

Wild Japan in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

30 January – 14 February 2019



Steller's Sea Eagle



Red-crowned Crane



Hokkaido



Blakiston's Fish Owl

Report compiled by Duncan McNiven
Images courtesy of Peter Duncan



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Day 1

Wednesday 30th January

Travel to Tokyo

Day 2

Thursday 31st January

Tokyo – Kasai Rinkai Koen

Our group members began to assemble at the Shinagawa Prince Hotel in Tokyo from various starting points and some chose to relax and take it easy after long international flights. However, six of us opted to accompany Duncan on an exploration of Kasai Rinkai Park in Tokyo so that we could begin to acquaint ourselves with the local birdlife. After negotiating the Tokyo metro system we soon arrived at the park which borders the sea front and which contains a number of different habitats to explore including lawns, woodland, tidal mudflats, offshore islands and a freshwater marsh. Luckily for us the rain that had been falling since our arrival in Tokyo magically stopped as we began our walk and the first birds we saw were a flock of soggy looking White-cheeked Starlings accompanied by some cheeky Tree Sparrows. However, our attention was quickly distracted by a flock of smart Azure-winged Magpies moving through the trees.

As we made our way through the park we quickly realised that the commonest and noisiest resident birds were gangs of Brown-cheeked Bulbuls but the bird that attracted the photographers' attention the most was a very confiding Dusky Thrush feeding on a lawn. We crossed the bridge that leads to the main offshore island noting the Black-necked Grebes and Red-breasted Mergansers fishing below us and the Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Gadwall and Eastern Spot-billed Ducks dabbling along the edges. Out on the bay a huge mixed flock of Greater Scaup and Great Crested Grebes loafed whilst on a distant post an Osprey was busy consuming a fish. We amused ourselves for a few minutes watching a Great Cormorant trying and eventually succeeding in swallowing a huge ray with a long tail and then returned across the bridge and walked to the miniature wetland which is run as a nature reserve. Here there were more duck – Common Pochard, Tufted Duck and Northern Shoveler - and our third grebe of the day in the shape of some Little Grebes.

We ate our sandwiches watching an Eastern Buzzard bathing and Common Reed Buntings flitting around among the reeds before walking around the wetland where four Common Greenshanks were fast asleep and John picked out a Common Kingfisher perched on a post. Japanese Bush Warblers called unseen from some dense bushes but much more obliging were a flock of showy Grey-capped Greenfinches. As we returned to the station to catch our train back into central Tokyo a flock of pretty Japanese White-eyes captivated us briefly but our attention was soon drawn to a Pale Thrush nearby tossing leaves around in typical thrush fashion. Returning to the station, we caught our train back to Shinagawa and later the whole group met up for our first meal at a traditional Japanese restaurant before retiring to bed ready for an early start the following morning.

Day 3

Friday 1st February

Tokyo – Hokkaido

After an early breakfast at the Shinagawa Prince Hotel we all hopped on the Keikyu Line train to Haneda airport and twenty minutes later we were checking in for our morning flight to Kushiro. The flight left promptly at 08.00 and an hour and a half later we touched down in the winter wonderland that is Hokkaido in January. We met our local guides Sonoko and Masayuki, boarded our bus and set off on a bright sunny, cold day with a forecast for increasing winds later on. Very soon we arrived at Tsurumi-dai where we found that some Red-crowned Cranes that had been fed by the locals that morning were still in the farmer's field socialising in typical crane fashion. Having had their morning feed the birds gradually began to drift off in family groups, many flying low overhead right above us. In fact, one bird flew so low it clipped some wires and we held our breath as it dropped on to the road. However, to our relief it quickly recovered its composure and took off again. We would have many more opportunities to watch and photograph this special bird later so we made our way to a local hotel where we enjoyed a very nice 'Bento' lunch.

After lunch we drove the short distance to the Ito Crane Sanctuary where another group of Red-crowned Cranes had arrived in anticipation of some food being scattered for them. The wind had now increased as forecast but we were all well wrapped up so we didn't mind. Neither it seemed did the cranes, as these huge, elegant birds put on a great show of crane behaviour – dancing, bugling and posturing in the snow – just a few metres from where we stood. Surely the most beautiful of all the world's cranes, over half the world population now live in east Hokkaido where they were brought back from near extinction by the actions of local farmers and conservationists. After finally having our fill of the cranes we boarded the bus again and drove further into the interior of Hokkaido stopping at Lake Kusharo, large parts of which were completely frozen over. However, around the fringes where a hot spring bubbled up and emptied into the lake, a flock of Whooper Swans had taken advantage of the open water and were seemingly completely unconcerned by our close presence as we snapped away at the wintery scene.

But by now the sun was setting and the temperature was beginning to drop quite markedly so it was time to make our way to our hotel nearby. This was a traditional 'Onsen' with hot baths fed by volcanic springs, so for those that wanted it there was a chance to warm themselves up whilst soaking in a sulphurous bath before joining the rest of the group for a lavish Japanese meal.

Day 4

Saturday 2nd February

Otowa Bridge – Ito Crane Sanctuary – Lake Mashu – Mt. Io

Today we had an early start as we wanted to get to our first destination, Otowa Bridge, soon after sunrise. The bridge spans a braided river where a flock of Red-crowned Cranes roost downstream. It's a world-renowned spot for wildlife photographers attempting to get the ultimate shot of cranes wading in the silvery river and emerging from the dispersing mist as the day gradually warms up. Over the next couple of hours we watched as the cranes gradually became visible as ghostly apparitions whilst the hoar frost on the riverside trees sparkled like diamonds. Not that cranes were the only wildlife of interest here – some Goosanders flew up the river, a smart Japanese Wagtail trotted across the gravel islands and the beautiful local *schrencki* subspecies of Red Fox appeared briefly on a river bank.

We were hoping that some of the cranes would fly up the river and over the bridge but it became clear they had decided to have a lazy morning so we drove back to the Ito Crane Sanctuary again to watch some more cranes enjoying their morning feed. It was fun to catch up with Mark Brazil, the author of the field guide to the birds of Japan at the sanctuary, but all too soon it was time to move on. So, after taking a last look at the magnificent Red-crowned Cranes dancing and bugling in the snow, surely the most beautiful crane spectacle in the world, we bade them farewell. After stopping at a pleasant rural restaurant for lunch, we drove a short distance to a small river valley where after short walk through the forest we were able to watch a pair of sleepy Ural Owls enjoying the mid afternoon sun at the entrance to their nest cavity in a large oak tree. It was another amazing photographic opportunity even if you didn't have a big camera lens.

Having snapped the pair of owls in their photogenic setting to our hearts content we continued on to Lake Mashu, a huge endorheic crater lake formed in the caldera of a potentially active volcano. The lake's waters are claimed to be the clearest in the world and it is certainly the deepest lake in Japan. The steep crater walls are cloaked in forest and the snowy landscape makes it one of the most scenic vistas in the incredibly scenic island of Hokkaido. Whilst it was a beautiful place to stop to take photos of the stunning scenery it was otherwise a little quiet and only a perched Peregrine and a herd of grazing Japanese Sika deer added any wildlife interest. On our way back to our hotel we stopped briefly at the amazing volcanic area of Mt Io, which literally means 'sulphur mountain'. The reason was not hard to discern as numerous steaming sulphurous vents covered the hillside with strange yellow steaming cones.

Day 5

Sunday 3rd February

Shibetsu - Rausu

After a leisurely breakfast and after packing our luggage into the bus we set off eastwards towards the coast. A couple of hours later we arrived in the seaside port of Shibetsu where we stopped briefly to pick up lunch from a convenience store before checking out the harbour to see what seabirds were seeking refuge there. It was bright, sunny and calm as we scanned the water to find that there were flotillas of sea duck which included some smart Black Scoter and colourful Harlequin Duck as well as more familiar Goosander, Greater Scaup and Tufted Duck. Sifting through the gull flocks we found that they were mostly Slaty-backed with a scattering of big 'white-winged' Glaucous Gulls. Some Black-eared Kites were patrolling the airspace over the harbour but the raptor which really caught our attention was a magnificent Steller's Sea Eagle perched on the harbour wall – hopefully the first of many that would see over the next few days.

Back on the bus we made our way north-east up the coast of the mountainous Shiretoko Peninsula and within an hour arrived at our next destination, the little sea port of Rausu. We were booked to go out for a cruise on the 'Evergreen', a small boat run by Shiretoko Nature Cruises, at about 1pm but as we had a little time to spare we stopped for comfort break at a cafe. As we were waiting in the car park we began to notice that some eagles were sitting in some trees on the hillside – both Steller's and White-tailed eagles – so we had a quick look at these through the scope but as time went on more and more eagles drifted out from the hillsides surrounding Rausu and pretty soon the sky was full of the huge raptors. The omens were looking good for our cruise so we quickly boarded the Evergreen and soon we were heading out of the harbour on to the open sea. The captain opened the throttle and we headed out into the channel between Hokkaido and the Russian island of Kunashir only a few miles away followed by a flock of Slaty-backed Gulls and a solitary Glaucous-winged Gull. The reason, the captain explained, was that on his previous cruise they had spotted some Dall's Porpoises in this area. We

scanned the sea for a few minutes hoping to relocate these intriguing cetaceans but to no avail so we quickly turned around and headed back towards Rausu.

As we neared land again the captain slowed the boat down and some of the crew began to fling some fish into the water. At first the fish attracted the expected throng of gulls but before long a Steller's Sea eagle swooped in to snatch one just a few metres from our boat; and then another one, and another, and another...Soon there was a steady procession of eagles, both Steller's and White-tailed, queuing up to help themselves to the feast and providing marvellous opportunities for the photographers amongst our group. After having our fill of this amazing spectacle we headed back into Rausu harbour noting the flocks of Pelagic Cormorants flying past the boat.

