

Wild Japan in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 – 26 February 2019



Red Fox



Steller's Sea Eagle



Blakiston's Fish Owl



Japanese Macaque

Report compiled by Alison Steel
Images courtesy of Alison Steel



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Tour participants: Alison Steel (leader) plus local guides and interpreter, with twelve Naturetrek clients

Main Tour Day 1

Friday 15th February

Tour leader, Alison, and 6 clients departed Heathrow on an overnight flight to Tokyo.

Main Tour Day 2

Saturday 16th February

After our approximately 11 hr flight, those who had left London the day before landed in Tokyo Haneda Airport. After an extremely slow baggage reclaim, we met our local assistant, Kei, who escorted us to a bus for the journey to Shinagawa. On arrival, we checked in to our rooms to freshen up and rest. The other half of the group who had arrived in Tokyo earlier met up with Alison in the reception area to find out the plan for the day.

Meeting up again around 11.30, those participating in the afternoon excursion got some lunch from the 7/11 then followed Kei to Shinagawa Station to get our first taste of the Japanese public transport system. We needed to change lines at Tokyo Central and it seemed like a very long way between the platforms as we were bombarded by an array of unfamiliar sights. After a slight hiccup of accidentally getting on the fast train that didn't go to our stop, we arrived at Kasai Rinkai Marine Park. It was a sunny Saturday, so there were lots of families playing games & flying kites, as well as lots of photographers. The first bird spotted was a Dusky Thrush, foraging below some trees. Other small birds flying over were less identifiable as they darted between areas of cover.

At the shore we sat down for lunch and watched well over a thousand Great Crested Grebe and Scaup out on the water just a short way from the shore. A few smaller grebes were also in evidence and some of the closer ones were identified as Black-necked. The sun shining on the water created a lot of glare, making it difficult to distinguish identifiable features. A bird on top of a speaker system caused confusion for a short while, but eventually we concluded that it was a female Blue Rock Thrush.

Carrying on along the shore we found Wigeon and Teal feeding out beside the islands. More Dusky Thrush were in evidence as well as Oriental Turtle Dove and White-cheeked Starling. Some Brown-eared Bulbul sat still long enough for everyone to get a good look at them. At a small pond there were a number of local photographers, one of whom was very happy to show us his pictures of a fairly habituated Bull-headed Shrike that he could feed from a stick held in his mouth. He then indicated that it was still around and that we should wait. Sure enough a very smart looking bird turned up a few minutes later, staying long enough to grab a mealworm before flitting off again. The pond produced our first Shoveler, Moorhen, Little Grebe and Spot-billed Duck. Out on an island in Tokyo Bay we identified our first Eastern Buzzard and a Peregrine. Black-headed Gulls were resting on a platform while Vega Gulls floated on the sea beyond. The next pond round had more Shoveler and Wigeon as well as Cormorants. Across the top of the reeds there were good views to be had of another Eastern Buzzard, which later flew directly across the pond and perched on top of a nearby tree. In the reeds, Black-faced Bunting showed well and Tree Sparrow were tempted by the photographers' feed. Some people had good views of a Kingfisher, while others saw Japanese White-eye, House Swift and Large-billed Crow.

Returning to the train station, we completed the journey in reverse, but without our local assistant. Dinner was taken in the food court of the hotel which offered a selection of Asian foods, before an early night was had by all.

Day 3

Sunday 17th February

An early start this morning saw us down for breakfast at 5am. The tight schedule was squeezed even more by the very regimented seating assignments in the restaurant, which were done at a sedate pace. Nonetheless we made it to Shinagawa Station in plenty of time for the train to the airport.

After checking in for our domestic flight, we passed through security and congregated in the lounge to wait for the bus. A full flight meant that we took off a little late, but once in the air, there were some lovely views to be had of Mt Fuji and some other snow-capped peaks. As we approached the runway we could see a much more wintery landscape, with much of the ground covered in snow.

After arriving in Kushiro Airport, we took some time to prepare for the colder temperatures. Our guide, Shao Jing Jing, is Chinese, but now works on Hokkaido. She helped us to board our bus then we set off in search of cranes.

The first stop was at Tsuruimidai where the cranes were just off the side of the road in a field. Their honking cries filled the air as squabbles broke out or small groups of Red Crowned Cranes took off and landed. There were a few attempts made at photographing flying cranes. At first glance there appeared to be only a few cranes here, but as we watched more could be made out amongst the trees at the back of the field. A number of Whooper Swans were resting a short way from the fence, while a mixed tit flock flitted between the trees above our heads.

From here we went to Taito for lunch, which was a selection of traditional Japanese dishes that were pretty tasty. Unfortunately one of the group wasn't feeling well, having picked up a bad cold on the pre-tour extension, so they chose to stay at the hotel rather than accompany us to the crane sanctuary for the afternoon.

We arrived in plenty of time for the feeding, but had to negotiate space at the fence around the encamped photographers. The cranes were already gathered in anticipation and a few ructions broke out, creating a number of interactions that were absorbing to watch. They knew exactly when someone would come out to feed them and were all pushing up towards one corner in expectation. As a tray of feed was pushed out into the field there were squabbles over choice morsels and variety of displaying happening. It was a good start to our time in Hokkaido.

After collecting our last group member from the hotel, we headed further north. There were lots of tracks in the snow as we drove along, and a couple of White-tailed Eagle were seen. A quick stop at the 'Drug Store' and then at the hotel, allowed us to get medication then drop off those feeling unwell before we headed to Kotan. On the way a Red Fox and a number of Sika Deer were spotted. At Kotan thermally heated water keeps the lake free of ice in places and Whooper Swans congregate here. The scenery around the lake was fantastic and the steam coming off sections of the water made it very atmospheric. Marsh Tit, Varied Tit and Japanese Tit were seen, as well as the now familiar Brown-eared Bulbul.

Further round the lake at Sunayu we were the last visitors of the day. It's possible to dig down into the sand on the shoreline here to find hot water and there was a good number of swans gathered here, enjoying the warmth. The temperature was starting to drop and we were thinking about leaving when the gentleman from the nearby shop came out to dismantle part of the foot hot spring. This caused great excitement amongst the swans, which puzzled us until we realised that he was about to feed them. We watched as he ran one way along the sandy beach, then turned and ran at greater speed back towards us, throwing out food as he went. In order to get to the food, a proportion of the swans beat their wings, almost taking off, running along the water's surface. It was a spectacular sight.

Back at the hotel about half of the group dressed Japanese style in Yukata for our traditional evening meal. It consisted of huge amounts of food, including some unfamiliar items, the identity of which we had to guess at. Most people took up their chopsticks to eat the variety of sashimi, pickles, tempura, fish, meat, miso soup and rice.

After completing the checklist we said our good nights, with a few people heading to check out the onsens in the hotel. An onsen is a communal bath where a number of pools are fed by thermally heated water and are graduated in temperature. They are normally segregated, with separate bathing areas for men and women.

Day 4

Monday 18th February

We were aiming to leave the hotel about 5.30 this morning, but a failed alarm clock delayed us a little. There was fresh snow on the roads which made it slower going, so it was around 7.30 by the time we got to Otowa Bridge. It wasn't too busy with photographers, but there were not many cranes either. There were about 50 birds further down the river that looked fairly settled, but it was a nice morning, so we enjoyed the atmosphere of the frost and mist. Clive found a Meadow Bunting, which later returned to feed on the reeds along the edge of the river.

After about an hour five cranes took flight and flew towards us over the river and then over our heads, making it possible to see just how large they are. A little while later two others appeared from the other side of the bridge and flew away. Deciding that the remaining cranes were settled for the time being, we boarded the bus again and headed back to Tsurui Ito to see the cranes as they finished their morning feed. A few less were present than yesterday, but the site was also not as busy, making it a more relaxed visit. Some smaller birds and Brown-eared Bulbul were flying around, but not perching for any length of time.

From here we drove to a site for Ural Owl and along the way a number of foxes were seen. Down a small road we found a track which led along to a clearing overlooking the tree where two owls were peacefully resting. They were so calm and unconcerned that some asked if they were indeed real! We took some time just to enjoy watching them in the quietness of the wood.

Returning the same way for some time, we then stopped for lunch at the lovely, rustic Heart 'n' Tree Restaurant. We had pre-ordered so all we had to do was relax and enjoy the setting. Particularly of interest were the feeders outside the windows and we debated the possibility of Marsh versus Willow Tit. Just before we left, two foxes were spotted in field. Some of the group had good views of them trotting through the snow. We seem to have seen a lot of them today.

Our journey then took us to Lake Mashu. It was starting to snow and there was a lot of obscuring cloud when we arrived. Almost immediately on arrival a circling eagle was spotted way below, just above the surface of the ice. Our first Steller's Sea Eagle! As we watched it fairly quickly circled up and overhead before it flew away. A couple of Sika Deer were seen sheltering on the slopes, belly deep in snow. Gradually some of the cloud cleared and we could see more of the lake, getting an idea of its shape and scale.

Mount Io was billowing steam as we approached, but thankfully the wind was blowing uphill which markedly reduced the strength of the sulphur smell as we neared the yellow fumarole mounds, hissing loudly. Extremely hot water was bubbling out of the ground in places. The shape of some of the mineral deposits could be interpreted as cartoon characters! As we walked back to the bus the icicles hanging from the side of the visitor centre were admired.

An early return to our hotel allowed a number of the group to make use of the onsen again. A few went for a last bird walk, finding a few Brown-eared Bulbul, Long-tailed Tits and some Dusky Thrushes. There is a thermal stream that runs right through the centre of the town, creating atmospheric areas where the steam is strongest. A mixture of buildings, from the traditional wooden houses to more modern structures, line the streets in a mish-mash of styles.

Dinner was Japanese style again, with the burners on the tables. Suitably replete, the day's checklist was completed before it was time for bed.

Day 5

Tuesday 19th February

Today we had a more relaxed start, with the time to meet being just before 9am. Some elected to take a pre-breakfast walk around the town. There was some spectacular hoar frost along the river where the steam rises from the thermal waters. A variety of birds were seen, including Grey-headed Woodpecker and Eurasian Treecreeper.

Once on the coach, it was around a 90 minute journey to Shibetsu. More Red Foxes and lots of corvids were spotted along the way. Arriving at the harbour there were plenty of Slaty-backed Gulls in evidence, along with some Harlequin Ducks, Black Scoter, Goosander and a number of eagles (both Steller's and White-tailed), spaced out along the harbour wall, standing like sentinels.

Arriving in Rasau we had a quick comfort break before going to the harbour to board our cruise. The place we stopped at sold lots of dried seafood products and seaweeds, some of which were unidentifiable to our untrained Western eyes. We had time for a look around the harbour first, with Red-breasted Merganser and a very smart male Harlequin Duck being seen.

On board the boat the gulls lining the harbour were scanned for different individuals, with Glaucous and Glaucous-winged being sighted. Leaving the shelter of the harbour, we picked up speed as we headed out towards the offshore islands, being followed by gulls as we went. As we travelled, a shiny area became apparent then gradually became more defined as we approached - pack ice with plenty of eagles dotted over the surface. Coming to rest against the edge of the ice, one of the crew threw out some fish, sending our gull escort into a frenzy. Before long some larger shapes joined in the melee as White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagle swooped in for

fish. It was amazing to have almost eye levels views of these magnificent birds. The spectacle was much enjoyed by all.

All too soon it was time to return to the harbour. Some elected to go for a walk around town where Pintail, Red-breasted Merganser & a Brown Dipper were spotted in the river. The dipper was actively swimming along the surface before diving down to feed and reappearing, usually downstream, a few moments later.

After checking into our hotel, we had a short time to prepare for our early dinner at 4pm. It was our interpreter, Shao's birthday, so the group presented her with a small gift and a delicately folded origami crane. There was just enough time to eat before we boarded the bus to the owl hides. Despite a three hour effort, we left disappointed - perhaps tomorrow would bring a better result.

Day 6

Wednesday 20th February

Another early start, this time so we could head out while it was still dark to see the Eagles leaving their roost sites and looking for their morning meal. It was very atmospheric leaving the illuminated, icy port and heading out to sea with a thin layer of fine mist sitting on the water surface. As dawn approached the pack ice became visible. Our captain decided to set himself a challenge of seeing how far through the thinner ice he could get us, before changing his mind and heading for another point along the edge of the ice. Here the crew started to throw out some fish and the gulls were very quickly chased off by the many Steller's and White-tailed Eagles swooping in. You had to take time to admire the skill of these large birds as they delicately pluck fish from the water, without much of a splash. Looking out across the ice, there were hundreds of eagles dotted all over the edges. Occasional scrimmages would break out for choice morsels.

We moved a little further on and then more fish was thrown out. The distance ensured that only still hungry eagles followed us - they really are fantastic birds to watch. Away from the ice a little, there was one final fish toss to allow for more views of them grabbing one from the water. Watching them was hungry work and we headed back to the hotel for a well-deserved breakfast.

Refreshed, we headed south along the coast to Notsukehanto - the Notsuke Peninsula. There was a frozen stream, Sika Deer, including stags, and a Red Fox along the road side. Disappointingly our driver didn't have anywhere to stop to allow us good views of the fox. A quick stop at a parking place to scan the sea revealed a male Harlequin Duck, Black Scoter, Glaucous-winged Gull, Red-breasted Merganser & Goosander.

Carrying on to the information centre, we then got out for a walk. There were deeper patches of snow in places, making it a bit tough going at times. Some Sika Stags were grazing amongst the fishing gear, an incongruous sight. A further scan of the sea revealed some White-winged Scoter, while Slaty-backed and Glaucous Gulls flew past in the stiff breeze. We walked a fair distance down the peninsula, with only Long-tailed Duck to add to the day's sightings. Our bus came down to pick some of the group up, which unfortunately confused Linda, who turned round and the bus had gone. She was very relieved that she hadn't been left behind!

Returning to Rausu, some decided not to return to the owl hide tonight, so a smaller than normal group set off. It was quite busy again and those who decided to return to the hotel for dinner early were disappointed yet again. Anna bravely chose to stay on and her patience was rewarded. The dark shadow of the owl in flight was

glimpsed as it flew down the valley to perch up on the ridge. Minutes went by and just as we were wondering if we'd imagined it, it came down to the tree beside the pond and took stock for some time. Eventually it was satisfied that it was safe to approach and it dropped down next to the pond, contemplated its options then, with a few quick beats of its wings, grabbed a fish and proceeded to tuck in on the snowy bank. Initial hunger sated, it took off up river, fish in its talons. A satisfying end to a long day.

Day 7

Thursday 21st February

Most of the group decided to go on a pre-breakfast walk this morning. Just a minute or so from the hotel some calling Marsh Tits pointed us to a nearby Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, which we enjoyed good views of for several minutes. Some of the group then wandered on, but the remaining ones were treated to a second of these diminutive birds joining the first. About four Brown Dippers were calling and diving along the river. Further up the valley thermal steam could be seen, rising up into the cool morning air.

After breakfast we set off along the coast, but only got as far as Rausu before stopping again. Overnight the sea ice had been blown in to shore and a large number of eagles were not far out. A number of Scoters and other ducks were hemmed into one corner along with some gulls. It was incredible that this volume of ice had come in just overnight.

The next harbour down was Matsunori where we got out for a short walk. The harbour was full of ice, but nearby there was some clear water that we could see from the pavement. Some nice Harlequin Ducks were showing well, as were Black Scoter, Goldeneye and Greater Scaup. As we drove further along we could see the line of sea ice drifting, not that far out, a shimmering white line. Shibetsu Harbour had a Steller's Eagle still in pretty much the same position as we had seen it the other day. A male Harlequin a Duck close in pleased the photographers by displaying nicely in good light.

Back on Notsuke Peninsula we drove along slowly, spotting more Sika Deer & some Dusky Thrush. A Steller's Sea Eagle was perched atop a telegraph post just next to the road. At the visitor centre a dedicated few did some sea watching, while others enjoyed the display within the visitor centre. A lot of birds were difficult to make out as they were out near the ice floe. We did eventually manage to identify Black Scoter, Ancient Murrelet, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander and Spectacled Guillemot, just for John. A brief stop further along the peninsula added more Sika Deer to the day's sightings, along with a close encounter with a Red Fox. A number of eagles were evident today that hadn't been around yesterday.

Back in Shibetsu we had another huge lunch in a lovely restaurant before setting off for Yoshuri Onsen. Some of the long roads are incredibly straight, stretching on for miles, and the snowy scenery was stunning to look at. Arriving about 3pm, we had a relaxed rest of the day. The bird feeders outside the window were very lively, with Eurasian Jay being a new bird for the trip. Woodpeckers, tits and nuthatches were also about. A few people went to the onsen while others explored nearby.

Around 5pm the group started to trickle in to the main lounge area by the large windows, getting into prime position for owl watching. A cheeky mink cleared out the first lot of bait from the tiny pond, so the staff needed to restock, but its antics kept us amused for a while as it ducked in and out from behind a snow pile. A small

mammal was also spotted below the bird feeders. We eventually established that there were two of them and that they were shrews, but without closer examination, determining the exact species would be tricky.

Time was ticking on and we were due to go for dinner at 8.00pm. As 7.30 came and went people were starting to get a little anxious that the long wait had again been for nothing. All of a sudden there was a stir as a large pale shape came up the river. 7.45 and what we had all been waiting for landed in view. As cameras clicked, one of the group suddenly realised that what they had been photographing in the dim light wasn't moving and that they now had a number of pictures of an owl shaped tree trunk! A quick refocus was required before any further action happened. This immense owl seemed to look us in the eye before jumping in for a fish. Once on the snow it swallowed this one almost whole, gulping it down head first. Turning around, it hopped in for another fish and sat with its back to us for a short while. It then grabbed one final fish before taking off downriver again. What an experience! The eight hours of waiting (for some) finally paid off.

Dinner was a jubilant affair, although the feast of yet more fish was almost too much for some. A few group members were well dressed in lovely yokatas provided by the hotel.

Day 8

Friday 22nd February

An early walk this morning failed to turn up any snipe, but we did manage to find a small Winter Wren hopping around on the river and some Hawfinch. Clive and Jan managed to locate some Siskins when they were out.

Breakfast was a lavish Japanese buffet with many of the choices remaining a mystery! The bird feeders outside the window continued to draw in a variety of species and a lovely Brambling was showing well. Some birds were even spotted from the onsen, with the outdoor pools allowing for the enjoyment of bird calls and viewing while bathing. A few participated in the rice pounding this morning, and we were all treated to small traditional cakes made of rice flour.

Setting off for the airport in the late morning, foxes continued to be spotted from the bus. Even with a stop to buy lunch we made it back to Kushiro Airport in plenty of time. We posed for a group picture with the owls then, after checking in, said goodbye to Shao. Landing safely at Haneda Airport, we once again met with Kei to be guided through the transport system. It was quite packed so a few caught a taxi from Shinagawa while the rest braved the Tokyo rush hour. From Tokyo station it was only a short walk to the hotel, but many were quite tired. After checking in we met up and ventured along the road into the world of underground shops and restaurants. We managed to find one that could accommodate us across a couple of tables so had an enjoyable, relaxed meal.

Day 9

Saturday 23rd February

An early start this morning for some as we headed out for a walk to the Imperial Palace. As the gardens didn't open until 9am, we took the opportunity to search the huge moats that encircle the complex. Wigeon, Gadwall, Coot, Great Cormorant, Grey Heron and Mute Swan were seen in quick succession. Brown-eared Bulbul called noisily from some nearby trees.

The next section of moat contained some Tufted Ducks and Spot-billed Ducks. A few White Wagtail were flicking about and we had a brief view of a Grey-headed Greenfinch. A Little Grebe and Kingfisher were feeding in one corner. Out on the grass, amongst the trees, were a number of Dusky Thrush and White-cheeked Starling. As we passed an area full of Coot, Anna spotted a duck that we hadn't yet seen - a Falcated Duck. It didn't stay long, disappearing out of sight behind the large walls, but thankfully we found a few more a little further along. They were feeding really close to the bank so we were able to get excellent views, particularly of the male's stunning iridescent head plumage. It was a very smart bird. A male Shoveler was also showing well in breeding plumage.

It was a bit of a walk back to the East Gardens. After a security check and getting a ticket, we wandering around the lower Japanese gardens. Very quiet on the bird front with just a few Japanese White-eye, Japanese Tits, Brown-eared Bulbul and the sound of Long-tailed Tits.

Returning to the hotel, we checked out then went our separate ways for a couple of hours to explore some more of central Tokyo. After lunch we met back at the hotel to meet our escort to the station. We arrived in plenty of time for our train, and the comings and goings on the other platforms were fascinating to watch. The bullet trains are very smart looking and quiet. The train before ours arrived late, so our train eventually left a few minutes late - almost unheard of! Soon we were heading out of Tokyo, on a very smooth journey, although it took quite a while for the views to change from city-scapes to more rural scenes. Hills and mountains started to appear on the horizon. A few stops and a number of tunnels later, we pulled into Nagano Station. By pre-arrangement, most of the group got out of the far door while Clive, David and Alison 'threw' the luggage off the train, while trying not to get too much in the way of other passengers getting off. Suitcases and the group safely off, we headed out of the station and across the road to the hotel.

After checking in there was some time to refresh before we headed out for dinner. On the recommendation of a previous group leader, we went to the top floor of the station, to a steak restaurant, and very good it was too. We were hoping for a cold day tomorrow as we anticipate our visit to the Monkey Park.

Day 10

Sunday 24th February

We met our local guide for this section of the tour, Ken, at our hotel this morning. It was a beautifully sunny day for our drive to the Monkey Park, allowing for great views of some of the snow covered peaks, however this did mean that it was quite warm today, reducing our chances of seeing bathing macaques. We passed a number of apple orchards and Ken told us that there are also vineyards in the area. He explained that the monkey park was set up to reduce the friction between the macaques and the farmers. Farmers would try to kill the monkeys as they would come down from the hills to eat the apple crops. Someone suggested that they create a park and feed the monkeys instead, which has turned into a successful project.

The park was busy today, as it was the weekend. The bus dropped us off for the walk in. A few Varied Tits, Japanese Tits and Grey-capped Greenfinch were seen along the way. Linde's foot was giving her trouble, so unfortunately she had to stay at the cafe at the bottom rather than come all the way with us. It's a 2km walk in, on an icy surface, with a steep-ish concrete staircase at the end. Ken arranged our tickets and we walked out to a busy area, where groups of people were watching groups of macaques. Some were grooming or resting, others were clambering over rocks, trees or cables, a number were foraging in the snow, between rocks or in the pools

while a few were wrestling. Up at one of the hot pools females were reaching in for rice grains off the bottom. After some time of watching, one female went to in reach more. This is fairly unusual as they tend to only go in the hot water if it's really cold out. She was in for a good few minutes, allowing for some photographic opportunities. It's only ever the females and youngsters that go into the hot pools as the males are too busy defending their females to be able to relax. It was unusually warm in Nagano for this time of year. Normally 25 out of 30 days would be snowy, but this year the city is almost free of snow and the monkey park has much less than most years. We still enjoyed the experience of seeing the interactions between the different troop members.

A stop at the cafe on the way back to the bus for coffees and lunch was welcome. A party of Long-tailed Tits flew past on the final stretch towards to car park, and we tried to spot any white headed birds.

Heading back to Nagano, we visited the Zenkoji Temple. It's a large complex with some very impressive buildings. Some braved the dark, underground room in search of the lucky key and admired the temple interior. Unfortunately, much of the garden was blocked off, making birding more difficult. We did manage to find a Hawfinch, Japanese Tit, Grey-capped Greenfinch and had some nice views of Varied Tit. Anna had a brief sighting of an Oriental Turtle Dove flying over, but otherwise it was rather quiet on the birding front.

After returning to the hotel for a short while, once again most of the group headed across to the upper floor of the station complex for dinner. We'd eaten in this great steak restaurant last night and decided to return again this evening. It was another very enjoyable meal.

Day 11

Monday 25th February

It's hard to believe that it's already our last full day in Japan. All packed and ready to go, we met Ken and our driver outside the hotel at 8 o'clock. As we left Nagano we could see a snowy peaks of the Alps running parallel to us. Again the day was warm with no snow, very unusual for this time of year.

After driving past Mt Asama, an active volcano, our first stop was at a 7/11 to pick up lunch. Behind the store we found Hawfinch, Japanese Tit and Grey-capped Greenfinch in a hotel car park. We also paid a short visit to a resort hotel that has bird feeders outside of it. Here we had good views of Varied Tit, more greenfinch and a Red Squirrel, although some got better views than others of this and were able to make out the ear tufts on this very grey looking individual.

Arriving at Karuizawa Bird Sanctuary, we got off the coach at the visitor centre, beside the statue of Godo Nakanishi who was one of the first to advocate the cause of wild birds in Japan. As we walked by the river we could hear some birds calling from high up assisting us in locating Pygmy Woodpecker and Japanese Tit. Long-tailed Tit and a Willow Tit could be heard, but weren't seen. We caught a glimpse of what might have been a Japanese Grosbeak, but had to move off the track to let a vehicle past and by the time we looked again it was gone. A couple of Meadow Buntings high in a tree sat still long enough to get some scope views.

Going up and over the hill it was fairly quiet, with just a few tits calling. We found a bench and a couple of logs to act as picnic benches and enjoyed this sunny spot in the woods. As we returned towards to visitor centre another Pygmy Woodpecker was spotted. As we watched this, flickers of movement kept catching our eyes and

we then realised that this was leaves being tossed about by a foraging flock of Brambling. The longer you looked the more you found.

After a refreshment stop we wandered along the river. A couple of White Wagtail were seen on a building roof shortly before we got back on the coach. Heading towards Tokyo we wound our way down through some fantastic rocky outcrops. The air gradually became hazier and mountain views disappeared. It was positively balmy at the rest stop and a number of the group enjoyed ice cream.

It took quite a while after reaching the city edge to get to our hotel, including travelling through an 18km tunnel. We were very glad to get back out into the daylight. Traffic was slow in places, but we finally reached our hotel. Dinner tonight was taken at the hotel and was decidedly interesting, with staff that spoke very little English, didn't know how to make drinks and we had to calculate the bill on a sheet of paper. The food was good though and everyone was in a good mood as we said goodbye to those who were not returning to the UK on the group flight.

Day 12

Tuesday 26th February

All that remained was to have a final breakfast before catching the shuttle bus to Haneda Airport for our morning BA flight home, all of which went smoothly. Due to the time difference, after a 12-hour flight we arrived home still on the 26th February and only early afternoon local time!

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Species Lists

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

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February									
	Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Mute Swan - I	<i>Cygnus olor</i>									2	
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		120+	15							
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	4								4	
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>									5	
5	Falcated Duck	<i>Mareca falcata</i>									4	
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓								1	
7	Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	2	1							7	
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓					4	
9	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				4						
10	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓									
11	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓									
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	2			✓	✓	✓			7	
13	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	1000+			✓	✓	✓				
14	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				10+	✓	✓				
15	White-winged (Stejneger's) Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi stejnegeri</i>					7	✓				
16	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>				✓	✓	✓				
17	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>					✓	✓				
18	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			2	✓	✓	✓				
19	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2		✓	✓	✓				
20	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	✓	✓				
21	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>						1				
22	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓								✓	
23	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓									
24	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	✓									
25	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>									1	
26	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1									
27	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>				✓	✓	✓				
28	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓								3	
29	Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus lineatus</i>		2	2		✓	✓	✓			✓
30	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2+		✓	300+	✓				

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February									
	Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
31	Steller's Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>			1	30	300+	✓	✓			
32	Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>	2								✓	
33	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1									
34	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2									
35	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓							✓		✓
36	Red-crowned Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>		200+	400+				100			
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	6							10+		
38	Common (Kamchatka) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					✓	✓				
39	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>				✓	✓	✓				
40	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				✓	✓	✓				
41	Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae</i>	12									
42	Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>				✓	✓	✓				
43	Spectacled Guillemot	<i>Cephus carbo</i>						✓				
44	Ancient Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>						✓				
45	Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓					✓		✓	✓	✓
46	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	✓								1	
47	Blakiston's Fish Owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>					1	1				
48	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>			2							
49	House Swift	<i>Apus nipalensis</i>	1									
50	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1F							1		
51	Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus kizuki</i>							4			3
52	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1			✓	✓			
53	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus Canus</i>				1						
54	Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>	1								LO	
55	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>						3+	10+			
56	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>	6									
57	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓							✓
58	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓								
60	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>							1			
61	Japanese Varied Tit	<i>Sittiparus varius varius</i>	1	1							3	✓
62	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			

	E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		February									
	Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
63	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			✓		✓	✓				
64	Japanese Tit	<i>Parus minor</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Brown-eared Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			2			5	✓	H	✓	✓
67	Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>	2+							6+		
68	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H						1			
69	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓				✓	✓			✓
70	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				1						
71	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	✓							8	✓	✓
72	Dusky Thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	1	✓	✓	✓
73	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius philippensis</i>	1F									
74	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>				1	✓	✓				
75	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
76	White (Black-backed) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba lugens</i>	✓								✓	✓
77	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba leucopsis</i>								✓	✓	✓
78	Japanese Wagtail - N	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>	1 poss.									
79	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>							✓			10+
80	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>							✓		1	1
82	Eurasian (Grey-bellied) Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula griseiventris</i>						LO				
83	Grey-capped Greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>									✓	✓
84	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>							✓			
85	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>			1							2
86	Black-faced Bunting	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>	4									
87	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	6									

Mammals

1	Japanese Macaque - E	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>									40+	
2	Japanese Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris orientis</i>										1
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		2	6+	✓	✓	✓	✓			
4	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>		✓	4	LO-3	✓	✓	✓			
5	American mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>						1				
6	Shrew sp.							2				