

Tour Report

Winter Japan: Cranes & Sea Eagles 2017

Jan 20, 2017 to Feb 4, 2017

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

This was my thirteenth winter Japan trip, and this year was again blessed with reasonable to good weather (other than one wet day on Kyushu), whilst Hokkaido was gorgeous, with little snow, but quite a bit of sea ice, and very cold temperatures. It seemed to be another odd year though, with quite a few species being scarce or absent; there were few grebes around, and duck numbers were reduced on the whole. Jun Matsui was once again my co-leader and our driver, and we benefited greatly from his patience, local knowledge, and interpretive skills.

We began, as usual, at Narita, where a Brown-headed Thrush was at a creek not far from the hotel; as in past years, it was the only one we saw. A Goshawk there was unusual, and the striking Japanese Wagtail made its first appearance. En route to Karuizawa we made a detour to twitch a fine subadult Demoiselle Crane, a nice addition to the tour, and also saw the only Azure-winged Magpies of the trip nearby.

Karuizawa was quite snowy. Japanese Accentor showed well there, as did Brown Dipper, while Brambling near our hotel were fortunate, as they proved scarce elsewhere this year. That afternoon's trip to Saku gave us our first Smew and Falcated Duck, 12 White-fronted Geese were a surprise drop-in, and we saw our only Rustic Buntings of the tour.

The Snow Monkeys at Jigokudani were a big hit as always, and with large amounts of very atmospheric and scenic snow this year. The next day, we had great views of Taiga Bean Goose at Kamoike, plus about 70 Baikal Teal, and more Smew; a Mountain Hawk Eagle was a big bonus here, perched up nicely, my first for some years, AND it may well have been Marcy's 4000th species. Bewick's Swans showed nicely, and a bonus Naumann's Thrush was a good find, as was Grey-headed Lapwing. We dipped on Scaly-sided Merganser on the Sai River, one possible sighting was not confirmed as the bird vanished! Sadly our hotel in Kanazawa is set for redevelopment so we will lose both it and the longtime chef who always did such fantastic meals for us.

Kyushu gave us wonderful Hooded and White-naped cranes -- some 14,000 in the area this year -- plus 6 Sandhill and at least 7 Common Cranes. Saunders's Gull was great this year, with lovely views of about 15 at Yatsushiro. Black-faced Spoonbills showed well, with 5 Eurasian Spoonbills for comparison. A drake American Wigeon at Minamata was presumably the same bird I found here in 2015 and 2016. We saw just a few Mandarin Ducks at Kogawa Dam and again at Sendae later, though seeing what was my first Badger from Japan amazingly well in daylight was a huge highlight from Kogawa.

Japanese Woodpecker showed very well and was calling and drumming at Sendae, where we also found some distant Chinese Penduline Tits and Chestnut-eared Bunting for most. Crested Kingfisher and Long-billed Plover showed nicely on the Sendae River as we drove to

Miike. Lake Miike was fog-shrouded and with dull showery conditions, but still gave us views of Yellow-throated Buntings and Ryukyu Minivet, whilst Japanese Woodpecker also showed very well and White-backed Woodpecker all too briefly, despite drumming loudly but out of sight for ages.

Then it was up to snowbound Hokkaido, where we were lucky to get in due to poor visibility, and rather fortuitously immediately twitched an elusive Ural Owl that was in the same site near the airport as last year. We also had time to make a foray out to Tsurui, where we had a fabulous show from some 120 Red-crowned Cranes as they bugled and danced in the snow before departing -- just fantastic.

The next day, we witnessed the famous and beautiful frosted misty river spectacle of these cranes at Otowa Bridge. We then went to Teshikaga, where Whooper Swans showed well; a fascinating old Japanese art and craft shop was worth a visit, and some adventurous souls enjoyed deer burgers for lunch. Our first Steller's Sea-Eagles were also memorable, sitting in trees along the road near Rausu. Rausu Harbor in late afternoon gave us Harlequin Ducks, and both Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls amongst the numerous Slaty-backs, then it was time to head for the small minshuku (the Japanese word for a small, family-owned bed-and-breakfast) at Washi-no-Yado. They have upgraded their facility recently, so there are now more bedrooms and a separate dining room, but this year the male Blakiston's Fish-Owl made us wait and only eventually appeared at 0245, joined by its mate shortly after.

Though the sea ice was still well north of Rausu, we did our scheduled boat trip anyway, and it was fantastic, with amazing close views of both Steller's and White-tailed eagles as they came in to scavenge the fish that the boat crew threw out for them. Finding both Red-throated and Arctic Loon in the harbor after the trip was a good bonus too.

Next came the great sand spit of Notsuke -- always a bleak, barren, icy place. Sea ducks were sparse but Black Scoter showed well, as did Long-tailed Duck, and Spectacled Guillemot showed very nicely on the calm sea. We got down to the lighthouse area, which is typically snowbound at the time of our tour, but passerines were absent, although we did see hundreds of Sika deer and some beautiful red foxes along the spit.

Yoroushi Onsen was as ever a big highlight, with lovely rooms, a magnificent hot spring (complete with outdoor facilities, if required), super Japanese meals, an enviable and very beautiful art gallery en route to the rooms, and a bird feeder that yielded Great Spotted Woodpecker, the strikingly pale asiatica race of Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit, Hawfinch, Brambling and the distinctive brandtii race of Eurasian Jay. Our checklist that night was interrupted by the arrival of a Blakiston's Fish-Owl to the fishing area outside, with great looks from the comfort of the lounge! A later appearance saw the bird getting a snowy cap as the flakes fell, all very scenic and shown on the website.

Our boat trip off the coast of Ochiishi was challenging as it was bitterly cold and choppy, but we had lovely looks at Common Murre, Ancient Murrelet, Least Auklet, and the much-prized Spectacled Guillemot, as well as a Crested Auklet. Nosappu misaki area was very very cold with much sea ice and no sign of Red-faced Cormorant or Rock Sandpiper, but very scenic and with views of occupied Japan from close range. Here the Kurile Islands are very close by,

seized by the Russians at the very end of World War 2, and there are many memorials and signs set up by the Japanese as they optimistically claim the islands back.

Kiritappu on the final afternoon gave a White-tailed Eagle flying by, and a memorable frisson of excitement with the plastic models of Tufted Puffins, set amidst the tussock grass to lure nesting birds. Asian Rosy Finch showed nicely at the house on the headland, it had been elusive this year thus far. Black Brant amongst a flock of Whooper Swans nearby were an unexpected trip bird and the final trip addition.

It is always hard to pick highlights from the tour as there were so many. Certainly the Red-crowned Cranes in the snow were a major one, Demoiselle Crane was great, and the crane spectacle at Arasaki is amazing. The Blakiston's Fish-Owls were again simply outstanding this year, and we had a terrific experience with both Steller's Sea-Eagle and White-tailed Eagle. The Snow Monkeys were also a major hit and that daytime Badger was fantastic.

Add to this the Japanese culture, the intriguing hotels, onsens, and minshuku we visited, and the many fine Japanese meals we sampled; given the multi-course meals, washing-up must be a major industry in this country!

My thanks to the group for being such good company and enjoying the various aspects of the tour as well as the birds. We became experts on 7/11's and pit-stops but it was all good fun. Marcy gave some very nice neck massages and her flute playing in honour of the cranes was a nice touch, as was the farewell tune in the restaurant. Particular thanks to Jun for driving so well, arranging the bags like an origami piece each day and acting as our intermediary in all matters Japanese;

-- *Phil in Narita Feb 2017*

Itinerary

Jan 22 -- Narita Creek. Ibaraki Prefecture/Komoro Park

Jan 23 -- Karuizawa/ Shiotsubo/Saku

Jan 24 -- Jigokudani Monkey Park/Kanazawa

Jan 25 -- Sae River/ Kaga Fields/ Kamoike/Hachodate harbor

Jan 26 -- to Kagoshima/ Kogawa Dam/Izumi

Jan 27 -- Arasaki and eastern fields/ Minamata/ Yatsushiro

Jan 28 -- Akune/Sendae area/Arasaki and eastern fields

Jan 29 -- Sendae Gawa/ Lake Miike/Kagoshima

Jan 30 -- to Kushiro/Tsurui

Jan 31 -- Otowa Bride/Tsurui Crane Reserve/Teshikaga/ Rausu harbor/Washi no Yado

Feb 1 -- "Evergreen" boat cruise Rausu harbor /Notsuke/Yorouchi

Feb 2 -- T Yorouchi/ Ochiishi boat trip/Onnemato/Nosappu

Feb 3 -- Onnemato/Furen Reserve/Kiritappu/Kushiro

Feb 4 -- Return to Tokyo

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate:

* = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

TAIGA BEAN-GOOSE (*Anser fabalis middendorffii*) – Lovely views at Kamoike as usual with around 150 birds on the lake.

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (*Anser albifrons*) – Twelve at Saku Reservoir were an unexpected sight, and they did not stay long.

BRANT (BLACK) (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) – There was flock of about 250 near Kiritappu, by far the most I've ever seen on the tour, and with some of them feeding with a flock of Whooper Swans.

TUNDRA SWAN (BEWICK'S) (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) – Good views in the fields around Kamoike with around 250 birds.

WHOOPER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido, with a flock of Brant Goose being amongst the group near Kiritappu, an unexpected sight.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – About a dozen at Arasaki, a very local winter visitor here.

MANDARIN DUCK (*Aix galericulata*) – A small group on Kogawa Dam, and again on a pond at Sendae, but not close by this year.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – Very small numbers in the south only, just 3 day records and max. 2 birds.

FALCATED DUCK (*Anas falcata*) – Three drakes at Saku and 2 at Kogawa Dam.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – Relatively small numbers this year, and not on Hokkaido.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – The fine drake Baldpate was still on the river at Minamata where we found it 2 trips back in 2015.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Widespread in the south and centre with good numbers at Kamoike and Kaga.

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Widespread with 7 day records, max count 200 from the Yatsushiro/Arasaki day.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – Just one female at Saku, the only sighting this trip.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Very good numbers at Arasaki with over 1500 there, and small numbers elsewhere.

BAIKAL TEAL (*Anas formosa*) – About 70 at Kamoike were the only sighting, with some good scope views.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Small numbers in the southern wetlands.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – Small numbers in the south and centre.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – Six day records, widespread but only in small numbers.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Small numbers in Hokkaido on 4 days, max 20 near Kiritappu.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Lovely views of this exquisite bird at Rausu Harbor and then again off Notsuke, Nosappu/Ochiishi and Kiritappu max. 25 birds.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – About 70 off Notsuke, 100 off Nosappu and 170 from there and Kiritappu next day. This is a split from Common Scoter of Europe, the males have much more orange on the bill but the females are identical.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – 3 day records max 20 birds from the Notsuke and Nosappu areas. Some of the drakes had lovely long tails.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Small numbers only, some fine drakes in Hokkaido.

SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) – One fine drake and 2 females at Saku, and a drake and 4 redheads at Kamoike.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – 5 day records starting at Saku, with 35 around Nosappu the most. A pity I could not confirm the Scaly-sided at Kanazawa, it did look good at one point but I needed a longer and better view

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – 2 females at Yatsushiro and then up to 10 daily on Hokkaido.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – Two females flushed at Saku bridge and promptly vanished. [E]

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – One in the harbor at Rausu.

ARCTIC LOON (*Gavia arctica*) – One in Rausu Harbor was a surprise, not a species we usually see on the trip.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (LITTLE) (*Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*) – Four day records from the south, max. 2 birds.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – One near Kanazawa and a single off Yatsushiro.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Widespread off Hokkaido, starting at Rausu, with 150 from the Nosappu area.

GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN) (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – Seven day records of small numbers from the southern islands.

JAPANESE CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – 7 at Hachodate harbor, then about a dozen at Akune. The pointed gular area and more extensive white face were obvious. [E]

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Small numbers on Honshu and Kyushu.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – Similarly very small numbers on Honshu and Kyushu, mostly singles.

LITTLE EGRET (WESTERN) (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – Three day records from Arasaki and Sendae, max 4 birds.

PACIFIC REEF-HERON (*Egretta sacra sacra*) – One dark grey bird was on the breakwater rocks at Hachodate, but quickly disappeared amongst the crevices. I had not seen one this far north before and we seldom get it on the tour.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – 5 birds at the eastern fields at Arasaki, with 4 next day.

BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL (*Platalea minor*) – Four in the eastern fields, and then 3 at Yatsushiro. A rare and endangered species, the 2012 census recorded a new high of 2,693 birds.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (HALIAETUS) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – A couple of sightings from Arasaki and Yatsushiro with up to 4 birds.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

MOUNTAIN HAWK-EAGLE (*Nisaetus nipalensis orientalis*) – Diane spotted a perched raptor at Kamoike that proved to be this rather rare species. We got great scope views and it was a bird I had not seen for about 15 years. This taxon is also quite a good candidate for a split at some point.

NORTHERN HARRIER (EURASIAN) (*Circus cyaneus cyaneus*) – Fred saw a ringtail bird at the eastern fields at Arasaki, usually split as Hen Harrier these days.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Just one by the Hotel Wing at Izumi early one morning, though Phil saw one by Narita earlier.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – A lovely male perched up at Narita Creek, this is an endemic race with rather dark upperparts; then another on the sea wall at the eastern fields at Arasaki.

BLACK KITE (BLACK-EARED) (*Milvus migrans lineatus*) – Widespread and fairly common, they sure look different to Black Kite and some lists (not IOC) do split them.

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Great views on Hokkaido, especially at Rausu and Notsuke Hanto, whilst fine adults went directly by us at Onnemato and Kiritappu.

STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – The most magnificent of all the eagles, this huge imposing bird showed amazingly well on the boat trip off Rausu harbor, where they were coming in to grab fish and dominating the White-tailed Eagles. We saw about 110 birds there, with 7 the day before and odd sightings of small groups over the next 2 days. One of

the major highlights of the tour as always, I have posted new sound cuts on IBC and xenocanto.

EASTERN BUZZARD (*Buteo japonicus japonicus*) – Very few this trip, we saw it at Sendae only with just 3 birds.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

RUDDY-BREASTED CRAKE (*Zapornia fusca*) – Jun spotted one in reeds by a creek near Arasaki and most folks got brief looks.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – Just one at Narita and one at Arasaki.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – 7 day records in the south, with a maximum of 15.

Gruidae (Cranes)

DEMOISELLE CRANE (*Anthropoides virgo*) – We twitched a single subadult bird at Kokaigawa in Ibaraki Prefecture en route to Karuizawa. There was quite an assemblage of birders and photographers there as this species is a rare vagrant, another I'd not seen for about 15 years!

SANDHILL CRANE (*Antigone canadensis*) – We saw 6 birds in the eastern fields, I'd like to know which race this is here, where it is annual in very small numbers.

WHITE-NAPED CRANE (*Antigone vipio*) – About 1500 at Arasaki, giving wonderful views, one of the most striking of the family. They depart quite early, starting this month.

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – Seven birds in the eastern fields, with a group of 6 and one odd-looking singleton that has black blotches on the flight feathers, presumably some sort of hybrid.

HOODED CRANE (*Grus monacha*) – Around 12000 were reported this year at Arasaki, and we had tremendous views of the noisy flocks, Many were seen dancing, and small family groups were dotted about the area, often with White-naped Cranes intermixed.

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – One of the great icons of the tour and one of the birds of the trip as usual, the setting is just so fantastic. We saw them near Tsurui at the old ladies sanctuary there on the first afternoon, with over 150 birds seen, and next day there were 50 or so around the famous river bridge at Otowa, a great sight in the morning mist. The great spectacle came at the Crane Reserve though, where something like 150 birds arrived in small groups for their morning feed, with wonderful displays, calling and dancing, what a shame my darn camera malfunctioned today! I have a sound cut posted to the IBC site.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – About 30 at Yatsushiro.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A few near Kamoike, and then up to 5 at Arasaki.

GREY-HEADED LAPWING (*Vanellus cinereus*) – This was a good find near Kamoike, with up to 7 birds in the snowy paddyfields, easily missed on the tour.

KENTISH PLOVER (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – Small numbers at Yatsushiro and 2 at Arasaki eastern fields.

LONG-BILLED PLOVER (*Charadrius placidus*) – 3 on the river at Minamata, with the first seen by Fred from the bus as we crossed the bridge and I'd just mentioned it. Then a couple at Sendaegawa, this is one of the special birds of the tour.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – A couple at Yatsushiro, it is scarce in Japan.

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER (*Calidris acuminata*) – One with Dunlin at Arasaki eastern fields was unexpected.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Small numbers at Arasaki and Yatsushiro.

SOLITARY SNIPE (*Gallinago solitaria japonica*) – A fabulous bird in the stream at Yoroushi, seen beautifully from the reception area, well spotted Diane.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Quite a good year for them with small numbers at Saku, Arasaki and Sendae.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Small numbers on Kyushu.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – One at Narita Creek and one at Arasaki.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – Just a single at Yatsushiro this trip.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – Three winter dress birds on the boat trip.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – A single from the boat trip, the dark coming well below the eye.

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – Great looks at 8 on the flat calm icy sea off Notsuke, then several from the boat trip and off Onnemato.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – Nice views of half a dozen on the boat trip.

LEAST AUKLET (*Aethia pusilla*) – Also seen very well on the boat trip, a tiny thing about the size of a Dusky Thrush.

CRESTED AUKLET (*Aethia cristatella*) – Just one on the boat trip, all black, small sized and with a pale eye.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SAUNDERS'S GULL (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – The tide was low but not too far out, and we got some lovely looks at about 15 of this small rather tern-like rare gull at Yatsushiro.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Very few, just 3 day records of one's and two's in the south.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – A nice look at one at Hachodate, then 3 at Yatsushiro were it for this trip, less than usual.

MEW GULL (KAMCHATKA) (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) – First seen at Rausu where there was handful of immature birds, then about 10 off Onnomate from the bird hide. I can't understand why this has not yet been split, at the very least from Mew Gull of America.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – Small numbers around Arasaki and Yatsushiro, max. 40 birds, then oddly about 15 in Ochiishi harbor, they are always scarce on Hokkaido.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (HEUGLIN'S) (*Larus fuscus heuglini*) – One darker mantled gull with yellowy legs at Yatsushiro is most likely one from this assemblage. It might have been Marcy's 4000th species but I'd advise lumping it in Lesser Black-backed Gull and go for Mountain Hawk Eagle instead!

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – Common in Hokkaido, the default gull here, though we did see one at Hachodate.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – Phil saw an immature one off Akune, quite far south, then we had small numbers from Hokkaido with up to 10 around Rausu.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Very sparse this year, just 3-day records and max. 5 birds, from Rausu, Notsuke and Nosappu.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Widespread throughout and in many color forms. [I]

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – Also quite widespread in small numbers starting at Narita, but not on Hokkaido.

WHITE-BELLIED PIGEON (*Treron sieboldii sieboldii*) – 5 shot over at Sendae power plant, but only a couple of us saw them.

Strigidae (Owls)

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – The Washi-no-Yado birds had been harder this year as the female has gone off to nest already. Hopes of the male between 6-8 pm were soon dashed, and it was not until 0245 that Phil, whilst getting up for the toilet, heard one calling. Thankfully two birds came in and we watched one feed the other- apparently it then came back 7 times that night but we had all gone back to sleep! Yoroushi was fantastic again this year, with one bird interrupting our checklist and sitting by the pond right outside. After dinner, it or more likely another came and sat there for some 45 minutes, getting progressively snow-covered and making for some memorable shots. The eye-brows really protect the eyes and a snow-capped Blakiston's Fish Owl is quite a sight. This is arguably the largest owl in the world, a seriously impressive creature and again one of the birds of the trip.

URAL OWL (*Strix uralensis*) – Tough this year, the roosting site from the past two trips was not in use this year, and our check of a site near Kushiro airport got most of us brief views of a shy and flighty bird. Apparently it has not been regular there either, I think this is another where photographers are causing a problem.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Singles on 5 days starting at Narita, with one at Yatsushiro later.

CRESTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle lugubris*) – Good scope views at Sendae Gawa, and Phil saw one shoot by the onsen at Yoroushi. Another that can be hard to find.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – Very few this trip, just one at Komoro Castle Park, a couple at Karuizawa and 2 at Lake Miike.

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (WHITE-BACKED) (*Dendrocopos leucotos subcirris*) – Drumming loudly at Lake Miike but the very devil to see, most of us got brief looks only. No sign of it at Furen this year.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED) (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – Very few, 3 briefly at Karuizawa, 1 seen at Otowa Bridge by Fred, then at Yoroushi with a close but short stay female

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – Heard tapping and glimpsed by some at the Snow Monkey site, then a great male drumming and frequently calling in a shrine woodland at Sendae. Finally a male and female at Lake Miike later, this one can be elusive. [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Four brief sightings from the bus in the south.

Campephagidae (Cuckooshrikes)

RYUKYU MINIVET (*Pericrocotus tegimae*) – Several birds seen nicely at Lake Miike where they can be hard to find. [E]

Laniidae (Shrikes)

BULL-HEADED SHRIKE (*Lanius bucephalus*) – Very nice looks at Narita, Kamoike and Yatsushiro.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (BRANDT'S) (*Garrulus glandarius brandtii*) – This is the dark-eyed race we saw at Yoroushi, a potential split that is a long time coming.

EURASIAN JAY (JAPANESE) (*Garrulus glandarius japonicus*) – This yellow-eyed race was seen well at Karuizawa, another potential split when someone gets to look at the Eurasian Jay complex.

AZURE-WINGED MAGPIE (JAPANESE) (*Cyanopica cyanus japonica*) – At least a dozen in a loose flock at Kokaigawa in Ibaraki Prefecture as we neared the Demoiselle Crane spot, the only ones of the trip. Usually split from the far-disjunct Iberian birds.

DAURIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus dauuricus*) – A nice pied adult and a dark immature with Rooks in the eastern fields at Arasaki, this is an uncommon winter migrant in very variable numbers.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*) – Lots around Arasaki, with dozens by the crane centre, another possible split too.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – Widespread in small numbers.

LARGE-BILLED CROW (LARGE-BILLED) (*Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis*) – This large heavy billed species with the domed forehead was also widespread, and another likely split as Japanese Crow, they are vocally unlike mainland birds in the complex.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (ASIAN) (*Alauda arvensis japonica*) – Seen at the Demoiselle Crane sight and around Arasaki and Sendae, to me they do not call or sing like Eurasian Skylarks, and I think they should be split as they once were.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – 20 at Sendaegawa were unexpected, not a species we usually see on the tour.

ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon dasypus*) – About 10 in Ashikita as usual, though they seem to have gone from Minamata where we used to see them too.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL) (*Periparus ater insularis*) – Only seen at Yoroushi this trip, this form has a small crest on the hind crown.

VARIED TIT (*Sittiparus varius varius*) – Great looks from Karuizawa, Sendae and Miike, a very striking bird.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – Seen very well at Tsurui and Yoroushi. They sound very like chickadees and lack the buzzy call of the very similar Willow Tit

WILLOW TIT (WILLOW) (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Seen well at Shiotsubo onsen, where also heard calling the nasal "eez eez eez" series.

JAPANESE TIT (*Parus minor*) – Seen well at Karuizawa then Sendae and Miike, this former Great Tit is quite nicely coloured when seen well. I lament the loss of *Parus major minor* though...

Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)

CHINESE PENDULINE-TIT (*Remiz consobrinus*) – A lucky find from a reedbed at Sendae, where I heard them call and then managed to spot 4 birds on distant reed tops, which we could not find when we went over there. This is an irruptive visitor and by no means guaranteed each year.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – The striking white-headed race was only seen at Tsurui crane reserve this year, they seemed absent from other sites like Yoroushi and quite how they find food and survive the cold is a mystery.

LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Good views from Karuizawa, Kogawa Dam and Sendae. This race has black head markings.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea asiatica*) – Great looks at Yoroushi and Teshikaga, this race has striking white underparts with a touch of chestnut on the hind flanks.

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea amurensis*) – This is the one from Karuizawa which has quite a lot of pinkish-chestnut below.

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea roseilia*) – The form from Miike, with a white throat and pinkish underparts.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (EURASIAN) (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – Scarce as ever, but we did see one at a pond at Karuizawa and briefly at Kogawa, whilst Diane saw one at Yoroushi. A very dark race and must surely be a split at some point.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Nice looks from Karuizawa and Yoroushi, where one was swimming about in the stream.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis*) – Widespread and noisy, the shrill squealing call is a feature of most woodlands and urban sites.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH-WARBLER (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – Heard at Kogawa. Sendae and Arasaki but only Diane and Dick got to see one. The bird I saw at Sendae proved to be a *Phylloscopus*, quite vivid green with a thin whitish supercilium and no wing bars. I think it must be a wintering Japanese Leaf Warbler, shame it flew off just as I got a decent view!

Zosteropidae (White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies)

JAPANESE WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Good looks from Narita, and the Arasaki-Sendae area, a very green white-eye.

Leiothrichidae (Laughingthrushes and Allies)

RED-BILLED LEIOTHRIX (*Leiothrix lutea*) – Seen nicely again at Lake Miike, foraging about in fallen tree branches and a very striking species that is spreading fast in the south. Hopefully a neutral introduction, not harming any other species? [I]

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – Just one at Karuizawa bird forest for Ken and I, it promptly vanished into the willows.

DAURIAN REDSTART (*Phoenicurus aureus*) – A few seen well at Narita, Sendaegawa, Sendae and Miike.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (PHILIPPENSIS) (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – Lovely slaty-blue birds with chestnut-bellies were at Hachodate harbor and then Akune.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

PALE THRUSH (*Turdus pallidus*) – Small numbers from Arasaki and Sendae.

BROWN-HEADED THRUSH (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – Just one bird by the creek at Narita, a place where we usually see it but actually the only site on the entire tour!

DUSKY THRUSH (*Turdus eunomus*) – The default winter thrush, we saw them most days in small numbers, even on Hokkaido.

NAUMANN'S THRUSH (*Turdus naumanni*) – One of this rare visitor was out in the fields near Kamoike, seen nicely with the red in the tail showing well. A split some while back from Dusky Thrush, this one had no hybrid characters.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – A couple at Arasaki was a good find of a scarce migrant here.

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Spodiopsar cineraceus*) – Six day records, it seemed quite widespread in small numbers this trip, starting at Narita.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

JAPANESE ACCENTOR (*Prunella rubida*) – A single at the feeders at Shiotsubo was a good find of a very elusive and endemic bird. [E]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GREY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Just four day records mostly of singles from Arasaki, Kogawa, Lake Miike and Sendaegawa.

WHITE WAGTAIL (BLACK-BACKED) (*Motacilla alba lugens*) – This was seen most days of the trip, most identified birds were of the black-backed race *lugens* as usual. One flying off the frozen rock stacks off Ochiishi on the boat trip was a surprise.

JAPANESE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla grandis*) – Some good looks at this exotic looking species at Narita and Karuizawa especially, with none in the north.

OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – Five under the pines at Lake Miike, giving some very good views.

RED-THROATED PIPIT (*Anthus cervinus*) – A couple flying over and calling at Arasaki eastern fields, but not seen on the ground.

AMERICAN PIPIT (JAPONICUS) (*Anthus rubescens japonicus*) – Good looks at Buff-bellied Pipit in the Eastern Fields, this is the race japonicus with heavy breast streaks and eye-ring, potentially a split from American Pipit.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cioides*) – Good views of this striking bunting, starting at Narita.

CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING (*Emberiza fucata*) – One in the reedbed at Sendae sat up for a while and many folks got a look at it, this is always a tough one to find.

RUSTIC BUNTING (*Emberiza rustica*) – Seen at Saku bridge, the only site on the trip this time

YELLOW-THROATED BUNTING (*Emberiza elegans*) – Good views of 5 of this striking species at Lake Miike.

BLACK-FACED BUNTING (PERSONATA) (*Emberiza spodocephala personata*) – Seven day records, seen well at Narita, Saku and Arasaki, this yellowish race is a potential split as Masked Bunting.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – Just a few in the Phragmites reeds at Sendae.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – A big flock of about 100 at Komoro Park, then again at Yoroushi.

ASIAN ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – Scarce this winter, but we got about a dozen at the grumpy guy's place on Kiritappu on the last afternoon.

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – Very sparse this trip, unlike last year, we had a handful of records of small numbers from Arasaki and Karuizawa only.

EURASIAN SISKIN (*Spinus spinus*) – A small flock in the pines by Shiotsubo were the only ones we saw.

HAWFINCH (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – This striking bird was seen well at Komoro Park, Narita and Yoroushi, but always just singles.

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – 5 shot over at Sendae, then we had another small flock at Lake Miike that sat for some while high in a pine, it was not a good year for them.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

RUSSET SPARROW (*Passer rutilans*) – These used to be hard to find, but are now quite common around Arasaki and at Yatsushiro, with maximum flocks of about 25.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Common in the towns but very few on Hokkaido, where we only saw a few in Nemuro.

MAMMALS

JAPANESE MACAQUE (*Macaca fuscata*) – Memorable looks at the hot springs at Jigokudani, in terrific snowy conditions and before all the tour buses arrived. Certainly a trip highlight.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Lovely looks on Hokkaido, some very close, after the first at Saku bridge on Honshu. One big fluffy one trotted by the fish owl site at Washi no Yado in the deep snow.

SABLE (SIBERIAN MARTEN) (*Martes zibellina*) – 3 of them were on the snow at Yoroushi, one warily interacting with the Fish Owl too.

OLD WORLD BADGER (*Meles meles*) – Unexpected sighting of the trip was the Japanese race of Badger seen late afternoon on the back roads at Kogawa Dam. It was much browner with less well-defined head stripes than the British ones, and had a blue eye-ring; a marvellous creature that stayed for very good photos and views. My first in Japan and a species I have very seldom seen anyway, and not for a distressingly large number of years.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – I think this is the species we saw off Notsuke and Nosappu, also at Kiritappu. They look like Grey Seals from Britain.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – Common on Hokkaido and some great stags seen, especially at Notsuke where we had several hundred animals.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Some of the trip photos are on the Internet Bird Collection (IBC), a free-access site via Lynx Edicions (publishers of the classic Handbook of Birds of World). It is a superb collection of videos, photos and sound cuts, and I usually post pictures and sound cuts from the tours here.

I also recommend the xeno-canto website, which has cuts of almost all of the world's bird species; I contribute cuts from most of my tours.

Folks were also asking about the IOC World Checklist of Birds, a free-access downloadable Excel file that gets updated every four months; version 7.1 has just been published. Go to worldbirdnames.org, or Google "IOC" and ignore the Olympics stuff!

Totals for the tour: 158 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa