

Wild Japan in Winter plus Kyushu pre-extension

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 – 26 February 2020



Red-crowned Cranes



Steller's Sea Eagles



Sable



Varied Tit

Extension tour report by Philip Thompson
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Day 1 (pre-extension)

Wednesday 12th February

Having arrived into Tokyo Haneda International Terminal, we transferred directly for our domestic flight to Kumamoto on the southern main island of Kyushu. After a short flight we arrived into a rather drizzly and gloomy day. We were met in arrivals by our friendly and helpful local guide and soon all onboard our sizeable minibus.

Our first leg of our transfer journey took us to the estuary of the Yatsushiro River where we made a quick stop in a local convenience store for lunch supplies before parking on the riverside to take our first walk. Unfortunately, the light drizzle we had been experiencing now turned to quite heavy rain. Undaunted, we headed out, keen to discover what was new horizons for the whole group. Several Black (also known as Black-eared) Kites were settled and flying all around caught our early attention, followed by a number of roosting Black-crowned Night Herons in the wooded hill behind the number of residential houses. On the water of the river, among a mix of dabbling duck species familiar from home, were numerous Eastern Spot-billed Ducks as a taste of East Asian species sought by the group. Fishing over the river were a number of wintering Western Ospreys providing further reminders of home.

We reached a local shrine beneath a large sheltering *Ficus* tree that kept the worst of the weather off while we scanned the exposed tidal mudflats. We were delighted to find a small party of the scarce and endangered Black-faced Spoonbills, one of our main target species, resting prominently to admire in the rain-swept scope. On the point of calling it a day, the rain began to ease, filling the group with a fresh boost of enthusiasm. We began a careful scan through the roosting gulls resulting in finding a single Saunders's Gull, another very scarce regional specialty, among the throng of Vega Gulls. On the landward drainage dykes a final highlight was a small group of Chinese Penduline Tits working their way along the reedy edges. After what had been a very long day, we headed on to Izumi to check in before going out for our first traditional Japanese meal.

Day 2 (pre-extension)

Thursday 13th February

We rose early for our specially allowed early admittance to the Arasaki Crane Centre, to be there on the rooftop viewing platform for the 7am feeding of the cranes. We were not disappointed with the spectacle before us! The dense throng of many thousands of mainly Hooded Cranes plus good numbers of White-naped Cranes steadily increased as birds arrived from the surrounding area, eventually forming a solid mass of backs as the birds crushed together with their heads down feeding on the grain provided. As well as the visual aspect, there was a constant sound of bugling birds filling the air. Once we had become accustomed to this mass display of birds we began to pick out other species present such as the small number of Sandhill and Common Cranes contained within the dense throng, and striking black-and-white Daurian Jackdaws among the large number of Rooks and Large-billed Crows.

Our allotted hour of pre-opening viewing came to a close and we headed back to the bus to drive out to explore the surrounding areas. We began with a walk along side a reed bed lined river where we were amazed by the abundant Warbling (Japanese) White-eyes, seemingly everywhere, working their way through the reed beds, joined by good numbers of Chinese Penduline Tits showing very well. A number of other notable passerine species were seen during our slow patient walk, such as Meadow, Masked and Reed Buntings, Dusky Thrush and Bull-headed Shrike. Having returned to the bus we headed back to the Crane Centre for a coffee break before moving on once more to the Eastern Polder with its large gathering of cranes.

Our next stop was at Fukunoeko Port area with its war shrine and small park. Here we were successful in picking up a number of new species that included Hawfinch, Eastern Blue Rock Thrush and Pale Thrush. Lunchtime had by now arrived, so we stopped off at a convenience store where we bought some supplies before heading to the Crane Museum building and park alongside the Komenotsu-gawa River. We ate lunch in the pleasant gardens before entering the museum building to ascend to the rooftop viewing platform where we enjoyed the stunning views and a number of good birds also!

A short drive from here took us back to the coast where we walked a short way along the Komenotsu River heading towards the mouth. Unfortunately, the tide was high leaving no sand banks exposed and few birds, although we were successful in picking out our main target bird of Black-tailed Gull flying past.

Our last stop of the day was a walk along the river within Izumi town. Here a number of new and exciting birds were seen as we walked slowly along the embankments between bridges, most notably Japanese Wagtail and Long-billed Plover. After a long day it was then a short drive back to the hotel to freshen up before dinner.

Day 3 (pre-extension)

Friday 14th February

We had another early start to allow us time to arrive at the Eastern Polder protected crane area at sunrise. This was to allow us to witness the spectacle of the many thousands of cranes lifting off and flying overhead as they headed to the feeding at the Irasaki Crane Centre nearby. Having enjoyed this spectacle, with a number of accompanying bird species also noted, we then undertook a slow drive to explore other areas nearby, stopping when anything of note was seen. We drove along the concrete seawall with a stop opposite the commercial seaweed nets where a number of Ospreys were perched on the posts.

After having spent an enjoyable morning in the general area, we returned to the Visitor Centre for coffee and a rest stop before heading inland to visit Kogowa Dam with a quick stop to pick up lunch on the way. We stopped at the river crossing to check for Kingfishers, succeeding in finding a perched Common Kingfisher with a Brown Dipper also spotted feeding within the river. After travelling the short distance to the lake, we disembarked and undertook a number of short walks along the road, surrounded by the lush evergreen forest. We struggled a little with any forest birds but did spot both Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Northern Goshawk soaring above the canopy. On the lake we found excellent numbers of Mandarin Ducks in a number of flocks flying past and, when settled, keeping close to the shoreline and the overhanging forest branches. On the open water, among numerous Mallard and Eurasian Wigeon we found our first Tufted Duck.

Having reached the picnic site we stopped for lunch, during which a Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker put an appearance. A walk from here down a forest track to a small finger of the lake being fed by a river produced several buntings that included a flighty flock of Yellow-throated Buntings followed by hearing and obtaining the briefest of sightings of a Chinese Bamboo Partridge rapidly flying off up through the forest!

We were next able to manage only very brief views of a rather shy and flighty Crested Kingfisher, first spotted perched from the vehicle as we drove slowly along the perimeter road. We disembarked and waited some time in the hope that it would return to its favoured perch, being rewarded with another brief appearance before our presence clearly upset it and it rapidly flew off once more out of sight. Whilst we waited a female Sika Deer was noticed feeding by the waters edge.

Day 4 (pre-extension; Main Tour Day 1)

Saturday 15th February

Our final day on Kyushu found us travelling from the hotel to Kagoshima Airport via a number of stops along the way. The first of these was in the town of Satsuma on the banks of the Sendai-gawa River. Here we took a short walk down to the rocky islands within the river where a wonderful range of birds were present. The highlight was three Long-billed Plovers that provided some great viewing opportunities. These were joined by a flock of Asian House Martins feeding overhead and Japanese Wagtail and Masked Bunting among others.

Our next stop was at Kannondaki Koen, a small park with a typical Japanese pleasure garden, waterfall, river and glass factory. Here we were able to enjoy a coffee and admire the attractions. Unfortunately, at this time of year the gardens were roped off out of bounds, but we could still see the waterfall and most of the grounds from the perimeter. On the river we spotted another Brown Dipper that put on a good show. It was the glass factory that drew most of our interest where we could watch the bowls and vases being blown, polished and engraved by the skilled workers. The shop had many examples of their finished products, with prices to match the skill and time involved in their production!

After a further transfer passing much attractive scenery and points of interest, we arrived at Lake Miike, a volcanic caldera lake. Here we drove into the park and then walked the last stretch through the stunning towering evergreen sub-tropical forest down to the campsite area on the lakeshore. We then spent our final remaining time birding the area and eating our lunch. Birds were pretty thin on the ground, but we did find Olive-backed Pipit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Japanese Green Woodpecker, Varied Tit and Eastern Buzzard. From here we drove the final leg to the airport to catch our flight back to Tokyo where we were met and driven to our hotel.

The extension group arrived in Tokyo and met their new leader at the hotel. Our first task was to find some dinner, which we did in a restaurant in the hotel. The meal was enjoyable and the company good, as Phil and Jon met and shared a meal with the group. Then off to bed before the start of the tour proper..

Day 2

Sunday 16th February

As the one client who was supposed to be flying on from the UK this morning didn't arrive due to health issues, today we had a moderately lazy start, with a long enjoyable breakfast. We then set off to Shinagawa Station to get our first taste of the Japanese public transport system. Changing lines at the madness that is Tokyo Central station was a long walk between the platforms, bombarded as we walked by flashing signs, crowds of people and small shops everywhere. We eventually found the right platform and finally arrived at Kasai Rinkai Marine Park. It was a nice afternoon, although grey and slightly overcast as we set off for our walk.

The first bird spotted was a Dusky Thrush, foraging below some trees, with much to Phil's delight, the second species being a Brown-headed Thrush, a species Phil has been looking to see for many years. At the same moment we also spotted three Azure-winged Magpies in some adjacent trees, setting up a good start to the day.

