



Field Guides Tour Report

Winter Japan: Cranes & Sea Eagles 2020

Jan 17, 2020 to Feb 1, 2020

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

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



One of the highlights of this highlight-filled tour was seeing the wonderful Red Crowned Cranes at Tsurui. This small village on Hokkaido hosts many of these magnificent birds, and we were able to enjoy them on two days of the tour. Photo by guide Phil Gregory.

This was my sixteenth winter Japan trip, and we began as usual at Narita, where a Brown-headed Thrush was at Tokko Creek not far from the hotel; it was the only one we saw. The striking Japanese Wagtail made its first appearance here, as did Meadow and Black-faced Buntings.

Karuizawa was not very snowy, so there were no ice hazards this time. Our initial afternoon trip to Saku gave us our first Smew, though duck numbers were low and the riverine habitat had been damaged by a cyclone earlier last year. A forested road up in the hills near the town next morning produced a fabulous pair of Copper Pheasant, after a resplendent male Green Pheasant near the town earlier. We also got great looks at Varied Tit and Japanese Woodpecker there.

Our visit to Shiotsubo onsen for coffee gave wonderful looks at unusual numbers of Varied Tit, plus lovely looks at Long-tailed, Japanese, Willow and Coal Tit, but there were no Japanese Accentor or Grosbeak this year.

The Snow Monkeys at Jigokudani hot springs were a big hit as always, with very atmospheric and scenic snow. Later we had great views of Taiga Bean Goose and the usual distant Baikal Teal at Kamoike, a flyover of Hen Harrier, a formidable female Goshawk that grabbed a Coot and devoured it right in front of us, plus more Smew and great Falcated Ducks nearby. Hashidate Harbor gave Japanese Cormorant and both Vega and Slaty-backed Gull.

Kyushu was nice for the first day, which was great for photography, but turned very cold and windy with snow showers or heavy rain for the next two days. Arasaki gave us a wonderful show of Hooded and White-naped cranes -- some 15,000 in the area this year -- plus 6 Sandhill and at least 2 Common Cranes with sundry hybrids, and a gorgeous bonus Demoiselle Crane.

Saunders's Gull was back again this year and showed well; Black-faced Spoonbills also showed nicely, with Eurasian Spoonbill for comparison. A Wryneck in scrub woodland at the Eastern Fields was a J-tick for me, and very unexpected. We saw a Mandarin Duck at Kogawa Dam as well as some unseasonal Japanese Pipistrelle bats hawking over the river late afternoon. Heading down to Sendae next day we saw Japanese Cormorant and great Mandarins but it was again a very poor year for buntings, with hardly any around.

A fine Crested Kingfisher showed nicely on the Sendae River as we drove to Miike, but it began to rain hard though we did see both White-backed and Japanese woodpeckers, and picked up Japanese Grosbeak for good views at last.

Hokkaido by contrast was gorgeous, with little snow, not much sea ice, and very cold temperatures. This year the male Blakiston's Fish-Owl came in very late after a Red Fox disturbed the area. Still, we had great looks and the views from the rooms were terrific, and the overnight sharing arrangements seemed amicable enough. Two folks were lucky were enough to see a White-tailed Eagle stoop on the owl just after dawn, and actually strike it, with the owl shaking itself and recovering, before heading off down the valley after the eagle!

Though the sea ice was still well north of Rausu, we did our scheduled boat trip anyway, and it was fantastic in cold, but calm and clear weather, 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. Rausu Harbor gave us Harlequin Ducks, an unexpected male Stejneger's Scoter just outside the sea wall, and both Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls amongst the numerous Slaty-backs, plus a few Kamchatka (Common) Gulls.

Yoroushi Onsen was, as ever, a big highlight, with lovely rooms, a magnificent hot spring (complete with outdoor facilities with lovely views of the forested ridge), superb Japanese meals, an enviable and very beautiful art gallery en route to the rooms, and a bird feeder that yielded both Japanese Pygmy and Great Spotted Woodpecker, the strikingly pale asiatica race of Eurasian Nuthatch, plus Marsh, Willow and Japanese Tit. Blakiston's Fish-Owl arrived at the fishing area outside, with great looks from the comfort of the lounge around 1800 for a couple of us! No sign of Solitary Snipe and only a few saw Sable this year, though.

The wonderful Red-crowned Cranes at Tsurui were a big highlight on two days; this is just such an exquisite species. Another highlight was visiting a pair of Ural Owl at their day roost in morning sunlight, at a site where we saw them in previous years,

Next came the great sand spit of Notsuke, very cold as always; a bleak, barren, icy place but very spectacular. Sea ducks were sparse but both Stejneger's and Black Scoter showed well, as did Long-tailed Duck and Spectacled Guillemot on the calm sea. We saw dozens of Sika deer and some beautiful red foxes along the spit, but there was sadly no sign of the vagrant adult Bald Eagle seen the day before.

Nosappu in the late afternoon was bitterly cold and very windy, with a ferocious sea making seeing alcids impossible, but we did see a huge sea otter, and a fantastic surprise in Red-legged Kittiwake flying by below the cape, a vagrant here and a birthday lifer for Phil. A return next morning was still very windy but Black-legged Kittiwake was a nice trip addition.

Our last day saw us visit the great bleak cape of Kiritappu in worst ever conditions, with driving horizontal snow and strong windy conditions. We were lucky to get Asian Rosy Finch near the infamous grumpy guy's place, eventually seeing the birds very well on the power lines without peeking into his yard too much! A wonderful end to the birding.

Jun Matsui was once again my co-leader and our driver, and we benefited greatly from his patience, local knowledge, and interpretive skills. My thanks to the group for coming and enjoying the many varied aspects of the tour as well as the birds. Particular thanks to Jun for driving so well, arranging the bags like a Tetris piece each day and acting as our intermediary in all matters Japanese; thanks also 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. Why not join us for an unforgettable birding and cultural experience in this wonderful country in 2021?

Itinerary

Jan 19 Tokko River outflow (Narita Creek)/ Saku Reservoir /Komoro

Jan 20 Karuizawa area / Shiotsubo

Jan 21 Jigokudani Monkey Park/Kahokugata/ Komatsu

Jan 22 Awara city fields/Hashidate Harbor/ Katano Kamoike/ Kahokugata

Jan 23 ANA to Haneda/ ANA to Kagoshima/ Kogawa Dam/ Izumi

Jan 24 Arasaki and eastern fields/ Akune/ Sendae river area

Jan 25 Minamata and Yatsushiro area/ Arasaki and eastern fields

Jan 26 Sendei Gawa/Lake Miike/Kagoshima

Jan 27 ANA to Haneda/ ANA to Kushiro and then Tsurui cranes

Jan 28 Otowa Bridge, WBSJ Crane sanctuary, Ural Owl site, Teshikaga lake, Rausu harbor and Washi-no-Yado

Jan 29 Washi-no-Yado. Evergreen eagle viewing boat trip, Notsuke Sandspit, Yoroushi onsen

Jan 30 Yoroushi onsen then heavy snow and sleet and string winds. Nosappu misaki in dire conditions, overnight Nemuro

Jan 31 Onnemoto bird hide, Nosappu misaki, then Kiritappu in horizontal snow and strong wind/ Kushiro overnight

Feb 1 ANA 772 Kushiro to Haneda/ Express bus to Narita and flights home

Phil Gregory, Topaz Queensland, Feb 2020

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 =

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

TAIGA BEAN-GOOSE (*Anser fabalis middendorffii*) – A flock of about 70 at Katano Kamoike, our usual site for them.

TUNDRA SWAN (BEWICK'S) (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) – There was a noisy flock of about 50 at Katano Kamoike; a good trip bird and lovely to see them flying about in small groups. This is a sister taxon to the Whistling Swan of N. America, the two together being known as Tundra Swan.

WHOOPEER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido, very tame at Teshikaga.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Small numbers at Arasaki and Yatsushiro.

MANDARIN DUCK (*Aix galericulata*) – A drake at Kogawa Dam was very flighty and quickly vanished, but we then had over 30 on the lakes at Sendae, with lovely views of this exquisite duck.

BAIKAL TEAL (*Sibirionetta formosa*) – About 50 at Katano Kamoike, rather distant this year; there were about 1500 here the week before but they depart early. Then unexpectedly, there was a drake with the Mandarins at Sendae, my first sighting from here.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – 9 at the Tokko River at Narita were unexpected, then small numbers from Saku, Ootzunagi and Katano Kamoike.

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*) – Just a single drake at Ootzunagi and 4 on the river at Minamata.

FALCATED DUCK (*Mareca falcata*) – A pair at the Tokko River were nice, then lovely views of about 70 at Ootzunagi Lake, in great morning light. Falcated means sickle-shaped and refers to the long curving tertials characteristic of this fantastic duck.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – One of the commonest ducks, seen at all the coastal and wetland sites.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Mareca americana*) – A drake at Ootzunagi lake appeared very briefly for a couple of us, and promptly vanished; it is rare but regular in Japan in winter.

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – The first was at Tokko River at Narita, then 120 at Sendae and 90 at Sendae, with small numbers elsewhere in the south.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Common at most wetlands, with hundreds at Kahokugata and Ootzunagi.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Widely distributed on Honshu and Kyushu, with over 300 at Arasaki.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – About 60 at Sendae, and small numbers at other wetlands. This species has a confusing Clements name, as the nominate race is actually Eurasian Teal, whilst the American carolinensis is Green-winged Teal and is split as such by some other checklists.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – We saw small numbers at Saku, Hashidate, Katano and 5 at Kogawa Dam. BirdLife states: New information suggests the population has declined rapidly across the majority of the range, and it has therefore been uplisted to Vulnerable.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – Small numbers from Lake Miike and then at Teshikaga.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – 10 at Rausu with 6 there next day, uncommon on our route.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – A few at Rausu and off Nosappu and Onnemoto; always a lovely bird to see.

STEJNEGER'S SCOTER (*Melanitta stejnegeri*) – A fine drake at Rausu was a surprise, the first I've seen here, then there were 4 off Notsuke. Now split from White-winged Scoter and quite scarce here.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – Small numbers of Notsuke and Nosappu; a split from what was Common Scoter.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – 3 off Notsuke, 1 off Nosappu and 5 flying off there later.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Just a few in Hokkaido with 20 the most; quite small numbers again this year.

SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) – A drake and 2 redheads (females) at Saku, and a drake and 3 redheads at Katano Kamoike; always a great bird to see.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – Nice looks at Saku, then a few on Hokkaido.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – Small numbers from Rausu and Notsuke this year; the first were a pair off Yatsushiro.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

CHINESE BAMBOO-PARTRIDGE (*Bambusicola thoracicus*) – Heard briefly at Kogowa Dam. [I*]

COPPER PHEASANT (*Symaticus soemmerringii scintillans*) – One of the trip highlights was finding a pair of this elusive species foraging in leaf litter at the first stop we made along a forest road near Karuizawa. This race is sometimes called Scintillant Pheasant and is a possible split.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – A splendid spot from the van near the shrine at Karuizawa; we got lovely looks in the scope at a stunning male with glowing purple neck iridescence. Later we had close views of 2 females in dry scrub by the shrine, so a good trip for them, much to George's delight. Most checklists split this species as Japanese or Green Pheasant. [E]

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (LITTLE) (*Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*) – Three singles (and one record of 2 birds from various wetlands in the south; this race has a yellow eye).

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – Three records from Saku, Yatsushiro and near Katano.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*) – A single at Kahokugata and one at Miike.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Feral Pigeon was widespread throughout and in many color forms. [I]

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – Widespread, with 7 day records, and up to 60 seen at the Sendae and Arasaki areas.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – Just a single subadult at the Sendae River.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Small numbers at Saku, Katano Kamoike and the Arasaki area.

Gruidae (Cranes)

DEMOISELLE CRANE (*Anthropoides virgo*) – A great spot from the van, with a splendid adult amongst Hooded Cranes near the visitor centre; it is a rare visitor here. Harlan had not seen one on the ground before either.

SANDHILL CRANE (CANADENSIS) (*Antigone canadensis canadensis*) – Around half a dozen in the Eastern fields; this is the usual site for them and they occur annually in very small numbers, we saw a group of 4 at one time.

WHITE-NAPE CRANE (*Antigone vipio*) – One of the largest, most beautiful and exotic of the family, with a loud bugling call. There were about 1200 at Arasaki, giving wonderful views. They depart quite early, starting next month. The species is classified as Vulnerable with only around 3750-4500 individuals.

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – A couple of pretty good-looking adults at the Eastern Fields, and 3 or so rather atypical paler birds that may be subadults or perhaps some sort of hybrid with Hooded Crane.

HOODED CRANE (*Grus monacha*) – Around 12,000 were reported this year at Arasaki, and we had tremendous views of the noisy flocks. Small family groups were dotted about the area, often with White-naped Cranes intermixed, and the very vocal flocks fighting-in at the Crane Centre is an unforgettable spectacle. It is classified as Vulnerable, with about 15,000 birds wintering at just 10 sites.

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – One of the most beautiful of all the cranes, and in wonderful snowy settings here, a major trip highlight. The first were at the old ladies' field at Tsurui, then next day we saw them in the famous highly atmospheric mist at the river, before going to watch around 70 of them at the WBSJ reserve at Tsurui. Here, many were displaying, with head thrown back and wings uplifted, bugling loudly, a wonderful spectacle.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – About 70 at Yatsushiro mudflats.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – Small numbers around Arasaki.

KENTISH PLOVER (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – About 30 up at Yatsushiro mudflats.

LONG-BILLED PLOVER (*Charadrius placidus*) – Absent at three of the sites we checked, but we found 3 on the river at Minamata in rainy conditions, and had good views of them.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – About 40 at Arasaki and 120 up at Yatsushiro mudflats.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Just a single briefly at Arasaki, not a snipe year this year; maybe not yet snowy enough to bring them in.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Singles at several river and creek sites starting near Narita.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – One at the Sendae rice paddies.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – Just one at Arasaki, and 4 at Yatsushiro mudflats.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – I think some folks saw these in flight in dire conditions at Nosappu misaki, but views were very brief in poor visibility.

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – Lovely views of 4 on the calm sea off Notsuke, lucky as they were impossible in the gale at Nosappu the next two days. New for most folks.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (POLLICARIS) (*Rissa tridactyla pollicaris*) – Two in gale force winds over the very rough sea at Nosappu misaki on the second day there; luckily close enough to see quite well and much paler grey than Red-legged Kittiwake.

RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa brevirostris*) – A huge bonus was this small, delicate, darker grey kittiwake flying past, close in off the lighthouse at Nosappu. I immediately yelled "what color are the legs?" and we were able to see they were red, as hoped. Brazil's book describes it as Accidental, but Otani has it as rare but regular, and it has been seen more regularly since about 2002. Whatever, it was a marvelous find and a birthday lifer for Phil, his bird of the trip, as it was so unexpected.

SAUNDERS'S GULL (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – Thankfully back at Yatsushiro again this year after wintering further north in 2018. We had great view of about 15 birds, most in first winter plumage, and heard the distinctive squeaky dry flight call. They feed like delicate terns along the tide edge, catching small crabs. A rare species with something like 5000 in total, mostly breeding at a handful of coastal sites in China.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Just a couple at Yatsushiro this trip.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – Ashikita harbor gave us our first, with several nice close birds, then there were about 5 at Yatsushiro; a very attractive, dark-mantled yellow-legged gull.

MEW GULL (KAMCHATKA) (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) – This to me is an obvious split from Common/Mew Gull, with quite different immature plumages and significantly different adults. Most checklists persist in burying it in with Common/Mew Gull, and also the even more distinctive Short-billed Gull of western North America- go figure. There were far more than usual about this winter; a flock of 24 at Rausu was noteworthy, a few off Notsuke, then there were around 15-20 flying by off Nosappu misaki on both days.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – The common, pale-mantled pink-legged Herring-type gull, with one adult at Hashidate and half a dozen seen at Yatsushiro. Large gull taxonomy remains vexatious and HBW/BirdLife class this with American Herring Gull, whilst IOC split it as Vega Gull.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – One at Hashidate harbor and a couple at Akune; then the default large gull on Hokkaido with several hundred most days.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – A good winter for them, with several adults and young birds at Rausu where it was new for Harlan, then a few off Notsuke and over a dozen past at Nosappu misaki on both days.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Just a handful around Rausu and Notsuke, and a few near Furen, with one or two off Nosappu misaki. Several very nice, really white looking birds were fun to see too.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

BROWN BOOBY (*Sula leucogaster*) – 4 off Akune rocks were a nice find as it is uncommon at this time of year.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – 20 at Hashidate harbor, then small numbers from Rausu and Nosappu misaki.

GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN) (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – Widespread, starting near Tokyo, with many in the white head breeding plumage, with white patch near the vent. None on Hokkaido.

JAPANESE CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – Five at Hashidate Harbor. The pointed gular area and more extensive white face were obvious on the adult, whilst the greenish gloss on the wings showed very well at Hashidate too. Then we had more nice views on the rocks off Akune in Kyushu. The more extensive white face is a really good field character and they never get a white head. [E]

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Small numbers at most wetlands.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – Widespread this year in small numbers; all seemed to be nominate race.

LITTLE EGRET (WESTERN) (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – 4 birds at Arasaki were the only sighting.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – 12 at the Eastern Fields were unusually close to the road.

BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL (*Platalea minor*) – 4 out in front of the crane center; as usual asleep much of the time, making the black face area hard to discern. Being asleep is almost a field character of this species!

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (HALIAETUS) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – Three singles, then 15 at Yatsushiro, with 12 seen at one time perched on posts in the sea, the most I have ever seen.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

EASTERN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus spilonotus*) – One female-plumaged bird soared over at Ootzunagi lake, and was mobbed by a female Goshawk for its trouble. Seldom seen on the tour.

HEN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*) – A great view of a ringtail (female-plumaged) bird from the blind at Katano Kamoike; not often seen on this tour.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (EURASIAN) (*Accipiter gentilis fuyujamae*) – A female came up to mob the Eastern Marsh-Harrier at Ootzunagi, and there was much smaller male there later. The highlight however was a massive female at Katano Kamoike that dove in and grabbed a hapless Coot, taking some minutes to subdue and kill it too. It then plucked it and fed, all right in front of us in the blind, a very lucky sighting.

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

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Lovely view from Rausu with around 80 birds, alongside the magnificent Steller's Sea-Eagles, and then a couple near Nosappu.

STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – We had around 40 at Rausu, with fabulous looks at point-blank range on the boat trip. Also odd birds from Furen and Notsuke; a shame we could not locate the Bald Eagle found the day we arrived. One of the great charismatic species for sure, and a truly magnificent bird. Classified as Vulnerable, with just 3600-3800 individuals, mostly wintering in Japan and breeding in Russia and Korea.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*) – Two brief glimpses of probables on Hokkaido, but not confirmed.

EASTERN BUZZARD (*Buteo japonicus japonicus*) – The first was from the forest above Karuizawa, then one at Katano Kamoike which George later saw come in to drive off the Goshawk from its prey!

Strigidae (Owls)

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – It came in really late after a whole run of early evening arrivals; one bird being seen at 2300 by George only, then nothing until 0520 when the male came in and landed by the fishing pond. It came back three times, on the last occasion around 0610 being attacked by a White-tailed Eagle, recovering and then going after the eagle down the valley! An amazing sight for Rick and Harlan. A second bird came in at 1800 at Yoroushi, but only stayed for about a minute as it grabbed a fish, and only a couple of us were there to see it. Then a great bird once again at Yoroushi, seen brilliantly from the dining room around 1830. A fabulous creature, arguably the world's largest owl. Classified as Endangered with population estimates of just 1000-2500 birds, it is a hard species to survey in its remote forest habitat in Russia and Japan. The Hokkaido population is estimated to be just 150 birds.

URAL OWL (*Strix uralensis*) – The roost site near Tsurui came good again, with a pair in perfect winter morning sunlight, just fantastic and a trip highlight.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – One at Tokko R at Narita, then 4 singles seen around Arasaki.

CRESTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle lugubris*) – One at Kogowa Dam stream, perched up briefly, then a fine male from Sendai River, sat on power lines. An easily missed species, so nice to get it twice.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

EURASIAN WRYNECK (*Jynx torquilla*) – A totally unexpected find from the scrubby area by the Eastern Fields; it is occasional in winter apparently, and was a Japan tick for Phil.

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Yungipicus kizuki*) – Lovely views at Komoro Castle Park, then at the shrine near Karuizawa, before one at Miike and great looks at one at Yoroushi.

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (WHITE-BACKED) (*Dendrocopos leucotos subcirris*) – One at Miike gave reasonable views in the rain, and was drumming briefly. Some folks saw another bird later that they thought was also this species; I did not see it well enough to be sure.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED) (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – One striking female at Komoro, then great views at the suet feeder Shiotsubo onsen, before another at Yoroushi onsen feeder. This race is a potential split too.

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – Seen well along the wooded road near Karuizawa, where 3 birds were foraging amongst fruiting branches, with another very nicely at Komoro Castle Park later. Then one in the rain at Miike. [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – A couple of folks saw singles near Tokyo and then near Saku; it is always scarce.

PEREGRINE FALCON (EURASIAN) (*Falco peregrinus japonensis*) – One on a pylon at Arasaki, and another flying over at Yatsushiro.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

BULL-HEADED SHRIKE (*Lanius bucephalus*) – Two at Tokko R near Narita, one at Saku, one from Kahokugata and one at Katano Kamoike.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (JAPANESE) (*Garrulus glandarius japonicus*) – One seen nicely in the forest above Karuizawa; this race has a pale eye and is split as Japanese Jay by BirdLife, long overdue! Oddly, we did not see Brandt's Jay, the dark-eyed form from Hokkaido this year, the first time we have missed it.

AZURE-WINGED MAGPIE (JAPANESE) (*Cyanopica cyanus japonica*) – At least 8 lovely birds at Kahokugata in the shrubs and willows there, by no means easy to find on this trip. Now split from the Iberian Magpie of Spain and Portugal by most as well.

DAURIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus dauuricus*) – None by the crane center, but we found 10 birds in several nearby areas, including 3 fine pied adults.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*) – Lots around Arasaki, with over 250 by the crane centre one morning; this is another possible split.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – Widespread on Honshu and Kyushu, with 70 near Sendae the most. A potential split too.

LARGE-BILLED CROW (LARGE-BILLED) (*Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis*) – This large heavy-billed species with the domed forehead was also widespread, and another likely split as Japanese Crow; they are vocally unlike mainland Asian birds in the complex. Two were risking life and wing harassing the feeding female Goshawk at Katano Kamoike, without success. Also common on Hokkaido.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL) (*Periparus ater insularis*) – Seen very nicely at the feeder at Shiotsubo, and briefly in the forest above Karuizawa, this race has a small crest.

VARIED TIT (*Sittiparus varius varius*) – The first were from the forest road near Karuizawa, then it was seen well at Shiotsubo. There were good numbers this year with up to 12 birds; a striking and colourful species.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – Seen at Tsurui, then up to 6 on the feeders at Yoroushi, with a couple of Willow Tit for comparison.

WILLOW TIT (WILLOW) (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – The first were along the forest road near Karuizawa, then great views from Shiotsubo, the pale wing panel and large head quite apparent. Also a couple seen at Yoroushi.

JAPANESE TIT (*Parus minor*) – Seen well at Narita, Komoro and Shiotsubo, then at Yoroushi; the former Great Tit is quite nicely coloured when seen well. I do lament the loss of what was *Parus major minor* though....

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (FAR EASTERN) (*Alauda arvensis japonica*) – A few were seen around Arasaki; they do not call or sing like Eurasian Skylarks, and I think they should be split as they once were.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – A couple over the Sendae River were the only sighting.

ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon dasypus*) – A twittering flock of about 20 were at Ashikita.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis*) – Widespread and vocal, seen every day on Honshu and Kyushu but only a few on Hokkaido.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH WARBLER (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – Heard takking at Sendae then at Yatsushiro, where George got to see one, they did not seem to be calling properly at all this trip.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – 7 at the Tokko River at Narita, then 7 at Komoro Castle Park; this race has the dark stripes on the head.

LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS GROUP) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Lovely looks at 7 of the delightful white-headed race at the Tsurui Red-crowned Cranes; not always seen on this tour.

Zosteropidae (White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies)

WARBLING WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Small, active groups on Camellias at Arasaki, then again on ground layer purple flowers at Yoroushi. Formerly known as Japanese White-eye but now split into at least 4 species, so note where you may have seen them!

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (WHITE-BELLIED) (*Sitta europaea asiatica*) – This is the one with the striking white underparts with very little chestnut, seen well at Tsurui and then at Teshikaga and Yoroushi.

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (BUFF-BELLIED) (*Sitta europaea amurensis*) – Seen on the feeders at Shiotsubo, quite pinkish below.

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (BUFF-BELLIED) (*Sitta europaea roseilia*) – Seen at Miike in wet conditions.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – One near the Ural Owl spot on Hokkaido; always a tough bird to see on this tour, I have no idea why they are so scarce as there is plenty of habitat.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (EURASIAN) (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – Just a single in the park at Teshikaga; this dark race is a potential split at some point.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Two singles on streams at Karuizawa, then 3 chasing on the creek outside Washi-no-Yado and one at Yoroushi.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Spodiopsar cineraceus*) – Seven day records; it seemed quite widespread in small numbers this trip, starting near Tokyo, and with up to 70 near Katano.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

BROWN-HEADED THRUSH (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – One on a pre-tour walk for most of the group at the Tokko River near Narita as in previous years, a traditional site for us. Often the only place we find it, as was indeed the case this year!

PALE THRUSH (*Turdus pallidus*) – Common in Kyushu with nice looks on several occasions.

DUSKY THRUSH (*Turdus eunomus*) – The default winter thrush, with good views around Tokyo and Komoro.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – A fine female-plumage bird at Miike was a pleasing find.

DAURIAN REDSTART (*Phoenicurus aureoreus*) – One male at Saku and one by the bird forest at Karuizawa, then others at several sites in Kyushu.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (PHILIPPENSIS) (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – One on a lamppost by the Nikko Narita, then two lovely males at Hashidate harbor; this taxon is split by BirdLife as Eastern Blue Rock-Thrush, as it is very distinct.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

RUSSET SPARROW (*Passer cinnamomeus*) – Only seen at the paddyfields at Sendae with a small flock on the wires, and a couple up at Yatsushiro.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – The common urban sparrow in Japan, even in Kushiro.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – One at Karuizawa near the bird forest, and another at the Sendae River.

JAPANESE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla grandis*) – Some good looks at this exotic looking species at Narita and Karuizawa especially, and also seen again near Rausu this year.

WHITE WAGTAIL (BLACK-BACKED) (*Motacilla alba lugens*) – This was seen most days of the trip in Honshu and Kyushu; all identified birds were of the black backed race *lugens*, as usual.

OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – One at Sendae paddies, then 3 at Miike.

AMERICAN PIPIT (JAPONICUS) (*Anthus rubescens japonicus*) – Very few at the Eastern Fields this year; this taxon is a likely split as Buff-bellied Pipit.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – 9 at Komoro Castle Park were the only sighting.

HAWFINCH (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – 3 at Ootzunagi were rather distant, and there was a bad view of one at Teshikaga, but absent from Yoroushi this year as there was not yet much snow.

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – Two small flocks flew across the motorway en route to the snow monkeys, then two groups of 5 at Miike, one of which everyone caught up with.

LONG-TAILED ROSEFINCH (*Carpodacus sibiricus*) – George saw one at Saku but it promptly vanished, a pity as this is now a hard bird to find. However, we unexpectedly found a pair in dry reeds by the Otowa crane viewing bridge, a lucky and late pick-up.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – A male and 3 female plumage birds as we drove to Yoroushi; this is the grey-bellied taxon *griseiventris*, a possible split.

ASIAN ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – Dire conditions at Kiritappu with gale force winds and horizontal heavy snow meant I did not feel optimistic, but just as we were about to leave, a large flock of about 110 appeared by the grumpy guy's house and we had some nice looks on the wires and his roof. I expect we will be on his website as peeping at his house, which has a sign declaiming "No Peeping"!

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – Small numbers from Karuizawa and Kyushu, not a good year for them.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – Three birds with the bullfinches on some weeds as we headed towards Yoroushi; a scarce bird here and one we had not seen for some while.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*) – Unexpectedly heard flying over at Teshikaga; not a species we usually record on the trip. [*]

EURASIAN SISKIN (*Spinus spinus*) – One along the forest road above Karuizawa, calling noisily but flying as soon as we saw it perched up.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING (*Emberiza fucata*) – Just one single from fields at Sendae; this species has become hard to get of late.

MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cioides*) – Small numbers from Narita, Saku, Arasaki and Sendae, even singing at a couple of sites.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – Heard around Arasaki and at Sendae but oddly enough none were actually seen. [*]

RUSTIC BUNTING (*Emberiza rustica*) – A small flock of 3 near the shrine at Karuizawa were the only ones we saw.

BLACK-FACED BUNTING (PERSONATA) (*Emberiza spodocephala personata*) – Very few, with just 4 day records, with 4 near Narita pre-trip the most. This yellowish race is a potential split as Masked Bunting and is indeed now split by BirdLife/IBW and in Brazil's book.

MAMMALS

JAPANESE MACAQUE (*Macaca fuscata*) – Wonderful views of these at the Snow Monkey Park in heavy snow again this year; a great experience. Also seen distantly at Mt. Bunao near Komatsu.

DALL'S PORPOISE (*Phocoenoides dalli*) – The eagle boat trip off Rausu got us a pod of these diminutive porpoises with the small pointed dorsal fin, though the views were not great as they dived so much. A lifer mammal for Phil.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Lovely views at Notsuke, these Hokkaido animals are a beautiful orangey colour, very striking. One was at Washi no Yado too and I think stopped the fish-owl arriving early...

RACCOON DOG (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*) – Harlan and I saw what I think was this species as we drove to Komatsu, but it was only a brief look from the van, unfortunately.

SABLE (SIBERIAN MARTEN) (*Martes zibellina*) – A few folks got to see one at Yoroushi, where the owner traps and relocates them, as they disturb the fish-owls. We also saw tracks of this species at Karuizawa.

SEA OTTER (*Enhydra lutris*) – A nice view of one in pounding surf in rough seas off Nosappu; a huge great creature, it must be so powerful to survive in the freezing rough waters.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – A brief view of what is presumably this species off Nosappu.

WILD BOAR (*Sus scrofa*) – Two on the hillside opposite the Mt Bunao visitor centre, with one digging energetically into the earth after roots. A nice addition to the triplist.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – Great views at Notsuke.

SEROW SP. (*Capricornis crispus*) – One at the monkey park gave good views on the hillside opposite, then one in the scope and then on the video feed at Mt. Bunao. Also known as goat-antelope, this strange shaggy creature is known as Japanese Serow here.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Birds of the trip were many and varied as ever, but the cranes, Steller's and White-tailed eagles and both Ural and Blakiston's Fish Owl inevitably loom large as we had such terrific sightings. Other highlights were the terrific male Copper Pheasant and Green Pheasant, that amazing female Goshawk at Katano that killed and ate the Coot, Varied Tit, Warbling White-eye and some very fine woodpeckers. The vagrant Red-legged Kittiwake off Nosappu in dreadful conditions was also a stunner and totally unexpected.

One unexpected mammal was Japanese Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus abramus*), with 4 or 5 flying about above the stream below Kogawa late in the afternoon on a fine sunny day. My first bat sighting on this tour and a lifer mammal. Another good mammal was Japanese Weasel (*Mustela itatsi*), an orange furred mustelid with no dark tail tip, seen running over the road on Nosappu.

Some of the trip photos are on the Macaulay Library Internet Bird Collection (IBC), a free-access site linked to eBird. 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 Smugmug gallery for that particular tour.

I 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.

Also recommended is the IOC World Checklist of Birds, a free-access downloadable Excel file that gets updated every four months; version 10.1 has just been published. Go to worldbirdnames.org, or Google "IOC" and ignore the Olympics stuff!

Totals for the tour: 147 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa