

## Trip Report — Winter Japan: Cranes & Sea Eagles 2025

January 10-25, 2025 with Phil Gregory & local guide



FG Japan in Winter 2025 group at Snow Monkey Trail

We began on January 12 with a birding stop at Tokko Creek at Narita, with good views of Masked Bunting, Meadow Bunting, 2 Common Snipe, a Green Sandpiper and Common Kingfisher plus Eastern Spot-billed Duck and some drake Falcated Ducks, then went over to Hacchoike Pond, where a big flock of Baikal Teal were wintering along with Bewick's Swan and a single Whistling Swan, both now part of Tundra Swan. We had the only rain of the trip here and it was over by the time we got to the site for Taiga Bean Goose, also Eastern Buzzard, Osprey and Bullheaded Shrike, and here we had our first Japanese lunch at a very nice local restaurant that is famous for its eel dishes.

January 13 saw us at the Karuizawa area where there was no snow, and conditions were fine though small birds were not much in evidence. We added **Long-tailed Tit** 

and Willow Tit plus Great-spotted and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Eurasian Nuthatch and Eurasian Treecreeper and a brief flyby of 3 Japanese Grosbeak. The afternoon at Saku reservoir and the Chikuma River gave great looks at Smew, Falcated Duck, a female Baikal Teal, lots of Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Common Merganser, Tufted Duck and Pochard.

January 14 saw us drive over to Jigokudani for the **Snow Monkey** trip, with an obliging **Eurasian Jay (Japanese)** feeding in the road, then a walk through snowy woodlands in very nice conditions, with a good experience with the monkeys before the crowds arrived. That afternoon we revisited Saku in quest of a **Rustic Bunting** that some saw yesterday, and were duly rewarded with nice views of 3 buntings plus 2 drake **Baikal Teal** out on the ice.

January 15, the Nagakura Shrine area gave our only **Azure-winged Magpies** of the trip, more **Rustic Buntings** and at a nearby flower farm good views of a male **Green Pheasant** which improved on the one we drove past yesterday. Back then to Haneda, ready for the flight to Fukuoka next day.



Steller's Sea Eagle landing on Rausu harbor wall

January 16: Flight to Fukuoka then a visit to Higashi marsh where **Saunders' Gull** showed really well, though Black-faced Spoonbill was absent. **Eurasian Curlew**, **Black-bellied Plover** and a surprise **Spotted Redshank** were the main shorebirds,
then there was a long drive over to Nobeoka in Miyazaki Prefecture, with a nice meal at
a Japanese pub that night.

January 17: We went up into the hills near the Kadogawa harbour, which gave us two Ryukyu Minivet, Warbling White-eyes and a surprise Yellow-throated Bunting for some of us. The weather was lovely, calm and sunny, maybe too much of a good thing as we could not find any murrelets, though Black-tailed Gull and Japanese Cormorant were some consolation. We then drove across Kyushu to Yatsushiro where Saunders' Gull and 4 Black-faced Spoonbill were good additions, also Kentish Plover and Russet Sparrow, before heading to the refurbished Hotel Wing in Izumi ready for the cranes next day.

January 18: Arasaki Crane Centre from 0700 on was fantastic on another beautiful winter's day, very unusual for Kyushu in my experience- **Hooded** and **White-naped Cranes** put on a great show in lovely light; the sounds were fantastic as thousands of them gathered to be fed. A **Peregrine** came overhead, causing panic amongst the ducks, and adult and immature **Daurian Jackdaw** showed very well, as did a vagrant **Swan Goose** and a lone **Common Crane**.

The Eastern Fields gave more splendid views of cranes, including 2 Sandhill Crane, another Peregrine and Eastern Skylark and Siberian Pipit (formerly Buff-bellied). The scrubby bush area nearby gave one of the few Dusky Thrush of the trip, usually this is the common winter thrush, Japanese Bush Warbler and Masked Bunting, with later an unexpected find by Jun of Naumann's Thrush which is rare on this tour. We had good count of Black-faced Spoonbill too with 12 birds, one sporting a yellow leg flag, with one bird having a crest, much to Sharon's delight as this was her most wanted species. A White-fronted Goose was on the fields, a useful trip bird.

We did lunch at a local distillery, then made yet another attempt for **Long-billed Plover**, this time finding 3 near Hitose Bridge for very good looks at this elusive bird.

Kogawa Dam was the final stop, some of us seeing a flighty pair of **Mandarin** on the river which was unusual, then on the lake itself were several hundred **Baikal Teal**, very unexpected here and seeming to have replaced the **Mandarin** as we struggled to eventually find just 3 birds.

January 19: Farewell views of the cranes at Arasaki and in the fields, then a drive down

to Sendaegawa where the river bridge gave more **Long-billed Plover**- see the ebird video of them dashing about-, **Green** and **Common Sandpiper**, and a surprise find of 2 male **Greater Painted-snipe** sat on a wet rock in the middle of the river, just bizarre and a very good bird on the winter trip. **Russet Sparrow**, **Japanese**, **White** and **Grey Wagtail** all showed well here.

Lake Mike was the final stop after lunch at restaurant where a very cute robot waiter was the best thing. The lovely conditions continued and a major surprise here was a Japanese Badger wandering about, no doubt lured out by the sunshine- it even went into the ladies toilet at one point and was shooed out by a Japanese woman who went in shortly after, not every day you find a badger in the restroom! Small birds were again elusive- a brief flyby of Japanese Grosbeak, splendid views of Long-tailed Tit and Varied Tit, the latter feeding on the grass, a good view of Coal Tit and Olivebacked Pipit at the campsite as usual, though the dreaded leaf blower man did his best to chase everything away and wreck recordings. Our only Eared Grebe of the trip was on the lake.

January 20 saw us fly to Haneda and then on to Kushiro, all very efficient and punctual unlike many other places. We forayed out to Tsurui and had wonderful late afternoon show from 81 **Red-crowned Cranes** in the snowy fields, calling and dancing and giving good flight views, just magic and in good light too. Two single **Steller's Sea Eagle** flew over on the way back to the hotel, a taster for what was to come.



Japanese Squirrel at Karuizawa, lured out by a sunny day

January 21: A foray out near Tsurui failed to find the Ural Owl in the favourite spot, but a stop at the famous Otowa Bridge crane site got a fantastic perched **Steller's Sea Eagle** and some **Red-crowned cranes** nearby in the river. The other feeding site near Tsurui held quite a good number too, but the bright sunshine made for bad light for photography.

Teshikaga had very tame **Whooper Swan** as usual, **Goldeneye** and **Tufted Duck**, plus the first **Marsh Tit** of the tour, and we did lunch at the visitor centre cafe where delicious venison burgers are a bestseller. Next came Rausu Harbour, with both **Steller's** and **White-tailed Eagles**, great look at **Harlequin ducks** and **Greater Scaup** and our first **Kamchatka** (**Common**) gulls.

That evening after a lovely Japanese meal we went over to Washi no Yado, the traditional site for the rare Blakiston's Fish Owl. We waited several hours, but unfortunately the wretched photographers had the far end windows all wide open and it was very cold, something I had not experienced here before and causing us to abandon at 2130.

January 22: A fabulous boat trip off Rausu Harbour in wonderful calm conditions, cold but not unbearable and with great light, Shiretoko Peninsula with its light dusting of snow looked really extraordinary, like something out of a Japanese landscape painting. Both species of eagle performed brilliantly as the crew threw fish out for them to snatch off the surface, there should be some excellent photos. 5 **Ancient**Murrelet were a bonus, and we were very lucky to see 6 **Dall's Porpoise**, a lifer mammal for Phil and rare at this time of the year.

A scrutiny of the local gulls gave Glaucous and what proved to be a small female **Glaucous**, sadly not an Iceland Gull, being notably slighter in build with a dark eye and long primary projection. Gull expert Lou Salomon was able to solve the puzzle, thanks Lou.

Notsuke Peninsula was the next stop after coffee following the boat ride, and the calm sea gave us fine views of Red-throated Loon, Spectacled Guillemot, Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and the hoped-for Stejneger's Scoter, with nice looks at 9 Asian Rosy Finch that flew up and sat on the wires further down the sand spit. The sea defenses here are impressive, and the whole place has a stark, bleak beauty to it, with Red Fox and Sika Deer adding to the atmosphere.

Yoroushi onsen was our last stop, a great place to have a night, and we arrived with a **Solitary Snipe** showing nicely in the river outside the lounge, see the videos I posted. The white-bellied form of **Eurasian Nuthatch** showed well, as did **Marsh Tit** and the distinctive *japonicus* taxon of **Great-spotted Woodpecker**, surely a split in waiting, as is the local **Eurasian Jay (Brandt's)** which was a frequent visitor this year. The Japanese banquet we had was memorable too, though the **fish owl** regrettably did not come in early today, so we decided to meet around 0400 which was the favourite time of late. Sadly our plan misfired and on the two occasions the bird came in most of us missed it by a couple of minutes, with hindsight staying up would have been better......

January 23 The river at Yoroushi was good at at breakfast, with Eurasian Wren, Brown Dipper and Japanese Wagtail showing well, the latter two species with videos on the Cornell site. The distinctive Eurasian (Baikal) Bullfinch was a fine sight with 2 males and a female, as was Hawfinch, new for some of the group.

Shunkunetai Forest Park at Furen was a nice walk in sunny conditions and almost no snow, though ice patches warranted care. **Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker** and best of all the beautiful and now emblematic of Hokkaido white-headed nominate race of **Long-tailed Tit.** I am constantly amazed how

such a small insectivore can survive the winters here.

Onnemato bird hide did not give the hoped for Rock Sandpiper despite ideal calm viewing conditions, though some **Harbour Seals** were nice and we saw the first **Glaucous-winged gulls**. Nosappu lighthouse was blocked off for construction work, but some of us went in after the workers had gone and we had a fine **Stejneger's Scoter**, **Red-necked Grebe** and 2 **Pigeon Guillemot** plus more **Spectacled Guillemot**.

January 24: We revisited Shunkunetai Forest back in the hopes of White-backed Woodpecker, enjoying a walk around the entire circuit which is usually snowbound by now. A lone bugling **Red-crowned Crane** with a yellow leg flag was by the visitor centre, it sounded like it was looking for its mate, and a few small birds showed much as before.

Next we drove across to Cape Kiritappu as threatening clouds massed, another wonderful bleak desolate spot, windy as ever but not yet snow covered. Here we had lovely look at a flock of about 50 **Asian Rosy Finch** that kept flying about and landing all too briefly, and 2 **Sea Otter** were an exciting mammal addition, thanks Margaret.

It was worth another try for **Ural Owl** as a finale, firstly trying a different spot that proved unfindable in the developing heavy snowstorm, so we returned to the one near Tsurui that has been a banker since 2014, and amazingly enough there it was, incredibly atmospheric views through the heavy snowflakes; see my videos on the ebird trip reports. It was a beautiful walk through heavy snow today, with no traffic and easier walking as the ice was covered, a nice way to end the tour.

The food on this tour was very varied with many delicious meals, 7-Eleven's were a surprise hit, and the hotels worked out nicely, some even getting an experience of futons as well as the hot spring onsen at Yoroushi. The weather was the best we have ever had on the tour, we lost no time to rain or snow and the wind was mercifully mostly very calm, which made temperatures much better. Small birds numbers were well down, I imagine weather related, with Dusky thrushes very scarce and woodpeckers elusive, whilst it was too nice for the murrelet this year! Conversely, we saw Daurian Redstarts more than on any previous trip, and Pale Thrush was much in evidence.

My thanks as ever to Jun Matsui for excellent driving, packing and logistics, to Karen at Field Guides for tour managing, Sue and Rowan at Sicklebill Safaris for the impressive

JAL flights, Peter for help with unloading heavy bags and to everyone for coming along and hopefully enjoying it.

Why not join us for Japan in Spring sometime?

## Mammals:

Japanese Macaque (Macaca fuscata) The famous Snow Monkey
Japanese Squirrel (Sciurus lis) One seen at Karuizawa
Eurasian Red Squirrel (Sciurus vulgaris) A couple at Shunkunetai Forest Reserve at
Furen, larger and darker than the japanese Squirrel of Honshu
Red Fox (Vulpes vulpes) Great looks at Notsuke and near Furen
Japanese Badger (Meles anakuma) A phenomenal encounter with one at Lake Miike,
lured out by the fine weather and busy foraging around the campsite.
Sea Otter (Enhydra lutris) Two laying on their backs in the freezing sea off Kiritappu
Harbor Seal (Phoca vitulina) 6 at Onnemato, a couple off Nosappu and again off
Kiritappu
Sika Deer (Cervus nippon) Japanese Common on Hokkaido especially at Notsuke

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link:

Phil (aka Sicklebill), Siem Reap, Jan 2025





## Field Guides Birding Tours- JAPAN IN WINTER 2025 (with Phil Gregory)



12 – 24 Jan 2025 (13 days) Link-only



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For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional...





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Checklists

**Species with Photos** 

**Species with Audio** 

## **Species Observed**

Show all details

1	Swan Goose Anser cygnoides	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
2	Greater White-fronted Goose Anser albifrons	▶ 🗖 2
51	Taiga Bean-Goose Anser fabalis	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
251	Tundra Swan Cygnus columbianus	▶ 🗖 2
54	Whooper Swan Cygnus cygnus 💿	▶ 2 13
51	Common Shelduck Tadorna tadorna	<b>▶ 1</b> 5
5	Mandarin Duck Aix galericulata	▶ <b>1</b> 2
2093	Baikal Teal Sibirionetta formosa	▶ <b>1</b> 4
1	Northern Shoveler Spatula clypeata	<b>→ ii</b> l 1

2	Gadwall Mareca strepera	<b>▶ 📶</b> 1
27	Falcated Duck Mareca falcata	▶ <b>1</b> 4
314	Eurasian Wigeon Mareca penelope	▶ 🚮 10
293	Eastern Spot-billed Duck Anas zonorhyncha	▶ 🗖 13
2604	Mallard Anas platyrhynchos	▶ 🖪 15
290	Northern Pintail Anas acuta	▶ 🖪 8
76	Green-winged Teal Anas crecca	▶ <b>1</b> 9
22	Common Pochard Aythya ferina	▶ 🗖 4
42	Tufted Duck Aythya fuligula	▶ <b>1</b> 6
36	Greater Scaup Aythya marila	<b>▶ ■</b> 1 <b>1</b> 2
56	Harlequin Duck Histrionicus histrionicus	▶ 🗖 4
7	Stejneger's Scoter Melanitta stejnegeri	▶ 🚺 2
45	Black Scoter Melanitta americana	▶ 🚺 2
21	Long-tailed Duck Clangula hyemalis	▶ 🚺 2
18	Common Goldeneye Bucephala clangula	▶ 🖪 3
26	Smew Mergellus albellus	▶ 🖪 3
15	Common Merganser Mergus merganser	▶ 🚺 5
41	Red-breasted Merganser Mergus serrator	▶ 🚺 5
3	Green Pheasant Phasianus versicolor	<b>▶ ■</b> 1 <b>1</b> 3
1	Chinese Bamboo-Partridge Bambusicola thoracicus *	<b>→ 1</b> 1

X	Rock Pigeon Columba livia *	I		1
44	Oriental Turtle-Dove Streptopelia orientalis	)	· 🗐 8	3
50	Eurasian Coot Fulica atra	)	15	5
3	Sandhill Crane Antigone canadensis	•		2
1440	White-naped Crane Antigone vipio	•	· 🗐 4	4
1	Common Crane Grus grus	<b>&gt;</b>	1 🚮	1
8400	Hooded Crane Grus monacha	•	1 4	4
237	Red-crowned Crane Grus japonensis	<b>&gt;</b>	1 🗐 5	5
96	Black-bellied Plover Pluvialis squatarola	•		2
6	Long-billed Plover Thinornis placidus	<b>M</b> 2	2 🗐 2	2
6	Northern Lapwing Vanellus vanellus	•	· 🗐 4	4
19	Kentish Plover Anarhynchus alexandrinus	•		2
2	Greater Painted-Snipe Rostratula benghalensis	<b>&gt;</b>	1 🚮	1
35	Eurasian Curlew Numenius arquata	1		1
1	Solitary Snipe Gallinago solitaria	<b>&gt;</b>	2 👖	1
2	Common Snipe Gallinago gallinago	1		1
3	Common Sandpiper Actitis hypoleucos	•		2
2	Green Sandpiper Tringa ochropus	•	12	2
1	Spotted Redshank Tringa erythropus	ľ		1
20	Common Greenshank Tringa nebularia	I	•	1

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180	Dunlin Calidris alpina	▶ <b>1</b> 2
19	Spectacled Guillemot Cepphus carbo	<b>1</b> 2
2	Pigeon Guillemot Cepphus columba	<b>1</b>
5	Ancient Murrelet Synthliboramphus antiquus	<b>)</b> 🚮 1
116	Saunders's Gull Saundersilarus saundersi	<b>1</b> 2
47	Black-headed Gull Chroicocephalus ridibundus	▶ 🚺 5
6	Black-tailed Gull Larus crassirostris	<b>)</b> 🗐 1
28	Common Gull Larus canus	▶ 🚺 5
33	Vega Gull Larus vegae	▶ <b>1</b> 4
23	Glaucous Gull Larus hyperboreus	▶ 🚺 5
5	Glaucous-winged Gull Larus glaucescens	<b>1</b>
419	Slaty-backed Gull Larus schistisagus	▶ 🚮 8
5	Little Grebe Tachybaptus ruficollis	▶ <b>1</b> 4
2	Red-necked Grebe Podiceps grisegena	<b>1</b> 2
9	Great Crested Grebe Podiceps cristatus	<b>1</b> 2
1	Eared Grebe Podiceps nigricollis	<b>)</b> 🗐 1
2	Red-throated Loon Gavia stellata	<b>)</b> 🗐 1
96	Pelagic Cormorant Urile pelagicus	<b>1</b> 4
34	Great Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo	▶ <b>1</b> 9
3	Japanese Cormorant Phalacrocorax capillatus	<b>1</b>

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6	Eurasian Spoonbill Platalea leucorodia	▶ 🗖 4
18	Black-faced Spoonbill Platalea minor	<b>▶ 1</b> 3
8	Little Egret Egretta garzetta	▶ <b>1</b> 6
7	Great Egret Ardea alba	▶ 🚺 5
78	Gray Heron Ardea cinerea	▶ <b>1</b> 9
4	Osprey Pandion haliaetus	▶ 🗖 4
1	Eurasian Sparrowhawk Accipiter nisus	<b>▶ ■1</b> 1
107	Black Kite Milvus migrans	▶ 🗖 17
30	White-tailed Eagle Haliaeetus albicilla	▶ 💌 2 👖 4
91	Steller's Sea-Eagle Haliaeetus pelagicus	▶ 💌 2 🚺 5
4	Eastern Buzzard Buteo japonicus	▶ 🖪 3
4	Common Kingfisher Alcedo atthis	▶ 🗖 4
14	Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker Yungipicus kizuki	<b>▶ □</b> 1 <b>1</b> 9
9	Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos major	▶ 💌 2 🗻 8
2	Eurasian Kestrel Falco tinnunculus	▶ 🚺 2
2	Ryukyu Minivet Pericrocotus tegimae	<b>▶ ■</b> 1
5	Bull-headed Shrike Lanius bucephalus	▶ 🗖 4
19	Eurasian Jay Garrulus glandarius	▶ 💌 1 🚮 4
2	Azure-winged Magpie Cyanopica cyanus	<b>→ 副</b> 1
9	Daurian Jackdaw Coloeus dauuricus	<b>▶ 1</b> 2

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870	Rook Corvus frugilegus	▶ 🗊 4
82	Carrion Crow Corvus corone	▶ 🗖 14
30	Large-billed Crow Corvus macrorhynchos	<b>▶  1</b> 16
3	Coal Tit Periparus ater	▶ 🖪 3
6	Varied Tit Sittiparus varius	▶ 🗖 4
11	Marsh Tit Poecile palustris 🕦	<b>▶</b> 🔼 1 🗐 5
9	Willow Tit Poecile montanus	▶ 🗖 4
28	Asian Tit Parus cinereus	▶ 🗊 11
5	Eurasian Skylark Alauda arvensis	▶ <b>1</b> 2
4	Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica	▶ <b>1</b> 2
5	Asian House-Martin Delichon dasypus	<b>▶ ■1</b> 1
30	Brown-eared Bulbul Hypsipetes amaurotis	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 11
2	Japanese Bush Warbler Horornis diphone	▶ <b>1</b> 2
32	Long-tailed Tit Aegithalos caudatus	▶ 🗖 5
20	Warbling White-eye Zosterops japonicus	▶ <b>1</b> 4
10	Red-billed Leiothrix Leiothrix lutea * 1	▶■1 12
12	Eurasian Nuthatch Sitta europaea	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 7
3	Eurasian Treecreeper Certhia familiaris	▶ 🗖 2
1	Eurasian Wren Troglodytes troglodytes	<b>▶ 📶</b> 1
2	Brown Dipper Cinclus pallasii	<b>→ 1</b> 1

42	White-cheeked Starling Spodiopsar cineraceus	▶ 🗊 5
14	Pale Thrush Turdus pallidus	▶ 🗷 2 👖 4
4	Dusky Thrush Turdus eunomus	▶ 🗊 4
1	Naumann's Thrush Turdus naumanni	<b>→ 前</b> 1
16	Daurian Redstart Phoenicurus auroreus	▶ 🗊 9
1	Blue Rock-Thrush Monticola solitarius	<b>→ 前</b> 1
6	Russet Sparrow Passer cinnamomeus	▶ 🗊 2
120	Eurasian Tree Sparrow Passer montanus	▶ 🖪 6
8	Gray Wagtail Motacilla cinerea	<b>▶</b> ☎1 <b>1</b> 5
11	Japanese Wagtail Motacilla grandis	▶ 🖪 8
32	White Wagtail Motacilla alba	<b>→ a</b> 111
4	Olive-backed Pipit Anthus hodgsoni	<b>→ 1</b> 1
4	Siberian Pipit Anthus japonicus	<b>→ ■</b> 3
1	Hawfinch Coccothraustes coccothraustes	<b>→ 前</b> 1
5	Japanese Grosbeak Eophona personata	<b>→ ■</b> 3
3	Eurasian Bullfinch Pyrrhula pyrrhula	<b>→ 前</b> 1
59	Asian Rosy-Finch Leucosticte arctoa	<b>▶ 1</b> 2
66	Oriental Greenfinch Chloris sinica	▶ 🗊 8
15	Meadow Bunting Emberiza cioides	▶ 🗖 6
1	Yellow-throated Bunting Emberiza elegans	<b>→ 1</b> 1

8	Rustic Bunting Emberiza rustica	•		13
9	Masked Bunting Emberiza personata	•		<b>1</b> 4
ADDITIONAL TAXA				
1	grebe sp. Podicipedidae sp.	Þ		1
1	loon sp. Gavia sp.	•	Ī	<b>1</b> 1
35	Great/Japanese Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo/capillatus	•		12