At the shore, Vega Gulls were feeding on a dead fish, and offshore there were lots of Black Scoter and an Osprey on a neighbouring fishing poles. Along the edge of a breakwater, Black-necked Grebes were so close their red eyes were striking, and then amongst the gulls was a superb Saunders's Gull. Carrying on along the shore we found Wigeon and Teal, and Dusky Thrush mixed with Oriental Turtle Doves, White-cheeked Starling and Brown-eared Bulbul.

At the visitor centre we were shown a superb Goshawk sitting on the edge of the pond, and out to sea a Black-faced Spoonbill was feeding in the mud. Then on a small pond we had fleeting glimpses of a Ruddy-breasted Crake, which was of great excitement to all.

Then, as we headed back to the station, we found a superb Japanese Wagtail feeding quietly on the edge of a pond. The train journey home was as manic as the outward journey, but the dinner was as good as last night's, closing out a great first day of the main tour.

Day 3

Monday 17th February

As today we had to travel to Hokkaido, we had an early start with breakfast at 5am. We made it to Shinagawa Station in plenty of time for the train to the airport and arrived in the airport in time for our connecting flight. However, upon arrival we found that the plane was delayed by an hour because of an extreme snow-storm at the airport on Hokkaido. After a nervous hour-long wait, and the real prospect of flying to our destination and then having to return to Tokyo if we couldn't land due to the snow, we took finally took off and the weather God's smiled on us, and eventually after an hour and a half flight we landed in the snow. After arriving in Kushiro Airport, we took some time to prepare for the colder temperatures, then our local guide, Masa-san helped us to board our bus before we set off in search of cranes.

The first stop was at Tsuruimidai where the Cranes were in a field just beside the road. These beautiful birds were stunning in the snowstorm, and their honking cries filled the air as groups of Red-crowned Cranes displayed to each other. In total there were 137 Cranes on view, which represented about 5% of the total world

population. In the field there were also lots of Whooper Swans who were making as much if not more noise than the cranes.

From here, we went to a restaurant for lunch which was a magnificent selection of tasty traditional Japanese dishes. From lunch, we went to our second crane-feeding area - Tsurui Ito. Here the encamped photographers made viewing somewhat difficult, but a bit of gentle elbow work soon cleared good viewing spaces. As we waited, a man appeared pushing a sledge with food, which was spread for the 121 Cranes, causing much excitement amongst the birds who squabbled over the food. As we left, we spotted a Mountain Hawk-Eagle cruising along the hilltops of the neighbouring mountains.

Then we headed north towards the mountains towards Kotan where thermally heated water keeps the lake free of ice in places and where Whooper Swans were congregated. The frozen lake made for an impressive backdrop, and then we found a beautiful male Falcated Duck on a thermal spring. Further round the lake at Sunayu, the light was fading and in the darkening evening, the rising thermal waters allowed Whooper Swans to gather in unfrozen water. It is an amazing experience to sit feet from wild Whooper Swans who had no fear of people. As we left, we saw a couple of the stunning local form of Red Fox, known as the Ezo Red Fox.

Arriving at the Onsen hotel, some of the group used the traditional Japanese Yukata (dressing gowns) to enter the hot springs that make these traditional hotels so special. Onsens are communal baths of different temperatures, fed by thermally heated water. After the baths, we settled down for a traditional evening meal, consisting of a huge range of courses eaten with chopsticks, including pickles, rice, sashimi, tempura, fish, meat and soup (obviously not with chopsticks!). After completing our checklists, we went to bed after a great first day on Hokkaido.

Day 4

Tuesday 18th February

As it had been snowing overnight, we left the hotel at 6.30 this morning and, as there was fresh snow on the roads, we arrived at Otowa Bridge by 7.30am. The weather meant that there were few other people around, and on the river, there were 20 Red-crowned Cranes keeping warm in the thermal water. Along the riverbank there were also two Green Sandpipers feeding on the edge of the snow.

Just beyond the main bridge, on a small stream, were a range of Nuthatches, Treecreepers, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Japanese Tits which enlivened the morning. Then as we returned to the coach, we spotted a ring-tailed harrier, which the photographs revealed to be a young Hen Harrier.

Having eaten our breakfast on the coach, we drove to a site for Ural Owls. In a stunning snowy landscape, down a track to a clearing, there was a superb Owl resting peacefully in a cavity in a tree. Around the small clearing Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers could be seen in the trees and Japanese Tits were calling loudly.

We boarded the bus again and headed back to Tsuruimidai, where in the café we had an excellent hot chocolate, before taking another look at the Cranes. However, on the way to the Cranes we spotted a group of Redpolls, two of which were much paler than the others. These were Coues's Arctic Redpoll whose shining white rumps marked them out from the other Redpolls in the flocks.

We then stopped for lunch at the rustic Heart 'n' Tree Restaurant. Here on the feeders were Marsh and Willow Tits, along with the stunning white-fronted subspecies of Eurasian Nuthatches. As we ate our lunch, a Brambling landed on the feeders and on checking outside the restaurant, there was a group of 12 in the adjacent trees. After lunch on the way to the coach we found a superb Hawfinch which pleased all the group.

Our return journey to the hotel took us to Lake Mashu where the snow was falling. This magnificent caldera lake had Steller's Sea Eagle flying around the mountain ridge and overhead three White-tailed Eagles battled in the air. Our next stop was Mount Io, where billowing steam was appearing from fumaroles, with a stench in the air of sulphur which was bubbling up from the volcano. The hissing steam was like a vast kettle and the extremely hot water was throwing sulphurous mounds onto the surface of the ground. Finally, we returned to the Onsen hotel and again a few of the group used the baths to soak away the cold of the day.

Dinner was another fully Japanese meal with individual burners heating the food in front of each diner. After completing our checklist tonight, some of the group went to bed, whilst others went for a walk in the snowy village looking for Raccoon Dogs, but all that was seen was another beautiful Fox.

Day 5

Wednesday 19th February

Today we left after breakfast on our way to the north. We drove through the stunning mountain scenery where the Sakhalin Spruce Forest was covered in snow, which made for a truly breath-taking drive. Arriving at the coast at Shari the sea ice was covering the sea, with just the harbour mouth open. Here on the sea we had Harlequin Ducks and our first Glaucous Gulls. On the beach there were flocks of Redpoll and the occasional Tree Sparrow.

Heading for Rasau, we saw Slaty-backed Gulls, more Harlequin Ducks, plus Black Scoter, and lots of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles. Arriving in Rasau we stopped for a comfort stop in a seafood and seaweed shop, before boarding the boat for our first cruise. On leaving the harbour we headed out to the sea ice which was a few miles offshore. Here along the edge of the ice, were masses of Steller's and White-tailed Eagles and hundreds of Large-billed Crows. This was an astounding experience with the Eagles coming within feet of the boat. A truly astonishing experience.

All too soon, we had to leave the ice and headed back to the harbour where on the harbour walls, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls were sitting. Along the river were Japanese Wagtails and there were masses of gulls and Harlequin Duck to enliven the view.

An early dinner was our next stop, before heading to a hide to look for Blakiston's Fish Owl. Tragically, despite a long wait, the owl was a no-show, so we left disappointed but hoping tomorrow would bring better luck.

Day 6

Thursday 20th February

Today was an early pre-dawn start, as we headed for the boat to get out to the ice before sunrise. As dawn appeared, we were stopped along the edge of the sea ice, and the first pink tinges of the rising sun illuminated all before us. And it was worth the early start!! The ice was pink, the eagles impressive, the air cold. Frankly, one of the best starts to a day anywhere on earth. Truly, words cannot do it justice. As we waited, the crew began to feed the eagles with fish, and the gulls and the huge numbers of both Steller's and White-tailed Eagles swooped in to collect them. Breath-taking. The huge yellow bills of the vast eagles ripped into the fish and in the pink morning light it was difficult to see whether the sea ice was tinged with sunrise or fish blood!

Along the edge of the ice other boats were doing the same thing and around each were gathered eagles and crows by their hundreds. After the eagles, we headed for the shore, and some gentle persuasion was needed to get the Captain to change course and go looking for birds. However, it was finally agreed and as we headed north we saw Pigeon and Spectacled Guillemots, plus a couple of the recently split Snow's Guillemots for good measure (still a subspecies according to the IOC). Then one of the group spotted a fin and delightfully we found a couple of Dall's Porpoise feeding in the bay just offshore. A fantastic end to the cruise.

After the cruise, we headed back to the hotel for a well-deserved breakfast before heading north along the coast to see what was at the end of the road. As we drove, we saw more Harlequins than it is possible to count, White-winged Scoter and Black Scoter in mixed flocks, and a superb Fox scavenging along the edge of the road. At the road's end we stopped for a group photograph in the snow and spotted a *Takagripopteryx* Winter Stonefly – an amazing insect that thrives in the freezing temperatures of a Japanese winter and is truly adapted to the harsh weather of Hokkaido.

Then we set off south from Rausu on a sea-lion hunt. Local information had suggested an area where Steller Sea Lions gathered, and we headed to try and find them. Stopping at the appropriate spot, it took only seconds to discover a group of 15 Sea Lions loafing around offshore. An amazing sight. Travelling a mile or so further on, we encountered another group of about 25 Sea Lions which were playing in the winter sun, surrounded by flocks of Kamchatka Gulls (a subspecies of Mew or Common Gull). What an amazing sight. There was also one enormous male Sea Lion on an ice flow offshore that was so huge it blew the mind.

Then back for another dinner and the use of the onsen hot springs, before another go in the owl hide. However, tragically like last night, it was a long, slow wait with no owl in sight, although as with the previous night, frustratingly, we could hear the owls calling. Finally, we returned to bed praying that we would have better owl luck elsewhere but knowing that the no-show could not dent an otherwise remarkable day.

Day 7

Friday 21st February

After breakfast we headed off, with a quick look at the Brown Dippers on the stream behind the hotel before we left to head south. We hadn't gone far when we found a group of about 40 Sea Lions together offshore. Swimming and playing in the sunlit (if cold) water they made for an amazing morning start.

Stopping at a number of viewpoints along the coast, we looked for sea birds and spotted Harlequin Ducks, Black Scoter, Goldeneye and Greater Scaup. In Shibetsu Harbour there was a range of duck and about 30 Black-eared Kites feeding around the harbour.

Then we headed on to the Notsuke Peninsula, where male Sika Deer were fighting each other, and the snowy landscape was bleak but fascinating. At the visitor centre there was a Nauman's Thrush and offshore masses of Long-tailed Duck were gathered amongst the ice.

At the end of the Peninsula were Asian Rosy Finch and lots of Grey-capped Greenfinch and offshore a Harbour Seal added to our mammal list, whilst Black and White-winged Scoter, and Long-tailed Duck swam on the sea. Back at the visitor centre we found seals on the ice, which turned out to be the arctic Spotted Seals, another great addition to the mammal list.

Back in Shibetsu we had a great lunch in a lovely restaurant before setting off for Yoshuri Onsen, which we reached driving through stunning snowy scenery. Arriving about 3pm, we had time for a short walk in the snow before settling down to look at the bird feeders outside the window, which had Eurasian Jay, Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, Willow and Marsh Tits and many Nuthatches were also about. Some of the group also went to the onsen.

Around 5.50pm, the group started to trickle into the main lounge area by the large windows, getting into prime position for owl watching. At 6.02 our owl duck was broken when a magnificent Blakiston's Fish Owl arrived from out of the dark. This monstrous creature was more than worth the wait, and as it caught and devoured fish; everyone was spellbound. Staying for 10 minutes, pictures were taken, dropped jaws returned to their normal positions and everybody breathed a sigh of relief and content (especially the leader). And so, we went to dinner feeling only slightly guilty about the Spaniards and Americans who arrived two minutes after the owl had left!

During dinner the guide kept checking for the owl, but it didn't return. However, another mammal was added to the growing mammal list as a Sable turned up and ate from one of the bird feeders. This beautiful large Weasel-like creature had everyone leaving their superb dinner mid-course to have a good look, before returning to complete their meal. What an evening – making the 10 hours (for some) of owl waiting worthwhile.

To put the jam on the day, at 10.30pm the Blakiston's Owl returned and, for those still up, it again gave a superb display, explaining why this largest of all owls is a species everybody should see.

Day 8

Saturday 22nd February

So good was last night that, for some, the day started in the reception area at 4.30 in the morning. Those up were treated to a Mink fighting with a Sable. Then three diffident Sables were together at one point and, remember, this is a rare and exceptionally difficult species to see (– anywhere other than here) and there was another amazing display by the Owl at 5.30am. An early walk, for some, then took us into the snowy woods looking for Kingfishers, but we couldn't find them. We did have Siskin and Bulbuls, but they weren't enough to keep us outdoors for long.

So we went back to the hotel, feasted well for breakfast and then settled down by the window. The Sables were on display regularly, there were Jays everywhere, and we spotted a Eurasian Red Squirrel or three on the woody banks on the other side of the river – another great mammal tick. We stayed watching the birds until our last minutes, adding Wren to the list and, just when we were about to leave, we spotted one of Japan's prize birds on the riverbank opposite. This was a Solitary Snipe, a tick for all the group and a species that most had assumed they would not see. A real find.

Then, sadly, we headed off towards the airport, where we had time for one last farewell to the Cranes before arriving at the airport just after lunch. Here we said goodbye to the fantastic Masa-san who had made our time in Hokkaido so enjoyable, with his kindness, care and willingness to break the Japanese rules – for the sake of the wildlife spotting!

Landing safely at Haneda Airport in Tokyo, we were collected and taken to our downtown hotel in a coach, just a short walk from the main station. Here we went foraging for food and found ourselves in a Japanese Burger restaurant, which was excellent, but so very different from all the traditional Japanese food of the last week. Then a much-needed bed called us all.

Day 9

Sunday 23rd February

We ate breakfast at a sensible time this morning and then headed off at 9am toward the Imperial Palace Gardens. First however we looked around the giant park with its 2000+ Japanese Black Pines and its moats filled with Great Cormorant, Grey Heron, Coot, Wigeon, Gadwall, and Mute Swan, plus a few Tufted Ducks and Spot-billed Ducks. In the park White Wagtail were evident, plus a brief view of a Bullfinch and a number of Dusky Thrush and White-checked Starling.

Then we visited the East Gardens, where a Pale Thrush was a good bird for the day as were the Warbling (Japanese) White-eye which were feeding on the damson and cherry blossom. The blossom had also drawn in the first tourists beginning to think about the Cherry Blossom festivals that will be starting in Japan in a month or so. Amongst the gardens we also managed to find a Japanese Leaf Warbler, several Sparrowhawks and one large Goshawk as it flapped past.

So, time was pushing on and we ate lunch in a café opposite the railway station before returning to the hotel to check out and collect our bags. We arrived at the station with 20 minutes to spare before our bullet-train ride to Nagano, and those interested in trains had the pleasure of watching the Japanese railway system at full tilt. Then onto the amazing bullet trains which whisked us at 148 mph north in a very quiet and efficient manner.

The view from the window included the sprawling centre of Tokyo, Mount Fuji in the distance and as we sped through the countryside, the mountain scenery of the centre of the island began to appear. Arriving at Nagano station we had a chain of people to get the bags off and, despite only having a three-minute stop, we were all safely off the train with a minute to spare. Then we headed out of the station and across the road to the hotel and after checking in, headed back to the station for dinner in an excellent steak restaurant. Tired but happy we all then retired to bed, looking forward to seeing the Monkey Park tomorrow.

Day 10

Monday 24th February

After breakfast we met our local guide for this element of the trip. It was a nice morning and as we drove, we discussed the lack of snow this year, which is very unusual. Stopping to look at the orchards that had been flooded by last autumn's typhoon, we spotted a large flock of birds. These turned out to be a mixed flock of over 500 Waxwings. Subsequent analysis of the flock shows that it was 547 in number with an almost 50:50 split between Bohemian and Japanese Waxwings. A stunning surprise sight. Driving on towards the monkey park, we then spotted a group of Japanese Grosbeaks in another orchard and managing to stop, getting excellent close-up views of this impressive species.

Our arrival at the Monkey Park was in consequence somewhat delayed (but boy, was it worth it). The Monkey Park which was set up to reduce the friction between the macaques and the orchard farmers, was busy today, but the walk up through the Japanese Red Cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) forest was beautiful. The two-kilometre walk wove its way through the woods, and we found Japanese Macaques feeding high in the trees around us. Further up the trail we added yet another superb mammal to the list – this time the odd antelope-/goat-like Serow, an endemic species of Japan. Arriving at the money-bathing area, where a pool has been created for the Macaques to bath in the thermal water, tragically the monkeys weren't in the bath and the crowd of people were all willing them to enter the water. However, the monkeys were happy playing in the snow, foraging for food and basically being monkeys, completely disinterested in all the humans that were watching them. A fascinating sight to behold.

On the return walk we found another Serow and enjoyed watching the monkeys feeding alongside the path. Then we had lunch in a café, before heading back toward Nagano. On our trip back, the first stop was supposed to be a small pond, but amazingly we discovered larger Waxwing flocks than we had seen this morning. Indeed, in one area of orchards there were thousands of Waxwings in large mixed groups. It was an astonishing sight to behold. Finally, we arrived at the pond, where Baikal Teal were the target bird, and they didn't disappoint, plus a group of terrapins sitting on some rocks. Along with the rare birds there were also masses of Wigeon, and Bramblings added a splash of colour.

Our final stop for the day was the Zenkoji Temple, a huge complex of Buddhist wooden buildings. In the gardens were Japanese Tits, Grey-capped Greenfinch and Varied Tits. Some from the group then returned to the hotel by coach whilst the remainder walked down through a special market put in place for the Emperor's birthday. This market had the added advantage of free samples of food, which were tried by all the walkers.

After returning to the hotel, the group headed across to the upper floor of the station complex again for dinner and returned to the steak restaurant for another very enjoyable meal including for many the intriguingly named Bottom Flap Steak!

Day 11

Tuesday 25th February

Our last full day in Japan dawned and we set off for an 8am start heading out of town towards Karuizawa. After Mount Asama, an active volcano, we stopped at a temple to look in the woods but didn't find anything of note, and so headed for a 7/11 to pick up lunch. Behind the store we found a Hawfinch but then travelled to an

Onsen hotel to use their chairs and watch their feeders. Here we had our second squirrel – the Japanese Squirrel, a different species from the one on Hokkaido which pleased all the mammal lovers. We also had excellent views of Varied Tit, more greenfinch and Pygmy Woodpeckers. We were also delighted to have point-blank views of a Japanese Accentor, looking for all the world like a Dunnock as it fed on the bird table. In the ground we also had our 145th bird species – Goldcrest.

Then we transferred to the Karuizawa Bird Sanctuary and visited the visitor centre where there were live pictures from a nest box camera of a sleeping Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel. Interesting – but frustrating if you wanted to see one in person. As we walked by the river, we heard Pygmy Woodpecker and Japanese Tit, and then were delighted when Hugh found a stunning male Red-flanked Bluetail, its vibrant blue colour standing out clearly against the forest. Alongside a stream there were a trio of Brown Dippers setting up a nest – carrying nesting material around with them.

Then, crossing over a bridge, Lesley beckoned the rest of us over urgently. To our great pleasure, in the mouth of a nest box was the face of a Giant Flying Squirrel who sat and watched us for ages, adding this superb mammal to our trip list.

By now however, we were running out of time, so we had to head back to the coach and set off for our journey back to Tokyo and as we left the mountains for the lowlands, the temperature rose and the number of people increased. After a stop in a rest station, dripping in Oriental Turtle Doves, we drove through an amazing 18-kilometre tunnel before arriving at our hotel near the airport. Here we said goodbye to our local guide and checked in for the last time. Dinner tonight was taken at the hotel and the good food made our last night a pleasant one. Two of the party left us tonight as they were heading for Australia, but the rest of us then went to bed before heading to the airport in the morning

Day 12

Wednesday 26th February

This was our last morning and after breakfast we caught the shuttle to the airport, and then caught our flight home, all of which went very smoothly. The daylight flight back over Russia was truly magnificent and those with a window seat had the extraordinary sight of the vast snow-covered mountains and rivers that are Siberia. A living geography lesson. Finally, after a 12-hour flight we arrived home safely, still on the same day and indeed only early afternoon local time! A quite extraordinary trip with a superb group!!!

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Species Lists

Birds

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced	Scientific name	trip	February													
				12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Chinese Bamboo Partridge - I	<i>Bambusicola thoracicus</i>	1			X											
2	Mute Swan - I	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	1												X		
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	1						X	X	X	X	X	X			
4	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	1		X												
5	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>	1			X											
6	Baikal Teal	<i>Sibirionetta formosa</i>	1														
7	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	1		X		X	X									X
8	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	1					X							X	X	
9	Falcat Duck	<i>Mareca falcata</i>	1						X								
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X									X
11	American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	1														X
12	Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X	X						X	X	
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
14	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1	X	X	X						X					X
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X									X
16	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	1					X								X	
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	1			X	X	X								X	
18	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	1			X		X					X		X		
19	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	1					X			X	X	X				
20	White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi stejnegeri</i>	1									X	X				
21	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>	1					X			X	X	X				
22	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	1								X		X				
23	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	1								X		X				
24	Goosander (Common Merganser)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	1						X		X	X	X				
25	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1	X				X			X	X	X				

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					12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
26		Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X			X		X			X
27		Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X							X	X
28		Ruddy-breasted Crake	<i>Porzana fusca</i>	1				X									
29		Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1		X										X	X
30		Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	1	X	X	X		X							X	X
31		Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>	1		X	X										
32		White-naped Crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>	1		X	X										
33		Red-crowned Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>	1						X	X				X		
34		Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	1		X	X										
35		Hooded Crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>	1		X	X										
36		Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1					X	X							X
37		Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1	X				X					X			X
38		Slavonian (Horned) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	1					X								
39		Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	1					X								
40		Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1													
41		Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1		X	X										
42		Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	1	X												
43		Long-billed Plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>	1		X		X									
44		Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1		X			X								
45		Solitary Snipe	<i>Gallinago solitaria</i>	1											X		
46		Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1	X												
47		Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X								
48		Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1		X				X							
49		Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	1					X								
50		Saunders's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus saundersi</i>	1	X				X			X					
51		Black-tailed Gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>	1		X			X			X					
52		Mew Gull (Kamchatka Gull)	<i>Larus canus kamtschatschensis</i>	1					X			X					
53		Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>	1						X	X						
54		Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	1							X	X					
55		Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae mongolicus</i>	1	X	X	X		X					X			
56		Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>	1	X	X						X	X	X			

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57		<i>Cephus columba</i>	1									X	X	X			
58		<i>Cephus columba snowi</i>	1										X				
59		<i>Cephus carbo</i>	1										X	X			
60		<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>	1									X	X	X			
61		<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X				X				X	X
62		<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	1		X	X											
63		<i>Platalea minor</i>	1	X				X									
64		<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	1	X													
65		<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	X	X	X		X									X
66		<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	X	X	X		X									X
67		<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	X	X	X		X									
68		<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1	X	X	X		X									
69		<i>Nisaetus nipalensis</i>	1						X								
70		<i>Accipiter gularis</i>	1		X												X
71		<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1			X										X	
72		<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1			X		X								X	
73		<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1							X							
74		<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X						X		X	X
75		<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	1						X	X	X	X	X				
76		<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>	1						X	X	X	X	X				
77		<i>Buteo japonicus</i>	1		X	X	X	X		X				X			X
78		<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>	1									H	X	X			
79		<i>Strix uralensis</i>	1							X							
80		<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1	X	X		X										
81		<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>	1			X	X										
82		<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	1		X												
83		<i>Yungipicus kizuki</i>	1			X	H	X					X	X	X	X	
84		<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1										X	X			
85		<i>Picus awokera</i>	1				X	X									
86		<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	X	X		X										
87		<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1		X	X											

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88		<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>	1		X	X	X	X									
89		<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1			X							X		X	X	
90		<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>	1					X								X	
91		<i>Coloeus dauuricus</i>	1		X												
92		<i>Corvus frugilegus pastinator</i>	1	X	X	X											
93		<i>Corvus corone</i>	1	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X				
94		<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
95		<i>Corvus corax</i>	1									X					
96		<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	1														X
97		<i>Bombycilla japonica</i>	1														X
98		<i>Periparus ater</i>	1							X						X	X
99		<i>Sittiparus varius varius</i>	1			X	X									X	X
100		<i>Poecile palustris</i>	1										X	X			
101		<i>Poecile montanus</i>	1						X	X			X	X			X
102		<i>Parus minor</i>	1		X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X	X	X
103		<i>Remiz consobrinus</i>	1	X	X												
104		<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	1	X	X	X											
105		<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
106		<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1		X	X	X										
107		<i>Delichon dasypus</i>	1				X										
108		<i>Horornis diphone</i>	1												X		
109		<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	1			X	X	X	X				X	X			X
110		<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1														
111		<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>	1		X	X	X	X							X		
112		<i>Regulus regulus</i>	1														X
113		<i>Troglodytes troglodytes clara</i>	1										X				X
114		<i>Sitta europaea clara</i>	1				X		X	X			X	X			X
115		<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1							X			X				
116		<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	1	X			X	X							X	X	X
117		<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1		X	X	X									X	
118		<i>Turdus pallidus</i>	1		X	X	X	X						X			

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119		<i>Turdus chrysolaus</i>	1					X									
120		<i>Turdus naumanni</i>	1										X				
121		<i>Turdus eunomus</i>	1	X	X		X	X	X			X			X	X	X
122		<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>	1														X
123		<i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>	1	X	X	X	X								X		
124		<i>Monticola solitarius philippensis</i>	1		X	X											
125		<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>	1			X	X				X			X	X	X	X
126		<i>Passer rutilans</i>	1	X	X	X											
127		<i>Passer montanus</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
128		<i>Prunella rubida</i>	1														X
129		<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1		X	X	X										
130		<i>Motacilla alba lugens</i>	1	X	X	X	X	X							X	X	X
131		<i>Motacilla grandis</i>	1				X	X			X			X	X		
132		<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	1		X		X										
133		<i>Anthus rubescens</i>	1	X	X	X											
134		<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	1								X					X	
135		<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	1		X					X				X			X
136		<i>Eophona personata</i>	1													X	
137		<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula griseiventris</i>	1											X			
138		<i>Leucosticte arctoa</i>	1									X					
139		<i>Chloris sinica</i>	1	X	X	X	X						X		X	X	X
140		<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	1							X	X						
141		<i>Acanthis hornemanni exilipes</i>	1							X							
142		<i>Spinus spinus</i>	1												X		
143		<i>Emberiza cioides</i>	1		X	X										X	X
144		<i>Emberiza elegans</i>	1			X											
145		<i>Emberiza spodocephala personata</i>	1		X	X	X										
146		<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1	X	X	X		X		X							

Mammals

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced	
	Common name	Scientific name
1	Japanese Macaque - E	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>
2	Steller Sea Lions	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>
3	Dall's Porpoise	<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>
4	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
5	Spotted Seal	<i>Phoca largha</i>
6	Japanese Squirrel	<i>Sciurus lis</i>
7	(Eurasian) Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
8	Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Petaurista leucogenys</i>
9	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
10	Sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>
11	Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>
12	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>
13	Japanese Serow - E	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>