



Field Guides Tour Report

Winter Japan: Cranes & Sea Eagles 2015

Jan 9, 2015 to Jan 24, 2015

Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

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These Hooded Cranes at Arasaki were part of the fabulous spectacle of 5 species seen on the tour. (Photo by guide Phil Gregory)

This was my eleventh winter Japan trip, and this year was one blessed with good weather right up until the very last day on Hokkaido, when we had a whiteout. Jun Matsui was the co-leader and driver, and we benefited greatly from his patience, local knowledge, and interpretive skills.

We began as usual at Narita, where Brown-headed Thrush was near the Tobu Narita Hotel again, once more the only ones we saw; Falcated Duck there was unusual too, and the striking Japanese Wagtail made its first appearance. Karuizawa was as ever very snowy, and we did not have any luck with Long-tailed Rosefinch or Japanese Grosbeak here, but Japanese Green Woodpecker and Asian Azure-winged Magpie showed well, plus we had a flock of 5 Rustic Buntings at the shrine, and a bonus Eurasian Woodcock feeding and resting in a snowy streambed. Winter Wren, Brown Dipper, and Japanese Accentor were good additions here, and we were lucky enough to get a male Copper Pheasant this time, nicely intercepted by Jun after an initial glimpse. The trip to Saku that afternoon gave us Long-billed Plover plus the first Smew and Baikal Teal.

The Snow Monkeys at Jigokudani were a big hit, and in nice weather too. Next day we had Green Pheasant and a bonus Naumann's Thrush at the hide at Kahokugata. We then got great looks at Taiga Bean Goose and Greater White-fronted at Komatsu, also more Smew and about 1000 Baikal Teal. We also found our only Gray-headed Lapwings of the trip near Kaga city on a paddyfield, and we had over 400 Bewick's Swans whilst en route to Komatsu Airport.

Kyushu gave us wonderful Hooded (9000) and White-naped cranes (1500), plus a single Sandhill and 2 Common Cranes. Saunders's Gull was sparse, we saw about 10 at Yatsushiro; but Black-faced Spoonbill with 2 Eurasian Spoonbill was nice, and a Temminck's Stint at the Eastern fields was a bonus. We saw Mandarin Duck well at Sendae and again at Kogowa Dam, and a drake American Wigeon at Minamata was an unusual find, along with another Long-billed Plover. Daurian Jackdaw and Chinese Penduline-Tit were found at Arasaki too, and we lucked onto a Crested Kingfisher and more Chinese Penduline-Tits on the Sendae River en route to Miike.

Lake Miike once more gave us a bonus Forest Wagtail -- it must be the same bird returning I'm sure -- and Ryukyu Minivet this time, as well as an unexpected Goldcrest.

Then it was up to snowbound Hokkaido, where we got in after lunch and had time to make a foray out to Tsurui, where we had a fabulous show from about 200 Red-crowned Cranes, bugling and dancing in the snow, just fantastic. Next day we did the beautiful frosted river spectacle of these cranes at Otowa Bridge, then went to see the staked-out Ural Owl which was in the same tree hole as in 2014. We went over to Teshikaga where Whooper Swans showed well and a fascinating old Japanese art and craft shop was worth a visit, whilst some adventurous souls enjoyed deer burgers for lunch. Our first Steller's Sea-Eagles were also memorable, sitting in trees near the road not long after the Ural Owl. Rausu Harbor in late afternoon gave us Harlequins and a Pacific Loon plus the Kamchatka form of Mew Gull, then it was time for the small minshuku at Washi-no-Yado.

They have upgraded this since my last visit, there are now more rooms and a separate dining room, and this was where we had protracted and wonderful

views of Blakiston's Fish Owl. A pair with a full grown youngster were haunting the pond, which is stocked with fish, and they turned up at 1730 and came in and out most of the evening, just amazing.

January 22 saw us check Rausu again, then head to the great sandspit (technically a tombolo, from my past existence as a geographer!) of Notsuke. This is always one bleak, barren, icy place, but this year it had Steller's Sea-Eagles in good numbers as the pack ice was still north of the Shiretoko Peninsula. Sea ducks were sparse but Black Scoter showed well, as did Long-tailed Duck. We actually got down near the tip, which is usually snowbound, looking for Snow Buntings without success, but we did get what proved to be one of exactly two Asian Rosy Finches of the tour. Jun was able to persuade the authorities to give us permission to drive down and pick up our group, and we nipped down to the tip just to check it out. A second Asian Rosy Finch was seen as we came out of the sandspit, and a Short-eared Owl was hunting over the snowy fields.

Dai-ichi onsen at Yoroushi was a big highlight, with lovely rooms, a magnificent hot spring complete with outdoor facility if required, super Japanese meals, an enviable and very beautiful art gallery on the walk to the rooms, and also a bird feeder that gave Great Spotted Woodpecker, the strikingly pale asiatica race of Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit, and the distinctive brandtii race of Eurasian Jay. Our meal that night was interrupted by the arrival of 2 Blakiston's Fish-Owls to the fishing area outside, with great looks from the comfort of the lounge! Next morning as we came to breakfast a Solitary Snipe was awaiting us in the stream, and I then saw a Blakiston's Fish-Owl sat on the bridge in broad daylight! Hawfinch at the feeder was another nice one too.

News of bad weather coming saw us bring our boat trip off Nosappu forward a day, and we rescheduled it for 1300 from Habomai harbor, going out on a fishing boat to the tip of the cape. Calm seas prevailed, and we got lovely looks at Common Murre, Ancient Murrelet, and the much-prized Spectacled Guillemot before the snow showers set in. We then went to the cape tip and used that excellent new hide, getting Horned Grebe, more alcids, and two flybys of the rare Red-faced Cormorant before we headed back to gathering snow showers, which developed overnight into a whiteout for the whole of the next day.

Luckily we had by now seen most things, and our homely minshuku at Furen run by Take and his wife (with its excellent bird book library) was a very pleasant place to be marooned, even better when one of the day's targets, White-backed Woodpecker, showed up on the feeders!

Happily the storm cleared overnight and a 0600 snow shovelling effort from Jun, Take, and Phil saw us extricate the van and be able to head off for Kushiro after breakfast, arriving in good time for the flight to Haneda.

It is hard to pick highlights from the tour as there were so many. Certainly the Red-crowned Cranes in the snow were a big one, the Blakiston's Fish-Owls were outstanding this year, and we had fine looks at both Steller's Sea-Eagle and White-tailed Eagle. I wish everyone could have got the male Copper Pheasant as that was surely a highlight too, as was Eurasian Woodcock being seen so well, and Solitary Snipe was a terrific find of a very tough species.

Our wisely rescheduled boat trip delivered very nicely on alcids, with Spectacled Guillemot and Ancient Murrelet being very well received. Ural Owl was very nice, and special requests that got met were Japanese Green Woodpecker and Patty's last crane species. A heavy bias to the non-passerines can be partly countered with Daurian Redstart and Forest Wagtail, too.

The Snow Monkeys were also a major hit, well worth the trek through the deep snow to see this extraordinary sight--why they don't freeze to death once they get out is a puzzle to me!

Add to this the Japanese culture, and the intriguing hotels, onsens, and minshuku we stayed at, and the many fine Japanese meals we sampled...washing-up must be a major industry in this country after the multi-course meals.

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

--Phil in Narita/Kuranda Jan 2015

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*) – 100 at Kitano Kamoike showed very nicely. 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 and a couple of singles with the Bean Geese earlier. Two odd hybrids amongst them had white bellies, some white at base of bill, and blackish necks with some pale on face or chin, I am not sure of the parentage.

TUNDRA SWAN (BEWICK'S) (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) – We had about 400 in fields between Awara and Komatsu, with lovely flight views and great calls.

WHOOPEE SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Small numbers on Hokkaido, but seen very well with the first on the lake at Teshikaga.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – About 16 at Arasaki and 40 at Yatsushiro, it seems to be becoming commoner in Japan.

MANDARIN DUCK (*Aix galericulata*) – Three males and two females at Sendae, and a drake at Kogowa Dam, a very striking species.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – Only seen at Arasaki in the creek by the eastern fields, with 10 birds there.

FALCATED DUCK (*Anas falcata*) – A lone drake by the Tobu Narita was unexpected here, then we had 12 near Kahokugata, 3 drakes at Saku and then 6 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*) – Eight day records, only very modest numbers max. 700 at Arasaki.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – A fine drake with Eurasian Wigeons on the river at Minamata was an unexpected find of this rare bird here.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Widespread with good numbers at Kamoike and Kaga, over a thousand birds at each site.

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Six day records, the maximum about 40 at Saku and Kamoike.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – Seven day records but very small numbers, max 10 at Arasaki.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Just 7 day records, the most being 150 at Arasaki.

BAIKAL TEAL (*Anas formosa*) – A drake at Saku, and then over 1000 at Kamoike.

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

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – Very few, 30 at Saku Reservoir then 40 at Kahokugata, with just a handful on 3 other days.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – Five day records but no big numbers, max. 30 at Rausu harbor.

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

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (SIBERIAN) (*Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*) – Just a very few seen off Rausu and at Notsuke with a female off Odaito at a pit-stop. Split from Velvet Scoter of Europe by most and also further split by HBW/BirdLife as Stejneger's Scoter.

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 but the females are identical. An imm. male bore a distinct resemblance to female Surf Scoter with a white face spot and pale mark behind the eye, but the bill shape was not long enough and black spots coming on the upperparts gave it away.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Just 15 off Notsuke and then 15 off Habomai. I love their calls.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Three day records from Hokkaido with 35 around Rausu/Notsuke the most.

SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) – 4 males and 4 redheads of this much prized species at Saku, 3 at Kahokugata and 2 at Kamoike before a final 2 at a wetland near Kaga. A good trip for them.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – 5 day records, the first at Teshikaga where a lone pink-flushed drake was with the Mallards, then 30 off Odaito. Known as Goosander in the UK.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – 3 off Yatsushiro, then see with Goosander at Rausu and Odaito with one flying by off Nosappu. It's an amazingly exotic beast when seen close by, those drakes are really striking.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

COPPER PHEASANT (*Symaticus soemmerringii*) – Wayne spotted one scurrying up a fir clad hillside near Shiotsubo, and Jun took most of the group in what proved to be a very successful effort to head it off, so much so I went later and also got a great look at a fine male. This is one hard bird to find and we were lucky, sorry a couple of folks missed it. [E]

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – A female walked in front of the hide at Kahokugata for most folks, and when I got back from the Naumann's Thrush walk we too were able to walk in and flush it for a nice flight view. Another tricky species to get. [E]

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – One off Nosappu in the gathering gloom of late afternoon.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – One in the harbor at Rausu was a very nice find, and we 2 others in the Habomai area, one flying by Cape Nosappu and one from the boat.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

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

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus*) – One on the sea off Cape Nosappu was unexpected, I have very few Japanese records.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*) – One at Kahokugata, then one off Yatsushiro and one on a lake near Awara, this is always scarce.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*) – One off Yatsushiro and one on a lake near Awara.

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*) – Half a dozen distant birds on the harbor wall at Hashidate, then a few on the rocks off Akune, where the pointed gular area and more extensive white face was obvious. [E]

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – Two singles flying with Pelagic Cormorant off Cape Nosappu Jan 22, the pale bill, paler facial area and slightly larger size were visible but a shame it was so rapid. It's a hard bird to get and we usually miss out, late afternoon here seems to be the go.

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – A few on the sea wall with Temminck's Cormorant at Hashidate, several also with them at Akune, and about 150 off Cape Nosappu late afternoon Jan 22.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Seven day records, small numbers max. 10 birds and none on Hokkaido.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – Small numbers in the south. The large size of those around Kamoike indicated they were of the nominate race.

LITTLE EGRET (LITTLE) (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) – Just 4 around Arasaki.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – One at Narita Creek was unexpected and the only one of the trip!

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – Two at Arasaki.

BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL (*Platalea minor*) – 2 at Arasaki, as usual they spent most time asleep making it hard to see the bill and whether or not the eye showed.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (EURASIAN) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – Three day records from Yatsushiro and the Arasaki area, where we had 6 in one day (with 4 together at one spot).

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

NORTHERN HARRIER (EURASIAN) (*Circus cyaneus cyaneus*) – A single ringtail was over the Eastern Fields at Arasaki Jan 17, now split as Hen Harrier of course.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – A terrific male flew through at Narita Creek on Jan 11, and then perched on a huge tank for nice scope views.

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

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

STELLER'S SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – Great looks at 7 birds perched in trees near the Ural Owl site, then seen up in the wooded cliffs at Rausu before we saw about 70 on Notsuke Hanto, where every fourth pole seemed to have one. Finally seen near Nosappu and near Furen on the ice, but plans to visit that site on the last day got snowed out. Surely the most magnificent of all eagles.

COMMON BUZZARD (JAPONICUS) (*Buteo buteo japonicus*) – Five day records, and split by many these days, we had some good views of singles and twos, especially at Saku Reservoir.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – Just one for Patti at Narita, and then a single at the Eastern Fields area.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Five day records, with 10 at Kahokugata and 10 at Miike the most.

Gruidae (Cranes)

SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*) – A single in the Eastern Fields, I bet it's the same bird returning each year as it's always in this area.

WHITE-NAPED CRANE (*Grus vipio*) – About 1500 at Arasaki, giving wonderful views, one of the most striking of the family. Tape of their calls posted on IBC.

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – Two adults at the Eastern Fields, in the usual area, maybe the same birds each winter I suspect.

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. Calls posted to IBC.

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – 200 on one day at Tsurui, a marvellous sight dancing and bugling in the snow, then 60 next day, with a final view of 3 near Furen. One of the great icons of the tour and one of the birds of the trip as usual, the setting is just so fantastic. Also Patty's final crane, a nice family to complete.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – A single at Arasaki in the creek by the Eastern Fields, quite rare on this tour.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – A few at Yatsushiro.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – About 15 around the Arasaki area.

GRAY-HEADED LAPWING (*Vanellus cinereus*) – 10 of these striking birds in a field as we came out of Kaga City Jan 14, and a distant flock of 11 later the same day as we neared Awara.

KENTISH PLOVER (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – 6 at Arasaki in the creek by the E Fields, and 7 at Yatsushiro on the mudflats.

LONG-BILLED PLOVER (*Charadrius placidus*) – Great views of 2 on the riverine gravel at Saku Jan 12, with another later on concrete blocks in the river. Finally another 2 were at Minamata on Jan 17.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – One at the Eastern Fields was a surprise.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Seen in the Arasaki area with 2 one day and 3 the next.

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

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*) – One at the Eastern Fields showed very nicely, and we got it in the scope much to the delight of the VENT group nearby.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Flocks of 70 at Arasaki and about the same at Yatsushiro.

SOLITARY SNIPE (*Gallinago solitaria*) – A terrific individual feeding in the stream at Dai-ichi onsen on Jan 22 as we came to breakfast, great views but hard to photograph through the steamy window. The second time we have seen it here now.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Singles at Arasaki E Fields and then 2 that showed well by the crane centre, this can be elusive in winter here.

EURASIAN WOODCOCK (*Scolopax rusticola*) – One of the birds of the trip was this amazing bird that we found sat in the creek at Shiotsubo onsen, and then refound later sat quietly on the bank before going back to feed in the stream. I got some nice photos which are on the IBC and the FG website. Great to see one at rest and a tough bird anyway.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – Two in the Habomai area.

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – We saw about 20 from the Habomai boat trip, with some very nice views, I even saw the red feet on one in flight, and then about 10 were off Cape Nosappu but distant as ever there. One of the prize alcids here.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – Nice looks at about 20 from the Habomai boat, and then about 10 off Cape Nosappu later.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SAUNDERS'S GULL (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – The small size, dark small bill, delicate build and dotted wingtip pattern are quite distinctive, and we saw at least ten at Yatsushiro on the falling tide. A rare species with a population <5000 birds.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Very few, just a couple at Arasaki and 10 at Yatsushiro.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – One at Hashidate port that flew right by, and about 30 at Yatsushiro.

MEW GULL (KAMCHATKA) (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) – 5 at Rausu, one off Notsuke and about 10 at Habomai; I am surprised this has not been split as Kamchatka Gull, it seems far more distinct than some of those god awful Herring Gull analogues that cause such debate.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – Singles at odd sites and about 200 of this pale mantled pink-legged taxon at Yatsushiro, with a couple at Habomai on Hokkaido. One Herring Gull type at Yatsushiro had a very streaky head and yellow legs plus a pale mantle, presumably one of these "taimyrensis" things that no-one really knows how to allocate.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – A couple of records from Hashidate and Arasaki, and then this was the common large dark mantled gull on Hokkaido, with up to 120 per day. Gulls overall were quite scarce this trip.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – First from Rausu and about 15 next day there and at Notsuke, plus a few at Habomai, it does seem one of the more identifiable of the big gulls even when immature.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Seen at Rausu, Notsuke and Habomai, the most about 15 at Notsuke and again one of the more readily identifiable gulls at all stages, those pale unmarked primaries really help.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

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

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – Also quite widespread but not on Hokkaido.

Strigidae (Owls)

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – Our most successful trip for this iconic species, we had 3 birds at Washi-no-Yado, the first of which came in at 1730 and was seen very well from the dining room! All 3 were sat on the wires later that night and the pair began calling, cut posted on XC and IBC. The birds at Dai-ichi onsen also showed very well, with one on the bridge by the dining room during dinner and another fishing in the stream. Then next morning as we came to breakfast one of them was sat on the bridge in broad daylight at 0710, my first daytime sighting. Pix on IBC and FG website.

URAL OWL (*Strix uralensis*) – A terrific roosting bird in the snowy woods quite near Tsurui, where we had brilliant views, the same site as last year but now with a track through the snow and a tape barrier erected to try and keep photographers at bay!

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) – One hunting across the frozen wastes as we came near the end of Notsuke, a really nice flight view.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

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

CRESTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle lugubris*) – This one can be tricky, and only Jun and Sully saw it at Kogowa, but happily we found a fine bird at the Sendae River and got some very good views.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – Great looks at several in the frozen woods at Karuizawa, a near endemic too.

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) – One fine male came to the feeder at Take's minshuku in the whiteout on the last day, we got fantastic looks and some fine shots are on the IBC and FG websites. How lucky can you get? This was one we were going to try for but we could not get out.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED) (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – Six day records from Karuizawa, then Dai-ichi, Tsurui and at minshuku Furen, a very distinctive bird and a good candidate for a split too. Shots on the IBC and FG websites, one female at Take's place had very striking brown chest and throat spots.

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – No sign on day one, but Patti found us one on Jan 13 at Karuizawa, much to Sully's delight as this was one of her main targets. [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Just 4 day records, all singles bar 2 on Jan 8 at Arasaki. None on Hokkaido.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Two birds seen at Arasaki, and a single as we came out of Saku.

Campephagidae (Cuckooshrikes)

RYUKYU MINIVET (*Pericrocotus tegimae*) – Lucky this year, we got 2 birds at Lake Miike eventually, they can be hard to find in winter. [E]

Laniidae (Shrikes)

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

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (BRANDT'S) (*Garrulus glandarius brandtii*) – This dark-eyed taxon showed well at the Dai-ichi onsen on Hokkaido, I would not be at all surprised to see this split.

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

AZURE-WINGED MAGPIE (JAPANESE) (*Cyanopica cyanus japonica*) – About 15 at the Nagakure shrine at Karuizawa which gave great looks in the late afternoon winter light, the pale tail tip showing well. Most authorities split it as Asian Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cyanus*, with a highly disjunct range to the Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cooki* in Iberia.

DAURIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus dauuricus*) – Two dark immatures at Arasaki amongst the Rooks, and a great pied adult on the pole right by the Crane Centre, both on Jan 18.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*) – Up to 200 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 on Honshu and Kyushu but hardly any on Hokkaido. Expect a split as Eastern Carrion Crow in due course.

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

Alaudidae (Larks)

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

again as yet. Song cut posted to xenocanto and IBC.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

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

ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon dasypus*) – None at Minamata again, but we saw about 20 distantly over the Sendae River.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – A Hokkaido special, seen well at Tsurui, Furen and Dai-ichi.

WILLOW TIT (WILLOW) (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Great looks at Karuizawa, they look bigger headed than Marsh Tit and the "bee 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 Miike.

COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL) (*Periparus ater insularis*) – Three day records from Karuizawa and Dai-ichi, this race has a small crest.

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 5 of this irruptive and elusive species feeding amongst the Phragmites there, and they gave good views. We also saw 2 in reeds from the bridge over the Sendae River.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Seen well in the snowy woods at Karuizawa, what hardy creatures they are, and also at Miike.

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 and undertail coverts 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

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (EURASIAN) (*Sitta europaea roseillia*) – This is seemingly the race we saw at Lake Miike, very like the Karuizawa taxon.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (EURASIAN) (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – A fine bird skulking along a frozen stream bed near Shiotsubo, and another at the garden there, this is a very distinct dark race and I wouldn't be surprised to see further splits here now that it is taken out of Winter Wren.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Seen nicely at Karuizawa, Kogowa stream and Dai-ichi. They look like giant Eurasian wrens!

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis*) – Noisy and conspicuous, and seen nearly every day of the trip. The bird eating Camellia flowers at Arasaki was noteworthy and I have posted the pix to IBC and the FG websites.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus japonensis*) – Jun found us one foraging high in the trees at Lake Miike, the first time I recall seeing it here, it is hard to find in winter.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH-WARBLER (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – One seen from the vehicle near Awara city amongst a bird flock, but sadly disappeared quickly. Otherwise only heard chacking at Narita stream, no song heard at all.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – A good look at one in reeds near Sendae, a species we often miss on the tour.

Zosteropidae (White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies)

JAPANESE WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Some years this can be elusive, but they were all over this year, starting at Narita and then with counts of up to 25 around Arasaki, where they had a peculiar fondness for the Camellia hedges. None on Hokkaido.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – One at Kogowa Dam, and another at Lake Miike, a nice pick-up.

DAURIAN REDSTART (*Phoenicurus aureus*) – Five day records, a good winter for them, starting with the male at Narita, and it showed well at Saku, Arasaki and Sendae too.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – This deep orange bellied race is long overdue to be split, we saw 3 on the seawall at Hashidate.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SCALY THRUSH (WHITE'S) (*Zoothera dauma toratugumi*) – One at the bird flock near Awara city which showed very well, usually split as White's Thrush but the taxonomy of the group is a mess.

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

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

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

NAUMANN'S THRUSH (*Turdus naumanni*) – This was an exciting find at Kahokugata and I suspect there were actually 2 birds, as my original one seemed to head way off. The reddish tall and rusty scalloped flanks showed nicely. Only my third Japanese sighting and the first for many years.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – A single at Arasaki Crane Centre, very exciting for the group from Tokyo as this is quite a rare bird here,

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Sturnus cineraceus*) – Seven day records from Honshu and Kyushu, only very small numbers. The first were 4 at a motorway pit-stop outside Tokyo.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

JAPANESE ACCENTOR (*Prunella rubida*) – A single at the feeders at Shiotsubo was a good find of a very elusive bird, pix on IBC and FG websites. [E]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Just four day records of singles, the best at Lake Miike 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 this exotic looking species at Narita and Karuizawa especially, with none in the north.

AMERICAN PIPIT (SIBERIAN) (*Anthus rubescens japonicus*) – Good looks 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 pleasant surprise was our again finding this vagrant at Lake Miike, where I got my lifer in 2008. It's a vagrant to Japan and is probably the one we saw here last year returning again.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

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

CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING (*Emberiza fucata*) – One bird in a field at Arasaki, seen nicely and even photographed. We had missed one earlier in the day at the Eastern Fields, only seen in flight.

RUSTIC BUNTING (*Emberiza rustica*) – A small flock of 6 at the shrine at Karuizawa.

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

GRAY BUNTING (*Emberiza variabilis*) – A single female was calling "tik" and showed very briefly in thick cover by the nuclear power plant, always a very tricky species to get.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – Some good looks around Arasaki, the neck is quite grayish on this form.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – Five day records starting at the shrine at Nagakure at Karuizawa, with a flock of 50 in the fields at Sendae.

ASIAN ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha*) – Two singles seen briefly from the vehicle at Notsuke, sadly we were unable to access the hide at Nosappu where they have been feeding, due to the snowstorm.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – 5 birds in a garden at Awara, 4 were of the race *griseiventris*, mooted as a potential split, and one may have been of the pinkish washed race *rosacea*. This is a species we seldom see on the tour, a lucky find.

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – Small numbers on 8 dates, starting at Narita and with most at Arasaki, but none on Hokkaido this year.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – 5 landed right by the hide at Kahokugata, an uncommon irruptive here.

EURASIAN SISKIN (*Spinus spinus*) – 3 singing quietly at Lake Miike were a good find, and Patty saw one at Karuizawa.

HAWFINCH (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – Five day records of single birds, seen very nicely near Komatsu and then at Dai-ichi, pix on IBC and FG website.

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – A poor winter for this species, 4 flew over at a roadside stop near Nagoya, and most folks got onto one at Lake Miike.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

RUSSET SPARROW (*Passer rutilans*) – This was big surprise at Arasaki Jan 17, where a flock of 150 were near the Eastern Fields, (I had seen one briefly the day before). We then had about 50 more by reedbeds near the Crane Centre, by far the most I've ever seen here. Photos on IBC and FG website.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Quite widespread with a flock of about 20 at Arasaki Crane Centre, and 15 at minshuku Furen.

MAMMALS

JAPANESE MACAQUE (*Macaca fuscata*) – The famous snow monkeys in the snow surrounded hot pools at Nagano were quite a sight and worth the walk, again a trip highlight. Try this sort of tourist thing with baboons or other macaques and it'd be anarchy!

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Several nice sightings on Hokkaido.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – The big seal off Cape Nosappu is this species, identified by Take from my photos.

SPOTTED SEAL (*Phoca largha*) – I think the big very pale seal some of us saw at Rausu was this species.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – Quite common on Hokkaido but with very few big stags seen.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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

I also recommend the xenocanto website which has cuts of almost all the world's bird species, I contribute cuts from most tours.

Folks were also asking about the IOC World Checklist of Birds, a free access downloadable Excel file that gets updated every 4 months, version 5.1 has just been published. Go to worldbirdnames.org or google IOC and ignore the Olympics stuff!

Totals for the tour: 157 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa