

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO JAPAN

Winter Spectacular

13 to 28 February 2009



Leaders: Tony Pym and local guides

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A Personal Diary

Friday 13 February

It was surprisingly quiet at Heathrow Terminal 3 and all the group were on time at 1000, for the scheduled meeting. Our check-in was easy; some had already used the online facilities and others the check-in machines at the airport. The Virgin Airlines desks were efficient and soon we had passed through the security area into the departure lounge, in time for coffee or refreshment before flying.

We met again at the departure gate and the plane left and was airborne virtually on time. Next stop, Tokyo and Japan, our holiday had begun!

The flight was scheduled to take 10 hours and 41 minutes (I like the preciseness from Virgin!) and dinner was served shortly after we were underway. Although leaving at 1500 local time, within a couple of hours it was dark, the shutters were pulled down, for everyone to get some sleep.

Saturday 14 February

We landed at Narita, Tokyo's international airport on time at 1000. There was quite a queue at immigration and we were to find our luggage was already on the carousel. We gathered up, and went into the arrivals hall to find Harumi, our Japanese guide waiting for us. She would be with us for the duration of the trip. We were in Japan and the adventure was underway!

We were surprised to find the temperature was 20°C, a warm balmy day for February. Our coach was loaded and soon we left Narita to head along the main expressway into the suburbs of Tokyo. The city skyscrapers could be seen to one side. We passed factories and skirted the built-up areas of the city as we headed out. Our first birds were ubiquitous Black-headed Gulls and Carrion Crows (though these are sometimes split as Oriental Crow), well known from home.

We stopped at a services area where everyone sampled their first Japanese food with varieties of noodles, rice and dumplings chosen from plastic look-alikes and then ordered from the fast-food counters. Some followed this with lashings of ice cream.

A large raptor, patrolling the edge of a large wood, was seen from the bus. It was a Goshawk but as we were travelling at speed not all saw this bird. We left the expressway, onto the small roads, and into the hills to find there was, surprisingly, no snow at all. We arrived at our hotel in Karuizawa, set in woodland, and whilst checking-in could look at the bird table with its Willow and Varied Tits coming to food. The Varied Tit with its colours of russet, black and cream was particularly admired, a new bird for the entire group.

Dinner was a banquet! More and more dishes kept appearing, and we counted at least 12 portions per person, each nicely presented as culinary works of art. We were to learn that this was to become the standard type of dinner in Japan.

It had been a very long day and everyone needed to sleep ready for tomorrow....

Sunday 15 February

I awoke, looked out of the window to see a flock of more than ten Japanese Grosbeaks in the treetops and, in amongst them, a lone Brambling. Early birding added Dusky Thrush and a male Daurian Redstart for some.

The breakfast was a buffet offering both Japanese and a basic Continental. We gathered to leave at 0900 when our specialist local birder arrived. His name was Toshi-san. A very nice guy who knew his birds and where to take us today.

We stopped at a convenience store, to buy our packed lunches for later, and then drove to a dam with a small reservoir. On the way, Stephanie was fortunate indeed to see a Japanese Serow from the bus but as we were on a bendy mountain road we couldn't stop. Recognised in Japan as a 'national treasure' the Serow is an endemic goat-antelope of densely wooded hillsides and conifer forests. We headed towards the Myogi Ko dam where Bull-headed Shrikes sat sentinel at the field edges and ducks, on the water here, included Asian Spot-billed and 'real' Mandarins. A female Long-tailed Rosefinch was not the best of views, and one we would see again. Japanese Bush Warbler also proved tricky but it is renowned as a skulking species.

We walked the road, skirting the reservoir edge, where another Daurian Redstart was found plus good views of our first Meadow Bunting. A bunch of raptors seen soaring were mainly Black-eared Kites but then, the distinct silhouette of a Mountain Hawk-Eagle to get our adrenalin running, and later a Japanese Buzzard also.

We ate our lunch on the drive to our next site. We had a walk planned in pleasant mixed forest at Oyama where the target species was Copper Pheasant...but no success today. The walk turned out to be longer than anticipated, and involved some inclines, but the reward was three Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers and a couple of Eurasian Nuthatches. It was a lovely bright day and the walk had been enjoyable.

We headed back to the hotel. A flock of Azure-winged Magpies flew across the road on their way to roost for the night. At the hotel, one of the staff pointed out two Japanese Flying Squirrels that were looking out from a nestbox. These are nocturnal, and soon would climb higher to then glide off to another tree.

Dinner tonight was a modest affair, with only 16 different dishes served! We followed this with our first birdlog for the tour, and we were off to a good start!

Monday 16 February

Toshi-san joined us after breakfast to lead today's walks. It was much colder than yesterday, more typical weather now, and a few more layers were needed to ensure we were warm. This morning Ben saw Hawfinch at the bird table, a species on his 'wish list'.

Our first walk took us alongside the river of Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest. Katherine found a flock of Eurasian Siskins, a pair of Japanese Wagtails were along a side stream and, best of all, a flock of Japanese Waxwings were feeding on mistletoe. Just like the Bohemian Waxwing this is an irruptive species and some winters just a few arrive in Japan, alternatively there can be many. This pretty bird is not easy to find and was a bonus for us to see. Other birds during the morning included Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker and we heard a Brown Dipper call as it flashed downstream.

We visited the visitor centre and, as is the custom, automatically took our shoes off as we entered the immaculate building. It had a hide in the basement, overlooking the river. The feeders outside had Oriental Greenfinches and Brambling coming to seed.

Lunch was at the Picchio Restaurant, Japanese-style, before our second walk into deeper forest. The woodland was generally quiet but with occasional highlights, like mixed tit flocks, a lone Long-tailed Rosefinch and a secretive Rustic Bunting. From a vantage point we could see Mount Asama, a volcano that started erupting two weeks back. Large clouds of steam and gas were coming from the caldera. On the return, close to the hotel, Malcolm and Mike F. saw an uncommon species, Pallas's Rosefinch, which would be discussed over the next few hours (and more!). We did try hard to refind this bird, but without success.

We got back to the hotel at 1730. There was time for a hot tea or coffee, or better still to soak in the hot spring baths, here called *onsen*.

It was agreed that everyone dress tonight in Japanese yukata kimonos for dinner. It was a colourful gathering and the dinner was another feast for the eyes as dishes just kept arriving. We called the birdlog in the lounge area and chatted afterwards over a glass of wine or two.

Tuesday 17 February

We checked out from the hotel after breakfast. The bags were loaded and Toshi-san arrived at 0830. I had organised through Harumi a smaller bus for us, to drive the mountain roads and try again for the Copper Pheasant. Mike F. found a very good bird, near to the feeders. It was a Red-flanked Bluetail, a species more usual in summer though a few do overwinter.

We drove to the same woodland at Oneyama as two days back to try again for Copper Pheasant. It was a sunny bright day, though with a cold wind. The group were very quiet, the fieldcraft good as well as conditions but, alas, still no sign of the pheasant. We had put in the effort but no luck today again.

We drove down to a large store to purchase our lunches, to takeaway and eat on the journey to our next birding site. Toshi-san had suggested a lake near the River Chikuma. The birding here was excellent, not least because we found a Baikal Teal! This is now a rare bird in Japan, it used to arrive in flocks of hundreds but these days only a few individuals and small groups appear. I glimpsed the bird as it moved from a small island and out of sight, and it took a while to relocate, to be found asleep amongst other duck. Patience paid off and all saw it well in the end. Other ducks on the lake included smart Falcated Duck, another new one for the group, plus those known from Europe like Smew, Goosander, Greater Scaup and Eurasian Wigeon.

We walked around the lake and found a small group of Meadow and Rustic Buntings and along a small stream, whilst scoping a Common Sandpiper, a Long-billed Plover came into view. It was well camouflaged on the shingle riverbed. Dusky Thrushes, Brown-eared Bulbuls and Grey Starlings ended a successful walk.

We thanked Toshi-san, bade him farewell, and began the drive to our next hotel in the small town of Kanbayashi. We arrived at a family-run Japanese small inn, a *ryokan*, where the bedrooms were traditional - tonight everyone would be sleeping on futons. Dinner was lovely, both in the way it was served by the ladies, entering through sliding doors to serve us sitting at floor level. Once again, presentation was exquisite and, as usual, many dishes.

Wednesday 18 February

We had breakfast, Japanese style, at a low table where we sat on cushions. Soup, vegetables, pickles and rice downed with local apple juice. At 0900 we walked from the *ryokan*, through woodland to a valley. There was not much snow but the path still had ice and was slippery. The area to which we headed was famous for the 'snow monkeys'. These are Japanese Macaques that come to the hot springs to soak and get warm.

The monkeys were in numbers, some searching the snow for food (spread by the rangers here) others along the slopes, some sat in trees, more along the pathway. At the hot springs the cameras went into overdrive, shutters clicking, to capture the expressions and behaviour of these primates. Occasionally the peace was broken as individual animals fought and sparred.

Lunch was at another small *ryokan* nearby, which today served mountain vegetable noodles to warm us too. The group had mixed objectives during the afternoon and so we broke up, agreeing to meet later for dinner. Some stayed with the monkeys, others returned to the town to visit local museums and the small Buddhist and Shinto shrines. Anyone returning early to the accommodation could try the hot springs also.

Earlier in the day I had said that accentors here were unobtrusive birds and we could pass one easily, just metres away. I was repeating this to Malcolm, Stephanie and Katherine and, exactly at that point, I looked to see an accentor! There it was, only about 12 metres from us, on a small open piece of ground with meltwater. What surprised me was that it wasn't the 'expected' Alpine Accentor but a Japanese Accentor. I showed it to Mark Brazil (author of *Birds of East Asia* and *Birds of Japan*) who was leading another tour who then told us that it was the first ever winter record for this region!

We compared bird sightings later. Ben and Maggy had seen Grey-bellied Bullfinches and Mike L. and Wendy saw a Meadow Bunting, Hawfinch and flocks of Siskins. The bird diversity was quite low due to the remoteness and snow cover. We had hoped for an eagle to cross over the high ridges, but none today.

Dinner was served early, at 1800, to allow time for packing and a good sleep, before we headed for the airport early tomorrow morning, and our next sector of the tour.

Thursday 19 February

We have an early start. The luggage was collected at 0600 and soon loaded. We had a quick cup of hot coffee before starting our journey to the airport in Tokyo, a drive of some five hours, passing through small mountain villages to the main expressway that took us into the metropolis of Tokyo. The domestic airport is central within the city; we passed the skyscrapers and Tokyo Bay to one side. The airport was very efficient and soon we had our boarding passes and went through security. At the gate we met Charles Harper, our specialist birding guide for this leg of our journey in Kyushu, southern Japan.

The flight left on time and one hour and fifty minutes later we touched down in a rainy Kagoshima. Our bus was waiting; we loaded and set off for the town of Izumi where our hotel was situated. We made one birding stop on the way, at a bridge over the Sendai River, suggested by Charles. It gave us two Crested Kingfishers plus Long-billed Plovers and more. A Barn Swallow was a surprise in February but they are, apparently, regular winter birds through central and southern parts of the country.

After being shown our 'western-style' rooms at this modern hotel we met for dinner and discussed tomorrow's programme.

Friday 20 February

We had an early morning start, to get to Arasaki and see the crane flocks at dawn, as they began leaving the roosting fields. We left the hotel at 0615 and were at the fields half-hour later - the bugling of cranes could be heard and the first of the morning's flights, as flocks could be seen lifting to the sky. Soon, the light improved and we could see thousands of Hooded and White-naped Cranes. The most recent official count was 8,680 Hooded and 3,010 White-naped. The latter do leave first for breeding grounds and a few had already gone. The scene was very atmospheric....the whole experience one to enjoy, savour and remember.

Soon we had found our first rarity, two Siberian Cranes, an adult and immature, were spotted in flight. This species is critically endangered and this is the first record in Japan of two together. The last one at Arasaki was six years ago.

We stayed at the 'western' fields, the roosting area, for some time, later moving to the 'eastern' fields where the Siberian birds were found again - quite easy as one was huge...and spectacularly white. We found a hybrid crane, Hooded x Common, which was difficult to scope as a Siberian was in the way! A small group of Sandhill Cranes were found here also. Four species of crane plus two hybrid birds was the tally.

A pond, a little further down the road, offered up two Eurasian Spoonbills (rarer here than the endangered Black-faced!) and three geese together gave us a rare vagrant Swan Goose and both Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese together for comparison. This was simply an amazing collection of birds, and many eastern rarities in just two adjoining fields.

We took a late breakfast back at the hotel before heading south, along the coast road. We had a 'stakeout' in mind - a known spot for seawatching at Michi-no-eki, close to Akune, where there were extensive views over the ocean. Four species of gull were here but these were eclipsed by two Streaked Shearwaters and then, best of all, the first of some ten Japanese Murrelets. Everyone saw these tiny flying golf-balls as they went hurtling by, even if for some the views were distant. The scientific name *S. wumizusume* is Japanese for 'ocean sparrow', most appropriate.

We carried on, pulling in at Takae, this is the wintering site for a now-famous Greater Spotted Eagle. This is the 17th winter this individual has returned! It is the only one in all Japan. We hadn't found the bird, in the windy conditions, when a local resident came along and casually said 'as it was windy the bird would be

over there, in that block of trees'...sure enough, there it was! We added a few more new birds for our lists with Russet Sparrow, Osprey, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Buff-bellied Pipits.

We headed back towards Arasaki mid-afternoon. The light was fading fast, and we tried to squeeze in just a little more time with the cranes. It was getting very cold though, and we returned to the hotel as dusk was falling. It had been an unforgettable birding day.

Saturday 21 February

After breakfast we left for the Kumagawa River mouth, a drive of a couple of hours north along the coast from Izumi. We had planned to be there as the tide turned, from high tide on its way out. This timing was most important for one special rare bird, the Saunders' Gull. This is a specialist feeder, which feeds on crabs on the exposed mud.

We were lucky to find at least ten of these dainty gulls in various plumages ranging from adult winter, first winter and some showing varying amounts of black on the heads (coming into summer breeding plumage). A cracking bird, and one of limited range, only a few winter in Japan. Further along the seawall we stopped to scope other gulls here plus shorebirds including Grey Plover, Dunlins and Kentish Plovers.

We left to drive to our next birding stop at Hikawa River. The bus driver did well to take the small back roads to find a track alongside the riverbank. The prize here was five Black-faced Spoonbills, another endangered species.

In the early afternoon we returned to the town, taking the road east to Kōgawa dam. This scenic spot was surrounded by woodland and we walked from the bus along the road to the dam wall. Oriental White-eyes and a Japanese Bush Warbler were seen. Close to the dam three Olive-backed Pipits, typically tail-pumping, were found walking around the woodland edge. I could imagine this site would be much more productive in later spring. It was time to return to the hotel.

Sunday 22 February

Another optional visit to the cranes was offered this morning and we left at 0630. At Arasaki there were a number of Japanese visitors wanting to photograph the cranes at dawn. We found the Sandhills and the Siberians again, amongst the mass of Hooded and White-naped. As we drove around the fields I saw a smaller *corvid* in the distance amongst the flocks of hundreds of crows and rooks – it was a Daurian Jackdaw, one we had a slight chance of finding on this tour.

We were transferring today, and left the hotel after breakfast. We had a drive of one-and-half hours to Kagoshima Airport where we checked-in for our flight to Hokkaido via Tokyo. We said goodbye to Charles in Tokyo and were met at the departure gate by Chris Cook, our next specialist birding guide for the north of the country. By the time we had reached Kushiro, in Hokkaido, it was 1930 in the evening. It was -4°C on arrival, and snow was falling. Our waiting bus transferred us to a family-run hotel at Tsurui.

Monday 23 February

Early morning, it was a winter scene outside. Snow carpeted the area, deep in places, and the outside temperature was -15°C. We left at 0600, to reach one of the Red-crowned Cranes roosting areas.

At the River Setsurui steam was rising from the water, warmer than the ambient temperature, creating a misty view of snow, river and roosting cranes. A pair began jumping into the air, wings out, disturbing the light snow; this was part of the courtship 'dance'. The scene was one the photographers tried to capture.

We returned to the hotel for breakfast and then Chris and I decided on a change of strategy. A Ural Owl was known to be have a roost site about an hour's drive away. We hadn't driven far when the bus came to an abrupt halt for our first Steller's Sea-Eagle, which simply dwarfed a White-tailed Eagle in the same tree. These are truly enormous raptors and the bird epitomises Hokkaido in winter.

The Ural Owl was found easily, as the larch trees had no foliage. It sat in a tree nook, taking no notice of us as the camera shutters clicked away. A good find here was also a lovely red male Pallas's Rosefinch that

came to perch at the top of a sapling and, just along the road from this, we found a most confiding female Asian Rosy-Finch that fed at the snow edge, three metres from our feet.

We headed back towards the crane observatory for a light lunch of warming noodles and broth. The cranes were outside the window of the café - a lovely sight, such elegant birds walking in the winter snow scene.

At 1400 a man came to feed the cranes with fish. There wasn't much squabbling, nor any feeding frenzy, the cranes still maintained their graceful posture, picking delicately at pieces of fish, but the food brought in the scavenging White-tailed Eagles that swooped down for any morsel and a lone Red Fox had the chance for a meal.

We watched a short film about the cranes of Hokkaido and took a quick tour of the museum and gift shop. We started to head back to our accommodation but a flock of small birds looked interesting and we pulled up. The flock was mostly Oriental Greenfinches, intermixed with a few Bramblings, but another female Asian Rosy-Finch was found and a very white 'frosty' Redpoll that was lost too quickly in the roving flock.

Back at the hotel some of us took the opportunity to enjoy the *onsen* before dinner.

Tuesday 24 February

The optional 'early birder special' was a walk to the local bridge. It was -18°C early morning, though bright conditions, and it didn't feel that cold when walking and properly wrapped up. Hawfinch, Eurasian Nuthatch and a pair of Goosanders were the morning's birds. We loaded the bus after breakfast and began the journey to our next hotel.

The route took us past the crane observatory and then into the mountains, passing the 'boy' and 'girl' volcanic mountains of O-Akan and Me-Akan. At one mountain lay-by I tried the tape for Black Woodpecker, which Chris said occurs there, but there was no response – possibly it was too early in the season?

An early lunch, at midday, was at a busy Japanese restaurant that all again thought had great food. We continued to Lake Kussharo in the Akan National Park where a few hundred Whooper Swans had gathered on the ice-free water, warmed by local hot springs. These wild birds would come to be fed by hand, and Chris threw out some bread for them to approach one metre away, too close for the photographers though!

We travelled on, passing steaming fumaroles on hillsides to the large crater lake of Lake Mashū. Birds were thin on the ground and the bird feeders, that I remember here, had now gone. The stop gave the group a chance to look around the souvenir shop and buy some presents for home.

We tried one of Chris's stakeouts for another Ural Owl, which again was found easily and seen well, before arriving at our small *ryokan* at Yoroushi. This was very nice, the entrance in lovely Japanese style, wood flooring and a large open fire. We had only just checked-in to our rooms, some were still unpacking, others had gone to the *onsen*, when the bird of this place appeared - the enormous Blakiston's Fish Owl. A minor panic ensued; telephone calls were made to the rooms, to ensure everyone saw this incredible bird. We desperately searched for Nick and Maggy who were finally tracked down. The bird was at the small fishpond that the hotel had built to attract this rare species. Soon, all were assembled and had marvellous views as it flew to a large floodlit tree. This had taken the pressure off Chris and myself as we had begun discussing plans to maximise finding this bird (even a night rota for the two of us) but here it was, at a respectable 1745!

Dinner again was an amazing spread of 14 dishes, beautifully presented. When we went to bed the owl was on the same branch, of the same tree. He had not moved now for three hours.

Wednesday 25 February

The optional early morning birdwalk left at 0700. It seemed much warmer than the last few days (the temperature was only 0C!) Jays were common birds around the hotel, these being a red-headed form. A new species for the list was Brown Dipper, two birds being seen this time, which apart from colour, was longer-

tailed than our birds. They flew downstream to plunge into the cold water to bob around like corks on the water.

We left for the coast of eastern Hokkaido. Chris had a few spots in mind for seawatching; the first at Odeito gave us Glaucous-winged and Glaucous Gulls together, plus many seaduck species. After buying our take-away lunches we continued along the Notsuke Peninsular to the visitor centre where freshly made coffee was eagerly accepted as a respite from the cold wind. Asian Rosy-Finches were at the bird table outside the small café. From the balcony we could scan the sea where up to 10 Spectacled Guillemots were put into the scopes for all to see, this being a species I had wondered if we would see. Pelagic Cormorants and Black and Stejneger's Scoters were here also.

We drove to the furthest point we could along the peninsular, where the road finished. A pair of Brent Geese did a fly-past and a full adult Steller's Sea-Eagle perched on an electricity pole close to the vehicle.

We returned to the hotel in time for a hot Japanese bath, or to simply relax in the lounge of this lovely *ryokan*, with views at the bird table and river. An inquisitive Sable, a small carnivore related to the martens, came close to the windowpane to move on nervously.

Thursday 26 February

We left the *ryokan* and headed towards Rausu on the Shiretoko Peninsular, northeast Hokkaido. We checked a number of small harbours for gulls and ducks, seeing Glaucous-winged amongst the numerous Glaucous and that lovely duck, the Harlequin, which was quite common and often in small flocks. Close to our lodge we took a short walk along the coastline where Red-necked Grebe, Common Guillemot, both Black-throated and Pacific Divers were scoped but, as best as we tried, the tiny Ancient Murrelet kept diving, most frustratingly for the group. Chris picked out a large falcon at distance over the sea which on size, let alone location, really must have been a Gyrfalcon, but a poor tick for anyone.

The driver stopped along the roadside where dozens of eagles perched in trees (probably knowing the sea ice was far to the north). Perched Steller's Sea-Eagles gave some mind-blowing shots for the photographers amongst us. In the sea, close-by, were more Spectacled Guillemots and occasionally the heads of Larga Seals popped above the water surface. A close inshore Pacific Diver gave Mike L. and Wendy a masterclass on diver identification. As we returned to the hotel everyone caught up with Brown Dipper. This one was seen in the town, on a stream leading to the sea, and performed superbly, bouncing on boulders and swimming in the fast current.

After dinner tonight there was another optional excursion. This time, it was an 'owl prowl' to one of Chris' sites to look for another pair of Blakiston's Fish Owls. We drove for only ten minutes from the hotel, down a small lane to a harbour. The air was cold and still, the snow lay around, and boats had icicles hanging from the rigging. We shone the spotlight onto a large stationary 'lump'...it was an owl. His mate was found soon and they both flew to perch on one of the boats. It was a magical scene and rated as one of my all-time best moments in birding.

Friday 27 February

We had a very early start with everyone up and about at 0500. Our early schedule meant that the luggage was to be stored and had to be in the lockup for 0530. We left the hotel for the harbour before sunrise. We had a special surprise for everyone, a cruise to the ice edge, and our boat was waiting. It was a fast cruiser that was to speed along at some 30 knots. It had a warm cabin where we could spread out our backpacks and the extra clothing needed. We headed north for the pack ice, and it was much further away than usual. The skipper told us it would take about an hour before we could see the ice ahead.

A few birds were seen, even with the boat at speed, including some Brunnich's Guillemots yet the group missed once more the dainty Ancient Murrelet. Blows from two whales off to starboard had the boat detouring. These were Baird's Beaked Whales. Up to about 12 metres in length with large distinct melons and long beaks these are social animals often seen in tight groups that log, surface and blow in unison. A further group, some six animals, were most likely to be this species also.

To port lay the Shiretoko Peninsular with its snow-capped mountains. The pack ice came into view. This is the true domain of the Steller's and White-tailed Eagles. The boat nudged slowly into the ice, blocks moved as we inched forward, and one of the crewman put down some fish offal. Soon, there was a feeding frenzy as the eagles came in. Glaucous, Glaucous-winged and Slaty-backed Gulls tried with little success to steal scraps from the dominant eagles. To see Steller's and White-tailed Eagles squabble at three metres distance was something else!

We headed back for breakfast at the lodge. Soon after we had loaded the bus and were underway to the small airport at Memanbetsu. Tokyo's domestic airport took just over two hours to reach. We said goodbye to Chris at the airport and thanked him for his time, knowledge and birding skills.

We had an hour and half drive to Narita, the international airport, and our hotel for the night. Mike F. and Elisabeth were dropped at their hotel, they had a further day with a friend before returning to Australia, whilst the rest of us checked-in to the western-style airport hotel, very different to our accommodation of the last fortnight!

We met for our farewell dinner, which tonight was a 'western-style' buffet. We toasted the success of the tour with a glass of wine, compliments of Ornitholidays. The final birdlog was called in the hotel lobby/lounge and we recounted some of the highlights of this very special tour.

Saturday 28 February

Everyone took a relaxed breakfast and we met as a group at 0915, with our luggage, in the lobby. A private shuttle bus had been arranged and we were soon at the airport. Virgin Airlines desks were open and it took a while queuing to check-in. We said goodbye to Harumi who would be travelling to Kyoto.

Everything went to plan, the Security was prompt and efficient, Immigration fast, and we had time for a coffee before we boarded the Virgin flight for London. We left on time, 1200, and ahead lay a flight of eleven and three-quarter hours to London. We touched down a little ahead of schedule. It was 1500 and we were safely back in England....

Acknowledgements

The success of this tour was due to the efforts of many people. Thanks to our ground handlers in Japan who set up the hotels, lodges, ryokans, food, buses and transfers. Three guides, all bird specialists, were contracted for their knowledge of Honshu, Kyushu and Hokkaido respectively. Many thanks to Toshiyuki Otsuka, Charles Harper and Chris Cook for their birding skills and local site knowledge. Harumi Yamanaka was our Japanese interpreter/guide for the entire tour. She was a font of knowledge on all questions about her country and its customs. She helped enormously behind the scenes also, and now adds 'qualified birder' to her extensive CV.

Most of all, my thanks to you for coming on this tour to *Japan* to see the *Winter Spectacular* of its cranes, eagles, owls and so much more. You saw some very special birds that I hope will remain lifelong memories. I hope this report has reminded you of some of our time spent together in this remarkable country. I enjoyed your company immensely and look forward to seeing you again soon on another Ornitholidays' adventure.

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March 2009

Itinerary and Weather

13 February	Flew from London, Heathrow to Narita, Tokyo
14 February	Arrival in Tokyo. Drove to Karuizawa Pleasant day 20°C
15 February	a.m Myogi Ko dam p.m Oneyama, woodland walk Bright 16°C
16 February	Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest – walks Fresh, cold, windy 6°C
17 February	a.m Oneyama, woodland walk p.m River Chikuma Sunny, very bright 3°C
18 February	Kanbayashi ('Monkey Park') Bright and cold 0°C
19 February	Drove from Kanbayashi to Tokyo. Flew to Kogoshima, Kyushu. Drove to Izumi Snow, bright and cold, drizzle in Kyushu Variance -7°C (Honshu) to 12°C (Kyushu)
20 February	Arasaki. Akune (Michi-no-eki). Takae Bright, drizzle, windy, cold 8°C
21 February	River Kumagawa estuary. River Hikawa. Kōgawa dam Bright and sunny 11°C
22 February	Arasaki. Drove to Kagoshima. Flew to Tokyo and then to Kushiro, Hokkaido. Drove to Tsurui Dull, rain on leaving Kyushu. Light snow in Hokkaido Variance 5°C (Kyushu) to -5°C (Hokkaido)
23 February	River Setsurui. Kushiro Marsh. Kayanuma. Crane Observation Centre Sunny, cloud later Variance -15°C to -2°C
24 February	Tsurui. Lake Kussharo. Lake Mashu. Yoroushi Variance -18°C to -2°C
25 February	Yoroushi. Odaito. Notsuke Peninsular Variance -2°C to 4°C
26 February	Yoroushi. Various harbours. Rausu Some snow flurries, some sun -9°C to -1°C
27 February	Boat trip to pack ice. Shiretoko Peninsular. Lake Hakucho. Drove to Memanbetsu. Flew to Tokyo. Drove to Narita Sunny -8°C to -4°C
28 February	Flew from Narita, Tokyo to London, Heathrow

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

No of days recorded	Location	Abundance Scale
1 2h means seen on	Hu = Honshu	(max. seen on 1 day)
1 day and heard on	Ky = Kyushu	1 = 1-4 individuals
2 other days	Ho = Hokkaido	2 = 5-9
		3 = 10-99
		4 = 100-999
		5 = 1,000+

Species	No of days recorded	Locations	Abundance Scale	Scientific Name	
Black-throated Diver	1		Ho	1	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Pacific Diver	1		Ho	2	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>
Little Grebe	4	Hu Ky		1	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Red-necked Grebe	2		Ho	1	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Great Crested Grebe	1	Ky		1	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Streaked Shearwater	1	Ky		1	<i>Calonectris leucomelas</i>
Great Cormorant	6	Hu Ky		3	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Japanese Cormorant	2	Ky		3	<i>Phalacrocorax capillatus</i>
Pelagic Cormorant	3		Ho	3	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>
Grey Heron	6	Hu Ky		2	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Great Egret	6	Hu Ky		1	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Intermediate Egret	1	Ky		1	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>
Little Egret	3	Ky		2	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Pacific Reef Heron	1	Ky		1	<i>Egretta sacra</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	2	Ky		1	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Black-faced Spoonbill (Note 1)	1	Ky		2	<i>Platalea minor</i>
Bewick's Swan	2	Ky		1	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Whooper Swan	5		Ho	4	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Swan Goose	1	Ky		1	<i>Anser cygnoides</i>
Taiga Bean Goose (Note 2)	2	Ky		1	<i>Anser fabalis middendorffii</i>
Tundra Bean Goose	2	Ky		1	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>
Brent Goose (Black Brant)	1		Ho	1	<i>Branta bernicla nigricans</i>
Common Shelduck	1	Ky		4	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mandarin Duck	1	Hu		3	<i>Aix galericulata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	5	Hu Ky		4	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Falcated Duck	1	Hu		2	<i>Anas falcata</i>
Gadwall	1	Hu		3	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Baikal Teal	1	Hu		1	<i>Anas formosa</i>
Eurasian Teal	4	Hu Ky		3	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	10	Hu Ky	Ho	3	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Spot-billed Duck	5	Hu Ky		4	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>
Northern Pintail	5	Hu Ky	Ho	3	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	1		Ho	3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Common Pochard	1	Hu		3	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	2	Hu Ky		3	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	4	Hu	Ho	3	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Harlequin Duck	2		Ho	3	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Long-tailed Duck	1		Ho	3	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Black Scoter	2		Ho	3	<i>Melanitta americana</i>
Stejneger's Scoter (Note 3)	1		Ho	3	<i>Melanitta stejnegeri</i>
Common Goldeneye	5		Ho	4	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Smew	1	Hu		2	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	3	Ky	Ho	3	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	6	Hu	Ho	3	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Osprey	2	Ky		2	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Black-eared Kite (Note 4)	14	Hu Ky	Ho	4	<i>Milvus lineatus</i>
White-tailed Eagle	5		Ho	3	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Steller's Sea-Eagle	5		Ho	3	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	Ky		1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>

Northern Goshawk	1	Hu			1	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Japanese Buzzard (Note 5)	6	Hu	Ky	Ho	1	<i>Buteo (buteo) japonicus</i>
Greater Spotted Eagle	1		Ky		1	<i>Aquila clanga</i>
Mountain (Hodgson's) Hawk-Eagle	1	Hu			1	<i>Spizaetus nipalensis</i>
Common Kestrel	2		Ky		1	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Peregrine Falcon	1		Ky		1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Siberian Crane (Note 6)	2		Ky		1	<i>Grus leucogeranus</i>
Sandhill Crane	2		Ky		1	<i>Grus canadensis</i>
White-naped Crane	2		Ky		4	<i>Grus vipio</i>
Hooded Crane (Note 7)	3		Ky		5	<i>Grus monacha</i>
Red-crowned Crane	3			Ho	4	<i>Grus japonensis</i>
Common Moorhen	1		Ky		1	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	3	Hu	Ky		3	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Northern Lapwing	3		Ky		3	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Grey Plover	1		Ky		1	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Long-billed Plover	2	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>
Kentish Plover	2		Ky		3	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Little Ringed Plover	2		Ky		1	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Common Sandpiper	4	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Eurasian Curlew	1		Ky		1	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Dunlin	2		Ky		4	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Black-tailed Gull	2		Ky		3	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>
Kamchatka Gull (Note 8)	1			Ho	1	<i>Larus kamtschatschensis</i>
Glaucous-winged Gull	3			Ho	1	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>
Glaucous Gull	3			Ho	3	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Vega Gull (Note 9)	3		Ky	Ho	4	<i>Larus vegae</i>
Heuglin's Gull (Note 10)	1		Ky		1	<i>Larus heuglini</i>
Slaty-backed Gull	6	Hu	Ky	Ho	4	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>
Black-headed Gull	3	Hu	Ky	Ho	3	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Saunders' Gull (Note 11)	1		Ky		3	<i>Saundersilarus saundersi</i>
Black-legged Kittiwake	1		Ky		2	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Common Guillemot	2			Ho	1	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Brunnich's Guillemot	1			Ho	2	<i>Uria lomvia</i>
Spectacled Guillemot	2			Ho	3	<i>Cephus carbo</i>
Japanese Murrelet	1		Ky		3	<i>Synthliboramphus wumizusume</i>
Rock Pigeon	10	Hu	Ky	Ho	4	<i>Columba livia</i>
Oriental Turtle-Dove	3		Ky		3	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>
Blakiston's Fish-Owl (Note 12)	3			Ho	1	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>
Ural Owl	2			Ho	1	<i>Strix uralensis</i>
Common Kingfisher	1		Ky		1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Crested Kingfisher	3		Ky	Ho	1	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>
Pygmy Woodpecker	3	Hu			1	<i>Dendrocopos kizuki</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	6	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Japanese Skylark (Note 13)	3		Ky		2	<i>Alauda japonicus</i>
Barn Swallow	3		Ky		1	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Black-backed Wagtail	7	Hu	Ky		3	<i>Motacilla lugens</i>
Japanese Wagtail	4	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>
Grey Wagtail	3	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Olive-backed Pipit	1		Ky		1	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>
Asian Buff-bellied Pipit (Note 14)	3		Ky		3	<i>Anthus rubescens (japonicus)</i>
Brown-eared Bulbul	10	Hu	Ky	Ho	2	<i>Ixos amaurotis</i>
Goldcrest	1	Hu			1	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Japanese Waxwing	1	Hu			3	<i>Bombycilla japonica</i>
Brown Dipper	2			Ho	1	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>
Winter Wren	5	Hu			1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Japanese Accentor	1	Hu			1	<i>Prunella rubida</i>
Blue Rock-Thrush	1		Ky		1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Pale Thrush	2		Ky		1	<i>Turdus pallidus</i>
Dusky Thrush	12	Hu	Ky	Ho	3	<i>Turdus naumanni</i>
Japanese Bush-Warbler	2	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Cettia diphone</i>
Red-flanked Bluetail (Note 15)	1	Hu			1	<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>
Daurian Redstart	5	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>
Marsh Tit	3			Ho	2	<i>Poecile palustris</i>

Willow Tit	4	Hu			3	<i>Poecile montana</i>
Coal Tit	5	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Periparus ater</i>
Japanese Tit	8	Hu	Ky	Ho	3	<i>Parus minor</i>
Varied Tit	5	Hu	Ky		2	<i>Sittiparus varius</i>
Long-tailed Tit	6	Hu	Ky		3	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	6	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Japanese White-eye	3	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>
Bull-headed Shrike	3	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>
Eurasian Jay	6	Hu		Ho	3	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Azure-winged Magpie	1	Hu			3	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>
Eurasian Magpie	1		Ky		1	<i>Pica pica</i>
Daurian Jackdaw	1		Ky		1	<i>Corvus dauuricus</i>
Oriental Rook (Note 16)	3	Hu	Ky		4	<i>Corvus pastinator</i>
Oriental Crow	13		Ky	Ho	3	<i>Corvus orientalis</i>
Large-billed Crow	11	Hu	Ky	Ho	2	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
Common Raven	3	lh		Ho	1	<i>Corvus corax</i>
White-cheeked Starling	4	Hu	Ky		3	<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>
Meadow Bunting	4	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>
Rustic Bunting	2	Hu			2	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
Black-faced Bunting	1	Hu			1	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>
Brambling	8	Hu	Ky	Ho	4	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Grey-bellied Bullfinch (Note 17)	2	Hu	Ky		1	<i>Pyrrhula griseiventris</i>
Common Redpoll (Note 18)	2			Ho	1	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
Eurasian Siskin	3	Hu		Ho	3	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Grey-capped Greenfinch	7	Hu	Ky	Ho	3	<i>Carduelis sinica</i>
Asian Rosy-Finch	2			Ho	3	<i>Leucosticte arctoa</i>
Hawfinch	6	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Japanese Grosbeak	3	Hu			3	<i>Eophona personata</i>
Pallas's Rosefinch	2	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Carpodacus roseus</i>
Long-tailed Rosefinch	3	Hu		Ho	1	<i>Uragus sibiricus</i>
Russet Sparrow	1		Ky		3	<i>Passer rutilans</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	12	Hu	Ky	Ho	5	<i>Passer montanus</i>

Avian Taxonomy and further notes

- Note 1 Black-faced Spoonbill is an endangered species. Only 288 individuals survived in 1990. Today, due to conservation efforts the population in 2008 was estimated at 2065 birds
- Note 2 Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese are the two splits of Bean Goose recognised by many authorities (for example the AOU, though *not* the BOU note). There is a good case, recently put forward to further separate *middendorffii* from Taiga Bean Goose
- Note 3 Stejneger's Scoter has been split from White-winged Scoter of the US (itself split from Velvet Scoter in the past)
- Note 4 Black-eared Kite has been split from Black Kite, the split not recognised universally
- Note 5 Japanese Buzzard is another split (from Common or Eurasian Buzzard), still controversial, and debate continues
- Note 6 Siberian Crane is critically endangered. The future looks most uncertain with the building of the Three Gorges Dam in China that will directly affect the wintering site of 95% of the population. Both the western and central population seem biologically extinct leaving the eastern population of about 3000 birds
- Note 7 Two hybrids (Hooded x Common Cranes) were seen at Arasaki. The first, a complete mess in plumage but the second could easily have passed as a Common Crane, though the black of the neck was scruffy (can be though with 'good' Common Cranes), on further view the bird showed no red on the crown also
- Note 8 Kamchatka Gull is a split from Mew or Common Gull
- Note 9 Vega Gull is a split from the Herring Gull (or Lesser Black-backed) complex. Its classification is still controversial and uncertain. There are at least two subspecies: Vega Gull, *Larus (argentatus) vegae*, and Mongolian Gull, *Larus (vegae/cachinnans/argentatus) mongolicus*
- Note 10 We saw a bird closely resembling the form *tamyrensis*. Sometimes included within Lesser Black-backed but now often lumped under Heuglin's Gull (sometimes called Siberian Gull). Heuglin's Gull has been put forward as a split from Lesser Black-backed Gull
- Note 11 Saunders' Gull (sometimes spelled as Saunders's Gull) is another threatened species with a small declining population. Found breeding only in eastern China it winters in Korea, the tip of Vietnam, and small numbers in Taiwan and Japan

- Note 12 The magnificent Blakiston's Fish-Owl was a highlight of this tour. Analysis of mtDNA shows it clearly to be an 'eagle owl', and thus now placed in the *Bubo* genus. Another endangered species, this massive owl is probably the world's largest owl species. This bird is endangered due to the widespread loss of riverine forest, increasing development along rivers and dam construction. The current population in Japan is approximately 100-150 birds (20 breeding pairs and unpaired individuals), whereas on mainland Asia the population is much higher, perhaps several thousand individuals. I was asked who was Blakiston? Henry Seebohm named the bird after the English naturalist Thomas Blakiston who collected the original specimen in Hakodate, Hokkaido, Japan in 1883
- Note 13 Japanese Skylark is listed as a split in many publications but I can find no reference or biological paper as to why this bird should be recognised specifically from Eurasian Skylark
- Note 14 Asian Buff-bellied Pipit is a good candidate to be split from the American Buff-bellied Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*). Sequence differences have been found and work continues
- Note 15 Red-flanked Bluetail – it was a surprise to find this bird in winter in Japan. Mark Brazil informed me that a few do overwinter
- Note 16 Oriental Rooks do look very different to our own, though more work is needed to recognise a species split
- Note 17 Grey-bellied Bullfinch is another species with bewildering different plumages currently lumped with Eurasian Bullfinch or split under this 'new' name
- Note 18 The group saw a very white and 'frosty' redpoll perched in a bush. It was not seen in flight, so the rump was not seen for identification as Arctic Redpoll. Arctic Redpoll would be an extremely rare visitor to Japan, and so this bird may have been a pale 'Mealy Redpoll', which I assume visit Japan from northern Russia

CHECKLIST OF MAMMALS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

Japanese Macaque	2	Hu		4	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>
Red Squirrel	3	Hu		1	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel	2	Hu		1	<i>Petaurista leucogenys</i>
Red Fox	3		Ho	1	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Sable	3		Ho	1	<i>Martes zibellina</i>
Larga Seal	2		Ho	2	<i>Phoca largha</i>
Wild Boar	2	Hu	Ky	1	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
Sika Deer	3		Ho	3	<i>Cervus nippon</i>
Japanese Serow	1	Hu		1	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>
Baird's Beaked Whale	1		Ho	1	<i>Berardius bairdii</i>

These lists represent those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour



Japanese Macaque
(‘Snow Monkey’)



Ural Owl



Adult White-tailed Eagle



Some local rarities

2 Siberian Cranes - adult and young

(with Hooded, White-naped and a hybrid Common x Hooded in the background)



Swan Goose



Saunders' Gull
(with Black-headed Gull)



The enormous
Blakiston's Fish-Owl

All photographs taken on the Ornitholidays' tour to Japan February 2009 ©Tony Pym

Many thanks to Ben Wilson for the photo of Blakiston's Fish-Owl ©Ben Wilson



Japanese winter scene – Red-crowned Cranes at the River Setsurui, early morning