

# Wild Japan in Winter

## Including Kyushu Extension

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 21 February 2019



Steller's Sea Eagles by David Robinson



Blakiston's Fish Owl by David Robinson



Sunrise over the pack ice by David Robinson



White-naped cranes by Barrie Cooper

Report compiled by Barrie Cooper



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants:       Barrie Cooper (Leader), with twelve Naturetrek clients

## Summary

Japan is a wonderful country and in winter it has its own particular magic. From the frozen landscape of Hokkaido to the relatively mild Kyushu in the south there are some marvellous wildlife, landscape and cultural moments. This trip had all these ingredients and it was a privilege to experience them with an appreciative, enthusiastic group of people with a sense of humour! It's difficult to know where to begin with the highlights from this trip, but here goes. For some it was the beautiful Hokkaido sunrise over the pack-ice with a sky and landscape full of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles. For others it was the Snow Monkeys as they bathed in the warm onsen in the frozen landscape of Nagano. There was also the dancing Red-crowned Cranes, which are a tremendous conservation success story that the people of Hokkaido are justifiably proud of. For those who went on the extension to Kyoto the sight of thousands of Hooded and White-naped Cranes filling the sky and fields of their winter home of Arasaki was yet another unforgettable experience. The awesome sight of a Blakiston's Fish Owl feeding just a few metres away from the window of our hotel lounge was sufficient motivation for some keen members of the group to get up in the middle of the night for a second view of this globally endangered species. There was also the food, the culture and much more. Japan never fails to provide an unforgettable holiday.

## Day 1

Wednesday 6th February

Ten members of the group took the BA flight from Heathrow on a flight with plenty of spare seats.

## Day 2

Thursday 7th February

The flight arrived ahead of schedule and the group was met by Barrie at Haneda Airport. A relatively short coach trip brought us to our city centre hotel and after a brief freshen up ten of the group went on the scheduled trip to Kasai Rinkai Park and to have their first experience of the efficient Tokyo public transport system. We were treated to warm, sunny weather and only some strong winds around lunchtime hindered some of the excellent birdwatching opportunities that this site has to offer. As we left the station and before entering the park the group were seeing lifers in the form of Brown-eared Bulbul, White-checked Starling and Oriental Turtle Dove. Soon after entering the park a group of Japanese Tits caught our attention and had the bonus of two Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers accompanying them. Everyone appreciated good views of a Dusky Thrush before we reached the coastline to investigate what was on the sea. Some confiding Black-necked Grebes had the photographers clicking away as did our first close group of Wigeon. A couple of Common Sandpipers flew past before some roosting Eastern Spot-billed Ducks received some favourable comments. Looking out to sea there were hundreds of Greater Scaup with Great-crested Grebes and fortunately we later had much closer views of Scaup so that everyone could become familiar with the identification of this species of duck. There were fewer waders around today than the previous day due to many more people being around, but we still managed to see Kentish Plover, Dunlin and, surprisingly, a flock of Black-tailed Godwits. Some of the group recorded Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew and Greenshank. Four species of Gulls – Vega, Black-tailed, Common (of the *kamtschatschensis* subspecies) and Black-headed added to the good variety of birdlife. An Osprey was first found

sitting on a post before giving a fly around on a hunting foray. Soon after another raptor was over a reedbed and the scope helped to confirm its identification as an Eastern Marsh Harrier – yet another good bird for the morning.

We ate our picnic lunch on the tables near the visitor centre before entering it. No signs of jetlag on Rachel as she was the first to spot a Bull-headed Shrike that gave good views before flying off to chase another one. She then spotted an Eastern Buzzard sitting in a tree on the other side of the pond from the visitor centre. After a few minutes it flew down to the ground before disappearing. When we went for a walk around the pond the Buzzard was found enjoying a hearty meal of what appeared to be a rat. To complete her hat-trick Rachel then spotted a female Eurasian Sparrowhawk while the rest of us were watching a Black-faced Bunting. As we continued our walk another bonus bird was found – a male Blue Rock Thrush of the *philippensis* subspecies looking resplendent with its chestnut underparts contrasting with the blue of the rest of its body. The latest field guide to Japan regards this as a split and names it Eastern Blue Rock Thrush. Three Azure-winged Magpies showed well near the path but it was becoming clear that the absence of sleep after the overnight flight was beginning to catch up on some people so after one final walk past the visitor centre the group started heading back until Barrie called them back. A sleeping white bird revealed enough of its face to be confidently identified as a Black-faced Spoonbill. After everyone had scope views in an attempt to convince any sceptics a boat went pass and made enough noise to force the resting bird to become more alert and reveal its beak. It was a real bonus bird for those members of the group not going to Kyushu and was a fitting way to end an excellent first day. Everyone was sufficiently motivated and awake to go for a fine meal at a local restaurant to complete their first day in Japan.

## Day 3

## Friday 8th February

It was a leisurely start to the day so that people had a chance to catch up on some sleep. We then made a short train journey to Hama-rikyu Gardens, which is the family garden of the Tokugawa Shogun. This historic site had carefully trimmed full-sized bonsai trees in addition to three hundred year old pines. There was also a tidal pool connected to Tokyo Bay and the whole site was like a little oasis surrounded by concrete skyscrapers. Hama-rikyu was also a former duck-hunting site but fortunately it now provides a safe haven for wildfowl and other wildlife. A good variety of ducks were seen including Pintail, Spot-billed Duck, Shoveler, Teal and Pochard. Our first Black-eared Kite flew over before disappearing amongst the skyscrapers. A Dusky Thrush gave a good performance as it actively excavated for worms and was enthusiastically photographed. After a pleasant exploration of the gardens we navigated our way back to Shimbashi Station for our return train journey. Eight of the group made full use of the remaining time to make a quick visit to the Imperial Gardens for close views of the very attractive Falcated Ducks on the moat. Gadwall was the other new duck species here and was just shaded into second place in the attractiveness stakes. It was then time to make a brief return to the hotel to join up with the rest of the group and collect the luggage before returning to Tokyo Station to take the Shinkansen (bullet train) to Nagano. The designer of the Shinkansen was a birdwatcher and it was the beak of the humble Common Kingfisher that inspired his aerodynamic design. It was no surprise that the train departed and arrived on time in this efficiently run country, and it was then a short journey from the train station to our hotel which was across the road. Everyone appreciated a fine dinner at a local restaurant.

## Day 4

## Saturday 9th February

Today was Snow Monkey Day! We met Fumi (our local guide) and coach for the drive to the hot spring reserve called Jigokudani, which translates to Hell Valley. The traffic jam during our journey was a bit hellish but slow travel has its benefits and birds such as Black-eared Kite, Eastern Buzzard, Great Egret and Dusky Thrush were seen from the coach while seventeen Whooper Swans flew over us. We also passed the speed skating venue for the 1998 Winter Olympics. We eventually arrived at the parking area for the coach to drop us off and we began our walk to the “Monkey Park”. Light snow was falling and we certainly had a wintry scene by the time we arrived. The path can be quite slippery as Chris discovered when she went down and sprained her wrist half way along. The smell of sulphur became stronger as we approached the geothermal area and it helped to build up the sense of anticipation as we approached our target species. There were plenty of Japanese Macaques before we reached the main hot pool and some were messing about in the river or along the path. We were treated to plenty of action in the main pool with at least seventeen bathing on one occasion. As always, it was the youngsters who provided much of the entertainment. However Lynda made her contribution when a Macaque stole one of her walking poles and started mouthing around the handle as though it was an ice cream while sitting in the pool. It was left to one of the staff to retrieve it for her. Birds seen around the onsen area were a flock of Siskins, two Eurasian Jays of the very smart *Japonicus* subspecies and a Japanese Grosbeak. A female Sika deer doubled the mammal list. Eventually members of the Naturetrek group started to drift back for lunch at the restaurant near the start of the trail. Meanwhile the final group to leave were treated to a pair of Macaques who were actively trying to propagate their species (and on more than one occasion). The brazen couple were actually blocking the path as they went about their business. Presumably bored with that particular pleasure, one of them made an attempt to steal something from the rucksack of a passing tourist.

Once we were all assembled back at the bus it was a quicker return journey to Nagano. First destination was the hospital where Fumi accompanied Chris and husband Ken in search of treatment for her wrist. The rest of the group went to the impressive Zenkoji Temple complex. The snow was falling and light fading but the ones who were looking for birds managed to see Hawfinch, Pale Thrush and Grey Wagtail. Three more Hawfinch were seen near the parking area when back at the coach. Snow Monkey day had been memorable in various ways and had certainly provided great photos and videos to remind everyone about this great day.

## Day 5

## Sunday 10th February

The snow was falling as we left our hotel for the ninety-minute journey to Karuizawa. Fortunately, the weather soon improved and it was blue skies when we arrived. We had good views of the impressive Mount Asama volcano that was active as recently as 2015, but not today. We stopped at a 7-11 to pick up supplies for lunch and a couple of Hawfinches showed well behind the store. On arrival at the Wild Bird Park we walked slowly through the snowy landscape along the wide track that follows the river. The woods are relatively quiet at this time of year but do hold some interesting species, although the first bird that we found was a Great Spotted Woodpecker, albeit of the Japanese subspecies that may eventually be separated from our own. A couple of Black-eared Kites soared over the forest and we later had a very pale Eastern Buzzard do the same. A mixed flock of birds held Japanese Tit, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker and Nuthatch. Star bird along the walk was Red-flanked Bluetail with two together at a small stream and then another one near the river.

A visit to a local onsen hotel for a coffee and to view the feeders was very productive. New species here were Varied Tit, Grey-capped (Oriental) Greenfinch, Brambling, Wren, Chinese Hwamei and an obliging group of Long-tailed Tits of the Honshu subspecies. A quick visit to a nearby stream provided us with good views of Japanese Wagtail that enabled everyone to see the black face that is so distinctive compared to the more common White Wagtails that we had been seeing since arriving in Japan. It was now time to take the coach ride back to Tokyo in preparation for the next leg of our journey.

## Day 6

## Monday 11th February

It was a very early start this morning and after breakfast at the hotel we crossed the road to Shinagawa Station to take the train to Haneda for our 8am flight to Kushiro in Hokkaido. It was snowing when we left the hotel and it continued when our flight took off. Prior to boarding we had met Andrea from the UK office of the Japanese agency that was handling arrangements for the trip and he was to be an additional member of our group while in Hokkaido. It was to be a learning experience for him to gain a better understanding of how wildlife group trips work. Fortunately, we were greeted by beautiful clear skies as we approached Hokkaido and the snowy landscape looked pristine as our aircraft descended. We met our local guide Sonoko, and after a few minutes to change into warmer clothing we were on our way.

Our first destination was Tsururumidai for our first Crane experience and we were not disappointed. As soon as we got off the bus we had the bonus of an adult White-tailed Eagle flying over. Cameras were well used for the next hour or so as the Cranes performed dances, bugling and the occasional irritation to each other. These are the Red-crowned Cranes, a species that was once considered extinct in Japan until twenty birds were discovered on Hokkaido in 1924. Fortunately after a lot of conservation work including the banning of hunting, protecting nesting sites and winter-feeding, the population has built up and there are now approximately 1,800 Tancho on Hokkaido with about 600 based around Tsurui village. There were approximately 150 in the field in front of us but only nine juveniles with their brown heads. In addition to the cranes we also saw a few other species including Black-eared Kite, Marsh Tit, Eurasian Treecreeper, Japanese Pygmy and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Our first Steller's Sea Eagle was perched in a tree on a distant forested ridge.

Very happy after our morning's experience we drove the short visit to Tsurui village where we had a very pleasant bento meal, passing the Meakan volcano on the way. Some of the group took the opportunity to buy some souvenirs before we drove the short distance to Tsurui Ito reserve where the cranes are fed at two o'clock. A total of approximately 220 Red-crowned Cranes were counted including about 20 juveniles. There was plenty of excitement amongst them when a man came out with the corn providing more great photo opportunities. We were walking back to the coach when a Red Fox was spotted walking down the field and behind the cranes before disappearing into the woodland. The drive to Lake Kussharo kept people alert as Sika deer were occasionally spotted in the roadside forest. Most of the lake was frozen with only a few small areas of open water and at the first place we stopped, 55 Whooper Swans were close to the edge of the lake with some brave bathers in the onsen which is immediately adjacent to it. A few Spotbills and Mallard were also in the unfrozen water. A short drive took us to another unfrozen part of the lake where 85 Whooper Swans were counted along with two White-tailed Eagles. A Meadow Bunting briefly flew onto the beach near the Whoopers but was only seen by two people as most of the group were photographing some Sikas. On the short drive to the hotel two Goosanders completed the list for the day.

## Day 7

## Tuesday 12th February

Another early start for our drive to the famous Otowa Bridge with a stop at a convenience store for coffee and supplementary breakfast items, before arriving around 7am where the quoted temperature was  $-16^{\circ}$  Celsius. There were already plenty of photographers stationed on the bridge that crosses the geothermal Setsuri-gawa River and a winter roost site for some of the local Red-crowned Crane population. We hadn't missed much action, as most of the cranes were invisible in the mist rising from the river. Eventually the mist began to disappear to reveal the cranes in the river. Two cranes were much more obliging and were on the other side of the bridge, much closer and standing in the morning sunshine. Other birds on the river were Goosander, Goldeneye, Little Grebe and Mallard. However the most excitement was when Chris spotted a Steller's Sea Eagle flying over before eventually landing in a tree on the distant ridge. Scope views revealed it in all its glory in the bright morning sunshine and it stayed there for the remainder of our time on the bridge. Soon afterwards another Steller's Sea Eagle flew from the same direction and made towards the first one. There was some vocal jousting between the eagles before the second bird got the message and continued its journey. The eagles were a welcome distraction until some of the cranes decided to leave the river and fly off to the feeding grounds. Probably half the birds had left the river by the time we got back on the coach. It was a short journey to our next important destination, which was to view two magnificent Ural Owls posing in a hole in a tree. The couple made a wonderful sight in perfect light and, no doubt, some camera club members in the group may have been hoping to take some "highly commended" snaps to add to the growing portfolio that they were collecting. On this occasion the owls were relatively active and gave us some different poses. It was difficult to leave this magic place but we dragged ourselves away to make another visit to the Tsurui Ito reserve. There were fewer cranes today but we were still treated to plenty of dancing, displaying and bugling. Some of the family groups were quite close making it quite easy to see some juveniles making their distinctive calls. Lunch was taken at a quaint local restaurant that had some feeders where Tree Sparrows and Marsh Tits were seen at close quarters. A Red Fox was walking across a field next to the restaurant as we were making our way back to the coach and then a second one was seen soon afterwards.

Our afternoon drive passed through a snow shower but the weather was improving by the time we reached the volcanic crater lake of Mashu. After a few minutes the weather cleared to reveal the semi-frozen lake in all its glory surrounded by the beautiful snow-covered landscape. It was quiet birdwise but there were plenty of Sika deer including at least five stags that were on the slope below the visitor centre. After an hour here we drove down to the spectacular fumaroles of Mount Io that were spouting sulphur-tinged steam into the cold air. The yellow crystalline sulphur formations provided another interesting photographic subject. While walking back to the coach some of the group managed to get great views of a Steller's Sea Eagle flying low alongside the mountain and then disappearing into the steam cloud over the fumaroles. A short journey back to the hotel provided plenty of time for those members of the group who wished to partake in an onsen. Another fine Japanese dinner completed an excellent day.

## Day 8

## Wednesday 13th February

It was a more leisurely start to the day this morning, with a buffet breakfast at the restaurant before some people opted to go for a brief walk near the hotel. Four Sika deer, Japanese Tit and Brown-eared Bulbul were the only species of note. We then boarded the coach for the drive to the coast with two Pine Grosbeaks being the highlight but only seen by a few people on the bus. Steller's Sea Eagles were occasionally seen in preparation for

later. On arrival in Shibetsu we first visited a convenience store for food and drink for lunch and the evening session. It was then a short journey to the harbour for a quick look to see what delights there were to find. A close White-tailed Eagle on the edge of the car park was a good start and we soon had Steller's Sea Eagle flying around and sitting on the harbour walls so plenty of photos taken although it's possible some of those maybe deleted when compared to others taken soon after. Black-eared Kite was another raptor seen here. Ducks in the harbour included Black Scoter, Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck, Harlequin, Eurasian Wigeon, Goldeneye, Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser. We had a good introduction to gulls in this harbour with Slaty-backed, Vega, and Glaucous seen well. It was then another twenty-minute drive to Rausu where we passed plenty of ducks on the sea and a Red Fox on a beach.

On arrival in Rausu we made the short walk to the harbour for a one-hour boat trip, having seen a few Pelagic Cormorants on the way. There was plenty of sea ice not far from the harbour and that's where we were heading. In addition to the gulls seen previously we also saw Glaucous-winged, Black-tailed and the *kamchentkai* subspecies of Common Gull. However it's fair to say that for most/all members of the group it was the eagles that were the priority and we were not disappointed. On reaching the edge of the sea-ice the crew threw fish bits from the ship and this brought stunningly close views of large numbers of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles. It was an absolutely incredible sight and cameras were going into overdrive as eagles swooped down right next to the ship or were standing on the ice just a few metres from us. It was particularly interesting to see Steller's Sea Eagle and White-tailed Eagle next to each other on the ice. White-tailed Eagles are large birds but when next to a Steller's Sea Eagle they can look relatively small with the difference in size, particularly of the bills, being obvious. But the sheer number of eagles was incredible; Chris counted thirty-six White-tailed Eagles in the sky on one occasion. Sarah summed up the experience perfectly when she said it was one of the best days of her life. We returned to the harbour and were pleased that the number of Harlequin ducks had increased and were very close to the harbour wall where our ship docked. We were treated to stunningly close views of the Harlequins making yet another great photographic opportunity. Three Pintail were also in the harbour and giving close views. Half the group opted to go for a coffee break while the rest walked to a nearby bridge to watch a pair of Brown Dippers with a Wren putting in a guest appearance. After the dipper enthusiasts had their coffee it was time to make the short journey to our hotel for an early dinner. The dinner was excellent and we were soon on our way to the Blakiston's Fish Owl hide. There were lots of eagles around when we arrived and some were already roosting in the trees of the valley. Unfortunately the owl didn't appear by 9.15 so the remaining group members that had stayed needed to go in preparation for an early start the following day.

## Day 9

## Thursday 14th February

It was another early start today as our boat trip this morning set off in the dark. We eventually managed to negotiate the ice that had formed in the harbour and then moved through open water before reaching the pack-ice before dawn. Eagles, gulls and crows were already gathering in anticipation of free food that duly arrived. Fish for the gulls were thrown first because it is the activity of the gulls that gets the attention of the eagles to bring more in. The eagles appear to prefer flat fish so these are used to keep them happy, although they did appear to be taking other fish. As the light improved so did the number of birds and dozens soon surrounded us. The fish that were thrown from the boat brought the birds close and it was staggering to have Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles just ten metres away from us. It took a lot of self-discipline to stop taking photos and just stand back and watch the amazing spectacle. The sunrise was truly beautiful. In the land of the rising sun we watched the sunrise in a superb sky for photography – clear skies near the horizon and a few clouds above it

to capture the first rays of the sun. It had been an effort to get out of bed so early but nobody was regretting this once in a lifetime experience – absolutely wonderful. Sadly it was time to return to the harbour where the wall had more Pelagic Cormorants today and the harbour itself still had Harlequins, Scaup and Pintail. We had certainly worked up an appetite and on return to the hotel we were treated to an excellent breakfast. Before venturing onto the coach some of the group made the short walk around to the back of the hotel to see one of the Brown Dippers that inhabit the river. The dipper was only twenty-five metres away so decent photos were acquired by those with appropriate cameras.

A one-hour drive to the Notsuke Peninsula produced various ducks and gulls on the sea. However, there were occasional large areas of ice that were an indication of the low temperatures which were approximately -13 when we were out earlier in the morning. On reaching the peninsula we could drive more slowly and stop in some places. Birds such as Black Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander and Glaucous Gull showed well. There were plenty of Sika deer including some very fine stags near the visitor centre. The observation platform provided a good vantage point to scan the sea and the prize bird was White-winged or Stejneger's Scoter. One bird was close enough to show the key identification characteristics of the species, including the distinctive white marking around the eye. A couple of Red Foxes were seen and we managed to see a flock of Snow Buntings but were unable to get off the coach for a better view. A brief stop was made at Shibetsu Harbour where Harlequin, Goldeneye, Glaucous Gull and Glaucous-winged Gull were some of the species showing well. We returned to the hotel for an hour's rest before an early dinner and another unsuccessful evening waiting for a Blakiston's Fish Owl.

## Day 10

## Friday 15th February

It was another fine breakfast at our very good hotel with a few people looking at the dippers on the river before we boarded the coach for the one-hour drive to Notsuke Peninsular. Some of the species we saw from the coach as we drove south with the sea on our left included White-tailed Eagle, Harlequin, Black Scoter, Common (Kamchatka) Gull and Glaucous Gull and Red Fox. On the peninsular we saw many more Sika and a few more foxes than yesterday. The photographers certainly took the opportunity to take more photos of some of the superb stags. A few more Steller's Sea Eagles were around today and we had great views of one that flew over us. The Snow Buntings were in the same area as yesterday and we had sufficient time to walk up to where they were feeding and get good scope views, with twenty-five counted including some fine males. Star birds on the sea today were Long-tailed Ducks that caught the sunlight perfectly to enable everyone to appreciate what a beautiful bird it is. There were several small groups of Long-tailed Ducks around with the largest holding fourteen individuals. A few Pelagic Cormorants were close enough for scope views so that the differences between this species and Great Cormorant could be appreciated. Tony managed to find and photograph a group of six Lapland Buntings while the rest of us were elsewhere watching Snow Buntings. It was now time to move off the peninsula to go for a fine lunch at a restaurant in Shibetsu. The drive to Yoroushi was the final leg of the day for our one night stay at the excellent Dai Ichi hotel.

The hotel is next to a river and the feeders outside the lounge attract plenty of birds. We were soon watching the local subspecies of Nuthatch, Great-spotted Woodpecker, Marsh Tit and Brown-eared Bulbul. Some of the group had Brown Dipper and Hawfinch from their bedroom windows. A few of the group opted to go for a brief walk near the hotel and we soon had a few Dusky Thrushes. The highlight of the walk was a group of eight Bullfinches of the Grey-bellied subspecies that were busy feeding in an Alder tree. Good scope views enabled



everyone to see the subtle plumage of this attractive bird, which has a beautiful combination of pink contrasting with a cold grey. Two Coal Tits were, surprisingly, our first for the trip. As darkness approached we all gathered in the lounge in the hope that the world's largest owl would put in an appearance. Unfortunately it was a no-show before dinner so we dragged ourselves off to the dining room and were treated to yet another excellent meal. Desserts duly despatched, we returned to the lounge hoping that the show would begin before we went to bed. We didn't need to wait long. At ten past eight, to everyone's delight, the male Blakiston's Fish Owl flew in and soon caught a fish with cameras clicking away. Fish despatched, it quickly took another. Brilliant views and huge sighs of relief (certainly from the tour leader!). When the owl flew off down river we gained another perspective of this huge bird. There was now time for some mutual appreciation of everyone's photos of which there were some very impressive ones. Soon after, a little post-owl entertainment started when a shrew moved around near the feeders searching for seeds. The little fellow provided great delight but it was a much larger beast that was the highlight of the evening and we could all now sleep more easily in this excellent hotel. Some members of the group had second helpings of the owl during the night at 2.50 and 4.55.

## Day 11

## Saturday 16th February

A stay at Dai Ichi is an absolutely wonderful experience with birds such as Brown Dipper, Forest Wagtail and Hawfinch seen by some from their rooms. John even saw the Blakiston's Fish Owl fly past his room when it made its first appearance the previous evening. The excellent breakfast has the distraction of the constant birdlife coming to the feeders with more photographic opportunities. The species that created most interest was the local *Brandtii* subspecies of Eurasian Jay with the russet brown heads contrasting with their greyer bodies. A few of the group went for a walk near the hotel and were rewarded with good views of Siskin and Coal Tit. It was then time to say goodbye to the hotel staff before driving to Sunayu on Lake Kussharo. There were more Whooper Swans than on our previous visit and they provided some perfect poses in the strong sunshine. A Dusky Thrush showed well before we had to continue our journey to Tsururumidai. Roadside Steller's Sea Eagle and Eastern Buzzard were good but a flock of hundreds of Rooks was more of a surprise and quite spectacular. We reached our destination and had a final fifteen minutes to enjoy the Red-crowned Cranes with some bugling and displaying, reminding us of the spectacle we first experienced just a few days ago. One particularly energetic individual was doing his own version of "dad dancing" but most of his peers just ignored the exhibitionist. Sadly it was then a short journey to Kushiro Airport where we said our goodbyes and appreciation to Sonoko who had been a marvellous companion and assistant during our wonderful time on Hokkaido. On arrival at Haneda, we said our goodbyes to Andrea who had certainly gained a great appreciation about how special the wildlife of Hokkaido is. We had our final dinner as the large team at the hotel restaurant before saying goodbyes to Rachel, Lynda, David, Nicholas and Richard who were returning to the UK the following morning.

## Day 12 / Extension Day 1

## Sunday 17th February

It was a final goodbye to those returning to the UK and soon after the remainder of the team also went to Haneda Airport for the flight to Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu. The plane flew over Mount Fuji denying good photographic views but on our descent to Kumamoto, the active volcano of Mount Aso was belching steam which gave more than adequate compensation for those with window seats on the appropriate side of the plane. On arrival we met Masako who would be our guide on Kyushu. Our destination was the estuary of Yatshushiro. Our first stop at the river allowed us to stretch our legs in the sunshine and notice the higher temperatures compared to the sub-zero of Hokkaido that we had left the previous day. It felt like spring and the

close views of Ospreys and Black-eared Kites only added to the feeling of well-being. There were lots of wildfowl on the river and a Common Kingfisher was particularly obliging as it posed for the photographers. A few Common Sandpipers were dotted along the river and we saw our first Black-crowned Night Herons for the trip in trees overlooking some gardens. As we walked along the river wall towards the mouth of the estuary new birds appeared including a group of ten Black-faced Spoonbills roosting on a wooden structure in the river. More waders were found – Kentish Plover, Dunlin, Curlew and a Greenshank. A little further on, at our final stop on the river, some of the group managed to see two Saunders's Gulls flying over the bus, a rare bird that was a welcome find. Also on the river were a Black-tailed Gull and a few Vega Gulls, while some Russet Sparrows were in the trees behind the bus. It was time to bring this pleasant estuarine visit to an end and complete our journey to our hotel in Izumi.

## Extension Day 2

## Monday 18th February

It was an early breakfast at the hotel before our twenty-minute drive to the Arasaki Crane Centre. We had already seen some cranes in the fields as we approached the centre but there were thousands as we reached our destination. We immediately made our way to the roof of the building and were greeted by the spectacular sight and sound of the cranes as they excitedly gathered in anticipation of the seven o'clock feed. Large flocks of cranes were flying in all the time as some members of the group switched their cameras to video mode. Hooded Crane is the most numerous species and the latest recorded count at Arasaki came to 10,572 birds. The larger White-naped Crane stood majestically over its smaller cousin and looked imperious in its beautiful silver grey refinery contrasting with the white neck and red face. The latest recorded count for the White-naped Crane was 3,057. A couple of Common Cranes were spotted amongst the hordes of Hooded and White-naped. A Greater White-fronted Goose flew in and was easy to pick out while it fed away from the main crowd. As the light improved Rooks came out of their roost site and brought in a few Daurian Jackdaws some of which flew very close. Visitors then had to leave the visitor centre prior to the official opening at 9am so we went for a drive around the polders to get more close views of the cranes in the good morning light. Buff-bellied Pipits and Eurasian Skylarks were frequently seen, sometimes close to each other to provide a good identification comparison. We made a brief return to the centre and found a few Eurasian Starlings mingled with the White-faced Starlings. The light was now better to make it easier to appreciate the variety of wildfowl with Pintail and Wigeon being the most numerous and Common Shelduck being the least.

We decided to make the most of the good weather and leave Arasaki to go to Kogowa Dam. We first stopped at a convenience store to pick up supplies for lunch and then crossed the road to explore the river. Barn Swallow and Asian House Martins were hawking for insects and a Common Kingfisher was perched up next to the river. There were Falcated Ducks and Meadow Buntings to keep us alert before we found our main target – Long-billed Plover. Good scope views were had and the bill did manage to convince some sceptics about the appropriateness of the name. It was a fifteen-minute journey to the dam with a stop at a river first where Brown Dipper was seen. It was a pleasant walk around the reservoir in the warm sunshine and a couple of female Daurian Redstarts were seen but unfortunately no males. The best species seen in the woodland was Ryuku Minivet and other good birds included Red-flanked Bluetail, Long-tailed Tit of the Kyushu subspecies, White-backed Woodpecker and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker. We had lunch near the reservoir before heading back to Izumi. The lucky ones sitting on the left of the bus managed to see a Crested Kingfisher flying along the river soon after leaving the reservoir.

The afternoon session began at the Komenotsu Estuary and a flock of gulls sitting on an island in the river enabled a brief identification session. Black-tailed, Common, Slaty-backed and Vega Gulls were present and their proximity made for some good views. A couple of Japanese Cormorants were picked out on the opposite side of the river before we made our way back to the centre for a coffee and more cranes. A sleeping group of ten spoonbills included both Black-faced and Eurasian and a Common Snipe showed well close to the centre. A final visit to East Polder provided us with a female Peregrine sitting near a reservoir and five Tundra Bean Geese was a satisfying end to our wild goose chase. Our final stop was to see a Black-faced and Eurasian Spoonbill together before we returned to the hotel.

### Extension Day 3

Tuesday 19th February

The forecast for this morning was heavy rain and it was correct! In anticipation of the weather we made a late start, planning for a later finish. Our first stop was a walk alongside a river with Osprey and Common Sandpipers providing the interest before the rain became heavier so we retreated to the bus and drove to the East Polder at Arasaki to have our first crane experience of the day and to search for the species that had eluded us yesterday. It didn't take long to find a solitary Sandhill Crane amongst the hordes of Hooded and White-naped. Very obligingly, this long distance migrant from North-East Siberia came closer to the road and posed for photos, much to everyone's satisfaction. There were plenty of Skylarks and Buff-bellied Pipits feeding and flying around but it was the cranes that were getting people's attention.

Driving further down the road we managed to find the five Tundra Bean Geese in almost exactly the same place as yesterday; they were walking around and feeding so definitely were not plastic! A few Great Egrets were feeding in the drainage channel right next to the road. The rain was now getting very heavy so we made a short drive to a convenience store for lunch provisions before going to the visitor centre. It was a good decision as the rain was heavy with a strong wind, so was rather unpleasant. We took advantage of the comfortable interior of the centre where we could drink coffee while enjoying the cranes, kites, wildfowl and other birds. A Black-winged Stilt made a brief appearance in the distance but unfortunately had moved out of sight before everyone saw it, but everyone had the opportunity to study some White Wagtails of the distinctive *lugens* subspecies. The staff put frozen bundles of fish out for the cranes to feed on and we all had a good laugh as some cranes managed to extract pieces of fish and were then continually harassed by other cranes looking for an easy meal. An Eastern Marsh Harrier put a lot of wildfowl into the air but they needn't have worried because it was more intent on scavenging a fish from the frozen food section. A lone Black-faced Spoonbill was found as the weather seemed to be improving and soon after we boarded the bus to venture further afield.

We parked up near a harbour and immediately saw a group of Reed Buntings in the reedbed that ran alongside the river. The buntings were of the *pyrrhulina* subspecies and looked distinctly different than the ones we see in the UK. A couple of Ospreys were hunting over the harbour, competing for airspace with the numerous kites. A Meadow Bunting was singing at the top of a post adorned with loudspeakers and a Sparrowhawk soared over the forest on the other side of the harbour. More Reed and Meadow Buntings were found in the reeds plus a female Daurian Redstart. Ken and Chris drew attention to a bird they had seen fly into a tree in a garden and further investigation revealed it to be a Wryneck. It was a great find and a bonus to see this wintering woodpecker showing well as it posed in a tree allowing for good scope views. As we headed back to the coach a Pale Thrush flew out of the reeds and briefly went to the top of a tree before flying off. A male Daurian Redstart refused to show itself to the group before we made our final visit to Arasaki for the cranes. The beauty and colours of the

White-naped Cranes seem to constantly change dependent on the light and time of day, so our final visit provided another opportunity for yet more photos of this stunning bird. A Sandhill Crane was seen before we had a brief walk to a river. Just prior to getting on the coach for the last time of the day five Black-faced Spoonbills had come into roost on the small reservoir with the cranes and their wonderful sound providing the supporting cast. It was a fitting end for our visit to one of the top birdwatching sites in the world.

## Extension Day 4

Wednesday 20th February

It was a return to early breakfast for our final day on the island of Kyushu. In contrast to yesterday we had sunny, clear skies for the remainder of our time prior to our flight to Tokyo. We had a two-and-a-half-hour drive to Lake Miike to negotiate and soon after seeing a Brown Dipper on a roadside river some of the group saw a Japanese Mountain Hawk Eagle flying over the forest. A stop at a convenience store for our lunch provisions enabled Tony to find a Daurian Redstart but it had gone before the remainder of the group could see it. Since arriving on Kyushu we had seen trees with cherry blossom and we had more during our journey - an early sign of spring. As we approached the Lake we made a stop at a viewpoint where the Sakahoko volcano stood majestically in the distance with its peak at 1,570 metres. The scenery is quite spectacular in this area and we later had views of another volcano. On reaching Lake Miike, Nuthatches were noticeably vocal and a few Olive-backed Pipits were on the ground to provide decent views. A few Pale Thrushes were around and a male Daurian Redstart posed to reveal his beauty. Varied Tit, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker and Elegant Bunting were other birds around in the warm sunshine. We had sufficient time to call in to see the Kirishima Jingo Shrine in its attractive setting in the forest. A leisurely drive to Kagoshima Airport gave us plenty of time to check in prior to our flight to Tokyo for our final night of the trip. After dinner at our airport hotel we said our goodbyes to Chris and Ken who were continuing their overseas adventure to New Zealand.

## Extension Day 5

Thursday 21st February

Sarah, Margaret, Julie, John and Tony were the final members of the original group to be heading back to the UK today on their flight to Heathrow. We headed on our separate ways full of memories of the sights and sounds of a fabulous holiday in this fascinating country.

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## Species Lists

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

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February													
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1	Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>												5	5	
2	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>												1	1	
3	Mute Swan - I	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		1												
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			17		140			15	7	✓				
5	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>												✓	✓	
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓									✓		✓	
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓										✓	✓	
8	Falcat Duck	<i>Mareca falcata</i>		25										60		
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓						✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		2					3	3			✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓									✓	✓		
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓					✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
16	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	✓						✓	✓	✓					
17	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>							✓	✓	✓					
18	White-winged (Stejneger's) Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi stejnegeri</i>								3						
19	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>							✓	✓	✓					
20	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>									70+					
21	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>						4	✓	✓	✓					
22	Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>														
23	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				2	1	✓	✓	✓						
24	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	2					✓	✓	✓						
25	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓				1					✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓										✓			✓
27	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	✓													
28	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>												✓	✓	
29	Black-faced Spoonbill	<i>Platalea minor</i>	1										10	✓	6	

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February													
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
30	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>											6			
31	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1								2	✓	✓	
33	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓			✓							✓	✓	✓	
34	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>							✓	✓	✓					
35	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓		✓							✓	✓	✓	
36	Japanese Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capillatus</i>												✓		
37	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1										6	✓	✓	
38	Mountain Hawk-Eagle	<i>Nisaetus nipalensis</i>														1
39	Japanese Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter gularis</i>				1										
40	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1												1	
41	Eastern Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus spilonotus</i>	1												1	
42	Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus lineatus</i>		1	1	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
43	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					3		✓	✓	✓					
44	Steller's Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>					1	3	✓	✓	✓	1				
45	Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>	1		7	✓	✓	1	✓			2				
46	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				1										
47	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>												1		
48	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓												
49	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓		✓							✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>													2	
51	White-naped Crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>												✓	✓	
52	Red-crowned Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>					370	✓				✓				
53	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>												3	2	
54	Hooded Crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>												✓	✓	
55	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1													
56	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>													1	
57	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>												✓	✓	
58	Long-billed Plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>												1		
59	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	✓										✓			
60	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓										10			
61	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa melanuroides</i>	40													

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February													
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
62	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1										1			
63	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	50										4			
64	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>												2	2	
65	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2										4		4	
66	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓							✓			
67	Saunders's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus saundersi</i>											2			
68	Black-tailed Gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>	2							✓			1	✓		
69	Common (Kamchatka) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓							✓	✓	✓		✓		
70	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>								✓	✓					
71	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>								✓	✓	✓				
72	Mongolian Gull	<i>Larus mongolicus</i>												✓		
73	Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae</i>	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	1
74	Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>								✓	✓	✓		✓		
75	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	✓										✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Blakiston's Fish Owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>										1	1			
77	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>							2							
78	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>											1	2		
79	Crested Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>												1		
80	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>													1	
81	Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus kizuki</i>	2			4	1		1					2		2
82	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1	1				1	2	✓			
83	Ryukyu Minivet - E	<i>Pericrocotus tegimae</i>												2		
84	Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>	2													
85	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			3							✓				
86	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>	3													
87	Daurian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus dauuricus</i>												✓	✓	
88	Oriental Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus pastinator</i>										✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓		✓	✓								✓	✓	
90	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>										1				
92	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>									2	✓				
93	Japanese Varied Tit	<i>Sittiparus varius varius</i>				✓										✓

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February													
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
94	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					✓	✓			✓	✓				
95	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>				✓					1					
96	Japanese Tit	<i>Parus minor</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓
97	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>												✓	✓	
98	Brown-eared Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>												6		
100	Asian House Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus</i>												10		
101	Japanese Bush Warbler	<i>Horornis diphone</i>												2		
102	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				✓								10		
103	Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>	✓											✓	✓	✓
104	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				1			1			1				
105	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				3					✓	✓				✓
106	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>					1									
107	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	
108	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>												✓		
109	Pale Thrush	<i>Turdus pallidus</i>			1									✓	1	✓
110	Dusky Thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>	✓	1	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Chinese Hwamei	<i>Garrulax canorus</i>				2										
112	Red-flanked Bluetail	<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>				3								3		
113	Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>												3	3	2
114	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius philippensis</i>	1													1
115	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>				1			6	1	4	3		1		
116	Russet Sparrow	<i>Passer rutilans</i>											✓	✓		
117	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1									✓		✓
119	White (Black-backed) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba lugens</i>	✓	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓
120	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba leucopsis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
121	Japanese Wagtail - N	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>				1						1		2	3	
122	Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>														4
123	Buff-bellied Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>												✓	✓	
124	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>				1										
125	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			5	5					1	3				



	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February													
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
126	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>							2							
127	Japanese Grosbeak	<i>Eophona personata</i>			1											
128	Eurasian (Grey-bellied) Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula griseiventris</i>								8						
129	Grey-capped Greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>				✓								✓	✓	
130	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			50						6					
131	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>					1							✓	✓	
132	Chestnut-eared Bunting	<i>Emberiza fucata</i>														
133	Yellow-throated (Elegant) Bunting	<i>Emberiza elegans</i>														1
134	Black-faced Bunting	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>	2													
135	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>													✓	
136	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>								25	25					
137	Lapland Bunting	<i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>									6					

Other Taxa

1	Japanese Macaque - E	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>			✓												
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					2	3	4	2	8	5					
3	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>			1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
4	Long-clawed Shrew	<i>Sorex unguiculatus</i>									1	1					
1	Terrapin sp		3														



Sunrise over the pack ice by David Robinson



Macaque with Lynda's walking pole by Rachel Oakley



Red-crowned cranes by David Robinson