



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**Winter Japan: Dancing Cranes & Spectacular Sea Eagles 2014**

Feb 7, 2014 to Feb 22, 2014

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

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

This was my tenth Japan tour and an unusual one due to a combination of extreme weather and my unfortunate accident early on, when black ice at Karuizawa was my undoing and resulted in a broken right arm. I was not sure I could continue, but it seemed to work out and the group and my co-guide Jun were fantastic, rallying round and helping me with all the difficult stuff like getting strapped up with bandages, doing up coats and shoes, etc. It meant no photos or taping for me throughout, which was frustrating, but the tour could continue!

In the weather department, snow in Tokyo was very unusual (actually my first time for it here), and boy did we get a storm. It was so lucky the group all got in as the airport shut about an hour after Ellen landed, and Cynthia and Jack had to come by train and taxi from Kyoto as the flight was canceled. The worst storms in 120 years paralyzed Tokyo, the freeways were all shut, and there were thousands of abandoned cars everywhere -- we saw one car hanging off a bridge where only the top guardrail had saved them from plunging to doom! We were very lucky to find our way out of the city, albeit very slowly -- what is usually a three-hour drive took seven.

Brown-headed Thrush was by the Tobu Narita again, and once more the only one we saw; Falcated Duck there was unusual too. Karuizawa was very snowy, and we did not have any luck with Copper Pheasant or Long-tailed Rosefinch, but Japanese Green Woodpecker showed well and we had a bonus Solitary Snipe flush out of a streambed. The Snow Monkeys were a big hit, and we had Green Pheasant and Asian Azure-winged Magpie at the hide at Kahokugata. Great looks at Taiga Bean Goose and Greater White-fronted at Komatsu, also nice Smew and Baikal Teal (but the latter only seen at this one site this trip). We found our only Gray-headed Lapwing of the trip in Kaga city on a paddyfield.

Kyushu gave us wonderful Hooded (9000) and White-naped cranes (1500), plus Sandhill (4) and Common (2). Saunders's Gull was very sparse, I only saw a couple at Yatsushiro; but Black-faced Spoonbill with 3 Eurasian Spoonbill was nice, and a Ruddy Shelduck at the Eastern fields was a bonus. We saw Mandarin Duck quite well at Kogawa Dam after none at Sendai, and White-bellied Green Pigeon made a brief appearance. Lake Mi-ike gave us a bonus Forest Wagtail and Yellow-throated Bunting, but no Ryukyu Minivet this time.

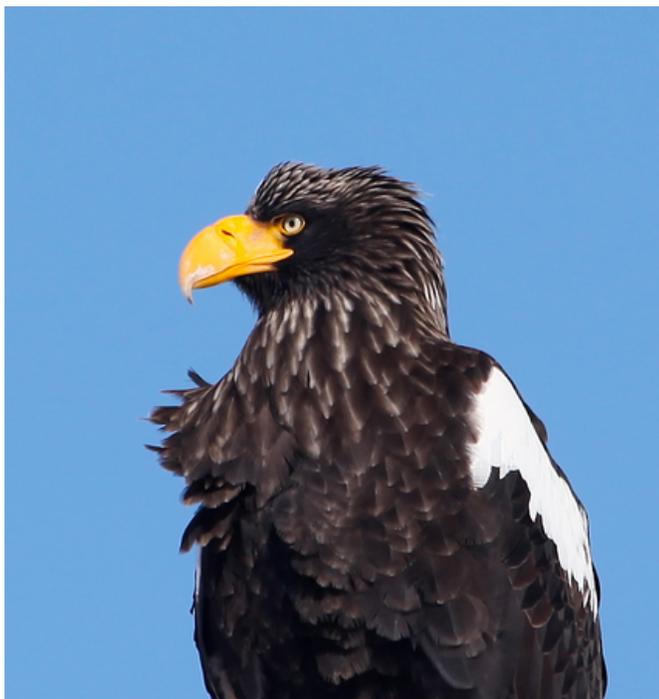
Hokkaido was tough due to the weather, but notable additions were two taxa of White-winged Scoter (*deglandi* vagrant, plus the usual *stejnegeri*), Rough-legged Hawk, Short-eared Owl, waxwing sp. flying over at Meto (darn it...), Brambling, and quite a few redpolls, some of which bore a pretty darn close resemblance to Hoary -- I can see why BirdLife is now lumping all the redpolls in their new lumping frenzy! Red-crowned Crane was again a huge highlight, and seeing them so close and dancing in the snow is fantastic. And the Steller's and White-tailed eagles we encountered were just wonderful as ever.

Hokkaido was very disrupted by bad weather, with high winds and much snow leading to closure of most of the road network; we could not get to Rausu for the Blakiston's Fish Owl lodge and boat trip, and we were lucky to get to Nemuro and Nosappu at the end. We managed a splendid Ural Owl at roost, Asian Rosy Finch and an amazingly close White-backed Woodpecker, plus Spectacled and Pigeon guillemots off Nosappu, where a new hide means our risk of dying of exposure is substantially reduced! Blakiston's Fish-Owl was problematic, but shuffling our schedule we managed to stay at two different lodges where they are seen. Sadly, however, they chose not to show (despite having been at one onsen for the previous 3 nights), though I did see two fly across at dusk, and we heard them calling for ages.

Birds of the trip were as always the cranes, Steller's Sea Eagle, Ural Owl, and White-backed Woodpecker, plus assorted spectacular wildfowl and some good alcids.

My thanks to Sue and Jun of Sicklebill Safaris for setting up the logistics, to Jun for doing the driving plus assisting me, to the group for good company, much kind assistance to me, cheerfulness and excellent medications for pain, and to Karen at Field Guides HQ for good work with the flights and tour material. This is still one of my favourite tours.

--Phil in Kuranda, Queensland



*Always a show-stopper and tour highlight: the spectacular Steller's Sea Eagle (Photo by participant Gil Ewing)*

## KEYS FOR THIS LIST

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

## BIRDS

### Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**TAIGA BEAN-GOOSE** (*Anser fabalis middendorffii*) – 129 at Kitano Kamo-ike and 4 at Arasaki Eastern fields. Bean Goose is split by some into Tundra and Taiga species.

**GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE** (*Anser albifrons*) – Nice looks at 700 grazing in wet paddies near Kaga city. We learned from Bernie and Chris that the Alaskan name is "niglik" which describes the call really well. Two odd hybrids amongst them had white bellies, some white at base of bill, and blackish necks with some pale on face or chin, not sure of the parentage but Snow Goose might be involved. There is a photo on the slideshow.

**WHOOPEE SWAN** (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Five day records, the first near Kanazawa, and about 70 on Hokkaido.

**RUDDY SHELDUCK** (*Tadorna ferruginea*) – One at Arasaki on Jan 13 and 14 was unexpected, it's a rare visitor here, this one was sat in a ditch and then on a side road for ages.

**COMMON SHELDUCK** (*Tadorna tadorna*) – About 20 at Arasaki and 15 at Yatsushiro.

**MANDARIN DUCK** (*Aix galericulata*) – None at Sendai, but nice looks at Kogawa where we saw 3 on the river and 3 on the dam, with a flock of 50 seen by Jun when our group flushed them out.

**FALCATED DUCK** (*Anas falcata*) – 3 males and a female by the Tobu Narita were unexpected here, then we had several flocks near Kahokugata and then at Kamoike pond. The sickle-shaped tertials seemingly give it the scientific name, see my photo on the FG photo display for this tour.

**EURASIAN WIGEON** (*Anas penelope*) – Five day records, modest numbers.

**AMERICAN WIGEON** (*Anas americana*) – One hybrid with Eurasian Wigeon was on a pond near Kaga city.

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

**EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK** (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Six day records, the maximum about 100 at Kamoike.

**NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*) – Just 3 birds at Kamoike, amazingly scarce this trip.

**NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*) – Very few, just 4 day records and the most being 30 at Kamoike.

**BAIKAL TEAL** (*Anas formosa*) – Only see at Kamoike this trip, there were about 500 there and for once a fine drake was quite close by.

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

**COMMON POCHARD** (*Aythya ferina*) – Very few, 30 at Saku Reservoir then just a handful on 3 other days.

**TUFTED DUCK** (*Aythya fuligula*) – Five day records but no big numbers.

**GREATER SCAUP** (*Aythya marila*) – Very few, just 3 day records.

**HARLEQUIN DUCK** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Seen on two days, we usually get plenty off Hokkaido but the weather made this impossible, so I am glad we saw one at Akkeshi and 4 off Nosappu.

**WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (SIBERIAN)** (*Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*) – Some excellent looks at this species off Notsuke, the small bill knob was seen well on the males. Split from Velvet Scoter of Europe by most.

**WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (NORTH AMERICAN)** (*Melanitta fusca deglandi*) – A single drake of this North American form was off Notsuke on Jan 21, luckily quite close by and I thank Gil for drawing our attention to it. There was more orange on the bill and it lacked a knob, giving a different head profile. It is a vagrant to Japan but may be overlooked, also a potential split and a new taxon for me.

**BLACK SCOTER** (*Melanitta americana*) – About 40 off Notsuke and then some 200 off Nosappu. This is a split from Common Scoter of Europe, the males have much more orange on the bill.

**LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – About 40 of this lovely vocal species were off Notsuke.

**COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – Four day records, the first 2 f at Saku then a few off Hokkaido.

**SMEW** (*Mergellus albellus*) – 2 drakes and 4 females at Saku Reservoir, then 3 drakes and 6 redheads at Kamoike with 2 drakes at Kahokugata. Always a very nice species to get.

**COMMON MERGANSER** (*Mergus merganser*) – Six day records, max. 20 at Saku. Known as Goosander in the UK.

**RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*) – Two redheads off Yatsushiro and 10 at Akkeshi.

### Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN)** (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – A fine male Japanese Pheasant was seen in the scrub at Kahokugata, initially flushed when Gil went after the Azure-winged magpies and seen again later. [E]

### Podicipedidae (Grebes)

**LITTLE GREBE (LITTLE)** (*Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*) – Five day records of one or two, this race has yellow eyes.

**RED-NECKED GREBE** (*Podiceps grisegena holbollii*) – One off Cape Nosappu was a nice find, always scarce on this trip.

**GREAT CRESTED GREBE** (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – Seen at Kahokugata with one bird, then one off Yatsushiro.

**EARED GREBE** (*Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*) – One off Yatsushiro and one off Akune.

### Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

**GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN)** (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – The local race is apparently hanedae, quite common in the south.

**JAPANESE CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – A fine bird posing on the harbor wall at Hashidate, then a few on the rocks off Akune, the green sheen could be seen well as also the pointed gular area. [E]

**PELAGIC CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Just a few off Nosappu this year, one pale yellowish billed bird had me wondering about Red-faced.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

**GRAY HERON** (*Ardea cinerea*) – Quite widespread in the south in small numbers.

**GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN)** (*Ardea alba alba*) – Small numbers in the south.

**LITTLE EGRET (LITTLE)** (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – Just a handful around Arasaki.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

**EURASIAN SPOONBILL** (*Platalea leucorodia*) – Three spent most of the time asleep at Arasaki.

**BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL** (*Platalea minor*) – One was with the 3 Eurasian Spoonbill but woke up sporadically so we could see the black face as well as the small size. Still one very rare bird with just a few thousand in existence.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

**OSPREY (EURASIAN)** (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – Three day records from Yatsushiro and the Arasaki area.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK** (*Accipiter nisus*) – Just a single at the Eastern fields this trip.

**NORTHERN GOSHAWK** (*Accipiter gentilis*) – One soaring over the river as we neared Mi-ike was a very nice find, we could see the dark cap, fluffy white undertail coverts and rounded tail tip very well.

**BLACK KITE (BLACK-EARED)** (*Milvus migrans lineatus*) – Widespread and fairly common, they sure look different to Black Kite and some lists do split them.

**WHITE-TAILED EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Good views on Hokkaido, especially at Notsuke Hanto.

**STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – The deep snow made accessing the usual sites impossible, but we saw this spectacular bird very well at Notsuke and near Kushiro; a shame we could not do the boat trip this year as Rausu was inaccessible.

**ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK** (*Buteo lagopus*) – One near Akkeshi and one up on Kiritappu, always scarce on this trip.

**COMMON BUZZARD (JAPONICUS)** (*Buteo buteo japonicus*) – Four day records, and split by many these days, we had some good views.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

**EURASIAN COOT** (*Fulica atra*) – Five day records, mostly just singles.

Gruidae (Cranes)

**SANDHILL CRANE** (*Grus canadensis*) – Three birds at Arasaki mixed in with the crane flocks.

**WHITE-NAPED CRANE** (*Grus vipio*) – About 1500 at Arasaki, giving wonderful views and with some flocks heading off north as they get ready to migrate.

**COMMON CRANE** (*Grus grus*) – A couple of individuals at Arasaki, one may have had some Hooded Crane parentage but the other looked pretty good.

**HOODED CRANE** (*Grus monacha*) – Around 9000 this year at Arasaki, and again tremendous views of the noisy flocks, Many were seen dancing, and small family groups were dotted about the area.

**RED-CROWNED CRANE** (*Grus japonensis*) – 140 on one day at Tsurui, a marvellous sight in the snow, then 60 next day with a final view of 3 near Kushiro as we went to the airport. One of the great icons of the tour, the setting is just so fantastic.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

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

**NORTHERN LAPWING** (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A few at Kahokugata and then Arasaki.

**GRAY-HEADED LAPWING** (*Vanellus cinereus*) – Just a single on a paddyfield in Kaga city, luckily we were able to pull over right by it!

**KENTISH PLOVER** (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – 10 at Yatsushiro on the mudflats there.

**COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – A single at Yatsushiro.

**LONG-BILLED PLOVER** (*Charadrius placidus*) – Great views of a single on the riverine gravel at Saku.

**LITTLE RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius dubius*) – Two at the Eastern Fields were unexpected.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

**COMMON SANDPIPER** (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – A couple of singles near Arasaki

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

**COMMON GREENSHANK** (*Tringa nebularia*) – One from Yatsushiro.

**EURASIAN CURLEW** (*Numenius arquata*) – A single at Yatsushiro, quite scarce in Japan.

**TEMMINCK'S STINT** (*Calidris temminckii*) – One at the Eastern Fields was a nice find.

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*) – About 30 at Yatsushiro.

**SOLITARY SNIPE** (*Gallinago solitaria*) – One flushed up from a stream bed in the snow at Karuizawa Jan 10 and gave a brief flight look for some of us. We checked next day and there was sadly no sign. This was just my second record.

**COMMON SNIPE** (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Just one at Narita was it for the tour.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

**COMMON MURRE** (*Uria aalge*) – A few folks saw this off Nosappu.

**PIGEON GUILLEMOT** (*Cepphus columba*) – A good look at one off Nosappu, the Brit birder who we squashed in the hide there was duly grateful!

**SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT** (*Cepphus carbo*) – Good numbers- c. 40- off Nosappu this time, with some nice looks, and a couple off Notsuke too.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

**SAUNDERS'S GULL** (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – My poorest trip for them, the tide was going out fast and I personally just saw 2 birds, though a handful more were seen by the two-handed observers. The small size, delicate build and dotted wingtip pattern are quite distinctive, and one was

quite well into the black-headed summer dress.

**BLACK-HEADED GULL** (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Three day records, with 40 around Yatsushiro the most.

**BLACK-TAILED GULL** (*Larus crassirostris*) – 15 at Hashidate gave nice looks, then a few along the coast near Akune and Yatsushiro. One good-looking gull.

**HERRING GULL (VEGA)** (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – Small numbers of this pale mantled gull of the Herring Gull complex, split by most these days as Vega Gull.

**LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (HEUGLIN'S)** (*Larus fuscus heuglini*) – A couple of dark mantled and yellowish legged birds of Yatsushiro might be placed here though something sometimes called *taimyrensis* muddies the waters, and the whole big white-headed gull taxonomy seems to be theology and opinion rather than fact!

**SLATY-BACKED GULL** (*Larus schistisagus*) – A handful in the south then quite common on Hokkaido.

**GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL** (*Larus glaucescens*) – Very few this trip, we saw them off Notsuke and Nosappu and one was seen at Akkeshi. This was the first tour we did not see the distinctive local *kamschatchensis* form of Common Gull too, no doubt the hard weather has made the larids move.

**GLAUCOUS GULL** (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Also very few, only seen at Akkeshi and then a few off Notsuke.

#### Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

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

**ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE** (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – Also quite widespread.

**WHITE-BELLIED PIGEON** (*Treron sieboldii sieboldii*) – One was seen briefly at Kogawa, always a scarce species.

#### Strigidae (Owls)

**BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL** (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – Boy did we go through the hoops here when our usual sites became inaccessible. We tried at an onsen called Meto where the birds had been seen recently, but had no success, than decided to try at Yoroushi as the road had just been opened. We paid a cancellation fee for our hotel at Nemuro and went to this lovely onsen, where the owls had been seen the past 3 nights, but sure enough despite my seeing two fly over at dusk and then persistent calling, the damn things never came in this night. Really bad luck, I felt we deserved this one, but the unwelcome appearance of the Sable by the pond might have been counter-productive.

**URAL OWL** (*Strix uralensis*) – We saw one flyby briefly in the snowy woods at Karuizawa, then Jun's friend at Tsurui took us to a terrific roosting bird in the snowy woods quite nearby, where we had brilliant views.

**SHORT-EARED OWL** (*Asio flammeus*) – One was flying quite high over the snowy fields as we came back into Nemuro late that afternoon, always a good addition to the tour.

#### Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

**COMMON KINGFISHER** (*Alcedo atthis*) – Three singles from Narita, Yatsushiro and Arasaki

#### Picidae (Woodpeckers)

**PYGMY WOODPECKER** (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – Great looks at 5 in the frozen woods at Karuizawa, then a few at various sites on Hokkaido. A near endemic too.

**WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER** (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) – This is a hard bird, but we heard that the visitor centre at Shunkunita near Furen had been having them, and sure enough there was a brilliant obliging one on the feeders and then nearby there, if only I'd been able to use my camera!

**GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED)** (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – Four day records from Karuizawa, then Fujiya, Tsurui and near Furen, a very striking bird and a good candidate for a split too.

**JAPANESE WOODPECKER** (*Picus awokera*) – Nice looks at a couple at Karuizawa, and then a single at Lake Mi-ike. This can be an elusive endemic, so we did well. [E]

#### Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

**EURASIAN KESTREL** (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Just 3 day records of singles on Honshu.

**MERLIN** (*Falco columbarius*) – Cynthia saw one shoot by at Kahokugata.

**PEREGRINE FALCON** (*Falco peregrinus*) – A fine large female was sat in the Eastern Fields, she gave nice looks. It looked like the race *japonensis*.

#### Laniidae (Shrikes)

**BULL-HEADED SHRIKE** (*Lanius bucephalus*) – Four day records, the first at Narita then again at Saku, Kamoike and finally from Sendai fields.

#### Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

**EURASIAN JAY** (*Garrulus glandarius brandtii*) – This dark-eyed taxon showed well at the onsens on Hokkaido.

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

**AZURE-WINGED MAGPIE (JAPANESE)** (*Cyanopica cyanus japonica*) – Jun gripped us off with one at the shrine at Karuizawa which we missed, but we got 4 unexpectedly by the hide at Kahokugata, the pale tail tip showing well. Most authorities split it as Asian Azure-winged Magpie, with a highly disjunct range to the Azure-winged in Iberia.

**DAURIAN JACKDAW** (*Corvus dauuricus*) – Three juveniles amongst the Rooks at Kahokugata were unexpected, one had some pale blotches on the head. Then we had 4 at Arasaki with the Rooks there, including a nice pied adult.

**ROOK** (*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*) – 15 at Kahokugata, then up to 120 at Arasaki; expect a split in due course as Eastern Rook, they seem fairly different to European birds. They winter here in varying numbers each year.

**CARRION CROW** (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – A good winter for them, they were widespread and we saw them on each of the islands. Expect a split as Eastern Carrion Crow in due course.

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

#### Alaudidae (Larks)

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

*Hirundinidae (Swallows)*

**BARN SWALLOW** (*Hirundo rustica*) – Two over a river as we neared Mi-ike were a surprise and may have been a Japanese tick for Phil.

**ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN** (*Delichon dasypus*) – Just 12 at Ashikita city, swooping about over the creek in the town centre.

*Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)*

**MARSH TIT** (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – A Hokkaido special, seen well at most woodland sites there and especially at Tsurui.

**WILLOW TIT** (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Great looks at Karuizawa, and then again at Fujiya, they look bigger headed than Marsh Tit and the "bee bee" raspy call seems like the Eurasian ones.

**VARIED TIT** (*Poecile varius varius*) – Another very striking species, about to be broken up into 4 components, seen very well at Karuizawa and then at Lake Mi-ike.

**COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL)** (*Periparus ater insularis*) – Six day records, with very small numbers only, seen very well at Karuizawa and Tsurui.

**JAPANESE TIT** (*Parus minor*) – Finally split by Clements, a shame as when it was Great Tit, *Parus major minor* had a certain je ne sais quoi to it.....They were widespread and showed very nicely.

*Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)*

**CHINESE PENDULINE-TIT** (*Remiz consobrinus*) – My reedbed site at Arasaki again came good, there were at least 10 of this irruptive and elusive species feeding amongst the Phragmites there, and they gave good views.

*Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)*

**LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS)** (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – This is the striking white-headed nominate ace which we saw at Fujiya onsen, with some seeing it at Tsurui as well.

**LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS)** (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Seen well at Karuizawa, what hardy creatures they are, and also at Mi-ike.

*Sittidae (Nuthatches)*

**EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN)** (*Sitta europaea asiatica*) – This is the taxon from Hokkaido with the striking white underparts, with just a hint of pale chestnut on the hind flanks on some. Some authorities propose to split it but I have to say the differences seem minor.

**EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN)** (*Sitta europaea amurensis*) – This is the taxon with the chestnut on the flanks which we saw Karuizawa and Mi-ike.

*Troglodytidae (Wrens)*

**EURASIAN WREN** (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – Great looks at one at Meto onsen, feeding on rocks in the stream there like a diminutive Brown Dipper. Expect this to be split in due course as Eurasian Wren gets better analyzed, the voice is very distinctive and it's a very dark taxon.

*Cinclidae (Dippers)*

**BROWN DIPPER** (*Cinclus pallasii*) – One at Karuizawa, then nice looks at Kogawa stream before a single at Meto.

*Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)*

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

*Regulidae (Kinglets)*

**GOLDCREST** (*Regulus regulus japonensis*) – Many of the folks on the snow monkey trek saw one, and we had another in the conifers near Meto onsen.

*Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)*

**JAPANESE BUSH-WARBLER** (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – One bird at the reedbed near the Crane Centre eventually showed quite well, and it was heard at Kahokugata. They can be very hard to see.

*Zosteropidae (Yuhinas, White-eyes, and Allies)*

**JAPANESE WHITE-EYE** (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Seen very nicely at Kogawa Stream, with 5 birds there on the blossoms.

*Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)*

**RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL** (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – A few folks saw this at Kogawa stream.

**DAURIAN REDSTART** (*Phoenicurus aureus*) – Five day records, it always seems incongruous to see this lovely bird in the snow, but the male at Karuizawa seemed just fine, and it showed well at Saku, Sendai and Yatsushiro too.

**BLUE ROCK-THRUSH** (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – Four day records, with this orange-bellied race at Akune and the blue-bellied race (presumably pandoo) at Hashidate seawall and Kogawa.

*Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**SCALY THRUSH (WHITE'S)** (*Zoothera dauma toratugumi*) – Just a single was seen by Gil at Karuizawa. Taxonomy of this race is unsettled.....

**PALE THRUSH** (*Turdus pallidus*) – Four day records from Kanazawa and then around Izumi.

**BROWN-HEADED THRUSH** (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – Just a single by the creek at Narita, a place where we usually see it but actually the only site on the tour!

**DUSKY THRUSH** (*Turdus eunomus*) – The default winter thrush, we saw them most days in small numbers.

*Sturnidae (Starlings)*

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – A flock of about 30 were by the crane centre at Arasaki, it's an uncommon winter visitor here.

**WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING** (*Sturnus cineraceus*) – Six day records from Honshu and Kyushu, only very small numbers.

*Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)*

**GRAY WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Just four day records of singles, the best at Saku I think.

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

**JAPANESE WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla grandis*) – Some good looks at Narita and Karuizawa especially, with none in the north.

**OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT** (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – Up to 7 feeding under the pines at Lake Mi-ike, a reliable spot for them.

**RED-THROATED PIPIT** (*Anthus cervinus*) – Just a single at the Eastern Fields, the best way to find them is the sibilant call.

**AMERICAN PIPIT (SIBERIAN)** (*Anthus rubescens japonicus*) – Good looks at Narita and then at the Eastern Fields, this is the race *japonicus* with heavy breast streaks and eye-ring, potentially a split from American Pipit.

**FOREST WAGTAIL** (*Dendronanthus indicus*) – A major surprise was our finding this vagrant at Lake Mi-ike, where I got my lifer about 5 years back. It's a vagrant to Japan and this bird we subsequently learned had been there since December.

#### *Bombycillidae (Waxwings)*

**BOHEMIAN WAXWING** (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – A brief flyover for Jun and Cynthia at Karuizawa, with 2 Waxwing sp., then a flock of about 20 Waxwing sp. flew over at Meto but sadly could not be found to check which species were involved.

#### *Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)*

**MEADOW BUNTING** (*Emberiza cioides*) – The commonest winter bunting, seen very well at Narita and Saku with up to 10 birds there, quite a striking species.

**CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING** (*Emberiza fucata*) – Just a single in a field near the Crane Centre.

**RUSTIC BUNTING** (*Emberiza rustica*) – One at Saku and 4 by the Eastern Fields.

**YELLOW-THROATED BUNTING** (*Emberiza elegans*) – Three at Mi-ike were a very nice pick-up of an elusive species.

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

**GRAY BUNTING** (*Emberiza variabilis*) – A single female showed very briefly at Mi-ike, always a very tricky species to get.

**REED BUNTING** (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – Two at Saku, and heard at a couple of other sites on Honshu.

#### *Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)*

**BRAMBLING** (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – 4 beautiful birds at the Tsurui feeders included a male coming well into summer plumage.

**ASIAN ROSY-FINCH** (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – About 50 were sheltering in the dwarf bushes near the house where they feed them in Kiritappu, a very bleak setting and amazingly cold this year! No others seen.

**ORIENTAL GREENFINCH** (*Chloris sinica*) – Small numbers on 7 dates, starting at Narita and even seen on Hokkaido.

**COMMON REDPOLL** (*Acanthis flammea*) – Not often seen on this tour, we had several flocks on Hokkaido and had great looks at c. 40 near the Ural Owl site, where there was a great variety of plumages including some that were pretty darn close to Hoary Redpoll, being so grey and white. Redpoll taxonomy is vexed and BirdLife now lump them all as one species!

**HAWFINCH** (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – Five day records, with good looks at Karuizawa and Tsurui as well as at Fujiya. Those weird pine-tree shaped tertials are very strange.

**JAPANESE GROSBEAK** (*Eophona personata*) – Seen well at Karuizawa, but very small numbers this year. Some folks saw a couple at Kogawa too.

#### *Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**EURASIAN TREE SPARROW** (*Passer montanus*) – Quite widespread with a flock of about 80 at Arasaki Crane Centre.

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## MAMMALS

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

**JAPANESE SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus lis*) – A couple of this cute tufted-eared species were seen at Karuizawa.

**RED FOX** (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Great looks on Hokkaido where they really stand out in the snow; one animal was unusually tame and was I suspect sick.

**SABLE (SIBERIAN MARTEN)** (*Martes zibellina*) – One or two came in to the feeder by the fish owl pond at night, and may have been a factor in keeping the owl away that night.....

**HARBOR SEAL** (*Phoca vitulina*) – Three off Nosappu in an ice free bay there.

**SIKA DEER** (*Cervus nippon*) – Quite common on Hokkaido with some nice big stags seen.

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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**Totals for the tour: 152 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa**