

JAPAN IN WINTER

13 FEBRUARY – 2 MARCH 2010

TOUR REPORT

Once again, the Birdquest Japan-in-Winter tour was a great success. With so many wonderful avian spectacles to thrill us in this enchanting land, it could hardly be anything else! As always the host country was very hospitable, with delightfully courteous people and a fantastic cuisine, all adding hugely to the enjoyment of the tour. We had fine weather almost throughout, even if Hokkaido didn't seem cold enough! There was, however, plenty of pack ice within easy reach of Rausu, and combined with a calm sea on which to reach it, we were able to witness the amazing spectacle of more than two hundred eagles sitting on the ice floes, some coming within five metres from us as they squabbled for fish handouts! Another favourite was our boat ride at the opposite end of the country, where in warm sunshine we watched Japanese Murrelets cheeping and diving as they swam close to our fishing boat. Overall we recorded 194 species on the tour, a tally that included five species of Crane, big numbers of both Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles, a pair of marvelous Blakiston's Fish Owls, two Ural Owls in the daytime, three Copper Pheasants, Baikal Teal, thirteen species of Gull including Saunders's, nine species of Auk, Japanese and Alpine Accentors, and eight species of Bunting. We also found various rare visitors, such as Black-faced Spoonbill, Swan Goose and Canvasback.

Our tour began in Tokyo, and we were met by Pete in a cold but sunny Narita. From here we took the train into the bustling Tokyo station, then took the Shinkansen 'bullet-train' for a quick ride out to Karuizawa at the foot of the Japanese Alps. Here we checked into our comfortable hotel for three nights, and almost immediately saw a Japanese Accentor on the bird table just outside the lounge window. It was joined by Hawfinch, plus a soon to become familiar range of Tits, including Japanese Varied, Eastern Great, Coal and Willow Tit. Making our first foray into the nearby woods that were blanketed by snow, we saw our first Dusky Thrushes, Elegant and Meadow Buntings, plus a surprise male White-backed Woodpecker. The next day we were out walking the woodland trails before breakfast, finding Great Spotted and Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, and after much creeping about we were surprised to find a rather fearless female Copper Pheasant, which emerged right next to us, and proceeded to forage on a snowy slope. We drove out into the lowlands to visit a broad river and adjacent lake that was crammed with a variety of Duck, such as Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Smew and Goosanders, with a handful of the elegant Falcated Duck, plus a few Greater Scaup. On the river itself we found several Long-billed Plovers, our first Mandarin Duck, Black-backed and Japanese Wagtails, Olive-backed and Buff-bellied Pipits. We also met our first Bull-headed Shrikes, Brown-eared Bulbuls, White-cheeked Starlings and Rustic Buntings, and on the way home watched a fine cock Japanese Green Pheasant lurking by some fields. Further searches around the forests of Karuizawa were quietly productive, with some nice looks at Japanese Green Woodpeckers, Red-flanked Bluetails, Daurian Redstart, Brown Dippers on the unfrozen rivers, some more of the demure Japanese Accentors, and

smart male Long-tailed Rosefinches. The hotel's bird feeders produced Oriental Greenfinches, Eurasian Nuthatch and a single Pale Thrush, plus a flock of bright Japanese Grosbeaks that waited in the treetops, a little more reluctant to come so close. We also added some good mammals to our tally, such as the rather pony-like Japanese Serow, some furtive Wild Boar, and a Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel that eventually popped out of his nest box after a cold wait!

The next morning, we were all packed up and ready to head on our way when a message came through that a male Copper Pheasant was showing well nearby, so off we shot, and sure enough there he was, trotting along an ice-free stream bed with his absurdly long tail wagging behind him. Brilliant! We were now ready to leave, and sped along the expressway to Nagano for our rendezvous with the 'Snow Monkeys', the troop of Japanese Macaques that have acquired a taste for a hot bath! After a walk up through a winter wonderland of deep snow and forest, we were thrilled to see these fascinating fellows sitting in their 'onsen', grooming each other and idling the time away, while scores of others played about in the snow. Nearby we found Alpine Accentors huddled on a rock face, and a Mountain Hawk Eagle lurking in the forest. Heading northwards to the coast, we reached our destination of Kaga, and in paddyfields near to the city we found Grey-headed Lapwing and Hen Harrier. A scan of the sea revealed some distant Ancient Murrelets, Black-throated Divers and Red-necked Grebe, and we finished up at the Visitors Centre at Katano Kamo-ike ('The Duck Pond'), a regular wintering site for Baikal Teal, and we were not disappointed to see 14 of them here. Some Bewick's Swan flew in to roost on the pond, but the hoped for flocks of roosting Geese never materialised.

A rather radical plan developed next, which saw us driving across Honshu to Kyoto where we hoped to 'twitch' a Baer's Pochard on a small pond. Upon arriving, it didn't take long for us to realise that the bird wasn't here, however we met our first Japanese White-eyes, Japanese Bush Warbler and another male Long-tailed Rosefinch. The huge freshwater lake of Biwa-Ko straddled our path homeward, and pausing near the northern end, we found some small flocks of Taiga Bean and Greater White-fronted Geese. Here we learned that there was a vagrant Swan Goose nearby, and we soon found it with a large flock of Bewick's Swans feeding in rice paddies. Alongside it was a lone Greylag Goose, that seemed to be of greater interest to the local birders present! Heading back to the Kaga area we peered out to sea as cold rain arrived, finding our first Pelagic Cormorant, Black-tailed and Slaty-backed Gulls, and a sooty-coloured Pacific Reef Egret. Another duck pond produced 68 Falcated Ducks, and then in some roadside paddies we happened upon a Harrier roost, with a female Eastern Marsh and several Hen Harriers, plus a dozen Grey-headed Lapwings, and a Eurasian Bittern was glimpsed in the gloom.

We continued our journey with a flight from Komatsu to Fukuoka in Kyushu, at the warmer end of the country! As was to be expected, everything ran perfectly on time, and soon we were picking up new vehicles and heading south along the expressways. At an area of mudflats and cultivation near Yatsushiro, we had a very productive stop where we found a flock of gulls that included an adult Pallas's, immature Mongolian and a few Heuglin's Gulls, while 20 or more Saunders's Gulls patrolled the exposed mud, giving their tern-like calls and pouncing on any crabs they found. Also on the mud were Grey and Kentish Plovers, and there were huge numbers of Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail, plus Common Shelduck and Red-breasted Mergansers. A Black-faced Spoonbill appeared among the wildfowl, and in the fields were some Little Ringed Plovers, Buff-bellied Pipits and our first Russet Sparrows. We pressed on southwards to Arasaki, arriving after dark at our simple minshuku.

Of course the main purpose of any visit to Arasaki is for the Crane spectacle, and scattered across the fields here were thousands of birds of four species. In order of abundance, there were Hooded (7000+), White-naped (3000+), Sandhill (7) and Common Crane (2). Perhaps we didn't see this many, but we weren't exactly counting! We began our day among some weedy fields, where we found a Richard's Pipit, smart Chestnut-eared Buntings, Red-throated Pipits, and many Buff-bellied Pipits and Japanese

Skylarks. In among a large flock of Oriental Rooks we found several Daurian Jackdaws, although none were in pied plumage. On returning to our lodgings for breakfast, we were able to enjoy the view of hundreds of Cranes jostling each other at the feeding station just yards from the window. It seemed that some Cranes had already left, and some of the White-naped were on the move on this clear sunny morning, with birds visible soaring high in the sky. After soaking up the spectacle for a while, we headed southwards, stopping along the coast where we saw our first Temminck's Cormorants, and then to another area of fields where a regular wintering Greater Spotted Eagle has been returning for 18 years. We didn't have to wait too long before he came sailing over, mobbed by the ever-present Black-eared Kites. We also found Eurasian Woodcock, Black-faced Buntings and Zitting Cisticola here, and at a nearby lake we saw a nervous flock of Mandarin Ducks, with a single duck Baikal Teal among them. A lengthier search in some reedy fields was ultimately successful, when we located our target of Chinese Penduline Tit, finding an unobtrusive flock of 25 birds feeding quietly among the reeds. We returned to Arasaki for a last look around the fields, finding a Dusky Warbler, and enjoying prolonged close views of a rather fearless Japanese Green Pheasant.

The following day we spent a few hours around our lodgings, seeing both Eurasian and Black-faced Spoonbills, a young Northern Goshawk, and an Eastern Water Rail that showed well in a wet ditch. With our hosts cheerily waving us on our way, we headed inland, and paused by a dammed lake where hundreds of Mandarin Ducks swirled around in tight flocks, some Asian House Martins circled overhead and a fine male Blue Rock Thrush soaked up the warm rays. We pressed on to our destination of Mi-ike, and after checking in to our delightful hotel we headed into the wooded hills. On a rushing mountain river we found a Crested Kingfisher, and a late afternoon cruise along forest tracks was partly successful when a male Copper Pheasant appeared briefly by the roadside, but blink and you would have missed it!

The next day we started early for a fun-filled day in eastern Kyushu, and our first stop was Koda-oike, a small lake in the lowlands near Saito. In the surrounding forest we saw several vocal Ryukyu Minivets, a flock of Brambling, many Elegant Buntings in the fields and an obliging White's Thrush that stood bouncing away at the forest edge. From here we drove up the east coast to a small harbour from where we would take a boat out in search of the rare Japanese Murrelet. While waiting for the fishermen to finish their lunch, we saw our first of these diminutive birds bobbing about in the harbour, then as we headed out into the bay, it wasn't long before we were eyeballing Japanese Murrelets at close range as they called to each other with high-pitched squeaks, diving all around us. After this thrill, we headed back southwards, along the coast to a large estuary at Hitotsuse Gawa, where we found shorebirds in the shape of Kentish Plover and Sanderling, before returning the forests around Koda-oike. After some effort we found three elusive Grey Buntings; a male that showed for a short while, plus a couple of demure females that popped out briefly onto the roadsides as the light faded from the sky.

A final morning in Kyushu saw us scouring the forests around the crater lake at Mi-ike, where a Black-necked Grebe bobbed about, Japanese Grosbeaks called from huge deciduous trees, and Pale Thrushes zipped in and out of the undergrowth. We saw some more Ryukyu Minivets, some Eurasian Nuthatches of the *roseillia* race, Daurian Redstarts, and finally some distant White-bellied Green Pigeon perched high up. A quick dash to Kagoshima airport followed and we were on our way once more, this time via Haneda airport in Tokyo, and on to Kushiro in Hokkaido. Arriving after dark we transferred to our comfortable hotel, somewhat surprised that the temperature here was above freezing!

Before sunrise the next morning, we joined the assembled ranks of photographers on a bridge over the Setsurigawa river, looking out to where a rather small number of the fabulous Red-crowned Cranes began their day with a bit of preening, and it was only -11°C ! The photographers would have wanted it colder ideally, for the full scenic effect of the mist rising off the river, but we weren't complaining! We moved on to another lookout where the Cranes began assembling, and little by little the numbers built

up until we had over a hundred birds before us, marching up and down, bugling as they came in to land, and starting their dancing with graceful leaps and twirls with wings outstretched, all on the bright white snow under a clear blue sky. This trip has so many fantastic spectacles, and this is yet another contender for the most wonderful!

In this area we found some of the few passerines available, such as the snowy *asiatica* Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper and Marsh Tit. Tearing ourselves away from the dancing Cranes, we headed towards the east coast, with two stops on the way, each with their own roosting Ural Owls! The first wasn't in his usual roost hollow however we located him nearby, then the second sat in front of its hollow in a blasted tree, roped off to keep the photographers from flushing it! Here we also saw some white-headed Long-tailed Tits, and on roadsides we saw our first White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles. We reached the coast and paused at a feeding station for Whooper Swan, some of who were waiting in the car park to greet us, while the main flock sat out to sea accompanied by a flock of Black Brant. We then drove up the Notsuke Hanto, a sandy spit that stretches many kilometres out to sea. Numerous Duck were visible on the sea, and we found our first Stejneger's and Black Scoters, Long-tailed Duck and Spectacled Guillemots. A roadside flock of small passerines turned out to be Asian Rosy Finches, and we enjoyed some nice looks at these subtle beauties. We then headed up the coast to our humble minshuku at Rausu. After supper we squeezed into the upstairs rooms overlooking the stream that runs outside, and waited for the Blakiston's Fish Owls to appear. The owner of the minshuku put fish into a small pond in the stream to try and tempt the birds down, and so we waited. A pair soon began dueting, their deep booming calls echoing across the valley, and they became visible sat high in the trees across the valley. We were able to get some reasonable scope views, seeing their white throats puff out their every time they called. Various photographers set up shop by the river in front of us, but seemed naive about disturbing the Owls, so it wasn't until 12.30 that the birds came down to the stream for a brief visit, and not everyone was awake at this time! Regardless of the photographers' soap opera, it was yet another great experience.

After this restless night, we began our day slowly with some birding around the minshuku finding Brown Dipper, Common Raven and our first Harlequin Ducks on the sea, then after breakfast we headed down to the docks to embark on our 'nature cruise', a trip out to the pack ice on a powerful boat. We headed out onto a calm sea, pursued by ever increasing numbers of Slaty-backed Gulls that got bolder and bolder, helping themselves from the boxes of fish heads piled up on the back of the boat. On reaching the pack ice, the boat lodged itself within the ice, and the fun began. The crewman began hurling fish heads out onto the ice, creating a storm of Gulls around the boat that soon brought in numerous White-tailed Eagles, followed by the 'big daddy', Steller's Sea Eagles, dwarfing everything else on the ice. We spent over two hours out here, during which time some of the Eagles were within five metres of the boat (no long lens required!), while others just sat around on the ice, with 130 White-taileds and 115 Steller's counted dotted around the white landscape! Awesome! The word spectacular is fast becoming over-used on this trip!

Once back on shore we made our way southwards, with various stops along the coast providing us with many more Black Scoters, large numbers of Common Goldeneye, Goosander and Red-breasted Mergansers. We headed for the Nemuro peninsula, and in the large harbour at Hanasaki we found a drake Canvasback, many Greater Scaup, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls. Staying in nearby Nemuro city, we returned the next morning and enjoyed some close looks at an Ancient Murrelet swimming around just a few metres off the dock, before heading out to Cape Nosappu at the far eastern point of Hokkaido. This was a superb place for seabirds, and as the mists cleared we began seeing an exciting array of birds, with Spectacled Guillemots in varying states of summer plumage, several Pigeon and Common Guillemots, a couple of Brunnich's Guillemot, numerous Harlequin Ducks and a few Red-necked Grebes. Rather harder to spot were the tiny Least Auklets bobbing about on the waves, and a Crested Auklet came shooting past under our noses. Equally thrilling were a pair of Sea Otters that came swimming past the rocks, lying on their backs, stroking their whiskers and

twiddling their thumbs! A check through a flock of Pelagic Cormorants sat on a tall rock revealed one rather demure first-year Red-faced Cormorant, and while we watched that, an adult landed next to it and showed off his colours to full effect. We checked a few harbours on our return leg, and then at dusk in some nearby woods we waited for Blakiston's Fish Owl to perhaps show itself, but had to be content with just hearing him call.

The next day a return to Cape Nosappu before breakfast was fruitful, with clearer conditions revealing hundreds of Spectacled Guillemots, some distant fly-by Rhinoceros Auklets, and several Stejneger's Scoters. Then it was time to leave the coast and head towards Kushiro airport, but not before we joined the crowd of photographers and tourists for the Red-crowned Crane feeding time at Tancho-no-Sato. Another flock of Cranes resides here, enjoying the supplemental food they are given, and we were hoping to witness some combat and comedy between the Cranes and the local White-tailed Eagles. However it all passed off very peacefully as the Eagles stayed away today, but the people-watching was good – the paparazzi here were toting more than 50 long lenses between them, trained on the birds just a few metres away!

It was then time to head for the airport, and fly back to Tokyo. From the domestic airport it was an easy bus ride to Narita and then by shuttle bus to our hotel. We made a final pre-breakfast walk close to our hotel, and in persistent rain we eventually found our target of Brown-headed Thrush. It was then time to bid farewell for some of us, while others were staying on for two days for the extension, a ferry ride from Tokyo to Hachijojima and back.

Our first birding of the extension took place in a small park on the other side of Tokyo, and we whiled away the afternoon here, not moving far from a delightful Solitary Snipe, bobbing up and down continually as he fed in the rich mud of a wet paddy on the edge of some woodland. We also saw Japanese Green Woodpecker, a Northern Goshawk, another Brown-headed Thrush, the introduced Chinese Hwamei, and an Eastern Water Rail that showed well along a reedy stream. Moving from here towards the port of Takesiba, on reaching the ferry terminal we were told that our ferry was cancelled! There had been a small tsunami emanating from the large earthquake in Chile (all the way across the globe!) that was enough to disrupt the schedule and cause the cancellation of the service. With long faces we traveled back to Narita, and hastily concocted a back-up plan.

Luckily, Narita is close to some excellent birding areas, so after securing a car for the day we drove northwards to the Tone River, for some birding in the reedbeds on the flat valley plain. It was a fine morning, with many Common Reed Buntings sitting up, and it wasn't long before we found our target of Japanese Reed Buntings, with some splendid males showing well which were almost in full breeding plumage. We could also hear Marsh Grassbirds calling, so with skilful luring we all had some good looks at this well-marked skulker. From here it was a short drive to the fishing port of Choshi, famed for its huge numbers of Gulls. The rumours were true, with Black-tailed Gulls being the most numerous, followed by Vega, Kamchatka, Slaty-backed, Black-headed, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, and Black-legged Kittiwake of the Pacific form. Some sharp spotting by Pete revealed an adult Thayer's Gull, a tricky bird to identify that we were able to watch at length, and even show to the local birders! Hundreds of Temminck's Cormorants lined up along the harbour walls, and a seawatch from a nearby headland threw up some surprises, namely two Black-footed Albatrosses, a Pomarine Skua, Red-throated and Pacific Divers, and both Red-necked and Slavonian Grebes. It hadn't been the extension we had hoped for, but it had been a great days birding to finish off a great tour. As we headed home the following morning, I felt rather sad to be leaving this enchanting and exciting country. It's not hard to understand why this tour is such a favourite, and I am sure many of us will find ourselves returning here some day. Domo arigato gosaimas!

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were not personally recorded by the leaders are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H)

PHASIANIDAE

Chinese Bamboo Partridge (introduced) *Bambusicola thoracica*: A glimpse of a bird in flight at Maioka Park during the extension. Many others were heard calling there, and also at Takae in Kyushu.

Copper Pheasant *Syrnaticus soeemmerringii*: A lot of creeping along snowy trails at Karuizawa first revealed a rather fearless female, and then a tip-off received just as we were leaving on our last morning meant that we had a great view of the male, sauntering along a stream bed as the thermometer hovered around -10 degrees! Another male, of the white-backed *ijimae* race, was glimpsed from the bus at Mi-ike, but didn't hang around to give us views. Endemic to Japan, and listed as 'Near Threatened' by Birdlife. It is still heavily hunted, with as many as 100,000 shot each year!

Japanese Green Pheasant *Phasianus versicolor*: Our first male was seen close to Karuizawa, creeping through the herbage and also in flight, plus we had some great views of males at Arasaki, Koda-oike and at Maioka Park. Endemic to Japan.

ANATIDAE

Swan Goose *Anser cygnoides*: A rare winter visitor to Japan, we saw one that fed in the company of a vagrant Greylag Goose and many Bewick's Swan in some rice paddies at Biwa-Ko. The Swan Goose is a globally threatened species listed as Vulnerable by Birdlife. Although still thought to number between 60,000 and 80,000, the population is declining rapidly as a result of habitat loss, especially on the breeding grounds in Russia and China, and unsustainable levels of hunting.

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis*: The regular wintering flock of Bean Geese in the Katano Kamo-ike area seemed to have departed, however we found a group of 42 of the *middendorffii* race at Biwa-Ko. We also saw a flock of 36 Bean Geese close to Kaga, flying over at dusk, but these could not be accurately identified.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: A single joined the Swan Goose in the fields at Biwa-Ko. It was a very grey plumaged bird with very pink bare parts, of the race *rubidirostris*. A very rare visitor to Japan, and a write-in for this tour.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: We were unable to find any geese in the extensive rice-fields near Mikuni, probably due to the snow lying on the ground, but we found eleven birds at Biwa-Ko. The form concerned is *frontalis*.

Black Brant *Branta [bernicle] nigricans*: A flock of between 80 and 100 birds were visible at Odaito on Hokkaido, also a small flock were seen flying past Cape Nosappu.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: A visit to the feeding area at Odaito revealed several hundred of these, with numerous tame individuals waiting for us in the car park! We also found some at the eastern end of Lake Furen, and then some small groups joined in the fun with the Red-crowned Cranes at Tancho-no-Sato.

Bewick's Swan *Cygnus bewickii*: A flock of 18 arrived in the twilight gloom to roost on the lake at Katano Kamo-ike. The following day we saw a flock of 260 birds feeding in rice paddies at Biwa-Ko, and another 13 birds close to Kaga in the evening. At Biwa-Ko, one of the flock showed a bill pattern that seemed to suggest 'Whistling Swan' *C. b. colombianus*.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*: A few dozen were seen distantly at Yatsushiro, and another 20 were at the Hitotsuse Gawa estuary.

Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata*: Our first was a female that showed briefly at Lake Toden, then in Kyushu we saw a nervous 35 birds on a lake near Sendai, then near Izumi we saw 350

flying around at a dammed lake in the hills. Perhaps their nervousness is related to the fact that their Japanese name 'Oshidori' translates as 'tasty bird'!

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Regularly encountered on Kyushu and Honshu.

Falcated Duck *Anas falcata*: This beautiful duck appeared fairly regularly, with our first at Lake Toden, then commonly in the Biwa-Ko and Kaga area with 68 on the pond at Awara. Also seen at Odaito on Hokkaido.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Common at many sites in Honshu and Kyushu, but only small numbers in eastern Hokkaido.

[American Wigeon *A. americana* x Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope*. There was one of these commonly occurring hybrid types at Awara pond.]

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Abundant in Honshu and Kyushu (with largest numbers seen at Yatsushiro and Arasaki), with smaller numbers recorded on Hokkaido. Nice to see some really wild birds!

Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha*: Common and widespread in Honshu and Kyushu, and often rather tame.

Northern Shoveler *Anas chrypeata*: Small numbers recorded at several wetland sites.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: Small numbers were recorded at a number of sites in Honshu, Hokkaido and Kyushu, with a larger number seen at Yatsushiro..

Baikal Teal *Anas formosa*: There were 14 at their usual wintering site at Katano Kamo-ike, and despite their wish to remain at the far corner of the pond, we enjoyed some reasonable views of these lovely ducks. Also a female put on a good show for us at Sendai Lake in Kyushu. This relatively uncommon duck is listed by Birdlife as 'Vulnerable', because the bulk of the world population of around 500,000 spends the winter at a handful of sites in South Korea.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Commonly encountered throughout Honshu and Kyushu, with fewer noted on Hokkaido.

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*: A lone male livened up the scene at Hanasaki harbour on Hokkaido. A rare winter visitor to Japan.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: Small gatherings were seen in suitable habitat on Honshu and Kyushu, plus a handful more on Hokkaido.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Regularly encountered in small parties on Honshu and Kyushu, also some were present in Hanasaki harbour on Hokkaido.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*: Five were seen on the lake at Toden, a single at the Hitotsuse estuary, and then fairly commonly along the Hokkaido coast with some nice looks at birds in some of the harbours there.

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*: Some great looks at these very attractive ducks on Hokkaido, with some close inshore flocks at Hanasaki and Rausu, and hundreds on the sea off Cape Nosappu.

Stejneger's Scoter *Melanitta stejnegeri*: We found these fairly regularly along the coast of Hokkaido, with groups seen at Notsuke and Odaito, and also off Cape Nosappu. Some were also seen off Choshi on our 'extension'. Note that Brazil treats this form in with 'White-winged Scoter' *M. deglandi* of North America.

Black Scoter *Melanitta americana*: Hundreds along the Hokkaido coast, often close inshore.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*: Fairly common along the Hokkaido coast, with some hundreds seen at Odaito, and a few in harbours giving close looks.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: Fairly common along the coast of eastern Hokkaido, with largest numbers noted around Odaito.

Smew *Mergellus albellus*: The best were the first, with up to 20 birds of both sexes along the river and on the lake at Toden, then smaller numbers were seen in the Kaga area, and a single on Hokkaido.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*: Good numbers of these at Toden Lake where we counted 60, and a couple of dozen were seen at Biwa-Ko. They were also common on Hokkaido, with some on inland rivers, and a large gathering along the coast near Odaito.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Pleasingly common along the Hokkaido coasts, with biggest numbers seen around Odaito. In Kyushu, four were seen at Yatsushiro.

GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*: Not seen until our seawatch from the Inubosaki lighthouse at Choshi, where a handful were on the sea.

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*: We saw quite a number of these seen out to sea from a beach near Kaga City.

Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica*: Some rather distant views of a large number of these, at sea off the Inubosaki lighthouse at Choshi.

DIOMEDEIDAE

Black-footed Albatross *Diomedea nigripes*: After our Hachiojima ferry was cancelled, we did not expect to see *any* Albatrosses! Spending a couple of hours scoping the seas from the Inubosaki lighthouse at Choshi proved worthwhile, when we picked up two of these following fishing boats far out to sea. This species is listed by BirdLife as 'Endangered'. The world population is thought to number some 120,000 individuals, but is confined to a few breeding sites and is declining.

PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Encountered in small numbers on various wetlands in Honshu and Kyushu.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: Two were seen off the beach near Kaga, then several small groups were seen off Cape Nosappu and Hanasaki harbour, and also off the lighthouse at Choshi.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: A single was seen at Biwa-Ko, four in Kadogawa harbour, and a handful off Choshi.

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*: A couple were seen on the sea off the Nemuro peninsula, and some 20 birds were seen at Choshi.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*: One was seen on the crater lake at Mi-ike, then another more distantly off of Inubosaki lighthouse at Choshi.

THRESKIORNITHIDAE

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: A single immature bird flew around with a single of the following species at Arasaki.

Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor*: Great looks at an immature bird at Yatsushiro, followed by more distant views and a reasonable flight view of an adult at Arasaki. The Black-faced Spoonbill is a globally threatened species listed as 'Endangered' by Birdlife. The total population, with simultaneous counts across its wintering range between 8th and 10th January 2010, is 2346 individuals.

ARDEIDAE

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: A poor view of one near Kaga, flying and dropping into tall grass at twilight.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: Just two were seen, on a pond near Kyoto.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus*: A single was seen briefly at Arasaki, then two more were seen at Hitotsuse Gawa.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Widespread and frequently encountered in Honshu and Kyushu.

Eastern Great Egret *Casmerodius modestus*: Seen regularly in suitable habitats on Honshu and Kyushu.

- Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: Seen fairly commonly in Kyushu, particularly around the Arasaki area, plus singles also seen in Maioka Park and around Choshi during the 'extension'.
- Pacific Reef Egret *Egretta sacra*: A dark one was seen on the coast near Kaga, and one other along the rocky coast south of Arasaki..

PHALACROCORACIDAE

- Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: Encountered widely and commonly on Honshu and Kyushu. The subspecies involved is *hanedae* (often considered synonymous with *sinensis*).
- Temminck's Cormorant (Japanese C) *Phalacrocorax capillatus*: Good views of 19 sitting on rocks along the coast south of Arasaki, and another group of them around fish traps in Kadogawa harbour. A huge number (1500+) were sat on the concrete groynes in Choshi harbour on our 'extension'.
- Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*: Our first was seen near Kaga, then small numbers were noted near Mikuni, Kadogawa and near Arasaki, while on Hokkaido they were much more numerous and seen at most coastal locations. Also seen at Choshi harbour.
- Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*: A single dull-coloured immature gave us a thrill at Cape Nosappu, until eclipsed by a splendid adult that appeared next to it, complete with reds and blues!

FALCONIDAE

- Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Single birds recorded fairly frequently on Honshu and Kyushu.
- Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: Two were seen near Mikuni in Honshu, and singles were seen at Arasaki, Koda-oike and at Choshi.

ACCIPITRIDAE

- Eurasian Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: A couple were seen in the Komatsu area, then they were found rather commonly around the coasts of Kyushu.
- Black-eared Kite *Mihus lineatus*: Seen on every day of the tour, and probably at its highest density on Kyushu. It seems odd to find so many large scavengers in such a tidy country!
- White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: Not seen until we reached Hokkaido, with our first ones seen along the roadsides on our first morning. A few birds sat up around our minshuku at Rausu, a small sign of what was to come once we had sailed out into the pack ice that lay offshore. The sheer number of these and the following species (131 counted sitting on the ice) combined with their audacity was just stunning to see. Some of the hungrier birds were a sight to behold as they came down right next to the boat, almost within arms length of the awestruck observers. On a tour of many thrills, this was probably the biggest of them all. We saw quite a few more around the Nemuro peninsula, and had hoped for some more action at the feeding station at Tancho no Sato, but only a couple made an appearance.
- Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*: The concentrations of this huge beast in eastern Hokkaido are undoubtedly one of the world's greatest avian spectacles, and would be one of the biggest highlights of the trip *without* a boat ride into the pack-ice! Our boat trip off Rausu gave us fantastic views of many of the 120 counted, some at extremely close range as they squabbled for food with the White-tailed Eagles. Pure magic! They certainly earned their place as 'Bird-of-the-trip' for this group. It is currently listed as 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife, with a decreasing world population of less than 5,000 individuals. Of these, some 1,200 spend the winter in eastern Hokkaido.
- Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus*: A single female was seen at Biwa-Ko, then we had better views of another in the evening near Kaga, going to roost in the company of the following species. Also seen at Omigawa on our 'extension'.
- Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*: At least three were coming to roost with the above species in rough grass near Kaga, and we also saw at least two 'ringtails' in the area plus one other male. The well-

marked plumage of the males caused us to scratch our heads momentarily, but they were in fact typical for sub-adult (3k) individuals.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: A handful of singles recorded on all three islands.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*: An immature sat up in a tree at Arasaki, then we had a superb view of a big male circling overhead near to Kogawa Dam. This one was of the well-marked *fujiyamae* race. Another male was seen at Maioka Park, and two more were at Takae.

Eastern Buzzard *Buteo japonicus*: Frequently encountered in ones and twos on Honshu and Kyushu, with just one on Hokkaido.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*: 'Eddie' the returning winter visitor (now in his 18th year!) was to be found among his favourite rice paddies and hillocks of forest in western Kyushu. Some good flight views as he sailed around, scrapping with the Kites.

Mountain Hawk Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis*: A good if rather brief look at an adult moving from perch to perch on a snow-covered forested hillside at the Monkey Park. Another was seen at Takae.

RALLIDAE

Eastern Water Rail *Rallus indicus*: Great looks at one of these in a ditch at Arasaki, and another also seen very well in Maioka Park on our 'extension'. This recent split from *R. aquaticus* shows a pronounced brown wash across the breast, brown on the ear coverts, and black and white barred undertail coverts. The calls are wildly different from *R. aquaticus*, with sounds reminiscent of Stone Curlew!

Ruddy-breasted Crake *Porzana fusca*: Calling birds in a ditch at Arasaki remained hidden, with a single glimpse by one of us only.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: Small numbers recorded in Kyushu.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*: Not uncommon in Honshu and Kyushu on suitable duck-ponds and wetlands.

GRUIDAE

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*: Good views of a total of seven individuals amongst the thousands of other cranes in the rice fields at Arasaki

White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*: Many superb looks at many hundreds of these at Arasaki. There was supposed to be over 3142 of these splendid birds here this winter, but they start to return northwards in February, and some had probably already left. No matter, as dozens joined the scrum just outside our lodgings. This is another globally threatened species listed as 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife, with a world population of about 6500 individuals.

Common Crane *Grus grus*: Just two of these seen among the hordes at Arasaki.

Hooded Crane *Grus monacha*: Stunning views at Arasaki, with flights of birds set memorably against the orange skies of dawn, or their red eyes glowing madly as they pitched into the feeding frenzy along the bunds. Over 7000 were said to be present at the time, with a maximum count this winter of 10468, recorded on 14th November. The official population (also wintering in China and Korea) estimate is only 11500, and it is listed by Birdlife as 'Vulnerable', because of its reliance on just a few wintering sites. It breeds in such remote parts of south-east Siberia that its nest went undiscovered till 1974!

Red-crowned Crane (Japanese C) *Grus japonensis*: Surely one of the most beautiful birds in the world. Their stately grandeur, combined with their noisy calls and frolicking nature put this as our No. 2 'Bird-of-the-trip'. On the first morning on Hokkaido, we saw our first at their roost at the Setsurigawa River at dawn (well below freezing, but not as cold as expected!) then enjoyed a real show at their feeding area near Tsurui, dancing and prancing on the sparkling snow. We returned to that same area on our last day on the island, and also visited Tancho no Sato where the birds were closer, and also outnumbered by photographers! It is the world's second rarest crane, with a total population of only 2750 birds, 900 of which are resident in Hokkaido. It is listed as 'Endangered' by Birdlife.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*: One at Hitotsuse Gawa estuary.

CHARADRIIDAE

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: A flock of 70 were seen at Biwa-Ko, a dozen at Yatsushiro, at least 20 at Arasaki and 15 more in the fields by Hitotsuse Gawa.

Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus*: We saw two in rice fields near Kaga soon after arriving there, a single at Biwa-Ko, and then 12 birds were counted in the rice paddies at the Harrier roost near Kaga.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*: Common on the mudflats at Yatsushiro, with a few more seen at Hitotsuse Gawa.

Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*: Some great views of up to five birds along the Chikuma River near Karuizawa in Honshu. Although this species is quite widespread in Asia, Japan is certainly one of the better places to see it.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: Four were seen in paddyfields at Yatsushiro, plus a handful more around Arasaki.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*: Seven were seen on the mudflats at Yatsushiro, 10 or more in the rice fields at Arasaki, and at least 30 at Hitotsuse Gawa.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*: A flushed bird was seen going rapidly away at Takae, and another did virtually the same thing at Mi-ike.

Solitary Snipe *Gallinago solitaria*: A single bird was seen very well at Maioka Park on the 'extension'. After a short search we found this regular wintering individual in an old paddy inside a wooded park, and having time to kill, we stayed with the bird for nearly five hours! During this time he never moved more than three metres, all the time bobbing manically as he fed in the rich mud. The race here is *japonica*, which shows subtle reds and greys, unlike the more yellow and brown Himalayan birds. Another was seen briefly in flight at the Monkey Park, shooting rapidly upstream.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: A few birds seen around Kaga, at Arasaki and at Koda-oike.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: A single at Arasaki.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: Two were seen near Lake Toden, plus a few more in Kyushu.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: Scattered sightings, with one on the rocks at Mikuni, and a few more seen in Kyushu.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: Ten birds counted on the sand bar in the middle of the Hitotsuse Gawa estuary. Although common on passage in Japan, this is a scarce bird in winter, and is only the second time it has been recorded on the winter tour.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: A flock of a couple of hundred were seen at Mikawa near Komatsu, hundreds more at Yatsushiro, quite a few in the rice fields at Arasaki and another flock at Hitotsuse Gawa.

LARIDAE

Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris*: One of the most attractive gulls, we found our first along the coast near Kaga, then many more along the coasts of Kyushu. They were also seen on several occasions on Hokkaido, such as off Cape Nosappu. The biggest concentrations however were at Choshi fishing port on our 'extension', where they numbered in the thousands!

Kamchatka Gull *Larus kamtschatschensis*: First seen inland at Biwa-Ko, then more were seen along the coast near Komatsu. They were seen more commonly on Hokkaido, with plenty along the coasts and in the harbours. Big numbers were also seen at Choshi on our 'extension'. This species differs from the Common Gull *L. canus* in its immature plumage which is much

darker, the adults look more robust and can be pale-eyed, with prominent head streaking in winter.

- Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*: Seen daily in Hokkaido, with a full range of ages and plumages on display. There were few out on the pack ice, and they seem to prefer the coast and harbours, with up to 20 recorded in a day. Also seen in small numbers at Choshi.
- Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*: Common along the coast of Hokkaido, with at least 100 seen in a day, especially common around the Rausu and Notsuke/Odaito areas. We also saw several at Choshi, including one that showed characters of the smaller, 'Iceland Gull-like' *barrovianus* race that breeds in Alaska.
- Thayer's Gull *Larus thayeri*: A good prolonged view of an adult at Choshi fish docks on our 'extension' extra. It is a rare winter visitor to Japan, but annual at Choshi where there were reputedly three individuals among the many thousands of gulls here. The bird stayed in place for some hours, allowing time for local birders to enjoy it too.
- Vega Gull *Larus vegae*: We saw our first near Komatsu, then at Yatsushiro they numbered in their hundreds. A few were seen around Arasaki, and many more were seen along the coast at Kadogawa and Hitotsuse. Also, many were present at Choshi at the end of the trip. This species typically shows a well-streaked head and pink legs.
- Mongolian Gull *Larus mongolicus*: A couple of first-year birds at Yatsushiro showed characters of this Gull, being very pallid on the upperparts and with dark centred tertials. This is a difficult identification, and only now are observers learning how to identify them. They are a close relative of Caspian Gull, and breed between Lake Baikal and the Korean peninsula.
- Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*: Much the commonest gull in Hokkaido, especially around Rausu and out on the pack ice, with some very bold individuals helping themselves to the fish heads on the back of the boat! We saw our first along the coast near Komatsu, and also saw some around the coasts of Kyushu.
- Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini*: A small number of yellow-legged birds, referable to the *taimyrensis* form, were seen at Yatsushiro. This is a gull with confusing and complex taxonomy! These paler-backed 'taimyrensis' birds are considered by some as intergrades between the nominate *heuglini* and Vega Gull, originating from a 'hybrid swarm'. Hours of fun for the Gull aficionados!
- Pallas's Gull *Ichthyaeetus ichthyaeetus*: A boldly-marked adult entertained us at Yatsushiro. An easy ID compared to other gulls here, it was the only one with a black head!
- Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: A few seen around our route; at Biwa-Ko, Yatsushiro, Kadogawa and at Choshi.
- Saunders's Gull *Saundersilarus saundersi*: Great views of 20 or more on the mudflats at Yatsushiro, seemingly all adults bar one. Now placed in its own genus, it's a Gull with a distinct character, calling like a Tern and feeding by foraging for crabs over the mud not unlike a Gull-billed Tern. With a total world population estimated at only 7,100-9,600 birds, it is currently listed by Birdlife as 'Vulnerable'.
- Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*: A single was seen from Cape Nosappu, and as many as 20 were seen at Choshi on our last day. The race here is *pollicaris*, and the birds at Choshi showed noticeable plumage differences to nominate Atlantic birds, such as the first-year birds showing less contrast, and winter-plumaged adults showing large areas of grey and black on their napes. Adult *pollicaris* also consistently show more black on the wingtips than the nominate.

STERCORARIIDAE

- Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*: A distant but reasonable view of an adult light-phase bird harrying gulls off the Inubosaki lighthouse.

ALCIDAE

- Brünnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*: A total of five were seen in two visits to Cape Nosappu
- Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*: Ten or more seen out to sea off Cape Nosappu on our first visit, with a handful more on the following morning.
- Pigeon Guillemot *Cepphus columba*: Some reasonable scope views of at least ten on our first visit to Cape Nosappu, and three on our second visit. These birds are likely to have been of the *snowi* race, which may deserve separate specific status as Kuril Guillemot *C. snowi*.
- Spectacled Guillemot *Cepphus carbo*: Common along the coast of eastern Hokkaido, where we found our first concentration off the Notsuke Peninsula, then in two visits to Cape Nosappu we saw hundreds, particularly on the second visit when they were scattered across the ocean as far as the eye could see. Many were already coming into breeding plumage, and some were close enough for reasonable views. This species is restricted to the north-western Pacific.
- Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*: Our first were seen rather distantly off the coast near Kaga, then we had some great views of up to three birds at close range in Hanasaki harbour. Other distant birds were seen off Cape Nosappu.
- Japanese Murrelet *Synthliboramphus numizusume*: A personal favourite, the 'Sea Sparrow' experience was both thrilling and enchanting. We could see several birds out in Kadogawa harbour from the harbour wall, but a short ride on a fishing boat gave us repeated point-blank views of up to 15 birds, calling to each other in between dives and surfacing right next to our vessel. This is one of the world's rarest alcids, with a decreasing world population of less than 10000 confined to a few breeding sites in central and southern Japan. It is listed as 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife.
- [Parakeet Auklet *Aethia psittacula*: A bird with an obvious orange bill that passed us off Cape Nosappu may well have been this species, however I am only listing it here as a possible.]
- Least Auklet *Aethia pusilla*: A lot of staring out to sea was needed before these became visible off Cape Nosappu! So tiny, they were barely visible as they ducked in and out of the waves, but some eventually decided to play along, and we all got some reasonable views of some of 25 birds present.
- Crested Auklet *Aethia cristatella*: One came flying very close inshore at Cape Nosappu, which made the experience pass all too quickly!
- Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*: At least four birds were seen off Cape Nosappu on our second morning there, though none of them well. Several more were also seen off the lighthouse at Choshi, but were too distant to do much with.

COLUMBIDAE

- Rock Dove (feral) *Columba livia*: Frequently encountered.
- Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*: Not uncommon across much of Honshu, and common and widespread in Kyushu.
- White-bellied Green Pigeon *Treron sieboldii*: Five birds were seen perched distantly at Mi-ike, with others glimpsed there. Also heard singing. It is a bird that continues to evade yours truly!

STRIGIDAE

- Blakiston's Fish Owl *Bubo blakistoni*: One of the great highlights of the tour, even if the birds didn't quite behave as we had hoped! The pair here spent a lot of time duetting from big trees high on the slope; fortunately for us they were visible and scope-able from within the warm minshuku. Meanwhile, outside were some amateur photographers who kept moving about, running their car engines and behaving like fools, disturbing the otherwise tranquil scene! Consequently the Owl never came down to the pond till 0030hrs, but those still awake were able to enjoy the classic view of this awesome bird. We also tried at another place close to Nemuro, where we heard an Owl calling, but he never came into view. Alas, the total population of this splendid owl is now estimated at less than 1,000 individuals (120 of which are in Hokkaido), and the species is listed as 'Endangered' by Birdlife. The bird is

named after Captain Thomas Blakiston, a British businessman and consul in Hokkaido from 1861 to 1884.

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*: Superb close and prolonged looks at two different Ural Owls, basking in the Hokkaido sunshine on our first day on the island. Clearly paler than European birds, they were of the *japonica* race.

ALCEDINIDAE

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*: A handful of sightings in suitable habitat on Honshu and Kyushu.

Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris*: A good look at a splendid example on a mountain river near Mi-ike, which stayed on its perch long enough for some scope views.

PICIDAE

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker *Yungipicus kizuki*: A number of excellent sightings of this tiny and endearing woodpecker on all three islands. Best of all were the birds coming to the feeders at our hotel at Karuizawa, plus several others seen well in the woods there.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos*: A male was virtually the first bird we saw on arriving at Karuizawa, where it is not typically found! Also heard at Mi-ike, where a nest-hole was pointed out to us, but the bird remained elusive.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: Seen on several occasions in the forest at Karuizawa, and once near Tsurui on Hokkaido.

Japanese Woodpecker (J Green W) *Picus avokera*: Several good sightings of this endemic at Karuizawa, Sendai and Kogawa, and also heard at Mi-ike. We also had a good look at a curious male in Maioka Park. The scientific name *avokera* refers to its Japanese name 'ao' (green), 'gera' (woodpecker).

CAMPEPHAGIDAE

Ryukyu Minivet *Pericrocotus tegimae*: Some glimpses of flying birds were had at Kogawa and on our first afternoon at Mi-ike, then we had multiple good views of several birds at Koda-oike, and a few more on our final morning at Mi-ike. Although they are rather flighty, they proclaimed their presence with loud Waxwing-like trilling.

LANIIDAE

Bull-headed Shrike *Lanius bucephalus*: Seen on many occasions in Kyushu, also at Lake Toden, the Kaga area, and finally in Maioka Park during our 'extension'.

CORVIDAE

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: Some fleeting looks in the forest at Karuizawa at the distinctive pale-eyed race *japonicus*, followed by some better looks in the Monkey Park. On our last day on Hokkaido we ran into a pair of the ginger-headed *brandtii* race, which has a dark eye. This race is the widespread form of northern Asia, occurring west to the Urals.

Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cyanus* (NL): A small party seen from the bus en-route to Kaga.

Daurian Jackdaw *Coloens dauuricus*: At least six of these with the Oriental Rooks at Arasaki, but no sign of any pied ones.

Oriental Rook *Corvus pastinator*: Hundreds seen in the fields around Arasaki, and also at the Hitotsuse estuary. This species occurs in Japan only as a winter visitor.

Oriental Crow *Corvus orientalis*: Common throughout the tour, although how common in relation to the next species would require diligent observation! This species is still usually lumped in Carrion Crow *C. corone*.

Large-billed Crow *Corvus japonensis*: Generally the commonest corvid, and recorded on every day of the tour. I still love 'em though!

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*: Several seen in the valley by our minshuku at Rausu.

PARIDAE

Eastern Great Tit (Japanese T) *Parus minor*: Common in the forests of Karuizawa, also seen in Kyushu, at Tsurui in Hokkaido, and a few other places. These pallid Japanese birds are usually lumped in Great Tit *P. major*.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*: Seen fairly often at Karuizawa, particularly on the hotel's feeders, and also at the Monkey Park. The race here is *insularis*, and has a slight crest.

Japanese Varied Tit *Poecile varius*: A very attractive near-endemic, we enjoyed multiple good looks at these around Karuizawa (notably at the feeders at our hotel) and saw more around Mi-ike and Koda-oike.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*: A few seen on Hokkaido on both our visits to Tsurui, with one or two seen elsewhere. The race here is *hensoni*, and is small-billed and very frosty looking.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*: Fairly common in the forest at Karuizawa, and also on our hotel's bird feeders. Another was seen on Hokkaido.

Chinese Penduline Tit *Remiz consobrinus*: A great find of some 25 birds in a reed-bed south of Arasaki, where an hour of searching paid off with some great views of these unobtrusive little fellows.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Seen in the warmer climate of Kyushu, with high counts of 20 at Hitotsuse Estuary and 10 at Koda-oike, with other singles seen elsewhere

Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus*: A group of seven were seen along a wooded river valley near Izumi, plus another seen at the Hitotsuse Estuary, and also en-route to Arasaki.

AEGITHALIDAE

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*: Small numbers were seen on several occasions, with a variety of races involved. At Karuizawa, the Monkey Park and in Kyoto, the race was *trivirgatus*, at Koda-oike they referred to the race *kiusiuensis*, and in Hokkaido we saw a party of the white-headed *japonicus*.

ALAUDIDAE

Japanese Skylark *Alauda japonica*: Often the first bird to be seen in Japan, as they fly alongside arriving aircraft at Narita airport! We saw many at Arasaki, and also at Yatsushiro, with smaller numbers seen elsewhere. This species is often lumped in Eurasian Skylark *A. arvensis*, but several characters clearly suggest otherwise. In general it shows characters that seem intermediate between *A. arvensis* and Oriental Skylark *A. gulgula*.

CISTICOLIDAE

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*: A few seen at Arasaki and Takae, and also at Omigawa.

PYCNONOTIDAE

Brown-eared Bulbul *Hypsipetes amaurotis*: Very common in Kyushu and Honshu, with some comical vocalisations. Rather scarce in Hokkaido, as are most passerines!

SYLVIIDAE

Marsh Grassbird (Japanese Marsh Warbler) *Megalurus pryori*: A bonus of our rearranged 'extension', and fortunately for us it was a fine spring morning, so these uber-skulkers were calling. We managed to get a fair look at one excited individual, but he really didn't want to leave his grassy thicket! Listed by Birdlife as 'Near-threatened'.

Asian Stubtail *Urosphena squamiceps* (H): A single bird allegedly heard singing at Koda-oike! A depressing moment, as this is the first time I have knowingly been unable to hear a high-pitched

sound! The bird must have been singing at a higher frequency to the recordings of the song which I *could* hear, probably around 8.5kHz which is the same frequency as the calls and song of Eurasian Treecreeper.

Japanese Bush Warbler *Cettia diphone*: First encountered at a riverside in Kyoto, then others were seen at Arasaki, Mi-ike, and in Maioka Park on the extension.

Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*: A surprise find of a vocal bird in a ditch at Arasaki. Only the second time it has been seen on the winter tour, it's a very scarce wintering bird in Japan.

TIMALIIDAE

Chinese Hwamei (introduced) *Garrulax canorus*: One seen in Maioka Park.

Red-billed Leiothrix (introduced) *Leiothrix lutea*: A small group were seen at Mi-ike.

ZOSTEROPIDAE

Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonicus*: Our first were at the temple in Kyoto, then we found them fairly commonly in Kyushu. Also seen in Maioka Park during the extension.

REGULIDAE

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: Three seen on the walk up to the Monkey Park was our only sighting.

TROGLODYTIDAE

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: A couple of sightings at Karuizawa, with one seen through the lounge window of our hotel. Another was seen at Mi-ike.

SITTIDAE

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: Seen in the forest at Karuizawa and also at the Hotel's bird feeders. The race here is *bondoensis*. At Mi-ike we had a great look at a very vocal and responsive bird; the race here is *roseillia*, which is restricted to southern Kyushu. On our first day on Hokkaido we had great looks at several very attractive snowy-bellied birds that belong to the race *asiatica*.

CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: A single singing male was seen at Tsurui on our first morning in Hokkaido. The race here is *daurica*.

STURNIDAE

Crested Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres cristallus*: Two were seen in Tokyo as we drove towards Maioka Park.

White-cheeked Starling *Sturnus cineraceus*: Frequently encountered in small flocks on Honshu and Kyushu, especially in the Kaga and Arasaki areas.

TURDIDAE

White's Thrush *Zoothera aurea*: Fleeting glimpses of birds at Kogawa and Mi-ike, then a bird feeding at the edge of a paddyfield at Koda-oike performed at length, doing his little 'seismic-shimmy', presumably to bring invertebrates to the surface.

Pale Thrush *Turdus pallidus*: A couple of sightings on Honshu at Karuizawa and Narita, but they were much more common on Kyushu, and particularly at Mi-ike.

Brown-headed Thrush (Brown T) *Turdus chrysolaus*: Despite the continual rain, we found at least three in gardens near Narita airport, and then one more showed well and at length Maioka Park.

Dusky Thrush *Turdus [naumanni] eunomus*: Much the most commonly encountered Thrush in Japan at this season, they were especially numerous around Karuizawa and Arasaki, with a small number seen on Hokkaido.

MUSCICAPIDAE

Red-flanked Bluetail *Luscinia cyanura*: Some great views at Karuizawa where we saw six in a day, all but one being females or young birds.

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus auroreus*: Excellent views of both the attractive males and the more subtle females on many occasions in Honshu and Kyushu, with just a single seen on Hokkaido.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*: Several singles were seen along our route, with a memorably bright male seen at Kogawa Dam. The race involved is *philippensis*, which differs from other forms in having a rufous belly.

CINCLIDAE

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*: Up to three birds seen well at Karuizawa as they sped up and down the streams. We also saw two near Mi-ike, and one along the stream outside our minshuku at Rausu.

PASSERIDAE

Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*: A large group at Yatsushiro evaded our pursuit, but many were seen at Arasaki the next morning, posing well on wires among the rice fields. A winter visitor to Kyushu.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Common around towns and villages throughout the tour.

PRUNELLIDAE

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*: Three birds on a rock face at the Monkey Park were a surprise. They are resident on Honshu but rarely encountered on this tour.

Japanese Accentor *Prunella rubida*: Almost the first bird we saw upon arriving at our Karuizawa hotel, a superb introduction to the bird feeders there! We saw several around these forests, with four or five individuals involved. This near-endemic also breeds in the Kuril Islands.

MOTACILLIDAE

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: Several seen along our route through Honshu and Kyushu.

Black-backed Wagtail *Motacilla lugens*: Found on all three islands, they were in good number around Arasaki, though on Hokkaido we found them only on the Nemuro Peninsula.

Japanese Wagtail *Motacilla grandis*: Rather common around Karuizawa and in the Kaga area, this lovely bird is a near-endemic with an array of calls totally unlike the previous species. We also saw a pair at Tsurui on Hokkaido.

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*: A rare winter visitor, we had good looks at this lanky fellow in a rough field at Arasaki.

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*: A single at Toden Lake, then a couple each at Koda-oike and Mi-ike.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*: Good views of up to six in the rice fields at Arasaki.

Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens*: A handful were seen at Toden Lake, then at Yatsushiro and the Arasaki area they were numerous in the rice fields. The form we saw, *japonicus*, is much more heavily streaked than nominate *rubescens* of North America.

FRINGILLIDAE

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*: Around Karuizawa we found a few, and then at Koda-oike we saw a flock of 30 plus.

Oriental Greenfinch *Carduelis sinica*: Common and frequently seen in flocks on Honshu and Kyushu, typically around agriculture and villages.

Asian Rosy Finch *Leucosticte arctoa*: Good views of a flock of 15 foraging by the roadside on the Notsuke Peninsula, showing off their subtle pinks and charcoal tones to good effect.

Another group was seen near our minshuku at Rausu. The race concerned is *brunneonucha*, which breeds in eastern Siberia and the Kuril Islands.

Long-tailed Rosefinch *Uragus sibiricus*: Four different males were seen at Karuizawa, often requiring a little pursuit before they settled down. Another two males were seen rather randomly next to a large river in Kyoto.

Grey-bellied Bullfinch *Pyrrhula griseiventris* (H): Heard on one day at Karuizawa.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Always pleasing to see lots of these, we had multiple looks at these at Karuizawa, with a few more seen at Kyoto, on Hokkaido and at Maioka Park.

Japanese Grosbeak *Eophona personata*: Excellent views of some of 20+ birds at Karuizawa, they were shy around the Hotel feeders and preferred to sit high in the trees and sing. Other flocks were at the Monkey Park, at Koda-oike and Mi-ike, and we had a nice look at some bathing birds at the temple near Kyoto.

EMBERIZIDAE

Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides*: A common bird on Honshu and Kyushu often close to wooded areas, plus we found many in weedy fields in the Arasaki area.

Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*: Good views of these attractive fellows in rough fields at Arasaki, where we must have seen 30 birds in all. Also found at Takae and at Koda-oike.

Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica*: Some scattered encounters with this common winter visitor, with a few that popped up around Toden Lake, also seen at Karuizawa, Mi-ike and Koda-oike.

Elegant Bunting (Yellow-throated B) *Emberiza elegans*: Great looks at these beautiful birds, with a couple of males at Karuizawa that posed well, then a flock of 20 at Koda-oike that entertained us, some even singing in the late winter sunshine.

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*: Quite a few were seen around Arasaki in the rough fields, and also at Koda-oike, but perhaps our best examples were in the rain at Narita and in Maioka Park on the extension. The race here is *personata*, with streaked yellow underparts and a yellow throat, very different from the nominate mainland race.

Grey Bunting *Emberiza variabilis*: A very sneaky bird, with several heard at Koda-oike in the late afternoon where we managed a couple of views of a male and two females, but they wouldn't give themselves up easily. Also heard at Mi-ike. A near-endemic of Japan.

Japanese Reed Bunting *Emberiza yessoensis*: A bonus of our 'Extension - Plan B'! We had great looks at six of these, sitting up in the reeds at Omigawa and calling, looking like little Stonechats with long tails! Listed by Birdlife as 'Near-threatened'.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Common in the reed-beds and ditches at Arasaki, where we recorded up to 20 in a day. We also found plenty in the reedbeds at Omigawa on our 'extension'. These wintering birds are of one of the pale eastern races.

MAMMALS

Japanese Squirrel *Sciurus lis* (NL): One was seen in the forest at Karuizawa.

Pallas' Squirrel *Callosciurus erythraeus*: Two or three of these introduced beasts in Maioka Park, they are apparently of the Taiwan race.

Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel *Petaurista leucogenys*: Eventually one of these popped out of his nest box at Karuizawa and posed on the front porch before retreating back inside. We knew he was inside as he was on CCTV, it was just a rather cold and boring wait for him to emerge! A write-in for this tour.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: Rather common on Hokkaido, with at least eight animals seen, often along the beaches, and all with thick winter coats.

Largha Seal (Spotted S) *Phoca largha*: A couple were seen distantly on the pack ice on our 'Eagle cruise'.

Harbour Seal (Common S) *Phoca vitulina*: Several were seen just off the rocks at Cape Nosappu.

- Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris*: Superb looks at these wonderful creatures at Cape Nosappu, swimming along on their backs and stroking their whiskers. There were at least two, and possibly four animals involved. A write-in for this tour.
- American Mink (introduced) *Mustella vison*: One seen briefly at Tsurui.
- Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata*: We saw our first eight animals sitting around on cars at Karuizawa, then at the thermal baths in the Monkey Park near Nagano we saw at least 150. There were only ten at a time in the pool – perhaps it was ‘members-only’!
- Eurasian Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*: Two groups of five each were seen in the forest at Karuizawa.
- Sika Deer *Cervus nippon*: First seen near Mi-ike on Kyushu, on Hokkaido they were common and in good number in many places.
- Japanese Serow *Capricornis crispus*: A good long look at one of these in the forest at Karuizawa. Another write-in for this tour.