



Field Guides Tour Report

Winter Japan: Cranes & Sea Eagles 2016

Feb 5, 2016 to Feb 20, 2016

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



Is there anything more quintessentially Japanese than a picture of cranes in the snow? Photo by guide Phil Gregory.

This was my twelfth winter Japan trip, and this year was blessed with reasonable to good weather (other than one wet day on Kyushu), whilst Hokkaido was gorgeous, with little snow, very little ice, and relatively mild temperatures. It seemed to be an odd year though, with quite a few species being scarce or absent; there were no Gray-headed Lapwings around, and we didn't see Daurian Jackdaw either. Jun Matsui was once more my co-leader and our driver, and we benefited greatly from his patience, local knowledge, and interpretive skills.

We began, as usual, at Narita, where a Brown-headed Thrush was at a creek not far from the hotel; as in past years, it was the only one we saw. A Hawfinch there was unusual, and the striking Japanese Wagtail made its first appearance.

Karuizawa was quite snowy. Japanese Accentor showed well there, as did Brown Dipper, while Japanese Grosbeak and Brambling near our hotel were fortunate, as they proved scarce elsewhere this year. That afternoon's trip to Saku gave us our first Smew, and a large flock of Rustic Buntings.

The Snow Monkeys at Jigokudani were a big hit, as always, and in nice weather too! We had a bonus find of two Japanese Serows on a snowy ridge. The next day, we had great views of Taiga Bean Goose at Kamoike, plus a mere 8 Baikal Teal, and more Smew; three Northern Goshawks were unexpected. The big bonus, however, was an adult Siberian Crane with a family of Hooded Cranes, and a lone Swan Goose with one of the scattered groups of Bewick's Swans -- a great pick up, thanks to an old acquaintance of mine at the Kamoike centre, who had just seen the bird -- thanks, Gerry!

Kyushu gave us wonderful Hooded and White-naped cranes -- some 17,000 in the area this year -- plus four Sandhill and at least four Common Cranes. Saunders's Gull was sparse this year, with only 7 at Yatsushiro. A Black-faced Spoonbill with two Eurasian Spoonbills was nice, and a Temminck's Stint at Sendaegawa Bridge was a bonus. We saw only two Mandarin Ducks at Kogowa Dam; they don't seem to have come south this winter. A drake American Wigeon at Minamata was probably the same bird I found here last year. Crested Kingfisher and Long-billed Plover showed nicely on the Sendae River as we drove to Miike.

Lake Miike once more gave us a bonus Forest Wagtail -- it must be the same bird returning, I'm sure -- and a friend of Jun's came especially to set up a feeding station for buntings, where we got great views of Yellow-throated Buntings and the scarce Gray Bunting, a really nice bonus. A male Japanese Green Woodpecker also showed very well, much better than our brief glimpses at Karuizawa.

Then it was up to snowbound Hokkaido, where we got in after lunch and had time to make a foray out to Tsurui, where we had a fabulous show from some 200 Red-crowned Cranes as they bugled and danced in the snow -- just fantastic. The next day, we witnessed the beautiful frosted river spectacle

of these cranes at Otowa Bridge, then went to see a staked-out Ural Owl, which was in the same tree hole as it was in 2014 and 2015. We went to Teshikaga, where Whooper Swans showed well; a fascinating old Japanese art and craft shop was worth a visit, and some adventurous souls enjoyed deer burgers for lunch. Our first Steller's Sea-Eagles were also memorable, sitting in trees along the road near Rausu. Rausu Harbor in late afternoon gave us Harlequin Ducks, and both Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls amongst the numerous Slaty-backs, then it was time to head for the small minshuku (the Japanese word for a small, family-owned bed-and-breakfast) at Washi-no-Yado.

They have upgraded their facility recently, so there are now more bedrooms and a separate dining room, but it wasn't until after 9 p.m. that we had a wonderful view of a male Blakiston's Fish-Owl; it came in to the river pond, which is stocked with fish. We witnessed its only visit that night, so we were lucky; one group recently missed it!

Though the sea ice was still well north of Rausu, we did our scheduled boat trip anyway, and it was fantastic, with amazing close views of both Steller's and White-tailed eagles as they came in to scavenge the fish that the boat crew threw out for them.

