turned off the main road to visit a small visitor centre and walking trail that led around the edge of the low lying lake and marshland. The heavy snow underfoot was firm enough for us to venture into the woods where we picked up a few species including some smart white-headed northern *caudatus* subspecies of Long-tailed Tit.

Excitement was elicited by the disturbance in the woodland of a group of thickly coated Sika Deer that beat a retreat when they saw us. Back on the bus, as we left the car park a final send off was provided by the bizarre and unexpected sight of a pair of Red-crowned Cranes dancing in the road in front of the vehicle! We stopped to enjoy the spectacle of the performance just metres in front of us, which rather unfortunately was brought to an end by the arrival of a more impatient local car coming the opposite way that harried them off the road.

From here our transfer went uneventfully back to Kushiro airport where we said farewell to our helpful local guide before catching our internal flight back to Tokyo. Our arrival back into Tokyo was unfortunately timed to coincide with the afternoon/early evening rush hour. It was decided that that we would relax and find an eating establishment from among the many that tempted us and have a slightly early dinner and wait out the worst of the rush. This paid off, with a fed and rested group able to negotiate the underground trains to our hotel near Tokyo Station without too much stress or incident. We duly arrived at the hotel, booked in and headed straight to bed!

Main Tour Day 9

Thursday 28th February

With the weather forecast to be rather inclement, we took a leisurely breakfast before heading out on foot from the hotel to cross via the Tokyo Station underpass shopping mall maze to visit the Imperial Palace grounds and gardens. Our main focus, other than the impressive walls and outer buildings of the Palace, were the surrounding moats that held an interesting mix of wildfowl. The stars of the show were the beautiful Falcatid Ducks that swam unconcerned beneath us. Joining them were six other species of winter visiting duck of familiar species from home, although not usually seen so easily!

As we took a slow walk around the perimeter we also spotted a few passerine species such as Dusky Thrush, Tree Sparrow, Brown-eared Bulbul and White Wagtail. The most unusual and rather unexpected sighting was of a trio of Olive-backed Pipits strolling among the manicured trees.

We next headed to the attractive formal gardens where the group split up a little to make their own exploration of the site. Unfortunately the rather persistent rain that had been falling all morning was by now beginning to sap enthusiasm for a full tour of the area and a small rest room and vending machine coffee proved rather irresistible. Having had a sit down and rest, we returned to the entrance to re-form the group before heading back to the hotel, pausing on the way to pick up some lunch snacks. We arrived at the hotel where we ate lunch, dried off a little and collected our luggage before taking the short walk back to Tokyo Station to catch the Shinkansen Bullet Train to Nagano. This arrived promptly and we were soon settled into our seats to enjoy the rapid journey to our next destination.

Main Tour Day 10

Friday 1st March

Our first excursion from Nagano was a visit to the Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park. The snows of winter had almost completely gone this year, a couple of weeks earlier than normal, making our walk through the forest to the hot springs and bathing pool rather less icy and treacherous than normal, with only slushy mud to contend with. As we approached it was not long before we spotted our first Japanese Macaques going about their daily 'monkey business'. Upon reaching the park itself we were then surrounded by the unconcerned Macaques wandering among our legs and picking over the scattered grain provided for them at this time of year.

Any worries about the mild conditions and lack of snow meaning no monkeys being in the pool were soon dispelled by the discovery of three animals taking a relaxing soak. It certainly looked inviting judging by the blissful expression on one monkey's face, especially in view of the bitter cold breeze blowing down the valley. We were able to spend some considerable time among these attractive and characterful monkeys, allowing a range of behaviours and interactions to be observed among the troop of a parental and hierarchical nature.

The group then gathered together once more in a nearby café for our lunch before moving on. We were next due to visit the important Buddhist Zenkoji Temple site. On the way we took a quick speculative stop at a small urban lake on the recommendation of our local guide. The location did not suggest anything of major significance would be found, but it was on our route. We were to be pleasantly surprised by the discovery of a large number of wintering dabbling ducks being present of incredible tameness being fed by a local lady. The majority of duck present were Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail with a good number of Eurasian Teal and Eastern Spot-billed Duck among them. These birds waddled up the bank to mill about our feet looking for some handouts; an experience we are unaccustomed to with the duck wintering in the UK! Of primary interest and excitement was a single American Wigeon mixed in this flock and four Baikal Teal sleeping on the edge of the reed-lined lake with a trio of Black-crowned Night Herons roosting on an island.

After this ornithological success we continued on to spend the remainder of the afternoon walking around the fascinating Zenkoji Temple site with the many peripheral historic buildings adding interest. Our local guide was able to inform us of much of the history and significance of the structures present making for a rich and rewarding end to the day.

Main Tour Day 11

Saturday 2nd March

Our second coach excursion took us east to visit the Karuizawa Bird Park located in the upmarket hill resort of second holiday homes located beneath the imposing active volcano Mount Asama.

We took a first stop at Shiotsubo, one of the several hot spring Onsens in the area, where we were kindly allowed to use their lounge area to enjoy a coffee while watching the birds attracted to their feeders. Nothing of major significance was seen but we were able to enjoy some fantastic close views of Varied, Japanese and Willow Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker.

We next drove on to the Bird Park itself where we disembarked and took a walk through the quiet wintry forest. A good start was made with the sighting of a pair of Hawfinch in the top of some Larch trees. After this things were hard work entailing a lot of quiet listening as we walked to pick out any contact calls and tapping on the trees. This resulted in finding both Great Spotted and Pygmy Woodpeckers and a number of tits. As we reached a small stream feeding the nearby river a couple of Eurasian Wrens were heard and seen but remained very elusive, followed by a Brown Dipper passing rapidly downstream. Things were beginning to wind down in the group when we were delighted to spot a female Copper Pheasant burst from cover and rapidly fly out of sight followed by picking out movement from within a thick tangle of vegetation. This turned out to be a resplendent male Copper Pheasant who carried out a couple of his rapid wing-flapping territorial and mating displays for a second female lurking in the bushes. We were then delighted to watch the male slowly walk from cover into a more open area where we could admire his red wattles around the eye, diagnostic copper coloured plumage and stunning long tail. After this highlight a smart Meadow Bunting did not quite set the pulses racing as fast.

We returned to the visitor centre where we ate our lunch watching the locals skating on the frozen pond. A short walk along the river produced some excellent close sightings of a number of commoner birds before we had to board the bus for our transfer back to Tokyo. This journey passed through some pleasant agricultural land before entering the perimeter of the huge and sprawling city with its many raised road viaducts giving us an entirely different insight into the country.

Main Tour Day 12

Sunday 3rd March

Having spent our final night in a convenient airport hotel, it was just a short shuttle bus journey after breakfast into Haneda Airport from where we were due to catch our final flight back to the UK. All went well and we were all too soon heading home after an exciting and memorable holiday looking at the wildlife and culture of this fascinating country.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only; LO = leader only)

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February-March													
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2
1	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>									5					
2	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		1												
3	Mute Swan - I	<i>Cygnus olor</i>												2		
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>						200	12	2	5	5				
5	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		2												
6	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>		5												
7	Baikal Teal	<i>Sibirionetta formosa</i>													4	
8	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		12			2							6		2
9	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	2				6							2		
10	Falcat Duck	<i>Mareca falcata</i>			21					8				10		
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	100	✓	120	✓	✓				16	6		2	50	
12	American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>													1	
13	Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	500	✓	✓	✓	10	1						4	4	
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	100	100	✓	✓	6	20					3			
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	20	✓	5K						1	2			25	
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	10	✓	✓		✓								12	
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			5		✓							2		
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			1	3	6			3		2		3		
19	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					✓			40		15				
20	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>								8	40	200+				
21	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>								25	✓	✓				
22	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>									3					
23	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>						1		30	3	2				
24	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>						2	3	12	20	2				
25	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>							4	8	60	20				
26	Copper Pheasant	<i>Syrnaticus soemmerringii</i>														3
27	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>									1					
28	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	2	6	4	1	3							8		
29	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1	1			✓									

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February-March													
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2
30	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					4									
31	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		5	2											
32	Black-faced Spoonbill	<i>Platalea minor</i>	8	8	5											
33	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	6												3	
34	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	4	25	6		3									1
35	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	6	6										2	1
36	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		12	12		2									
37	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>								10	100	30				
38	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	10	50	1	1	12							6		4
39	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	3	10	2		1									
40	Mountain Hawk-Eagle	<i>Nisaetus nipalensis</i>			2											
41	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1		1									1
42	Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus lineatus</i>	25	50	✓	4		1	2	6	2	2	12			1
43	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>						3	1	50	120	✓	3			
44	Steller's Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>							6	40	100	✓				
45	Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>	1			1	1									
46	Brown-cheeked Rail	<i>Rallus indicus</i>		1												
47	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1											
48	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	30	100	✓		✓							✓	✓	
49	Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>			1											
50	White-naped Crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>		500	✓											
51	Red-crowned Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>						400	150	1			25			
52	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		2												
53	Hooded Crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>		10K	✓											
54	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		1												
55	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	2	20	20											
56	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	100													
57	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	15													
58	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	4	3												
59	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		3												
60	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1	5	1											
61	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1													

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February-March													
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2
62	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2												
63	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					✓							20		
64	Saunders's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus saundersi</i>	2													
65	Black-tailed Gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>	1	5												
66	Common (Kamchatka) Gull	<i>Larus canus kamtschatschensis</i>					1			3	4	6				
67	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>								6	25	10				
68	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>								3	10	6				
69	Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae</i>	40	100	✓	1	✓			6		4				
70	Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>		1						✓	✓	✓				
71	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>									1					
72	Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cepphus columba</i>									2					
73	Spectacled Guillemot	<i>Cepphus carbo</i>									50					
74	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbo livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		2		6			✓	✓	✓
75	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	3	10	50	✓	10							20	10	✓
76	Blakiston's Fish Owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>								1	1	1				
77	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>							2							
78	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1													
79	Crested Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>											1LO			
80	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		1												
81	Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus kizuki</i>			1				1			1	1			5
82	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>							1			1	4			3
83	Japanese Green Woodpecker - E	<i>Picus awokera</i>			1											
84	Ryukyu Minivet - E	<i>Pericrocotus tegimae</i>				1LO										
85	Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>	1	2												
86	Eurasian (Brandt's) Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius brandtii</i>			2	H			1			20	20			
87	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>														3
88	Daurian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus dauuricus</i>		10												
89	Oriental Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus pastinator</i>		✓	✓											
90	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
91	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>											1			2
93	Japanese Varied Tit	<i>Sittiparus varius varius</i>			2			1						1		15

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February-March													
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2
94	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>						1	10			20	20		H	H
95	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>						2								2
96	Japanese Tit	<i>Parus minor</i>		1	6	4		1	4			4	6	3		✓
97	Chinese Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz consobrinus</i>		20												
98	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓											
99	Brown-eared Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	2		1		4	6	✓	✓	✓
100	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		2	3											
101	Asian House Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus</i>	10	12	12											
102	Japanese Bush Warbler	<i>Horornis diphone</i>					1									
103	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			3	2						2	3			6
104	Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>		5	3	2	H							4		
105	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>														2
106	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				2		1	2			4	5			3
107	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>											1			
108	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	100	100	30	✓	✓								12	✓
109	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		3												
110	Pale Thrush	<i>Turdus pallidus</i>		3	2	4	2								1	1
111	Dusky Thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>			6		3	1	20		2	4	4	20	1	8
112	Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>		6	3	6	1							2		1
113	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius philippensis</i>		1												
114	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>		1							1	1		1		1
115	Russet Sparrow	<i>Passer rutilans</i>	1													
116	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
117	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2	1	1										
118	White (Black-backed) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba lugens</i>	6	20	✓				2	2	2	1		8	3	H
119	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba leucopsis</i>		2	✓	✓	2	1								
120	Japanese Wagtail - N	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>		4												
121	Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>		1		4								3		
122	Buff-bellied Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>		3	3											
123	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>														6
124	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>												1		2
125	Japanese Grosbeak	<i>Eophona personata</i>				8										

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February-March													
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2
126	Grey-capped Greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>		✓	✓										12	✓
127	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>											3LO			
128	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>		1	2											2
129	Yellow-throated (Elegant) Bunting	<i>Emberiza elegans</i>				6										
130	Masked Bunting	<i>Emberiza personata</i>		1	6											
131	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓		8									

Mammals

Japanese Macaque - E, *Macaca fuscata*

Japanese Squirrel, *Sciurus lis*

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*

Sable, *Martes zibellina*

Spotted Seal, *Phoca largha*

Sika Deer, *Cervus nippon*

Reptiles & Amphibians

Japanese Toad, *Bufo japonicus*

Red-eared Terrapin, *Trachemys scripta elegans*

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