

Tour Report

Winter Japan: Cranes & Sea Eagles 2018

Jan 26, 2018 to Feb 10, 2018

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

This was my fourteenth winter Japan trip, and we began as usual at Narita, where a Brown-headed Thrush was at Tokko creek not far from the hotel, though unlike past years we saw it again at the Monkey Park. The striking Japanese Wagtail made its first appearance, as did a lovely male Falcated Duck and Meadow and Black-faced Buntings. A quick foray after Japanese Marsh Warbler at the Tone River struck out despite good conditions.

Karuizawa was not very snowy, so no ice hazards this time, and our outing to Komoro Park was nice with fantastic views of Pygmy Woodpecker and Japanese Woodpecker, with Brambling also. The next day got off to a fine start too, with the first Japanese Waxwings I'd seen for many years at the local shrine, feeding on mistletoe and showing beautifully. Japanese Accentor showed well, as did the very dark local race of Eurasian Wren and Brown Dipper nearby, and our lovely walk in the Bird Forest gave us Japanese and Pygmy Woodpecker, Japanese Grosbeak, more Long-tailed Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch and a gorgeous male Red-flanked Bluetail. That afternoon's trip to Saku gave us our first Smew and an elusive Long-billed Plover though duck numbers were low due to the icy conditions there.

The Snow Monkeys at Jigokudani were a big hit as always, and with nice amounts of very atmospheric and scenic snow and very little ice this year. Golden Eagle made a surprise appearance for most of us, a new Japanese bird for Phil. Heading west we met heavy snow and next day spent much of the time at Katano Kamoike as we could not access other local sites. We had great views of Taiga Bean Goose and Bewick's Swan at Kamoike, plus about 150 Baikal Teal, and more Smew. Hashidate Harbor gave Japanese Cormorant and Black-tailed Gull before the snow started, and we found 3 Grey-headed Lapwing en route to Kamoike.

Kyushu was very nice for the first day, which was great for photography but very cold, windy and with snow showers for the next two days. Arasaki gave us wonderful Hooded and White-naped cranes -- some 15,000 in the area this year -- plus 4 Sandhill and at least 2 Common Cranes with sundry hybrids. Saunders's Gull was sadly missing in action this year, they seem to be wintering further north than usual. Black-faced Spoonbills showed well, with a Eurasian Spoonbill for comparison. We saw a few Mandarin Ducks at Kogawa Dam, and heading down to Sendae saw Japanese Cormorant, Ryukyu Minivet at the nuclear power plant, and two fabulous male Green Pheasants in the fields, one crouching low and hoping he was invisible just a few feet away. It was a very poor year for buntings, with hardly any around, so finding a female Pine Bunting at Arasaki was a bonus, and it showed well, whilst Russet Sparrow was very showy and has become much easier to find in recent years.

Long-billed Plover showed nicely on the Sendae River as we drove to Miike, which was lovely with dull quite sunny conditions, but again there were no buntings. Two great looks at White-bellied Green Pigeon were the highlight, along with a fine drake Falcated Duck, another species that was atypically scarce this trip.

Hokkaido by contrast was again was gorgeous, with little snow, not much sea ice, and very cold temperatures. Some species were scarce or absent; there were few grebes around, and both gull and duck numbers seemed quite low. We went straight from Red-crowned Crane Airport at Kushiro out to Tsurui, for a fabulous show from some 120 Red-crowned Cranes as they bugled and danced in the snow before departing -- just fantastic. Getting a couple of Steller's Sea Eagles quite near Kushiro was also nice, so two of the 3 Hokkaido mega ticks were seen on the first afternoon.

The next day, we visited the famous and beautiful frosted misty river spectacle of Red-crowned cranes at Otowa Bridge, before a trip to Tsurui-ito to see them up close and personal in the fields there- I saw over 300 birds today, a big proportion of the world population. We also saw the day roost Ural Owl in beautiful light at a site where we saw one in 2015 and 2016. Whooper Swans showed well at Teshikaga; a fascinating old Japanese art and craft shop was again worth a visit, and most enjoyed deer burgers for lunch.

Rausu Harbor in late afternoon gave us Harlequin Ducks, both Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls amongst the numerous Slaty-backs and an unexpected Ancient Murrelet in the harbour. 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. It has been upgraded recently, so there are now more bedrooms and a separate dining room and viewing area for non-stayers. This year the male Blakiston's Fish-Owl came in nice and early at 1715, then again an hour later, so we had great looks and the views from the rooms were terrific- I saw the pair out by the impoundment in the creek at 0230 whilst laying on my futon!

Though the sea ice was still well north of Rausu, we did our scheduled boat trip anyway, and it was fantastic in very cold but calm and clear weather, 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.

Yoroushi Onsen was as ever a big highlight, with lovely rooms, a magnificent hot spring (complete with outdoor facilities with lovely views of the forested ridge), superb 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 amurensis race of Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit, and the distinctive brandtii race of Eurasian Jay. A Solitary Snipe also showed in the stream not long after we arrived, a much wanted bird. Some folks saw Blakiston's Fish-Owl at the fishing area outside, with great looks from the comfort of the lounge around 1800!

Going over to Furen and Nosappu we stopped at Kyoudei viewpoint for scenic views of the landscape, and some unexpected tobogganing on cardboard for some of us, though I was only one to end-up headfirst in a snowdrift! A Bohemian Waxwing flew by and perched up briefly, a surprise addition and making it a 2 species of waxwing trip.

Next came the great sand spit of Notsuke -- always a bleak, barren, icy place but very spectacular. Sea ducks were sparse but Black Scoter showed well, as did Long-tailed Duck and Spectacled Guillemot 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 dozens of Sika deer and some beautiful red foxes along the spit. 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 around Nemuro set up by the Japanese as they optimistically claim the islands back.

Nosappu late afternoon gave us Red-faced Cormorant flying by as soon as we got there, with one later perched up with Pelagics on the rock stack. Spectacled Guillemot also showed well off the cape.

Our last day saw us walk the snowy woods at Tobai without seeing much, and Onnemoto Rock Sandpiper blind drew a blank, though Harbour seals showed well, but Kiritappu in beautiful calm sunny conditions was terrific. The grumpy guy with the Asian Rosy Finches called the cops when he saw us nearby, but there was no major issue and we eventually saw the birds very well on the power lines without peeking into his yard too much! Sea Otter was a huge bonus here, with two individuals showing very nicely in the calm seas. Steller's and White-tailed Eagle showed well in very scenic settings, and one of the plastic models of Tufted Puffins still remains, set amidst the tussock grass to lure nesting birds.

Some of us lingered near the point and as we were about to leave I saw a small black and white alcid on the sea which looked unfamiliar. I got local guide Chris Cook onto it, and it turned out to be both his and my lifer Long-billed Murrelet! Other alcids popped up nearby, with Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot and Spectacled Guillemot in the same area, plus the only Mew (Kamchatka) Gull of the trip. It was just a shame some of the group had gone back before these unexpected finds.

It is always hard to pick highlights from the tour as there were so many, though certainly the Japanese Waxwings were one right at the start. Red-crowned Cranes in the snow were a major one, and the crane spectacle at Arasaki is amazing. The Blakiston's Fish-Owls were again terrific this year, and we had a marvellous experience with both Steller's Sea-Eagle and White-tailed Eagle. The Snow Monkeys were also a major hit and in very nice conditions this time.

Add to this the Japanese culture, the intriguing hotels, onsens, and minshuku we visited, and the many fine Japanese meals we sampled -I am tempted to add a divine small salad from Yoroushi to the highlights as well, just so nicely done. Given the multi-course meals, washing-up must be a major industry in this country!

Jun Matsui was once again my co-leader and our driver, and we benefited greatly from his patience, local knowledge, and interpretive skills. My thanks to the group for being 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. 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 and Kuranda Feb 2018

Itinerary

Jan 28 -- Tokko River outflow (Narita Creek)/ Tone Fiver/Komoro Park

Jan 29 -- Karuizawa/ Shiotsubo/Saku

Jan 30 -- Jigokudani Monkey Park/Komatsu

Jan 31 -- Hachodate Harbor/ Katano Kamoike

Feb 1 -- JAL to Haneda/ Kagoshima/ Kogawa Dam/Izumi

Feb 2 -- Arasaki and eastern fields/ Minamata/ Yatsushiro

Feb 3 -- Akune/Sendae area/Arasaki and eastern fields

Feb 4 -- Sendae Gawa/ Lake Miike/Kagoshima

Feb 5 -- JAL to Haneda/ Kushiro/Tsurui

Feb 6 -- Otowa Bride/Tsurui-ito Crane Reserve/Teshikaga/ Rausu harbor/Washi no Yado

Feb 7 -- "Evergreen" boat cruise Rausu harbor /Yoroushi

Feb 8 -- Yoroushi/ Kyoudei viewpoint/ Notsuke/Nosappu

Feb 9 -- Tobai woodlands/Onnemoto/Nosappu/Kiritappu/Kushiro

Feb 10 -- Return to Tokyo on JAL, Express bus to Narita

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)

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (*Anser albifrons*) – Three at Katano Kamoike with the Taiga Bean Geese.

TAIGA BEAN-GOOSE (*Anser fabalis middendorffii*) – Great views of about 150 of this large dark goose at Katano, coming in late afternoon to feed on the snowy land right in front of the centre.

TUNDRA SWAN (BEWICK'S) (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) – Good numbers at Katano and some lovely views of them displaying and flying in and out. We could not access the fields where we usually see them this year due to too much snow

WHOOPEE SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Nice looks on Hokkaido.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Seen at Arasaki, Yatsushiro and near Kagoshima, this is a species that has increased greatly in recent years.

MANDARIN DUCK (*Aix galericulata*) – Nice looks at a dozen or so at Kogawa Dam, where they were very wary.

BAIKAL TEAL (*Sibirionetta formosa*) – About 150 at Katano, distant initially but with some coming fairly close and giving nice scope views, though the heavy snow made photography a challenge!

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – One at Tokko River at Narita and just 4 at Katano, with 2 drakes already going out of breeding plumage. Always oddly scarce on this tour.

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*) – John S. saw two at Saku River, then there was a pair at Katano.

FALCATED DUCK (*Mareca falcata*) – A fine drake at Tokko River at Narita in lovely light, then another fine drake at Lake Miike, a very poor trip for them.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – One of the commonest ducks, seen at all the coastal and wetland sites.

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Good views at Saku and good numbers at Arasaki and most wetlands.

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

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Big flocks at Arasaki with hundreds flying in behind the cranes.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – About 70 at Katano, and small numbers at other wetlands. This species has a confusing Clements name as the nominate race is actually Eurasian Teal, whilst the American *carolinensis* is Green-winged Teal, split by some other checklists.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – This bird is declining fast; we saw small numbers at Saku and Katano.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – A few at Saku River and Katano, then at Sendae.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Lovely looks at Rausu and off Nosappu and Onnemoto bird hide.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – Nice sightings from Notsuke then from Onnemoto, Nosappu and Kiritappu.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Great looks off Notsuke.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Small numbers from Hokkaido.

SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) – This showy bird is always a highlight, and we had 3 drakes with 4 redheads at Saku River, and two drakes with 4 redheads at Katano.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – A couple at Saku, and then two drakes at Katano.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – Three at Yatsushiro, as ever the only place we see it in the south.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

CHINESE BAMBOO-PARTRIDGE (*Bambusicola thoracicus*) – One in the road as we were driving out from Lake Miike was a big surprise., This is a species we sometimes hear but very seldom see. [I]

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – Two fantastic males in rice stubble at Sendae, one crouching low just a few feet away and hoping he was invisible. The video is on the IBC site. Clements does not split this species but the other major checklists do, as a Japanese endemic. [E]

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – One on the sea off Notsuke for a few, and one in flight off Kiritappu likewise.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (LITTLE) (*Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*) – Seen at Saku River at Katano, then at various wetlands in the south; this race has a yellow eye.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – One at Lake Miike was a nice sight.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*) – One on the river at Saku was a nice find, then there were two at Lake Miike.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – Amazingly two, then 3, flew by close-in just as we got to Nosappu, then we had another later on the rock face with Pelagic Cormorants, the yellowy bill showing well. Dave even got a flight shot of one of the first batch.

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Small numbers off Rausu, Notsuke and Nosappu, max. about 70 birds.

GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN) (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – A few at Narita and Katano.

JAPANESE CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – One at Hashidate Harbor. The pointed gular area and more extensive white face were obvious. Then a nice view on the rocks off Akune in Kyushu. [E]

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Small numbers at most wetlands.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – One at Katano, this one with pale yellowy upper tibia, then a few also of the nominate race at Arasaki.

LITTLE EGRET (WESTERN) (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – 4 birds at Arasaki.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – One at Arasaki, the eye clearly visible as distinct from the black facial skin.

BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL (*Platalea minor*) – 3 at Arasaki, then lovely views of 4 at Yatsushiro; still a rare bird with a restricted range and a total population around 2500 birds.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (HALIAETUS) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – One at Katano then seen at Arasaki, Yatsushiro and Sendae.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos japonica*) – A fine adult with a feather missing on the right wing was at Jigokudani, my first in Japan. Some folks saw an immature here earlier. I bet they can take a young snow monkey!

EASTERN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus spilonotus*) – One at Tone River, then a fine female plumage bird at Katano.

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

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Lovely views around Rausu, where they are dwarfed by Steller's Sea-Eagle.

STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – Classified as Vulnerable, with just 3600-3800 individuals, mostly wintering in Japan and breeding in Russia and Korea. We had nice views of two on the first afternoon en route to Tsurui, then several hundred around Rausu with fabulous looks at point blank range on the boat trip. One of the great charisma species for sure, and a truly magnificent bird.

EASTERN BUZZARD (*Buteo japonicus japonicus*) – Very few this trip. One at Hashidate was chased off by Large-billed Crow. There was a striking dark-bellied and pale-headed bird on Kiritappu as well.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Small numbers at Katano Kamoike and the Arasaki area.

Gruidae (Cranes)

SANDHILL CRANE (*Antigone canadensis*) – 4 at the Eastern fields at Arasaki, a regular winter visitor here in very small numbers.

WHITE-NAPED CRANE (*Antigone vipio*) – One of the most beautiful and exotic of the family, with a loud bugling call. There were about 1500 at Arasaki, giving wonderful views. They depart quite early, starting this month. The species is classified as Vulnerable with around 3750-4500 individuals only.

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – Two at the eastern fields, one paired up with some sort of Hooded Crane hybrid and with 2 very pallid juveniles that really stood out amongst the dark grey Hooded Cranes. Also most unexpectedly, a single adult with the Red-crowned Cranes at Tsurui-ito, the first Hokkaido record for some 30 years!

HOODED CRANE (*Grus monacha*) – Around 12,000 were reported this year at Arasaki, and we had tremendous views of the noisy flocks. Small family groups were dotted about the area, often with White-naped Cranes intermixed, and the very vocal flocks fighting-in at the Crane Centre is an unforgettable spectacle. It is classified as Vulnerable, with about 15,000 birds wintering at just 10 sites.

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – A marvelous year for them, with over 300 seen on Hokkaido and great views at the old ladies field near Tsurui, at Otowa Bridge at dawn, and at Tsurui-ito. Fantastic to see them in the snow, calling and starting to display. It is classified as Endangered, with a world population of just 1830, though it has recovered from desperately low numbers in Hokkaido last century.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – About 40 at Yatsushiro.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A few near Kamoike, and then up to 30 at Arasaki.
GREY-HEADED LAPWING (*Vanellus cinereus*) – This was a good find near Kamoike, with 3 birds in the snowy paddyfields, easily missed on the tour.

KENTISH PLOVER (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – About 60 at Yatsushiro, feeding on the mudflats.
LONG-BILLED PLOVER (*Charadrius placidus*) – One very cryptic bird on the river gravels at Saku, with fine views in the scope, then 3 at the Satsumasendai River.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – 7 at Yatsushiro, a scarce bird in Japan.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – About 70 at Arasaki and a few hundred at Yatsushiro.

SOLITARY SNIPE (*Gallinago solitaria japonica*) – Once again, one was in the stream at Yorouchi, but elusive and not as close by as last year. A lifer for almost all.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – 16 at Shibayamagata near Katano was a good count, concentrated on one of the few unfrozen fields. Also a couple at Arasaki.

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

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – One at Tokko River at Narita.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – One at Yatsushiro.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – Just one off Kiritappu.

PIGEON GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus columba*) – One on the sea off Kiritappu.

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – Seen very well off Notsuke again, then off Nosappu with a final bird off Kiritappu, another alcid which is a lifer here for most folks.

LONG-BILLED MURRELET (*Brachyramphus perdix*) – One on the sea off Kiritappu was a very unexpected finale for some of us, and a lifer for both Phil and local guide Chris Cook. The black cap and white breast were very striking, with the dark back and white on the wings, plus a slender murrelet-type bill. Quite a rare bird but maybe overlooked or confused with Pigeon Guillemot.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – One in the harbor at Rausu was a nice find.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Strangely enough, just a single bird at Yatsushiro, the only small gull we saw there this year.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – A nice look at 4 at Hashidate, then 3 at Yatsushiro were it for this trip, less than usual.

MEW GULL (KAMCHATKA) (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) – Just one on the sea off Kiritappu, always quite scarce and more so this year. 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*) – The common pale mantled pink-legged Herring type gull with pink legs, with 70 seen at Yatsushiro and a couple around Arasaki. A gull at Yatsushiro had yellowy legs but a pale mantle, maybe an intergrade with Heuglin's type Gull, something referred to as taimyrensis by some or mongolicus by others. Large gull taxonomy remains vexatious, to put it mildly.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – Quite widespread on Hokkaido where it replaces Vega Gull.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Likewise small numbers from Hokkaido.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

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

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – 7 day records with up to 15 each day from Kyushu, and none on Hokkaido as usual...

WHITE-BELLIED PIGEON (*Treron sieboldii sieboldii*) – Two very obliging birds from Miike, perched up and showing unusually well for a change, so often we only see this one in flight.

Strigidae (Owls)

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – Great looks at the male who came in at 520 pm as we had been advised. I was surprised some folks did not have cameras, but he came back later too, a far better time arrangement than last year! Phil saw 2 from his futon at 0220 next day as well, and some folks saw one at Yoroushi right outside the sitting room window again very early on. A fabulous creature, arguably the world's largest owl. Classified as Endangered with population estimates of just 1000-2500 birds, a hard species to survey in its remote forest habitat in Russia and Japan.

URAL OWL (*Strix uralensis*) – A beautiful bird was back in the very scenic tree roost hole in the snowy woods near Tsurui (where we saw it or another in 2015 and 2016), giving great photo ops.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Just a couple of sightings this trip, with one at Yatsushiro the best.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – Great views at Komoro Park and then at the Bird Forest next day, then a couple from Miike.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED) (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – One at the Bird Forest then great views at Lake Furen and Yoroushi, this taxon is a potential split.

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – One of my most prolonged views was at Komoro Park, where I got some reasonable video of a fine male tapping away. Another next day at the Bird Forest was much briefer and more typical! [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Singles near Sendae and at Arasaki.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – One over Arasaki crane fields, a male by the look of it.

Campephagidae (Cuckooshrikes)

RYUKYU MINIVET (*Pericrocotus tegimae*) – One at Sendae nuclear power station was a nice bonus and saved us a lot of time at Lake Miike where this species is elusive. [E]

Laniidae (Shrikes)

BULL-HEADED SHRIKE (*Lanius bucephalus*) – Very nice looks at Narita, Arasaki and Sendae, always singles.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (BRANDT'S) (*Garrulus glandarius brandtii*) – This dark-eyed northern taxon, another potential split, showed very well at Yoroushi, where a loose flock of about 20 came through early in the morning.

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

DAURIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus dauuricus*) – Two dark immatures at Arasaki Crane centre. I heard one calling as we got out of the van and got a nice video of it as it sat on the wires calling, see the IBC site and the FG website.

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

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – Large numbers this year, with 150 near Katano and a good count near Saku, another potential split too.

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. Many were stealing fish from the eagles on the sea wall at Rausu.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (ASIAN) (*Alauda arvensis japonica*) – Seen around Arasaki; 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 Satsumasendai with the Asian House Martins were unexpected, not a species we usually see on the tour.

ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon dasypus*) – About 10 in Ashikita as usual, we also had 4 as we were heading out of Kagoshima on arrival day, and a big flock of 60 or so at Satsumasendae.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL) (*Periparus ater insularis*) – One briefly at the Bird Forest and then much better at Yoroushi; this race has a small crest.

VARIED TIT (*Sittiparus varius varius*) – Seen well at the Bird Forest and Shiotsubo, a striking and colourful bird.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – This is the one from Hokkaido, where we saw it at Furen Lodge and Yoroushi.

WILLOW TIT (WILLOW) (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Only seen at the Bird Forest and Shiotsubo, best told from Marsh Tit by the buzzy trisyllabic call and by having an entirely dark bill.

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

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – One seen very briefly by one or two by the lake at Teshikaga, sadly the only one of this white-headed taxon for the trip.

LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Great looks at Komoro and the Bird Forest but mostly absent from Hokkaido this trip, where the nominate race has a lovely white head.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

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

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea amurensis*) – The one from Hokkaido, with the striking white underparts, seen very nicely at Yoroushi.

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea roseilia*) – This is the race from Miike which has pink-washed underparts.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

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

Cinclidae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Seen at Karuizawa and then at Washi-no-Yado and Yoroushi.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

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

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus japonensis*) – Jan found us one feeding at Miike, always an elusive little bird.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH WARBLER (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – One was skulking and calling in wet fields at Sendae and I think most got views of it. Also seen at the Arasaki area in bushy/reedy margins there.

Zosteropidae (White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies)

JAPANESE WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Small numbers on Kyushu.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – Jan found us an exquisite brilliant blue-tailed male at the bird forest, quite lovely and nice to have an adult male for once.

DAURIAN REDSTART (*Phoenicurus aureus*) – Seen at Tokko River and Saku, also at Katano, then a few from the Arasaki and Sendae area.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (PANDOO) (*Monticola solitarius pandoo*) – A nice slaty blue male was at Tokko River, this taxon lacks the red belly.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (PHILIPPENSIS) (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – A fine a subadult male at Tone River, and a nicely coloured red-bellied male with blue undertail coverts and red vent at Hashidate.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

PALE THRUSH (*Turdus pallidus*) – Good looks at Arasaki where a couple of birds were very obliging.

BROWN-HEADED THRUSH (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – One at the Tokko River near Narita as in previous years, but this year we also saw it en route to the snow monkeys as well.

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

Sturnidae (Starlings)

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Spodiopsar cineraceus*) – Eight day records, it seemed quite widespread in small numbers this trip, starting at Narita, and with up to 30 near Arasaki.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

JAPANESE ACCENTOR (*Prunella rubida*) – A single at the feeders at Shiotsubo was again a good find of a very elusive endemic bird, with a second bird briefly seen too. [E]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GREY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Five 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, all identified birds were of the black-backed race *lugens* as usual.

JAPANESE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla grandis*) – Some good looks at this exotic looking species at Narita and Karuizawa especially, and also seen near Rausu this year.

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

RED-THROATED PIPIT (*Anthus cervinus*) – Seen briefly and heard calling at Arasaki and Sendae.

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

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – One flew by and perched briefly by the viewpoint at Kyoudei on Hokkaido, a lucky pick up, I wish it had lingered.

JAPANESE WAXWING (*Bombycilla japonica*) – At least twelve in a loose group feeding on the mistletoe at the shrine at Karuizawa, a species I had only seen on one previous trip as it is irruptive and very elusive this late in the season. A fantastic bird, the pale yellow belly was very striking, as was the red tail tip.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

PINE BUNTING (*Emberiza leucocephalos*) – This was an unexpected find at Arasaki, sat up for some time as we puzzled over its identity- finely streaked below and on the mantle, pale eye ring and a markedly tawny-orange rump and upper tail coverts which gave away the female Pine Bunting answer. A Japanese tick for Phi, and in a poor bunting year; go figure.

MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cioides*) – Small numbers from Narita, Saku, Arasaki and Sendae.

BLACK-FACED BUNTING (PERSONATA) (*Emberiza spodocephala personata*) – Just 3 day records, seen well at Narita, Sendae and Arasaki, this yellowish race is a potential split as Masked Bunting and is indeed now split by BirdLife/HBW.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – One at the Tone River, and heard near Arasaki, a remarkably poor year for buntings overall.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – Ten from Komoro, and then a small flock at Sendae fields.

HAWFINCH (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – One flew over at Hashidate, then luckily one was found at Katano Kamoike, the only ones we saw all trip!

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – Twelve at Karuizawa Bird Forest, then a small flock briefly at the snow monkey site and 3 seen at Hashidate.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – I am not sure if anyone saw this at the forest walk site at Furen? I know Jun had one and maybe a couple of folks got glimpses?

ASIAN ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – Sparse this year, we managed to get nice looks at them at Kiritappu on the power lines by the house of the eccentric guy who feeds them but hates folks looking at them. Sure enough, he called the cops, who must sigh and dutifully show up to ask us to take care...

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – Small numbers this trip, we had records of small numbers from Arasaki and Karuizawa and about 40 near Sendae.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

RUSSET SPARROW (*Passer rutilans*) – These used to be hard to find, but are now quite common around Arasaki (60) and at Yatsushiro, with 10 at Sendae too.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Common in the towns but very few on Hokkaido.

MAMMALS

JAPANESE MACAQUE (*Macaca fuscata*) – Wonderful views of these at the Snow Monkey Park, a great experience.

JAPANESE SQUIRREL (*Sciurus lis*) – Two at Yoroushi were a nice bonus, the tufted ears are very cute.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Lovely views at Notsuke, these Hokkaido animals are a beautiful orange colour, very striking.

SABLE (SIBERIAN MARTEN) (*Martes zibellina*) – One large bulky beast under the feeders at Yoroushi was seen by most I think.

SEA OTTER (*Enhydra lutris*) – Two on the calm sea off Kiritappu on the last afternoon, nice scope looks as they lounged in the water, with one diving for what I think were sea urchins. A species we have only seen a couple of times before on this tour.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – We saw this species off Onnemoto, Nosappu and Kiritappu. The darker ones also had white whiskers and are I think Spotted Seal.

SPOTTED SEAL (*Phoca largha*) – Some of the pale ring marked seals off Onnemoto appear to be this species.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – Great views at Notsuke, and on the way back from Kiritappu.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Birds of the trip were many and varied as ever, but the cranes, Steller's and White-tailed eagles and Blakiston's Fish Owl inevitably loom large as we had such terrific sightings. Other highlights were the male Green Pheasant, the Japanese Waxwings and some fine woodpeckers, this is a tour for quality and not quantity

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 7.3 has just been published. Go to worldbirdnames.org, or Google "IOC" and ignore the Olympics stuff!

Totals for the tour: 143 bird taxa and 8 mammal taxa