Next came the great sand spit of Notsuke -- always a bleak, barren, icy place. Sea ducks were sparse but Black Scoter showed well, as did Long-tailed Duck. We actually got down to the new blind (hide) and lighthouse area, which is typically snowbound at the time of our tour; there, a couple of us had bad views of some flighty Snow Buntings. However we did get outstanding views (and photos) of 5 Asian Rosy-Finches, which have been very scarce this winter.

Yoroushi Onsen was a big highlight, with lovely rooms, a magnificent hot spring (complete with outdoor facilities, if required), super Japanese meals, an enviable and very beautiful art gallery en route to the rooms, and a bird feeder that yielded Great Spotted Woodpecker, the strikingly pale asiatica race of Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit, and the distinctive brandtii race of Eurasian Jay. Our meal that night was interrupted by the arrival of a Blakiston's Fish-Owl to the fishing area outside, with great looks from the comfort of the lounge! A Raccoon Dog also appeared, as did two Sable. The next morning, as we came to breakfast, we saw a Blakiston's Fish-Owl sitting in the trees outside in broad daylight; it stayed until 8:30 a.m., giving the most incredible views! Japanese Squirrels on the feeder were very cute -- and photogenic too!

Our boat trip off the coast of Ochiishi was good (at least in parts -- it was unfortunately cold and choppy, with some spray, on the way back), with an excellent English-speaking guide. We had lovely looks at Common Murre, Ancient Murrelet, Least Auklet, and the much-prized Spectacled Guillemot, as well as two taxa of Pigeon Guillemot, one of which was the little known dark race snowi from the Kuriles. We then went to the Nosappu Cape tip, and had great looks at a perched Red-faced Cormorant, with Pelagic Cormorants on a rock stack offshore.

Kiritappu, on the final afternoon, gave us a fine pale morph Rough-legged Buzzard, a Red-necked Grebe, a White-tailed Eagle (right overhead), and a memorable frisson of excitement with what proved to be plastic models of Tufted Puffins, set amidst the tussock grass to lure nesting birds -- a lifer for me for about 30 seconds until the awful truth dawned.

It is always hard to pick highlights from the tour as there were so many. Certainly the Red-crowned Cranes in the snow were a big one, Siberian Crane and Swan Goose were terrific additions, the Blakiston's Fish-Owls were outstanding this year, and we had an amazing experience with both Steller's Sea-Eagle and White-tailed Eagle. Our boat trip delivered very nicely on alcids. Ural Owl was very nice, with the bonus of another two at a roost near the airport, thanks to a Brit birder we met several times. The tour's heavy non-passerine bias can be partly countered with Daurian Redstart, the buntings at Miike, and Forest Wagtail, too. The Snow Monkeys were also a major hit; it was well worth the trek through deep snow to see this extraordinary sight -- though why they don't freeze to death once they get out of the water is a puzzle to me!

Add to this the Japanese culture, the intriguing hotels, onsens, and minshuku we visited, and the many fine Japanese meals we sampled; given the multi-course meals, washing-up must be a major industry in this country!

My thanks to the group for being good company and good fun (with some good spotters along); to Jun for driving so well and acting as our intermediary in all matters Japanese; to Sue and Rowan at Sicklebill Safaris for good internal logistics; and to Karen at Field Guides for the flights and being the general tour manager. Good birding, and I hope to see you again somewhere, sometime!

-- Phil in Narita / Seoul / Siem Reap; 2016

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)

SWAN GOOSE (*Anser cygnoides*) – One lovely bird with Bewick's Swans near Kamoike. We got it on the second attempt when Gerry Hinchon, (a guy I hadn't seen for 40 years) recognized me; he had just seen the bird, and was able to show us exactly where it was on the map. Not a bad way to get a lifer!

TAIGA BEAN-GOOSE (*Anser fabalis middendorffii*) – Just 50 at Kamoike this trip; wildfowl numbers seemed low in general.

TUNDRA SWAN (BEWICK'S) (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) – Several hundred around the Kamoike / Komatsu area, in small flocks scattered about the fields.

WHOOPEER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Some great looks on Hokkaido, with tame birds at Teshikaga and a beautiful calling flock of 20 wild swans near Onnemato, very atmospheric.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – About 10 at Arasaki and 20 at Yatsushiro, this seems to be becoming commoner here.

MANDARIN DUCK (*Aix galericulata*) – I thought we were going to dip, but Jun found us two drakes at Kawoga Dam, there have been very few arriving this mild winter.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – Just 5 at Crane Park near Izumi, and I think some saw one at Kamoike.

FALCATED DUCK (*Anas falcata*) – Another scarce one this trip, we saw 2 males and a female at Kamoike, then 40 at Izumi in horrible wet

conditions, and there was one drake at the harbor at Ochiishi.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – Widespread throughout.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – A fine drake Baldpate was on the river at Minamata again this trip, presumably the same bird as in 2015.

The white forehead really stood out in the sunshine there.

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

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Widespread with 7 day records, max count 200 from the Yatsushiro/Arasaki day.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – Just 30 at Kamoike this trip.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – 6 day records, max. 50 around Arasaki.

BAIKAL TEAL (*Anas formosa*) – There was big departure from Kamoike a few days before we got there, and we managed just 8 birds there, including some fine drakes.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Small numbers in the southern wetlands and 3 near Kiritappu. Seemingly now lumped again with Eurasian..... -

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – 15 at Saku, a female at Sendae and just 8 at Kamoike.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – Six day records, widespread but only in small numbers.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Small numbers in Hokkaido on 4 days, max 20 near Kiritappu.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Lovely views at Rausu Harbor and then again off Notsuke, Nosappu/Ochiishi and Kiritappu max. 20 birds. Great pix on the website.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (SIBERIAN) (*Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*) – Just 3 seen off Notsuke with 4 flying by on the boat trip out of Ochiishi, and a male off of Kiritappu. Split from Velvet Scoter of Europe by most and also further split by HBW/BirdLife as Stejneger's or Siberian Scoter.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – About 70 off Notsuke, 100 off Nosappu and 170 from there and Kiritappu next day. This is a split from Common Scoter of Europe, the males have much more orange on the bill but the females are identical.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – 3 day records max 30 birds from the Notsuke and Nosappu areas.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – 4 day records of small numbers, I counted 29 near Rausu harbor.

SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) – 4 males and 4 redheads of this much prized species at Saku, and 2 at Kamoike, uncommon this trip.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – 5 day records starting with 4 drakes and 4 redheads at Saku, and 13 near Onnemato.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – A redhead off Yatsushiro, then moderate numbers on Hokkaido with 35 near Rausu harbor and 60 off Notsuke.

SCALY-SIDED MERGANSER (*Mergus squamatus*) – This was frustrating as we were looking for one on the river at Kanazawa, and a male flew right by us with only a couple of us seeing it! I also suspect we had a female later that day, as there was a markedly small redhead bird with a pale gular mark, but the diagnostic flanks were always submerged!

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

CHINESE BAMBOO-PARTRIDGE (*Bambusicola thoracicus*) – I heard this by the hotel at Narita before the trip, and it was very vocal there when we were transiting to Narita post tour. [I]

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – A major piece of luck was spotting a fine male out in a burned rice field near Sendae, feeding quietly and allowing good photos for once. [E]

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – One off Kiritappu on the last day of the tour.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – One flying over on the Ochiishi boat trip, and another off Nosappu, always uncommon on this trip.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (LITTLE) (*Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*) – Four day records from the south, max 4 birds.

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus auritus*) – A fine bird on the sea off Onnemato, a good trip addition.

RED-NECKED GREBE (*Podiceps grisegena holbollii*) – One off Kiritappu, and some saw another at Ochiishi harbor, another uncommon species.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – Oddly none at Yatsushiro this year, all we saw was one near Kaga.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*) – One in Ochiishi harbor and one at Kiritappu.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN) (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – Six day records of small numbers from the southern islands.

JAPANESE CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – 11 on the rock stacks off Akune showed well in the scope, and there was unexpectedly one on a rock off Kiritappu. The pointed gular area and more extensive white face was obvious. [E]

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – A great find at Nosappu, where a single bird was on a rock stack not too far away late afternoon, and gave excellent scope views. This is quite a rare bird here and this was my best ever views of it.

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Widespread off Hokkaido, starting at Rausu, with 150 from the Nosappu area.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Small numbers on Honshu and Kyushu.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – Similarly very small numbers on Honshu and Kyushu, mostly singles.

LITTLE EGRET (LITTLE) (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – Three day records from Arasaki and Sendae, max 6 birds.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – 4 at Arasaki with 2 in that area next day.

BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL (*Platalea minor*) – Two at Arasaki, for once not fast asleep all of the time so we could actually see the black face! A rare and endangered species, the 2012 census recorded a new high of 2,693 birds.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (HALIAETUS) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – A couple of sightings from Arasaki and Yatsushiro.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

EASTERN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus spilonotus*) – Just 2 birds from the Kamoike area.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – Amazingly we saw 3 birds all on Jan 10, with an immature near Kamoike, then an adult at the duck pond and a rather pale perched immature there later.

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

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Good views on Hokkaido, especially at Rausu and Notsuke Hanto, whilst a fine adult went directly over us at Kiritappu..

STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – The most magnificent of all the eagles, this huge imposing bird showed amazingly well on the boat trip off Rausu harbor, where they were coming in to grab fish and dominating the White-tailed Eagles. We saw about 120 birds this day Jan 17, with 12 the day before and odd singles over the next 2 days. One of the major highlights of the tour as always, I have posted sounds cuts on IBC and xenocanto.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*) – A beautiful pale adult with a black subterminal band, white upper tail and a blackish belly patch flew right by us at Kiritappu on Jan 19, the last addition to the trip list.

EASTERN BUZZARD (*Buteo japonicus japonicus*) – Six day records starting at Komoro Park, mostly singles but 3 on poles as we came from Kiritappu to Kushiro. Good to see this distinctive bird split at last.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – One at Saku and one at Arasaki.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Just 4 day records in the south, max. 4 birds, and strangely a single with Scaup at Rausu Harbor.

Gruidae (Cranes)

SIBERIAN CRANE (*Grus leucogeranus*) – A fine adult was in fields near Kanazawa, with a family party of Hooded Cranes, a great bonus for the trip and quite a confiding bird too. They are annual in Japan but turn up in all sorts of odd places, we see them on about two thirds of the trips.

SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*) – A group of 4 were all together in the Eastern Fields, small numbers are annual here.

WHITE-NAPE CRANE (*Grus vipio*) – About 1500 at Arasaki, giving wonderful views, one of the most striking of the family. They depart quite early, starting this month.

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – At least 4 birds this year, scattered amongst the crane flocks at the Crane Centre and the Eastern Fields.

HOODED CRANE (*Grus monacha*) – Around 13000 were reported this year at Arasaki, and we had tremendous views of the noisy flocks, Many were seen dancing, and small family groups were dotted about the area, often with White-naped Cranes intermixed.

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – One of the great icons of the tour and one of the birds of the trip as usual, the setting is just so fantastic. We saw them near Tsurui and at the old ladies sanctuary there on the first afternoon, with over 250 birds seen, and next day there were 165 around the famous river bridge at Otowa, a great sight in the morning mist

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – About 30 at Yatsushiro.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – About a dozen near the Swan Goose, and then up to 5 at Arasaki.

KENTISH PLOVER (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – 3 at Arasaki and 4 at Yatsushiro.

LONG-BILLED PLOVER (*Charadrius placidus*) – A single on a river near Izumi Crane Centre in awful windy conditions, then 2 on the river at Satsumasendae which gave much nicer views.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Three day records from Kyushu, max. 3 birds.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – A single at Narita Creek was the only record this time.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – 11 at Yatsushiro were the only sighting.

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – 7 at Yatsushiro was quite a good count.

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*) – One on the riverine gravels at Satsumasendae was a surprise on Jan 14.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Up to 100 at Arasaki and 150 at Yatsushiro.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – One by Arasaki Crane Centre, then 15 in a wet field at the Eastern fields area.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – Just two singles near Ochiishi harbor.

PIGEON GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus columba*) – Good views of nominate race birds in winter dress from the Ochiishi boat trip, with the rare snowy taxon for comparison as well as Spectacled Guillemot.

PIGEON GUILLEMOT (SNOWI) (*Cepphus columba snowi*) – This is a mysterious and poorly known taxon, lacking a white wing patch and in winter dress bearing a close resemblance to Long-billed Murrelet. We saw at least 3 off Ochiishi, and got photos of a couple, with one of James's shots showing the red legs and feet and enabling is to conclusively identify it. I can't see why such a distinct taxon is not a split, both summer and winter dress are very different to nominate birds. Photos on Field Guides Smugmug site and the IBC.

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – Very good looks from the boat out of Ochiishi, and also off Nosappu next day where one bird was in summer dress already. Nice to see one beside a Pigeon Guillemot on the boat trip, see the pic in the Smugmug gallery and the IBC.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – Excellent looks off of Ochiishi, and a few off Nosappu next day.

JAPANESE MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus wumizusume*) – A very lucky find at the Japanese Cormorant site, where I saw 3 small alcids fly off and patient scanning picked up various singles and small flocks of this elusive species. I reckon I saw around 20 birds, giving distant scope views but still nice to get.

LEAST AUKLET (*Aethia pusilla*) – Great looks at the world's smallest auk off Ochiishi, I even got to see the pale eye on one sat on the water, though photos proved challenging.....Also 4 birds flying off Nosappu next day.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SAUNDERS'S GULL (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – The small size, dark small bill, delicate build and dotted wingtip pattern are quite distinctive, and

we saw at least 7 at Yatsushiro on the falling tide, most of them being first winter birds. A rare species with a population <5000 birds.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Very few, just a couple at Arasaki and 2 at Yatsushiro, plus one at Ochiishi looking very out of place.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – There were about 30 at Yatsushiro, giving good views, and we saw a couple near Akune. A striking gull, that red bill tip is very distinctive, as is the tail band.

MEW GULL (KAMCHATKA) (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) – I am surprised this has not been split as Kamchatka Gull, it seems far more distinct than some of those god awful Herring Gull analogues that cause such debate. We saw a couple at Rausu, a couple off Notsuke and about 5 off Ochiishi.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – A few at odd sites in Honshu and Kyushu, and about 70 of this pale mantled pink-legged taxon at Yatsushiro.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – This was the common large dark mantled gull on Hokkaido, with up to 120 per day.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – Very few at Rausu, Notsuke and Ochiishi, very scarce this year.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Small numbers at Rausu, Notsuke and Ochiishi. There was a really white bird at Rausu river mouth, the whitest I have ever seen and not one of the pale buff type which are the usual plumage. This is one of the more readily identifiable gulls at all stages, those pale unmarked primaries really help.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Widespread. [H]

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – Also quite widespread in small numbers starting at Narita, but not on Hokkaido.

Strigidae (Owls)

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – The Washi-no-Yado birds had been harder this year as the female has gone off to nest already, and some groups have missed it here. We persevered and got a great look at the male who came in to the pond at 2105, the only sighting of the night. This bird has been here since 1990, they seem very long-lived. The birds at Yoroushi onsen also showed very well during dinner once again, with one fishing in the stream. Then next morning as we came to breakfast one of them was sat out in broad daylight from 0600 to 0830, only my second daytime sighting and an astonishing sight. Pix on IBC and FG website.

URAL OWL (*Strix uralensis*) – A terrific roosting bird in the snowy woods quite near Tsurui, where we had brilliant views, the same site as in 2014 and 2015. Then a visiting Brit birder we had met a few times took us to see two at a roost very close to Kushiro airport which we had time to visit before we went through security!

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Nice views of singles at Sendae and Arasaki.

CRESTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle lugubris*) – Elusive, but we got a fine one at the Sendae River again, and then a second by a stream en route to Miike.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – Great looks at several in the frozen woods at Karuizawa, with a single at Miike later. This species is a near endemic too.

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos leucotos subcirris*) – Jun found us this tricky one in the oak woods at Furen park, with two birds, the male showing nicely.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED) (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – Six day records from Karuizawa, then Yoroushi, Tsurui and at Furen, oddly enough all females. This is a very distinctive bird and a good candidate for a split too.

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – A brief flight view at Karuizawa, then George found us a splendid male at Miike, photo now on IBC. [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Just 4 day records, all singles, the last at Kiritappu.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – A great look at a big female in the fields near Arasaki, and some saw one from the Ochiishi boat trip mobbing a White-tailed eagle.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

BULL-HEADED SHRIKE (*Lanius bucephalus*) – Seen on two days, the first at Sai River near Kanazawa.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (BRANDT'S) (*Garrulus glandarius brandtii*) – This dark-eyed taxon showed well at the Yoroushi onsen on Hokkaido with about 25 birds flocking in to the feeders, I would not be at all surprised to see this split.

EURASIAN JAY (JAPANESE) (*Garrulus glandarius japonicus*) – A couple at Karuizawa, the pale eye seen well.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*) – Up to 200 at Arasaki and a single near Kamoike; expect a split in due course as Eastern Rook, they seem fairly different to European birds. They winter here in varying numbers each year.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – A good winter for them on Honshu and Kyushu but hardly any on Hokkaido. Expect a split as Eastern Carrion Crow in due course.

LARGE-BILLED CROW (LARGE-BILLED) (*Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis*) – This big-billed dome-headed species was seen almost every day and but was only very common on Hokkaido. Split by some now as Japanese Crow, they sure don't sound like the ones in Cambodia!

Alaudidae (Larks)

SKY LARK (ASIAN) (*Alauda arvensis japonica*) – Good looks at the Eastern fields, seems fairly distinctive to me and I am surprised it is not split again as yet.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon dasypus*) – One seen briefly at our lunch stop at Ashikita, they have got much harder to find in recent trips..

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL) (*Periparus ater insularis*) – Three day records from Karuizawa, Miike and Yoroushi, this race has a small crest.
VARIED TIT (VARIED) (*Sittiparus varius varius*) – Very nice views from Shiotsubo onsen and at Miike, a very striking member of the family.
MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – A Hokkaido special, seen well at Tsurui, Furen and Yoroushi, they have a glossy black cap and small neat chin patch, as well as distinct vocalizations.
WILLOW TIT (WILLOW) (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Good views of 4 at Karuizawa, they have dull brown caps and smudgy chin patches.
JAPANESE TIT (*Parus minor*) – Quite common around Karuizawa and small numbers in Kyushu and on Hokkaido, but such a pity to have lost Parus major minor with this being split!

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – One of this white-headed race showed to some of us at Yoroushi onsen, the same taxon as the Scandinavian birds.
LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Good views in the snow at Karuizawa.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea asiatica*) – The nuthatches around Karuizawa are of this taxon with the chestnut-washed underparts.
EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea amurensis*) – Birds on Hokkaido have strikingly white underparts and look very different to the southern birds.
EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea roseillia*) – This was the one with the pale pinkish underparts at Lake Miike.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (EURASIAN) (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – The Leupolds saw this with Jun as they returned from their medical trip at Karuizawa, and one was seen at Teshikaga but vanished before most of us could find it.

Cinclididae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Great looks at a singing bird at Karuizawa, the white nictating membrane showing well, and then also at Sai River and Sendaegawa as well as at Yoroushi.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis*) – Noisy and conspicuous, and seen nearly every day of the trip.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH-WARBLER (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – One seen in the reeds near the Swan Goose site, and heard around Arasaki.

Zosteropidae (White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies)

JAPANESE WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Very sparse this time with singles at Narita and Kanazawa only.

Leiothrichidae (Laughingthrushes and Allies)

RED-BILLED LEIOTHRIX (*Leiothrix lutea*) – This striking and attractive introduced species appears to be spreading in Japan, and we saw at least 4 at Lake Miike at the feeding station. A Japanese tick for Phil. [H]

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

DAURIAN REDSTART (*Phoenicurus aureus*) – Widespread in small numbers starting at Narita, mostly females but with a couple of good males in Kyushu.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (SOLITARIUS GROUP) (*Monticola solitarius pandoo*) – One at the Sai River was of this blue-bellied group, a likely split from the orange-bellied birds.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

PALE THRUSH (*Turdus pallidus*) – Three day records from Karuizawa and then around Izumi and Lake Miike, small numbers only.
BROWN-HEADED THRUSH (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – Just one bird by the creek at Narita, a place where we usually see it but actually the only site on the entire tour! We also saw one at Nikko Narita when in transit to Cambodia, which was a catch-up for the delayed Paul.
DUSKY THRUSH (*Turdus eunomus*) – The default winter thrush, we saw them most days in small numbers, even on Hokkaido.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – A flock of 6 at Arasaki was a good find of a scarce migrant here.
WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Spodiopsar cineraceus*) – Seven day records, it seemed more widespread than usual this trip, starting at Narita.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

JAPANESE ACCENTOR (*Prunella rubida*) – A single at the feeders at Shiotsubo was a good find of a very elusive and endemic bird. [E]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

FOREST WAGTAIL (*Dendronanthus indicus*) – A pleasant surprise was our again finding this vagrant at Lake Miike, where I got my lifer back in 2008. It's a vagrant to Japan and is probably the one we saw here in the last 2 years returning again.
GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Just four day records mostly of singles, the best at Lake Miike and Sendaegawa where we had 5 birds.
WHITE WAGTAIL (OCULARIS) (*Motacilla alba ocularis*) – Some of the birds around Sendaegawa were of the grey-backed form *ocularis*, several of these races are likely splits I suspect.
WHITE WAGTAIL (BLACK-BACKED) (*Motacilla alba lugens*) – This was seen most days of the trip, most identified birds were of the black-backed race *lugens* as usual.
JAPANESE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla grandis*) – Some good looks at this exotic looking species at Narita and Karuizawa especially, with none in the north.
OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – Three under the pines at Lake Miike, giving some very good views.
AMERICAN PIPIT (JAPONICUS) (*Anthus rubescens japonicus*) – Good looks at Buff-bellied Pipit in the Eastern Fields, this is the race *japonicus* with heavy breast streaks and eye-ring, potentially a split from American Pipit.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – A very flighty flock of 10 flushed up at Notsuke lighthouse and Paul was the only one to see anything on them really.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cioides*) – Good views of this striking bunting, starting at Narita.

CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING (*Emberiza fucata*) – Paul saw one at Sendae paddies.

RUSTIC BUNTING (*Emberiza rustica*) – A large flock at about 30 at Arasaki, and 4 at Narita this trip.

YELLOW-THROATED BUNTING (*Emberiza elegans*) – Great views of 5 of this striking species at the photographic feeding site at Lake Miike.
Photos on IBC.

BLACK-FACED BUNTING (*Emberiza spodocephala personata*) – Seven day records, seen well at Narita, Saku and Arasaki, this yellowish race is a potential split as Masked Bunting.

GRAY BUNTING (*Emberiza variabilis*) – Outstanding views of two males at a feeding site the photographers had set up at Lake Miike, this is usually a very hard bird to see well. Pics on IBC.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – Small numbers at Arasaki and Sendae in the Phragmites.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – A small flock of 9 at Komoro park were the only ones.

ASIAN ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – A poor winter for them, so finding 5 at the lighthouse at Notsuke was a big bonus, and we got some very nice photos.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – George pulled a well, George, and photographed this at Furen Park, I should have punished him and told him it was a Hawfinch as he thought! His photo is of the grey-bellied race *griseiventris*, a likely split from Eurasian Bullfinch.

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – A good winter for them with some big flocks of 60 and 150 at Arasaki.

HAWFINCH (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – One at Narita creek was a surprise, then we had more at Yoroshi and Komoro Park.

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – Frustratingly few, we saw a single in the park at Komoro, had a flyby of 5 at Ashikita and 40 shot over at the snow monkey park.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

RUSSET SPARROW (*Passer rutilans*) – A few in the paddies at Sendae and a high count of 99 in the bushes by the field where I usually see Chinese Penduline Tit at Arasaki.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Widespread and seen most days.

MAMMALS

JAPANESE MACAQUE (*Macaca fuscata*) – Great looks in the hot springs at Jigokudata, though the modest snowfall had made fewer bathe. I have never seen so many in the area though, and all amazingly well behaved!

JAPANESE SQUIRREL (*Sciurus lis*) – Seen very well at Yoroshi onsen where they come to the feeders.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Great looks on Hokkaido, especially at Notsuke.

RACCOON DOG (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*) – This was a surprise visitor at Yoroshi, coming in as we were watching the Fish Owl and foraging along the stream bank.

SABLE (SIBERIAN MARTEN) (*Martes zibellina*) – Two animals with smart pale coats showed very well at Yoroshi.

SEA OTTER (*Enhydra lutris*) – One seen from the boat trip out of Ochiishi, quite distant but a large animal and great to see one again.

MASKED PALM CIVET (*Paguma larvata*) – One dead animal in the road near the snow monkeys, an introduced species that is now quite widespread it seems. [I]

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – Presumably this species was the seal we saw off Nosappu and which Paul saw at Rausu.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – Common on Hokkaido with some great close encounters with fine stags.

SEROW SP. (*Capricornis crispus*) – I found 2 of this odd creature (also called a goat-antelope) on a snowy ridge by the Snow Monkeys, a very pleasing trip addition that I had only seen once before.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Many of the trip photos are on the Internet Bird Collection (IBC), a free-access site via Lynx Edicions (publishers of the classic Handbook of Birds of World). It is a superb collection of videos, photos and sound cuts, and I usually post pictures and sound cuts from the tours here, as well as on the Field Guides gallery for that particular tour.

I also recommend the xeno-canto website, which has cuts of almost all of the world's bird species; I contribute cuts from most of my tours.

Folks were also asking about the IOC World Checklist of Birds, a free-access downloadable Excel file that gets updated every four months; version 6.1 has just been published. Go to worldbirdnames.org, or Google "IOC" and ignore the Olympics stuff!

Totals for the tour: 155 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa