

WINTER JAPAN: CRANES & SEA EAGLES

Feb 3, 2012 to Feb 18, 2012

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui



*The dancing Red-crowned Cranes on Hokkaido are always a highlight of this tour, and this year, the cranes certainly didn't disappoint!
(Photo by guide Phil Gregory)*

This was Phil's ninth Japan trip, one of his favorite tours and an exceptionally enjoyable one this time around, with a lively and fun group and some terrific sightings. We once again used Jun Matsui from Sicklebill Safaris as the co-leader, and his knowledge of the country and its many baffling customs was invaluable, as was his patience with the many food-related queries during lunch stops.

We began in style, foregoing our usual walk near the Narita Hotel, (which most folks had done on arrival day anyway), and going for a wintering Siberian Crane near Tokyo. This had been roosting amongst Bewick's (Tundra) Swans, but had gone when we got there at 0815, but luckily my mate Chris Cook then arrived and he had just seen the bird feeding in some fields nearby. We duly got fine views of this odd, long-billed crane, a mega to kick-off the trip, and Phil also ticked a Whistling (Tundra) Swan amongst the Bewick's and Whoopers, very ho-hum for the Americans but a nice one for the Aussie contingent.

Karuizawa was snow-covered and had very few small birds this winter, even thrushes were scarce, and sadly the Japanese Accentor was not in evidence. We did get nice looks at Japanese Wagtail, Scaly Thrush, Varied Tit, Eurasian Wren, Japanese Grosbeak and Japanese Woodpecker, whilst a pair of Long-tailed Rosefinch were the only ones of the trip.

The Chikuma River area was again very rewarding, with Smew, a female Baikal Teal and 2 Falcated Duck amongst the wildfowl, a Peregrine overhead, a Japanese (Common) Buzzard nearby, and Long-billed Plover on the river, with a Green (Ring-necked) Pheasant flushed for good measure.

The snow monkeys (Japanese Macaques) at Nagano were a big hit, in deep snow too, which we luckily narrowly avoided encountering on the drive, and the bird hide at Kahokugata got us more Green Pheasant, a fine male Merlin, Eastern Marsh-

Harrier, male Baikal Teal, and one of the few Black-faced Buntings of the trip. Katano Kamoike gave us Taiga Bean-Goose, lots of Baikal Teal, more Smew, and Gray-headed Lapwing nearby. Careful checking of the Greater White-fronted Goose flocks gave us no vagrants amongst them, but a harbor nearby gave us fine looks at Japanese Cormorant and the beautiful Black-tailed Gull.

The Kyushu section was again blessed with good weather conditions, and the crane experience around Arasaki was tremendous. There are over 13,500 cranes here with 9,600 Hooded, 3,500 White-naped and odd individuals of Sandhill and Common Crane. Other nice sights were Black-faced and Eurasian spoonbills, Northern Harrier, Northern Goshawk, Mongolian (Caspian) Gull, Daurian Jackdaw and Chestnut-eared Bunting. A trip south to Sendai/Takae gave us the vagrant Greater Spotted Eagle back for the 20th winter, Mandarin Duck and more Japanese Cormorant.

Next day we made a somewhat speculative twitch back to Sendai after Phil managed to get directions as to where 3 Scaly-sided Mergansers had been seen the weekend before, and amazingly when Phil checked upriver from the bridge he found a pair sat on rocks! Talk about a bonus species! This put us on a high for Yatsushiro, which we hit with the tide just right and saw my maximum ever of Saunders's Gull with 61 birds, plus Black-tailed and a taimyrensis type gull with dark mantle and yellow legs.

Going to Mi-ike we luckily picked up White-bellied Pigeon and Crested Kingfisher, then had a long search for brief views of Ryukyu Minivet, with Varied Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker for company.

Hokkaido is always a highlight of this tour, and this year it was snowy but not too much. Red-crowned Cranes dancing in the snow were a huge hit, as was watching Blakiston's Fish-Owl from the lodge windows or the abandoned buses which now serve as photographic hides outside. A Ural Owl was a neat pick-up at a crane site too, flying right past us and landing in a thick garden hedge to avoid the crows! The Rausu boat trip had only to go to the frozen harbor this year, and we spent a quite wonderful couple of hours with over 200 Steller's Sea-Eagles and 80 White-tailed Eagles at point-blank range for wonderful photo ops; this is just a magic trip. A small park gave us a vagrant drake Ring-necked Duck and an American Wigeon, and then one of my very favorite onsens at Shiotsubo welcomed us with a Solitary Snipe feeding in the stream just outside the picture windows, an incredible bonus. Blakiston's Fish-Owl showed here again that night, and a Siberian Marten was a nice mammal to see.

The last couple of days at Furen we spent getting Spectacled Guillemot in good numbers off Nosappu, where a Rough-legged Hawk came out of Russia (actually occupied Japan) and flew low over the pack ice to make landfall right by us. We also saw both White-winged and Black scoters, Long-tailed Duck plus Harlequin, and 96 Asian Rosy-Finches at Kiritappu, with a neat finale at a harbor nearby giving us Red-crowned Crane, Falcated Duck, and marvellous Whooper Swans and Common Goldeneyes.

A great trip with a fun group, having the Tassie devils along was a good cultural interchange (but keep Mary-Ann off the sake!). My thanks to Karen at Field Guides and Sue at Sicklebill Safaris for doing the various logistics so well, to Jun for being a great guide and driver for us, and to Japan Air Lines for fantastic courteous service which was a real pleasure to utilize, quite unlike the utilitarian misery of most flights! Thanks also to Take and his wife at Furen, the folks at Washi-no-Yado, and to Chris Cook for good information about rare birds. Jun and I even scored a drake Baer's Pochard the day before most folks arrived (which was even twitched from the UK by two English guys whom we met at Shiotsubo!), so we did exceptionally well for bonus birds this time around as well as having great experiences with the usual stars- the cranes, fish-owls and eagles.

Why not join us for 2013? It will be an unforgettable tour of a fantastic destination.

--Phil Gregory Kuranda March 2012

For more information about this tour, including future departures, visit our website at www.fieldguides.com. And to see this same triplist online, go to <http://www.fieldguides.com/triplists/jap12LIST.pdf> and you will find the list in its entirety.

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

TAIGA BEAN-GOOSE (*Anser fabalis middendorffii*) – Some good views of about 40 of this taxon at Katano Kamoike, with a couple of singles out amongst the White-front flocks as well. Sometimes split from Tundra Bean Goose.

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (*Anser albifrons*) – Good numbers around Kaga city, but careful and damn cold checking did not yield us a Lesser White-front!

TUNDRA SWAN (WHISTLING) (*Cygnus columbianus columbianus*) – One vagrant was with the Bewick's Swans at Inbanouma; interestingly one nearby bird had only a very small amount of yellow at the base of the bill, I wonder how much these two taxa hybridize?

TUNDRA SWAN (BEWICK'S) (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) – There were a 100+ Bewick's Swan at Inbanouma near Tokyo, with a few Whooper's and a single Whistling Swan.

WHOOPEER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – A good trip for them with 5 day records, though the very tame flock at Odaito were well offshore this year due to the ice. Birds at Teshikaga park were very tame however, and 120 at Hichitippu made a nice vocal finale on the last day.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Fourteen at Arasaki and then 130 at Yatsushiro, they seem to be becoming more frequent.

MANDARIN DUCK (*Aix galericulata*) – Nice looks at about 50 on the ponds by the nuclear power plant at Sendai, it is an amazingly exotic creature and quite wary too.

FALCATED DUCK (*Anas falcata*) – Two females at Saku Reservoir, then 30 around Katano and a fine male at Hichitippu on the last day.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – Widespread in small numbers, the most were 300 at Arasaki.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – A hybrid on a lake near Katano, then a good drake on the park pond at Teshikaga, found by Barbara and making a nice Nearctic duo with the Ring-necked Duck there.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Widespread and in good numbers.

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Five day records, and some good views, now split from the Indian Spotbill.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – Amazingly few, I recall 3 at Katano Kamoike only.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Not much of a winter for this species either, we saw them at various sites but no big numbers this year.

BAIKAL TEAL (*Anas formosa*) – A female at Saku Reservoir, then 3 including a drake at Kahokugata hide near Kanazawa, before about 300 at Katano Kamoike.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Eurasian Teal were quite widespread. Usually split from Green-winged Teal of the New World.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – Just a few sites with about 150 at Mi-ike the most

RING-NECKED DUCK (*Aythya collaris*) – A drake on a pond in the park at Teshikaga was a nice reason for a small detour, it was elusive but eventually showed nicely. A J-tick for Phil.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – Small numbers on 5 days.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Small numbers, mostly on Hokkaido where they frequent the harbors.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido, including some fine drakes.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (SIBERIAN) (*Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*) – Forty off Notsuke sandspit then 3 off Kiritappu. This taxon may be a split at some point from White-winged Scoter, itself a split from the Old World Velvet Scoter.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – Seen off Notsuke and Kiritappu, they have a great musical voice.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Also seen off Notsuke and at Kiritappu plus a few in harbors, another



A wonderful bonus while waiting for the cranes to dance - this Ural Owl flew past the group, then perched nearby and settled down for a nap. (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

amazing looking duck.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Small numbers, mostly on Hokkaido with some great looks at Hichitippu on the last afternoon.

SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) – A good winter for them, we had 6 drakes and a female at Saku Reservoir, then 3 m. and a f. at Kahokugata hide before 5 at Katano and 2 on a small lake nearby.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – Goosander were seen in good numbers, starting at Saku Res. then at a number of sites on Hokkaido.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – A pair at Yatsushiro then widespread on Hokkaido.

SCALY-SIDED MERGANSER (*Mergus squamatus*) – One of the birds of the trip, we heard about them a couple of days before we got to Kyushu, and I finally managed to get details of the site where a drake and 2 females had been seen; we checked out a vague area from Pete Morris, then went to check the bridge site on Route 504 in the hope they might be showing, and lo and behold, I found a fine drake and one female sat on rocks in the river! Good scope views, and nice to see Red-breasted Merg later that day for comparison. They reminded me of a cross between Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser, with that double shaggy crest on the male. One of the birds of the trip for sure, a terrific bonus, especially as most Japanese sightings are of females.



The crane fields at Arasaki are a spectacular sight, with nearly 10,000 Hooded Cranes and 3000 White-naped Cranes amassed for the winter! (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus*

colchicus versicolor) – A good trip for this endemic, the Japanese or Green Pheasant, with a male at Saku Reservoir, 2 males and 3 females at Kahokugata hide and a male near the Scaly-sided Merganser site. [E]

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – One off Kiritappu.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – Daniel saw one off Kiritappu.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (LITTLE) (*Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*) – Small numbers at various wetlands, this taxon has a yellow eye and the whole complex needs re-evaluation.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – Just a single from Kahokugata hide this trip.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*) – One at Kahokugata hide, one in a drainage ditch at Sendai, and one at Mi-ike.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN) (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – Seen at most wetlands in the south and centre.

JAPANESE CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – Great looks at small harbour near Kaga, with up to 12 birds with strongly green-sheened plumage there, then 3 at the usual site near Sendai. [E]

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Widespread in small numbers, the most being 15 at Arasaki.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – Four day records, the first at Saku, then up to 7 seen around Sendai.

LITTLE EGRET (LITTLE) (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – Only seen around Sendai, with just 3 on one day and one later.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – Just one at Yatsushiro, the shrine woodland colony seemed to be abandoned this season.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – An adult and imm. at the Eastern fields with a single Black-faced Spoonbill.

BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL (*Platalea minor*) – One at the Eastern fields with Eurasian Spoonbill, they stayed asleep for ages and it took a while to be able to see the dark face!

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (EURASIAN) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – A few around Arasaki and Sendai.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

BLACK KITE (BLACK-EARED) (*Milvus migrans lineatus*) – Seen almost every day, it's large and heavily speckled with whitish, very unlike Black Kite, I am surprised the IOC have yet to split it.

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) –

Outstanding on Hokkaido, we had wonderful views on the boat trip at Rausu and saw them every day up here.

STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – As ever one of the stars of the trip and surely one of the world's great raptors; the spectacle in the harbor at Rausu was truly amazing, with something like 200 Steller's Sea-Eagles out on the ice, squabbling with each other and the White-tailed Eagles for fish, and calling constantly; their gruff barking was a real feature of the morning. We got views to 10m range and in beautiful calm conditions for once. The first we saw was an adult near Rausu, then we had others at Washi no Yado, Furen, Nosappu and Kiritappu.

EASTERN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus spilonotus*) – One at Kahokugata was the only sighting of the trip.

NORTHERN HARRIER (EURASIAN) (*Circus cyaneus cyaneus*) – A ringtail over the Eastern fields was the Hen Harrier, now split from Northern Harrier by all except the dreaded Clements.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – One at

Tsurui was nice as it flashed over the crane fields, and some folks saw one at the Scaly-sided Merg site.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – Great views of an imm. at the Eastern Fields, it landed and we got some fine scope views; we saw another later that day at Takae.

COMMON BUZZARD (JAPONICUS) (*Buteo buteo japonicus*) – This split from Common Buzzard was widespread but only in very small numbers, the first at Chikuma River. The plumage is highly variable, they can show a black face with dark belly patch and pale supercilium, with a short dark eyestripe and barred tail.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*) – This is a good trip bird, we had one hovering by the road near Nemuro, then a great sight of one coming in from Russia; I picked it up way off flying low over the ice as it came off the occupied island, and we tracked it all the way over as it made landfall right by the light. Finally lovely views of one at Kiritappu, my best ever trip total for this uncommon species.

GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE (*Aquila clanga*) – The wintering vagrant bird at Takae was back again, I think this was it's 20th season and it even has it's own signboard on the road, being a local celebrity! It eventually soared up and came towards us before soaring away. A very nice trip addition!

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Very few, just 3 sightings from Sendai and the Eastern Fields.

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – A terrific male was perched on wires by the hide at Kahokugata, a species we seldom see on the trip.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – A fine male few over the bridge at Saku Reservoir.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – As always very sparse, Barbara saw one at Katano and then there was one at the Sendai ponds.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Widespread in small numbers in wetlands on Honshu and Kyushu.

Gruidae (Cranes)

SIBERIAN CRANE (*Grus leucogeranus*) – The first mega of the trip, we twitched a wintering bird near Tokyo, dropping



The magnificent Steller's Sea-Eagle has the largest bill of any eagle; along with that glaring yellow eye, it gives the bird a pretty fearsome appearance. (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

our walk near the hotel at Narita to go for this. It roosts with the Bewick's Swans, but had gone when we got there, but luckily Chris Cook arrived and had just seen it in the fields nearby, where we got good scope views of this strange long-billed species. It looked to be a sub-adult as there was some brown feathering on the body. They are a rare but regular winter vagrant to Japan.

SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*) – A couple amongst the cranes in the Eastern Fields, regular in very small numbers here.

WHITE-NAPED CRANE (*Grus vipio*) – There were over 3300 wintering birds around Arasaki and we had some fantastic views of this exotic looking species, which is an early migrant and will be heading north soon.

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – One at the Eastern Fields was paired up with a Hooded Crane and looked to have hybrid young too. Even this adult looked slightly "off" for a pure-bred Common Crane, the black flight feathers seemed greyer than usual, but I'd judge it good enough to list!

HOODED CRANE (*Grus monacha*) – There were around 9695 of them this year, and they gave a wonderful show at Arasaki, concentrated by the crane observatory and also out in the eastern fields. Lois and Kirk had recently twitched one in Tennessee of all places, so it was good for them to get back-up sightings of undisputed provenance!

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – As always a highlight of the tour, we started at the crane river near dawn and had nice looks at them in the atmospheric morning mist, then went to the Tsurui fields where they began flying in to dance and feed about 1000. A fabulous species, and in a great setting. Finally we had 5 birds feeding with Whooper Swans at Hichitippu, a very nice farewell.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A good winter for them with up to 40 at the Eastern Fields.

GRAY-HEADED LAPWING (*Vanellus cinereus*) – Just 3 birds on a flooded field near Katano, it's a scarce winter bird in Japan and another we never see at the same site!

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – Fifteen at Yatsushiro were the only ones of the trip.

LONG-BILLED PLOVER (*Charadrius placidus*) – Two on the Chikuma River at Saku, which showed very nicely.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Three singles at Sendai and Arasaki.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – One at Arasaki.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – Heard at Arasaki. [*]

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – Five at Yatsushiro were a good sighting of what is a scarce species in Japan.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – About 90 at Yatsushiro, wheeling about over the mudflats before settling to feed. Finally there were 8 at Hichitippu on the last afternoon.

SOLITARY SNIPE (*Gallinago solitaria*) – Barbara turned to me at Yoroushi and said she had a snipe, which I immediately knew was going to be a Solitary Snipe, a lifer for all of us except Jun. Sure enough, there it was, and we watched it feeding in the stream for some half an hour, what a great bird. I'd been after this one for years, it's a rare winter migrant in Japan, it even made Jun run from the car park to see it!

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Very sparse, I actually missed it this trip but some folks got to see one at Arasaki.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SAUNDERS'S GULL (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – Yatsushiro was again amazing for them, we saw at least 61 individuals, my largest ever count, and had great flight views, hearing them calling with a strident dry tern-like screech and watching



Red-crowned Cranes, or tancho, as they are known in Japan, have a well-deserved reputation for fidelity, making them a popular symbol in Japanese wedding ceremonies. (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

their dipping erratic flight over the mudflats. The small dark bill is very characteristic. The global population is only about 14,400 birds and still declining, though more searching has turned up more birds.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Four day records, the first at Kahokugata hide then very small numbers, with 10 at Hichitippu the maximum.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – A good trip for them, we had 12 at Hashidate harbor and 12 at Yatsushiro, whilst some folks saw a few en route to Sendai.

MEW GULL (KAMCHATKA) (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) – Small numbers at harbours in Hokkaido, and off Rauso, max. 7 birds. Both adult and first winter plumages are very distinct to both Common and Mew Gull, and I am puzzled as to why this is not yet split as Kamchatka Gull, it is far more distinctive than many of the species designated within the Herring Gull complex.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – Around 30 at Kahokugata hide, Arasaki and Sendai, then up to 80 at Yatsushiro, they look amazingly like Herring Gulls to me! Also a few around at various harbors on Hokkaido this year.

CASPIAN GULL (MONGOLIAN) (*Larus cachinnans mongolicus*) – One very white-headed bird at the Eastern Fields had pinkish legs and looked good for this taxon, thanks to Pete Morris for getting us onto it.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (HEUGLIN'S) (*Larus fuscus heuglini*) – A dark-mantled pale yellow-legged bird at Yatsushiro had a very white head, and looked like taimyrensis, which is supposedly the usual taxon here (but which is not listed in Clements!) It may belong with Heuglins's Gull, which most checklists now lump with Lesser Black-backed (*L. fuscus*), and the taxonomic situation is still far from resolved.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – A few seen around Kahokugata and Hashidate, then this was the common dark-mantled gull on Hokkaido with up to 300 per day.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – Uncommon on Hokkaido, we saw about 10 on most days.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Much commoner than Glaucous-winged, we had up to 50 per day on Hokkaido.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – One off Nosappu as we arrived on the first visit, but oddly no Common Murre this year.

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – A great year for them, we had about 30 off Nosappu on both visits, by far my largest counts here.

LEAST AUKLET (*Aethia pusilla*) – One off Nosappu was only seen briefly.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Widespread in the urban areas. [1]

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – Small numbers were widespread on Honshu and Kyushu

WHITE-BELLIED PIGEON (*Treron sieboldii sieboldii*) – Daniel got us onto this at Kogawa with a couple of singles in flight, a lucky pick-up as it's elusive and easily missed.

Strigidae (Owls)

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – One of the trip highlights, they began calling early with that deep double hoot, and we had the first by 7 pm, flying into the stocked pond in the ice. Great views on several occasions, and Kirk, Lois and Margy had 3 feeding there for some time around 1030. Then we had another at Yoroushi onsen which flew in and sat by the stream for some while. It is the largest owl in the world, a magnificent sight with its great bushy trousers and staring yellow eyes.

URAL OWL (*Strix uralensis*) – I have a very good record with this species in Japan, but have never seen it in the same



The Blakiston's Fish-owl is revered as a divine being by the Ainu people of Hokkaido; after the views we had on this tour, we're pretty convinced they're divine beings too! (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

place twice! This year one flew right past as we waited for the cranes at Tsurui, and we found it perched low down in some evergreen bushes in a nearby garden, where it showed nicely.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Nice looks at the Chikuma River, Arasaki and Lake Miike. This is the race *bengalensis*, much greener than the European birds.

CRESTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle lugubris*) – This one led us a dance, some of us saw one as we sped by coming from Kagoshima to Izumi, then we had good luck in finding a fine adult at a river not too far from Mi-ike, with great scope views of this spectacular bird.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – This delightful small species with the dry trilling call showed well at Karuizawa (presumably race *nippon*), Nagano and Yorouchi (race *seebohmi*). It is near-endemic to Japan as well.

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) – Heard at Lake Mi-ike but sadly not to be seen this year.

[*]



Onsen, or hot springs, are widespread in Japan, and the use of them is an integral part of the culture. So integral, in fact, that even the monkeys partake in them! (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – A pair at Karuizawa and some fine females at Tsurui and Yorouchi, this is the race *japonicus*.

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – This is always a tricky endemic to get, we did well with a couple of sightings at Karuizawa. [E]

Campephagidae (Cuckoo-shrikes)

RYUKYU MINIVET (*Pericrocotus tegimae*) – Tough this year, my hope to visit the nearby shrine were dashed when we spent several hours at Lake Mi-ike before finally getting one bird seen briefly. [E]

Laniidae (Shrikes)

BULL-HEADED SHRIKE (*Lanius bucephalus*) – Five day records, all singles except for 2 at Arasaki.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius japonicus*) – Just one at Karuizawa, of this yellow-eyed race.

AZURE-WINGED MAGPIE (ASIAN) (*Cyanopica cyanus japonica*) – Some of us saw one flying over the highway near Kanagawa; It is long split from Iberian Azure-winged Magpie (*C. cooki*), being highly disjunct and having a broad pale tail tip, though Clements seems blissfully unaware of this!

DAURIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus dauuricus*) – Great looks at a nice pied adult and 3 immatures near Arasaki, for once quite close by and moderately obliging.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*) – A good winter for them, we saw 8 at Saku Reservoir, then had up to 150 around Arasaki. This is a potential split as Eastern Rook too, with much less white on the face than western birds.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – Also widespread, and another potential split as Oriental Crow, we saw them up on Hokkaido as well.

LARGE-BILLED CROW (LARGE-BILLED) (*Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis*) – Widespread, with a huge bill and domed forehead, this is now split by most as Japanese Crow

Alaudidae (Larks)

SKY LARK (ASIAN) (*Alauda arvensis japonica*) – Three day records, from near Tokyo and at Arasaki. They look and sound different to Skylarks to me and a split may well be likely.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido, we saw them well at Take's Lodge and at Yoroushi.

WILLOW TIT (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Six at Karuizawa, then 3 on Hokkaido at Teshikaga.

COAL TIT (*Periparus ater insularis*) – Seen well at the onsen at Karuizawa.

GREAT TIT (JAPANESE) (*Parus major minor*) – I love the trinomial on this one! Actually it's yet another split, as Eastern Great or Japanese Tit, and they were widespread in small numbers, the first at Karuizawa.

VARIED TIT (*Sittiparus varius varius*) – Great looks at Karuizawa, and again at Mi-ike, a very striking species.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – We had the beautiful white-headed nominate birds at Tsurui on Hokkaido, with a flock of 4 foraging along the icy wood edge.

LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – There were 4 at Karuizawa, race trivirgatus, with a dark eyestripe.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea asiatica*) – We saw amurensis with chestnut washed underparts at Karuizawa, and much paler asiatica on Hokkaido, which is white below with a chestnut wash on rear flanks only.

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea amurensis*) – We saw amurensis with chestnut washed underparts at Karuizawa.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – There was one at the feeders at Karuizawa. These Old World birds will be split from the New World taxa, as the DNA is quite distinct.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Seen nicely at Karuizawa, and again at Washi-no-Yado.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis*) – Another species that we saw every day of the trip, they have a piercing call and seem remarkably adaptable.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus japonensis*) – Just one at the start of the track to the snow monkeys, with a tit flock.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH-WARBLER (*Cettia diphone cantans*) – This was a bit frustrating as we heard it at various sites, but really only got glimpses at Arasaki.

Zosteropidae (Yuhinas, White-eyes, and Allies)

JAPANESE WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – This can be elusive in winter, but we had one at Karuizawa then 2 there

next day, with one near Kaga and one at Kogowa Dam.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – There was a beautiful male wintering at Shiotsubo onsen, and it was the only one we saw.

DAURIAN REDSTART (*Phoenicurus auroreus*) – We had 4 day records of this species, with sightings from Chikuma River, Sendai, Yatsushiro and Arasaki. The male is a very striking bird and we had great looks at a couple of them.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – This distinctive chestnut-bellied race is long overdue for splitting as Red-bellied Rock Thrush (*M. philippensis*). We saw two birds, one at Hashidate and another at Akune

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SCALY THRUSH (WHITE'S) (*Zoothera dauma toratugumi*) – This was a good find at Karuizawa, where one bird was haunting the stream sides and gave nice views. The taxonomy of this group is a mess, this would now appear to be the race *toratugumi* which is placed with White's Thrush and not Scaly Thrush (*Z. aurea*).

PALE THRUSH (*Turdus pallidus*) – One at Karuizawa, then a few around Arasaki and Takae, the pale outer tail tips are distinctive, as is the chuckling call.

BROWN-HEADED THRUSH (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – As ever, tough to find on this trip, and again as is often the case the only ones seen were by most folks at Narita, (actually the day before the trip officially began!) We sacrificed looking for it to go for Sibe Crane....

DUSKY THRUSH (*Turdus eunomus*) – Amazingly few, it was a poor winter for thrushes too and we had just 5 day records of 2-4 birds. The Notsuke ones are the most hardy, up in that frozen wilderness.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Sturnus cineraceus*) – Widespread on Honshu and Kyushu, with flocks of 70 around Arasaki.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – One at Karuizawa and several around Arasaki and Sendai, with best views at the Merganser bridge on Route 504.

WHITE WAGTAIL (BLACK-BACKED) (*Motacilla alba lugens*) – We saw small numbers of Black-backed Wagtails on Honshu, and two at Kiritappu on Hokkaido. Now lumped again with White Wagtail, this whole complex could do with a reordering. A grey-backed bird at Kogowa Dam in Kyushu was presumably Amur Wagtail race *M. a. ocellaris*.

JAPANESE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla grandis*) – A striking species of rivers and streams that is endemic to Japan and southern Korea, we had a good trip for them with 3 near Narita pre-trip for some, some 5 at Chikuma River and Karuizawa, and singles at Katano Kamoike. There was also one at the crane bridge on Hokkaido, a hardy bird for sure.

OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – Merrill was the only person to see this this trip, with one at Mi-Ike.

AMERICAN PIPIT (SIBERIAN) (*Anthus rubescens japonicus*) – Ten at the Sibe Crane site, then just a few in the fields around Arasaki and Sendai.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cioides*) – Small numbers at Karuizawa, Chikuma River and Takae, but very few overall.

CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING (*Emberiza fucata*) – A nice look at two birds in waste ground at Arasaki, always an elusive species.

RUSTIC BUNTING (*Emberiza rustica*) – Three day records, with 7 at Saku Reservoir, 3 at Katano Kamoike and 2 at Sendai.

BLACK-FACED BUNTING (*Emberiza spodocephala personata*) – Amazingly scarce, this is usually one of the commonest buntings. We saw a fine male at Kahokugata hide, then had single birds at Takae and Arasaki. Note this taxon *personata* is a likely split as Masked Bunting, being very different to the Asian mainland forms.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – This was heard at Sendai, but none were seen. [*]

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – Up to 15 at Karuizawa, a spectacular finch.

ASIAN ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – This one is always a crowd-pleaser but was again very sparse this winter. The feeder site at Kiritappu came good and we had 96 there, sat on phone lines and giving lovely views.

LONG-TAILED ROSEFINCH (*Uragus sibiricus*) – It was a very poor winter for finches in general so finding a pair of

this species at Karuizawa was really good, and we got nice looks.

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – This was widespread, starting at Karuizawa, Chikuma River and Takae, with a flock of 30 in the eastern fields at Arasaki. There are two races involved, kawarahiba and minor, and we certainly saw the former at Shiotsubo.

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – A big spectacular finch that can be hard to find, the Karuizawa area again came good with 20 birds, including some at the feeders. We also had 8 at Kogawa Dam.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Quite common and widespread and seen most days, we even saw about 30 up at Kiritappu by the house with the feeders.

MAMMALS

JAPANESE MACAQUE (*Macaca fuscata*) – The famous snow monkeys in the hot pools at Nagano were quite a sight and a trip highlight, being remarkably tame and amazingly well-behaved, positively Japanese in fact! Try this sort of tourist thing with baboons and it'd be anarchy!

JAPANESE SQUIRREL (*Sciurus lis*) – One seen nicely at Shiotsubo onsen.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – We had a few sightings on Hokkaido with 5 on one day the most, they really stand out in the snow.

SABLE (SIBERIAN MARTEN) (*Martes zibellina*) – Just a single at Yoroushi, not as pale coloured this winter as in some previous ones.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – One off Nosappu looked good for this species, with long pale yellowish whiskers.

SPOTTED SEAL (*Phoca largha*) – We had 3 off Nosappu, which showed large dark spots on a pale grey background.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – Widespread on Hokkaido, mostly females or young but a couple of nice stags en route to Kushiro on the last day.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

It is hard to pick highlights from the tour as there were so many, certainly the Red-crowned Cranes in the snow is a big one, the Siberian Crane was a huge bonus bird, the Blakiston's Fish Owls were outstanding this year and the eagle trip off Rausu was terrific with unbelievably fine looks at Steller's Sea Eagle and White-tailed Eagle.

Wildfowl were quite a feature, with the pair of Scaly-sided Merganser a megatick, but Smew were great, Baikal Teal, Mandarin and Falacated Duck were lovely, and it is always nice to see the various sea ducks so well, with Harlequin and Long-tailed being tremendous. Bonus vagrant Ring-necked Duck and American Wigeon was nice, and we did well for swans with both Whooper and Bewick's as well as a vagrant Whistling, and Taiga Bean and White-fronted Goose showed very nicely too.

Solitary Snipe was a terrific find of a very tough species, and the smaller birds although few in number this winter showed well with Asian Rosy Finch and Long-tailed Rosefinch plus Japanese Grosbeaks being standouts.

The Snow Monkeys were also a major hit, well worth the trek through the deep snow to see this extraordinary sight, why they don't freeze to death once they get out is a puzzle to me!

Add to this the Japanese culture, and the intriguing hotels onsens and minshuku we stayed out and the many fine Japanese meals we sampled, washing-up must be a major industry in this country after the multi-course meals.

Totals for the tour: 149 bird taxa and 7 mammal taxa