Back on dry land we had a little time to spare before we were due to check in to our hotel so whilst some of our group opted to seek out the warmth of a local cafe, Duncan led the rest to check out the river running through the centre of Rausu. From one of the bridges we watched a pair of Brown Dippers going about their business sometimes disappearing under the icy overhangs of the frozen river whilst down at the river mouth an adult White-tailed Eagle was drinking from a puddle very close to our admiring group.

We checked in at our comfortable hotel mid-afternoon and then quickly re-assembled for an early dinner because tonight we had to leave just before dusk to enjoy one of the highlights of the trip. By 4.45pm we were all ensconced in a large observatory overlooking a floodlight frozen river in the forest eagerly anticipating the arrival of this evening's main performer. Sure enough, right on cue, a magnificent male Blakiston's Fish Owl emerged from the forest bang on time at 5.30 pm We all watched in awe as this huge shaggy haystack of a bird dropped into the water, caught a fish in its talons, transferred the fish to its bill and flew off with it back into the darkness. An hour later the owl made another visit to our floodlit theatre and went through a repeat performance. Hugely satisfied, we made our way back to our hotel and by 7.15 pm we were drinking beer, going through the checklist and recounting what a wonderful day's birding it had been.

Day 6

Monday 4th February

Rausu – Notsuke Peninsula

Due to inclement weather our early morning cruise was cancelled so instead we had a leisurely breakfast and boarded the Evergreen at 08.30. The snow was still falling heavily as we left the harbour, but our captain thought it was worth visiting the sea ice a few miles offshore so we headed out there. It was a magical experience as we cruised amongst the ice floes but due to the almost white-out conditions no eagles had ventured out here from the Shiretoko Peninsula. So after throwing some fish out for the attendant Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls we headed back to the coast where we greeted by hordes of hungry eagles. We spent another happy hour awestruck by the spectacle of huge Steller's and White-tailed Eagles swooping down next to boat to snatch fish from the surface and then pulled up alongside the harbour wall where many others had perched. The photographers had a field day snapping literally tens of eagles as the snow fell picturesquely around them just a few metres away.

Once ashore we drove down the coast and after picking up lunch from Shibetsu drove out along the Notsuke Peninsula where the snow was still falling steadily. Some Sika Deer stags grazing on the marsh vegetation under the blanket of snow allowed us to get close for some atmospheric photographs. Further along the peninsula we

stopped at the Nature Centre and whilst some went to look around the informative exhibits, the rest of us braved the elements along the sea wall where we found a delightful group of two males and a female Long-tailed Duck just offshore along with larger flocks of Black Scoters and Red-breasted Mergansers. As we retraced our steps back along the peninsula we encountered a huge Steller's Sea Eagle perched on a telegraph pole and by the time we had returned to Rausu the wind had developed into a full blown snowstorm. Consequently, we decided against a return visit to the Fish Owl hide as it would have been futile. So instead we spent a relaxed evening in our comfortable hotel drinking beer, comparing notes and photos and indulging ourselves in the hot baths.

Day 7

Tuesday 5th February

Rausu – Shibetsu – Notsuke - Yoroushi

We awoke the next morning to more driving wind and snow but at least the forecast for the day ahead looked good. So after breakfast we set off down the coast back in the direction of Shibetsu, checking the small harbours at Minehama and Kumbetsu for sheltering sea birds on the way. As we drove down the coast road a pod of Steller Sea Lions was spotted from the coach barreling through the surf just offshore. However, we were frustrated by not finding anywhere safe to stop the bus to get a better look in the poor weather conditions, so we had to keep heading south.

By the time we got to Shibetsu the weather was already improving and we were able to sift through the seabirds in the harbour which included Black Scoters, Harlequins, Goosanders, Red-breasted Mergansers, Greater Scaups plus Glaucous, Vega and Common (Kamchatka) Gulls whilst a White-tailed Eagle and a Black Kite kept watch over proceedings. Out on the nearby Notsuke Peninsula the weather continued to improve and as we drove along the peninsula we spotted a Red Fox and a couple of lovely male Meadow Buntings as well as yesterday's Sika Deer. At the visitor centre, we scanned from the elevated sea watching platform where the sparky Long-tailed Ducks wowed us just offshore whilst further out there seemed to be a steady passage of Spectacled Guillemots and Black Scoters taking place among which we noted a single White-winged Scoter.

Back in Shibetsu we stopped to have lunch at a very nice tempura restaurant then clambered back on board our bus and headed back westward arriving at our next destination mid-afternoon – the luxurious spa hotel Dai Ichi at Yoroushi. The hotel is situated in a wooded valley right next to a forest river and from the comfortable lounge we looked out through the huge plate glass windows as an endless succession of Japanese Tits, Marsh Tits, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and some very pale Eurasian Nuthatches visited the busy bird feeders. As we still had some light to spare some of us went out for a walk to stretch our legs along a snow-covered forest road but as dusk gathered we returned to our hotel where we were served with a sumptuous meal.

As we worked our way through the many courses a shout went up – “owl” – so we all dropped everything and rushed through to the lounge only to find that the resident Blakiston's Fish Owl had already visited the floodlit pool outside the window and made off with a fish! Having had such epic views at Rausu a couple of days earlier we weren't too disappointed so we finished our meal at leisure and then reconvened next to the windows so see if the star of the show would make another visit to the pool. As minutes turns to hours, people gradually admitted defeat and drifted off to bed but a hardy few were determined not to give up and finally were rewarded with another view of the magnificent owl at point blank range as it caught fish within inches of the window.

Day 8

Wednesday 6th February

Yoroushi – Kushiro - Tokyo

After the late night (and for some, early morning) owl vigil, it was nice to enjoy a relatively lazy morning having a long breakfast whilst watching Eurasian Jays of the distinctive russet-headed *brandtii* subspecies visiting the feeders and Brown Dippers and smart Japanese Wagtails working along the on the river. For those inclined, all of these birds could be easily enjoyed at very close quarters whilst lounging in the hot pools outside next to the river. You could even start your own onsen birding list! Eventually, we reluctantly dragged ourselves away from our luxurious hotel as we had a flight to catch from Kushiro. We just had time to call in at Chiyono-ura harbour on the way to the airport where Black Scoters, Harlequin Ducks, Eurasian Wigeons and Pelagic Cormorants were sheltering watched over by the ubiquitous White-tailed Eagle. At Kushiro Airport we quickly checked our bags in and after giving big hugs to our wonderful local guide Sonoko, we caught the early afternoon flight to Tokyo Haneda Airport and after negotiating the Tokyo rush hour on the metro system (quite an experience!) we arrived back at our comfortable downtown hotel in time for dinner at a local restaurant.

Day 9

Thursday 7th February

Imperial Palace - Nagano

This morning we took a short walk from our hotel to the Imperial Palace bypassing the vastness of Tokyo Central Station on the way. By special request, we found a nice flotilla of Tufted Ducks for Barbara which were sharing an outer moat with some Mute Swans whilst White-cheeked Starlings and Brown-eared Bulbuls foraged in the trees nearby. However, it was a smart male Daurian Redstart that really caught our attention and occupied the photographers in the group. On one of the inner moats near the Seimon Stone bridge we came across a mixed flock of waterbirds that included Gadwall, Common Pochard, Little Grebe and Great Cormorant. But it was the stunning Falcated Ducks especially the gaudy males with their green and bronze head iridescence and long drooping tertial feathers, that really stole the show. A walk through the beautiful Eastern Gardens produced a confiding flock of pretty Japanese White-eyes feeding on tree blossoms but all too soon it was time to return to the hotel to pick up our bags for the next leg of our trip. Catching a Shinkansen 'bullet train' from Tokyo Central we were soon whisked up into the mountainous interior of Honshu island to the city of Nagano which in 1998 hosted the Winter Olympics. After settling in to our centrally placed hotel we ate together at a terrific steak restaurant already looking forward to our next adventure tomorrow.

Day 10

Friday 8th February

Nagano – Jigokudani – Zenkoji Temple

We met up with our local guide, Ken, at 8 am, boarded our bus and drove through Nagano city and out into the snowy, forested mountainous scenery of Nagano Prefecture, famed for its hot springs and mountain resorts. Around 21% of the prefecture is designated as Natural Park and today we were heading up to an area called Jigokudani (Hell's Valley), named after the steam that issues from fissures in the rocks along the Yokoyu River valley. The hot springs associated with this geothermal activity have some world famous residents that we were hoping to see today.

As we put on our shoe grips for the icy 2km walk up the valley a smart Japanese Grosbeak sang from the top of a tall pine tree near the trailhead. After a gentle walk along the snowy forest trail we emerged into an natural

bowl in the valley where steamy hot springs were occupied by a troupe of Japanese Macaques, otherwise known as the “Snow Monkeys”. These are the most northerly and cold-adapted monkeys in the world and this group have taken advantage of the hot springs at Jigokudani to lounge around and socialize in comfort whilst the admiring human visitors take photos. We spent an absorbing couple of hours here watching the antics of these engaging primates and were only distracted when Duncan spotted an interesting mammal on the snowy valley slopes above the pools in the shape of a Japanese Serow. Serows are a group of strange goat-like animals, restricted to Asia, that wander slowly through mountain forests browsing as they go and we were lucky to catch a glimpse of one here.

All too soon it was time to make our way back down the valley to the trail head and some of us spotted Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Willow Tits, Japanese Tits and Long-tailed Tits on the way down, as well as Eurasian Jays of the race *japonicus*, quite different from the birds we had seen on Hokkaido. After a nice lunch at the Enza restaurant near the trailhead we all got back on the bus and drove back to Nagano to visit the impressive Buddhist temple of Zenkoji established in its current location in 642 AD. A short walk around the manicured grounds of the temple after our brief excursion into Buddhist culture added Hawfinch, Japanese Varied Tit, Pale Thrush and Dusky Thrush to our day’s bird list before we made the short journey back to our comfortable city centre hotel.

Day 11

Saturday 9th February

Nagano – Karuizawa - Tokyo

After meeting up with local interpreter Ken we drove east in our coach through the mountains arriving mid-morning at the resort of Karuizawa where popular winter activities are skiing and hot springs. However, we were here for a different reason – to visit Yacho no Mori, the “Wild bird Forest”. This area of mixed deciduous and coniferous forest has been protected for many decades and there are several snowy trails that can be followed looking for winter birds.

First stop though was the local Seven Eleven store to pick up some lunch but as it happens the wooded slopes and gardens immediately behind the store are known as a bit of a birding hot spot, and so it proved. A Hawfinch was sitting quietly in a garden tree as we exited the coach and as we scanned the trees behind the store we noted flocks of Japanese Grosbeaks, Grey-capped Greenfinches, Japanese Varied Tits, Coal Tits, Bramblings and a Japanese Squirrel.

A little way up the road we called in at the Shiotsubo Onsen which had graciously allowed us to view their feeders where we saw loads more Varied Tits, a Meadow Bunting and a couple of Japanese Squirrels. The star bird here though was an endemic Japanese Green Woodpecker which played hard to get, hiding behind the trunk of a tall tree, but which eventually gave half decent scope views.

After this we moved to the Wild Bird Park proper and took a walk through the forest along a track adjacent to the river, having first donned our trusty ice grips again. The mistletoe laden trees in this area are often a good spot for seeing Bohemian and Japanese Waxwings gorging on the berries but this relies on it being a good irruption year and clearly this was not one of those! Nevertheless, we had a pleasant walk seeing many of the woodland birds we had already encountered including many noisy Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers. But on the return walk, a high pitched call emanating from some undergrowth near the track attracted our attention and on further investigation we found a dapper little Japanese Accentor, another endemic, flitting from bush to bush

and everyone eventually got great views of this subtly plumaged, far eastern relative of our familiar European Dunnock.

Finally, it was time to head back to Tokyo, so we boarded our coach and three hours later we were back in Tokyo at the JAL City Hotel in Haneda, close to the airport, where we said goodbye to our helper Ken. After checking in we all met up in the hotel restaurant for a final meal together as a group because Peter, June, Sharon and Penny were sadly leaving us the following morning to return home whilst the rest of us carried on with the Kyushu extension.

Day 12 (Extension Day 1)

Sunday 10th February

Tokyo – Kumamoto (Kyushu) – Yatsushiro - Izumi

Having bade a fond farewell to our four friends last night, this morning we were happy to welcome three new amigos to the group in the shape of Roger, Geraldine and John for our excursion to the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. We caught the morning flight from Haneda to the city of Kumamoto where we were met by warm, sunny weather – quite a contrast to the positively arctic conditions we had endured at times further north in the archipelago. Our local interpreter guide Masako also met us with a warm, sunny greeting and soon we were off heading south along the coast to our first birding site on Kyushu, the Yatsushiro estuary.

As soon as we alighted from our bus we noticed flocks of Eurasian Wigeons and Eastern Spot-billed Ducks on the river whilst a female Blue Rock Thrush of the *philippensis* race sat on the sea wall and Ospreys patrolled above us. As we strolled along the sea wall, two Black-crowned Night herons flew out of a nearby roost and a smart male Daurian Redstart was found perching in a small tree. As we turned the corner of the estuary the mudflats opened out in front of us and it was clear from the vast expanse of mud that the tide was out! Nevertheless, the flats were covered with birds and by scanning with the scope we were able to pick out Kentish Plovers, Grey Plovers, Eurasian Curlews and Common Shelduck picking their way across the mud whilst beyond them Black-tailed Gulls patrolled the tideline. Right out on the tideline also were a group of seven long-legged, larger white birds which upon closer inspection proved to be Black-faced Spoonbills, a globally threatened species with a world population of only 4,000 individuals, which is at least an improvement on the estimate of only 288 birds thought to exist in 1988.

The other star bird patrolling the estuarine mud were small numbers of tern-like Saunders's Gulls which occasionally dropped on to the mud to pick up crustaceans to eat. This is also a globally threatened species which currently number about 14,000 individuals but unlike the spoonbill its population is unfortunately still declining, with mudflat reclamation throughout its east Asian range being an ongoing threat.

Inland of the sea wall the fields, bushes and power lines harboured some decent flocks of Russet Sparrows, Grey-capped Greenfinches and Oriental Turtle Doves. But soon we had to leave this productive area to continue our southward journey to our destination for the next three nights, the city of Izumi in south west Kyushu. After checking in to our hotel we sampled the delights of a local restaurant before retiring to prepare for our early start in the morning.

Day 13 (Extension Day 2)

Monday 11th February

Izumi - Arasaki

Izumi sits alongside the Komenotsu River which, as it enters the sea, is surrounded by a series of low-lying marshy polders which serve as rice paddies in the summer but in winter are a major wintering ground for cranes and other wetland birds. The Arasaki Crane Sanctuary on the polders was our destination this morning. We wanted to be in place at dawn to watch one of the world's great wildlife spectacles from the roof of the crane centre. So we had an early breakfast and then after only twenty minutes travel in the coach we were climbing up to our vantage point.

As dawn broke, the air reverberated with the trumpeting of thousands of cranes as they streamed past us at eye level, arriving from their flooded roosting sites out on the polders, and settled in the fields below us where crane centre staff were putting food out for them. At this time of year their normal feed of grain is supplemented by large blocks of frozen fish to help the birds prepare for their upcoming northward migration to the breeding grounds in northern China and southern Russia. Around 13,000 cranes winter here at Arasaki with by far the most numerous being Hooded Cranes (c.10,000 birds) and the taller, elegant White-naped Crane (c.3000) with one or two individuals of other species often present. It was difficult to know whether to take photos, take video or just stand and drink the whole amazing spectacle in.

We also couldn't ignore that fact that the free handout was attracting masses of other birds in the form of wildfowl and corvids and in particular the power lines adjacent to the centre were dripping with Rooks of the eastern subspecies *pastinator* like a scene from Hitchcock's "The Birds". Carefully scrutiny of these massed ranks revealed a couple of Daurian Jackdaws hiding amongst them, one of which was a strikingly pied adult.

Having had our allotted hour's worth of observations from the centre roof we returned to our bus and went off to explore the East Polder area where more flocks of Hooded and White-naped Cranes were feeding in the fields. Whilst we had stopped to take photographs of these birds, John and Liz noticed a solitary Sandhill Crane feeding very close to the road and we were able to contrast this vagrant from north eastern Siberia with the similarly sized and coloured Hooded Cranes it was mixing with. A quick look at the small estuary adjacent to the polder didn't turn up much new except for a small flock of Dunlin and a hunting Hen Harrier so we retraced our steps and stopped to take photos of some Eurasian Spoonbills roosting right next to the road. As we were doing this an adult Peregrine steamed in chasing a huge flock of Tree Sparrows and then very conveniently sat down right next to the bus providing more terrific photo opportunities.

By now it was mid-morning so we returned to the Crane centre for coffee and whilst we were staring out of the windows of the café John and Liz who were clearly "on a roll" found two Common Cranes feeding with the other birds. Refreshed, we ventured out again and this time headed over to West Polder and took a walk along the sea wall where the weedy fields and ditches harboured lots of Grey-capped Greenfinches but also several Meadow Buntings and briefly a single Chestnut-eared Bunting.

We picked up lunch from a convenience store and ate it overlooking a small estuary where Western Ospreys were fishing and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk soared overhead. After lunch we took another walk along the side of the reed-fringed estuary hoping to find some Penduline Tits which unfortunately eluded us but we did see lots of Meadow Buntings, a fine male Bull-headed Shrike and a noisy Green Sandpiper. Finally, to finish off the day we

returned to East Polder where flocks of both Hooded and White-naped Cranes were still busy feeding and John got some good views of Buff-bellied Pipits, one of his wish-list birds!

Day 14 (Extension Day 3)

Tuesday 12th February

Izumi – Arasaki – Kogawa dam

We had such a wonderful experience on the Arasaki observatory roof yesterday that we decided to return for one more go and so at dawn we were back up there as the hordes of cranes piled in for their breakfast. But perhaps stealing the show this morning was a fantastic “murmuration” of thousands of Northern Pintails wheeling around the sky over the polders just like winter flocks of starlings do back in the UK.

We returned to Izumi principally to pick up lunch from a convenience store but as the store was right next to the Komenotsu River we decided to have a quick look at what it had to offer. Whilst some folk were still inside the store, those of us in the car park were treated to a brief appearance by a beautiful rufous-bellied male Blue Rock Thrush on the roof of the shop! Down by the river three species of wagtail were busy feeding – White, Grey and Japanese – whilst above them flocks of Barn Swallows and Asian House Martins were hawking insects. Both Spot-billed and Falcated Ducks were dabbling around in the shallows and Reed Buntings haunted the riverside bushes. Careful searching of the gravel islands revealed a pair of beautifully camouflaged Long-billed Plovers and up by the weir Thelma located a Brown Dipper with a Common Sandpiper.

A quick twenty minutes bus journey up into the forested hills above Izumi found us at the reservoir created by the Kogawa Dam. The quiet road that runs around the reservoir allowed us to spend the morning and early afternoon exploring the wetland and the surrounding forest. The hot, sunny conditions were not particularly conducive to finding shade-loving birds but we tried our best and over the course of our exploration we found Daurian Redstart, Pale Thrush, Japanese White-eye, Long-tailed Tit, Japanese Tit, Japanese Varied Tit and the noisy and ubiquitous Brown-eared Bulbul. Out on the water flocks of Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Pochard were noted but Mandarin Ducks provided only fly-past views as their favourite perching branches were left high and dry by the low water levels. Our best sighting of the morning was an elusive Ryuku Minivet which disappeared almost as soon as Duncan found it and was glimpsed only by a few. The sunny weather did bring out a couple of butterflies though and we were able, with the aid of photographs, to identify Japanese Oakblue and Asian Admiral.

After a pleasant picnic lunch in the sunshine we continued our way round the reservoir and on a short side track Roger came across a beautiful but unfortunately freshly dead White-bellied Green Pigeon. Whilst we all admired its subtle plumage tones it was tinged with some regret that this might be as close as we would get to this elusive forest bird. Until that is, Gerry flushed a live one from the road and we were able to grill it properly through the scope as it perched quietly on a branch.

To finish off the day we dropped down to the East Polder again and took a longish walk around the southwestern edge of the polder along a reed fringed canal. A Black-winged Stilt was sharing a pond with some Eurasian Teal and three Little Ringed Plovers were running around a flooded paddy whilst out on the polder among the flocks of Hooded Cranes a big female peregrine was calling whilst dismantling a freshly caught prey item. As the day drew to a close we said goodbye to the cranes of Arasaki and headed back to our hotel to enjoy

one last meal with John and Liz who were leaving us on the train from Izumi in the morning whilst the rest of us were due to head back to Tokyo.

Day 15 (Extension Day 4)

Wednesday 13th February

Izumi – Lake Miike – Kagoshima - Tokyo

On our last full day in Kyushu, we left the hotel at 7 am and headed east for the two and a half hour journey to Lake Miike, a crater lake formed by a volcanic eruption over four and half thousand years ago. The lake is surrounded by mixed deciduous and coniferous forest and, in contrast to yesterday at Kogawa, it was cool and overcast when we arrived so we expected a higher level of bird activity. So it proved, as we made our way down the road to the camp site a female Red-flanked Bluetail flitted elusively in the undergrowth whilst down by the lake a flock of six Olive-backed Pipits were much more accommodating. The trees were full of Daurian Redstarts, Varied Tits and Long-tailed Tits as well as two noisy Eurasian Nuthatches which, with their peachy underparts, looked quite different from the pale bellied birds we had seen on Hokkaido.

We had good scope views of a showy Japanese Green Woodpecker before we set off on the footpath around the lake shore. Many trees had fallen over due to a recent typhoon that swept through this area making progress a little difficult but we did manage brief views of Black-faced Bunting, Yellow-throated Bunting and a male Red-flanked Bluetail. Back at the camp site a fine male Bull-headed Shrike hunted from lake side trees and a Japanese Grosbeak sang from the canopy. On the way back to the coach some introduced Red-billed Leiotherix's proved to be the final species for our list as we now had to make tracks for Kagoshima Airport, an hour's drive away. After taking photos of beautiful Lake Miike from the rim of the crater we drove to the airport, stopping briefly to admire a waterfall that Masako proudly proclaimed was Kagoshima Prefecture's second tallest!

After saying our fond farewells to Masako, we made the smooth transfer from Kagoshima to Haneda airport and before too long were back at the JAL City hotel in Tokyo where we enjoyed our last dinner together as a group and shared experiences of our personal highlights of the trip.

Day 16 (Extension Day 5)

Thursday 14th February

Tokyo - London

Having said our fond farewells last night to those of us not heading back to London, for the remainder it was another early morning start to catch the all day British Airways flight to Heathrow. Arriving in London in the early afternoon we collected our bags and said our final goodbyes, perhaps still thinking about cranes dancing in the snow, eagles swooping down over the sea and giant fish-eating owls emerging from the dark by a frozen river. Wild Japan in Winter!

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only; E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced)

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February													
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Mute Swan - I	<i>Cygnus olor</i>									2					
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓		✓			✓							
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	1										✓	✓	✓	
4	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>													2	
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	1											✓		
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓								1					
7	Falcat Duck	<i>Mareca falcata</i>									✓		✓		✓	
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓							✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
9	Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	✓						✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓	✓			✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓										✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓													
14	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓			✓					✓				1	
15	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓					✓			
16	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓							
17	White-winged (Stejneger's) Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi stejnegeri</i>							✓							
18	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓							
19	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>					✓	✓								
20	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
21	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
22	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1			✓	✓	✓								
23	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓								✓		✓		✓	✓
24	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓													
25	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	✓													
26	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>												✓	✓	
27	Black-faced Spoonbill	<i>Platalea minor</i>											7			
28	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>											2		2	
29	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓								✓		✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February														
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
30	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>											✓		✓	✓	
31	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓											✓	✓	✓	
32	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓								
33	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓								✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1											✓	✓		
35	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>														1	1
36	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>														2	
37	Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus lineatus</i>				✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			1	✓	✓	✓	1								
39	Steller's Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>				✓	✓	✓									
40	Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>	2										✓		✓		
41	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>												✓	✓	✓	
42	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>															
43	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1											1	1
44	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓														
45	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓											✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>														1	1
47	White-naped Crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>														✓	✓
48	Red-crowned Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>		✓	✓					1							
49	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>														2	
50	Hooded Crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>														✓	✓
51	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>															1
52	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>														✓	
53	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>													✓		
54	Long-billed Plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>															2
55	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>															3
56	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>													✓	✓	
57	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>													1		
58	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>															
59	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>													✓	✓	✓
60	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>														✓	✓
61	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>													✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February													
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
62	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	3													
63	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>												1		
64	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓								✓					
65	Saunders's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus saundersi</i>											✓			
66	Black-tailed Gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>				1							✓			
67	Common (Kamchatka) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓	✓						✓		
68	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>				✓	✓									
69	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				✓	✓	✓								
70	Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae</i>	✓					✓					✓	✓		
71	Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓							
72	Spectacled Guillemot	<i>Cepphus carbo</i>						✓								
73	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓						✓	✓				
74	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	White-bellied Green Pigeon	<i>Treron sieboldii</i>														1
76	Blakiston's Fish Owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>				1		1	1							
77	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>			2											
78	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1													2
79	Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus kizuki</i>										1	✓			H ✓
80	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>						✓	✓			✓				
81	Japanese Green Woodpecker - E	<i>Picus awokera</i>										1				2
82	Ryukyu Minivet - E	<i>Pericrocotus tegimae</i>														1
83	Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>												1		1
84	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>								✓		✓				H
85	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>	20													
86	Daurian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus dauuricus</i>													2	
87	Oriental Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus pastinator</i>													✓	✓
88	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓					✓			✓	✓	✓	
89	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>										✓				
91	Japanese Varied Tit	<i>Sittiparus varius varius</i>									✓	✓			✓	✓
92	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓					✓	✓						
93	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>									✓	✓				

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February													
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
94	Japanese Tit	<i>Parus minor</i>			✓				✓	✓						
95	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alda arvensis</i>												✓	✓	
96	Brown-eared Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>													✓	✓
98	Asian House Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus</i>													✓	
99	Japanese Bush Warbler	<i>Horornis diphone</i>	H													H
100	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				✓					✓	✓			✓	✓
101	Red-billed Leiothrix - I	<i>Leiothrix lutea</i>														✓
102	Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>	✓								✓				✓	✓
103	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>								✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
104	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓				✓	✓		✓				✓
105	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
106	Pale Thrush	<i>Turdus pallidus</i>	✓		✓							✓			✓	✓
107	Dusky Thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>	✓						✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
108	Red-flanked Bluetail	<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>														✓
109	Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus auroreus</i>									✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
110	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius philippensis</i>											✓		✓	
111	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>				✓			✓	✓			✓		✓	✓
112	Russet Sparrow	<i>Passer rutilans</i>											✓	✓		
113	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
114	Japanese Accentor - E	<i>Prunella rubida</i>										1				
115	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>													✓	✓
116	White (Black-backed) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba lugens</i>	✓			✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
117	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba leucopsis</i>													✓	
118	Japanese Wagtail - N	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>			1					1					✓	
119	Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>														6
120	Buff-bellied Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>												✓	✓	
121	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>										✓				
122	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>										1	1			
123	Japanese Grosbeak	<i>Eophona personata</i>										1	✓			
124	Grey-capped Greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
125	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>							2				1	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February													
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
126	Chestnut-eared Bunting	<i>Emberiza fucata</i>												1		
127	Yellow-throated (Elegant) Bunting	<i>Emberiza elegans</i>														✓
128	Black-faced Bunting	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>														✓
129	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓													

Mammals

1	Japanese Macaque - E	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>														✓
2	Japanese Squirrel	<i>Sciurus lis</i>														3
3	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	✓													
4	Shrew sp.	<i>Sorex sp.</i>														✓
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓				✓							
6	Steller Sealion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>							✓							
7	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓			✓							
8	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓								
9	Japanese Serow - E	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>														1

Butterflies

1	Japanese Oakblue	<i>Arhopala japonica</i>															1
2	Asian Admiral	<i>Vanessa indica</i>															1

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