

# JAPAN IN WINTER

6 – 20/22 FEBRUARY 2011

## 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 and well-organised, with delightfully courteous people and an exciting cuisine, all adding hugely to the enjoyment of the birding. Some of our best memories will be from Hokkaido, where we witnessed the amazing spectacle of hundreds of both Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles sitting on ice floes - some coming almost within arms-length, or having the Blakiston's Fish Owls visit us for dinner, or the Red-crowned Cranes standing in the sub-zero chill of dawn in the middle of a river. The weather was rather variable, and an excess of pack ice on Hokkaido made for an interesting experience. Overall we recorded 197 species, a tally that included five species of Crane, Ural Owl in the daytime, Baikal Teal, Saunders's Gull, Japanese Murrelet, Red-faced Cormorant, Japanese and Alpine Accentors, three flocks of Japanese Waxwings, Asian Rosy Finch and seven species of Bunting including Elegant and Grey. We also found various rare visitors, such as Black-faced Spoonbill, Long-billed Dowitcher and Chinese Grosbeak. Our pelagic extension was very successful, seeing nine Short-tailed Albatross, several Black-footed and hordes of Laysan Albatross, Providence Petrel and Tristram's Storm Petrels, with an obliging Eastern Water Rail, Wryneck and Red-billed Starling on land. It was a great trip, creating for us a special bond with the country that we would all have felt just three weeks later, when the trio of disasters struck this country.

Our tour began in Tokyo, where we were met by Otani-san 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. We checked into our comfortable hotel here, and had a pleasant but unproductive stroll in the nearby woods, blowing off the cobwebs of a long flight. We began our birding in earnest the following morning, with a busy session watching the hotel feeders that buzzed with activity. Most evident were the soon to become familiar range of Tits, including Japanese Varied, Eastern Great, Coal and Willow Tit, Dusky Thrush, Red-flanked Bluetail, Oriental Greenfinch, and a score of thrilling Japanese Grosbeaks alongside several Hawfinches, and a single smart Chinese Grosbeak that came in close for lengthy inspections. We headed out to the main birding trails, and within moments of stepping from the car park a flock of Waxwings flew over and landed in a nearby tree infested with mistletoe. Closer inspection revealed red tail tips and yellow centres to their bellies – Japanese Waxwing! A lifer for the leader (and not the last!) We got progressively better views of these Siberian sprites, with some birds dropping down to the adjacent stream bed to drink. Tearing ourselves away, we headed on into the woods, finding Japanese Green and Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, Eurasian Nuthatch and Long-tailed Tits. A male Long-tailed Rosefinch appeared very briefly, but there was no sign of any sneaky gamebirds. We left here and drove the fairly short distance down to Lake Toden, where in a bitter wind we scanned the lake and found eleven Baikal Teal among the numerous wildfowl which included many fine Smew, Goosander, Greater Scaup, Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Northern Pintail, plus a handful of elegant Falcated Ducks swimming on the adjacent

river. On the pebble river bed we found several Long-billed Plovers, Common Snipe, Eastern Great Egrets, Black-backed and Japanese Wagtails, Buff-bellied Pipit, our first Bull-headed Shrikes, Brown-eared Bulbul, White-cheeked Starlings, Rustic Buntings, a male Northern Goshawk perched up for us and we flushed a couple of female Japanese Green Pheasant from a patch of reeds. Three more Japanese Waxwing were found here, and after a fruitless search for Azure-winged Magpies, more Japanese Waxwings were found at a small temple near the town of Karuizawa. Clearly common where found!

We continued our searches in the early morning cold, and after some effort were rewarded with great views of several Grey-bellied Bullfinches feeding on the ground, but several solitary male Long-tailed Rosefinch remained uncannily elusive, until one that showed a little better in the tops of some tall trees. After trawling around some more in search of the elusive Copper Pheasant, we decided to go for a different scene, and drove along very windy mountain roads to some lakes where we found a collection of handsome Mandarin Ducks, and walking up quiet valleys we found an obliging Japanese Accentor, a demure fellow that we were able to observe at length. Meadow Buntings were numerous here, plus we had a fleeting glimpse of a couple of Hwamei, the wild progeny of escaped cagebirds. Another lakeside stop produced a second Japanese Accentor, behaving tamely and allowing a busy photographic session, and the last lake of the afternoon produced a male Crested Kingfisher, perched on branches overhanging the water.

The following morning we awoke to light snowfall, and on a pre-breakfast drive along snowy lanes we found a hefty Japanese Serow, peering down at us from a roadside bank. We left these forests and drove to the Snow Monkey Park, and after a pleasant walk up through the winter wonderland we were able to enjoy the remarkable sight of many Japanese Macaques languidly chilling out in the hot tub. We added Goldcrest and Eurasian Treecreeper here, and a mobile flock of Asian Rosy Finches came as a surprise. We headed northwards, along the motorway where the snow was piled 3m high on either side, and up to the north coast where we were met by drizzle as we passed through innumerable tunnels, en-route to our destination of Kaga. We reached the pond at Katano Kamo-Ike in the late afternoon, with enough daylight still to see both Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese and many hundreds of Baikal Teal, before heading to our hotel.

The following day we did a tour of small wetland and coastal sites in this area, starting with an area of paddyfields where thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese fed where the snow had cleared. We found a male Merlin perched nearby, and on another 'duck pond' we had close views of three male Baikal Teal, several Falcated Ducks and many Eurasian Wigeon. At the coast we checked a harbour where we saw our first Black-tailed Gulls and Great Crested Grebe, a chilly sea-watch from a nearby headland provided some good looks at Temminck's and Pelagic Cormorants sat on an offshore rock, while on the sea itself we found Rhinoceros Auklet, a flock of 35 Black-throated Divers, Red-necked Grebe, some distant Ancient Murrelets and a Blue Rock Thrush that dodged the sea spray on the cliff. In wet paddies we had some very close views of Grey-headed Lapwings, and a return to the comfort of the observatory at Katano Kamo-Ike allowed us to compare the Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese once more, enjoy the hordes of Baikal Teal, plus a Bull-headed Shrike hunting just outside the windows of the heated lounge. A late afternoon stop around some more fields produced a couple of fine male Japanese Green Pheasants, a Pale Thrush, and Rustic and Meadow Buntings.

The next leg of our journey saw us fly from Komatsu airport down to Fukuoka on Kyushu. Our plan here was a little uncertain, due to a double-whammy of bird flu, and a volcano erupting over Mi-ike! Nevertheless we sped south from Fukuoka, to Yatsushiro and its rich an area of mudflats and fields. Here scores of dainty Saunders's Gulls were hawking over the mud uttering their hoarse little yelps, plus we found two handsome Black-faced Spoonbills, a single Mongolian and numerous Kentish

Plovers, a group of Vega Gulls joined by a single Heuglin's, Grey Plover, Common Greenshanks, and in the fields we found a handful of Russet Sparrows and a large group of Japanese Skylarks, Buff-bellied Pipits, Oriental Greenfinch and a single Brambling. We continued south to Izumi and our hotel in the city, unable to stay in the minshuku at Arasaki due to the restrictions associated with the bird flu there.

A bitter wind greeted us in the early morning, and as we headed out to the Arasaki area we were greeted with what was probably the tail end of South Korea's 'Snowstorm of the Century', with driving sleet that cut to the bone. We were able to drive close to the closed-off area, and we looked out onto the fields that were thronged with both Hooded and White-naped Cranes. The roads surrounding the core were marked with white bands of disinfectant powder for the cars to drive through, so we decided to move away and limit our effects as possible agents of contagion, to try our luck in the surrounding fields. We shivered our way around some paddies that were alive with Chestnut-eared Buntings, and in a stand of reeds we were surprised to find a small group of Chinese Penduline Tit – a surprise to find them at all in such strong winds! Further scanning of the Crane flocks revealed a lone Common Crane, and several Daurian Jackdaws popped up into view among the hordes of Oriental Rooks. Moving away from the Arasaki area, we drove down the rocky coastline, collecting a Brown Booby along the way, but the weather meant most birds were keeping their heads down. We heard some Ruddy-breasted Crakes, Otani saw a White's Thrush, and exploring down anonymous tracks into the forest we found a trio of shy Grey Buntings, with a male that showed well as it fed quietly on a bank. The next morning we returned to Arasaki, and began by searching along a muddy canal where we had a good view of a Ruddy-breasted Crake, then soon after we had some good looks at our first Japanese Bush Warblers. Searching the Crane flocks revealed a lone Sandhill Crane, looking small and pale among the massed Hooded and White-naped Cranes, and we re-found the lone Common Crane. We saw a Eurasian Woodcock and some Hawfinches in a small park, then began our journey across to the east coast of Kyushu. We were unable to follow our usual itinerary here, as Mi-ike was now inside an exclusion zone surrounding the erupting volcano that is located just 8km away from our hotel! Of course the volcano had now quietened down somewhat, and as we passed it on the highway, all that was visible was an insignificant plume of smoke. We headed for a small area of woodland and fields near to the east coast, and found some charming Elegant Buntings and some lovely Ryukyu Minivets, uttering their Waxwing-like trills from the tall trees. A Crested Kingfisher flew over calling, and some Chestnut-eared Buntings popped up in a stubble field.

Having missed out on the forested hills around Mi-ike, by way of a replacement we headed into the nearby mountains and valleys. In a long valley with ribbon-like dammed lakes running its length, we drove slowly along mountain roads in persistent rain. We soon found a large gathering of White-bellied Green Pigeons sitting high in bare trees, bathing in the downpour by rolling on their backs and stretching out their wings. Numerous tasty-looking Mandarin Ducks fled on our approach, and a fine example of a Mountain Hawk Eagle perched up in the rain. From here we headed up the coast to Kadogawa harbour, where we boarded a small boat for a pelagic trip to see the delightful Japanese Murrelet, (or 'Sea Sparrow' as its Japanese name translates as). Not far from the harbour we found a pair of these delightful little birds, and a second pair were notably tame and even swam under our bows, in-between offering us some eye-popping views. Here we also found our first Kamchatka Gulls, alongside Vega, Slaty-backed and Black-tailed Gulls, Black-necked and Great Crested Grebes swam in the sheltered waters, and some dusky Eastern Reef Egrets sat on fish traps. Following this enchanting little excursion we headed southwards to the Hitotsuse estuary, where we found a collection of Black-faced Spoonbills that concealed a Eurasian Spoonbill within their midst, a trio of Sanderling fed busily on the beach, and we found Eastern Cattle Egrets and Black-crowned Night Heron, some Kentish Plovers, and a Long-billed Dowitcher standing in the shallows. We looked twice at the Egrets here, and

discovered two forms of Great Egret; the larger Western Great Egret alongside the strikingly diminutive Eastern Great Egret.

A visit to more fields around a wooded lake produced some more Ryukyu Minivet, Olive-backed Pipits, a flock of Elegant Buntings, several Mandarin Ducks and a few Baikal Teal, before it was time to scoot to Miyazaki airport. ANA decided we needed to be on an earlier flight in order to make our connection to Kushiro, so we were rushed through, which ensured we made it to Haneda airport on time for our second flight to Hokkaido. Annoyingly, after so much poor weather, the entire Japanese archipelago seemed to be bathed in sunshine today, and we arrived in Kushiro as the sun set on a crisp snowscape, and enjoyed some great dinner in our fine hotel, while the mercury dropped to -10 degrees C outside.

We began early and drove to the Setsurigawa River, and joined the throngs of photographers poised on the bridge. As the light rose, the Red-crowned Cranes gathered in the free-flowing river, while on land the mercury dropped to -11.7 degrees C! They began to move around and dance in the shallows before all taking off and headed out to the fields. Well pleased, and after a fine breakfast we set off once more, a short walk around the village revealed a quintet of Bohemian Waxwings. Nearby we returned to the Red-crowned Cranes, visiting some fields where local people put out corn to attract the birds. Under a blue sky and strong sun we enjoyed great views of these wonderful birds. Moving on here, we crossed eastern Hokkaido in fine weather (a welcome spell indeed!), pausing in a well-known patch of woodland where we found a roosting Ural Owl sunning itself in a bare tree. We continued onto the coast and drove up the narrow spit of the Notsuke peninsula, seeing a trio of Short-eared Owls, while offshore we found a drake Surf Scoter alongside numerous Black and Stejneger's Scoters, a trio of Harlequin Duck, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Mergansers, and some distant Spectacled Guillemot. The pack ice was close inshore here and sat on the ice floes were our first Steller's Sea Eagles. Several White-tailed Eagles sat around on prominences, and Glaucous Gulls fed on a beached Seal carcass. We reached our simple minshuku at Rausu by dusk, where roosting in the trees overlooking the valley were a Mountain Hawk Eagle, plus several White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles. We settled into our digs, and were treated to a wonderful feast of Kamchatka Crab, Fish and Sashimi, interrupted only by the appearance of Blakiston's Fish Owl! It perched up in the gloom behind the lodge, offering views by ambient light until it swooped down to the floodlit pool on the river, picking out a fish and flying off into the forest again. We continued our wait, and it returned once more for a very satisfying view of it devouring two fish caught from the river. Fantastic! This was voted as 'Bird-of-the-Trip', a high accolade indeed when all the other great birds on this tour are considered!

The following morning we found a pair of Brown Dipper, a Mountain Hawk Eagle and a flock of Asian Rosy Finches all within a few metres of our lodge, then moved down to the nearby harbour. We were worried our 'nature cruise' might be cancelled, as the pack ice was rammed tight into the harbour and also along the entire coast. We spent an hour watching other boats grind through the ice in order to get out to the ocean, among hordes of Slaty-backed Gulls alongside Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, plus several of both White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles. Even more bizarre were two Red Fox that trotted about on the pack-ice inside the harbour! After a wait, we boarded our boat, which then thumped its way out of the harbour, stopping just 300m out of the harbour mouth, and began throwing out a few fish heads. This caused a maelstrom of Gulls, swiftly followed by Eagles! Over the next two hours we were treated to a fantastic spectacle as both White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles came ever closer, squabbling over the abundant fish waste that they were tempted with. An unbelievably wonderful experience! The rest of the day was rather tame by comparison, as we traveled down the coast towards Nemuro city. We checked various harbours and viewpoints along the coast, finding some nice Long-tailed Ducks, Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser and some Spectacled Guillemots.

In Nemuro we awoke to persistent snowfall, and after breakfast headed out to some of the harbours that dot the Nemuro peninsula. At Hanusaki we were thrilled by some tame Black Scoters (some of hundreds encountered today) that engaged in some playful display, splashing along the surface while all the others wailed in unison with their mournful calls in applause. In fact the whole harbour rang with their enchanting calls, and were joined by some vocal Long-tailed Ducks. There was a great raft of Red-breasted Mergansers, good numbers of Harlequin Ducks, Greater Scaup and Common Goldeneye, Black-necked and Slavonian Grebes. We continued along to Cape Nosappu, past harbours that were completely iced in, the sea itself was choked with wind-driven pack ice. At the Cape the strong swell and rolling surf kept some of the sea clear of ice, and we managed to find a young Red-faced Cormorant sat on a rock in the teeth of the snow storm, while offshore we managed to find several Spectacled Guillemot, while Harlequin Ducks, Black and Stejneger's Scoter, and Pelagic Cormorants all dived for food in among the ice floes or rode the swell. Further explorations were fairly fruitless as we got wetter and colder as the day went on, punctuating our day with visits to convenience stores selling hot coffee and offering welcome shelter!

The weather cleared by the following morning, although with a temperature of  $-6$  C., brute force was required to open the doors of the minibus which were frozen shut! As nearby harbours were still frozen up, we sped along to Cape Kiritappu where fortunately the sea was ice-free. From the headland here we squinted at distant dots bobbing about on the sea, finding several Spectacled Guillemots, some Pigeon Guillemots (including a fairly close one that was gaining summer plumage), some microscopic Least Auklets, and Ancient Murrelets that required a forensic search of the surface of the ocean! Also here were many ducks that had become familiar over the recent days, including a good showing of Stejneger's Scoter, and a handful of Red-necked Grebes. A large flock of Asian Rosy Finches swirled around the scenic cliffs, and then it was time to head for Kushiro and 'Tanchō No Sato'. We arrived at the Red-crowned Crane observatory with moments to spare before 'feeding time' when the Cranes excitedly received handouts of live fish, an event that regularly attracts a collection of kleptomaniac White-tailed Eagles. At least ten suddenly appeared as if from nowhere, to snatch the fish away from the Cranes! Yet another Hokkaido spectacular, also attended by a small number of Steller's Sea Eagles, Black-eared Kites and the ever-present Large-billed Crows. Then it was time to say farewell to Hokkaido, and fly south from Kushiro to Tokyo.

An early morning foray close to our hotel produced a fine Brown-headed Thrush, plus a few Black-faced Buntings and a Japanese Wagtail, then those of us taking the extension headed off towards Tokyo. We visited a small park on its western side, popular with local birders and photographers, and saw some a confiding and showy Eastern Water Rail, another Brown-headed Thrush, a Wryneck and a sleeping Woodcock. Moving from here we took buses and trains to Takeshiba port, to embark on our pelagic, departing late in the evening. After a night in some very comfortable cabins, we awoke to find the ship in the teeth of a gale, the captain choosing to return to Tokyo from Miyakejima as we would not be able to land on Hachichojima. As the wind howled and the spray went past horizontally, just three hardy souls stood gripping the rail as the light came up. In the gloom we saw our first Laysan Albatross shoot past, and hundreds of Tristram's Storm Petrels skipped between the mountainous waves. As the light improved we were able to see increasingly more, and although the wind kept up its fierce blast (so strong we could barely open the doors onto the deck!) the waves died back a little and more of our number began to appear on the deck. Black-footed Albatrosses made an appearance, then a big fellow with large areas of white on its upperwing reared above the waves – Short-tailed Albatross! In the next hour or so another eight were seen, in various states of age and plumage. The storm was clearly working in our favour, as Laysan Albatrosses were becoming common, Streaked Shearwater numbers began to rise, a couple of Ancient Murrelet passed us and a handful of Pomarine Skuas came by. As we headed deeper into Tokyo Bay the Storm Petrels disappeared as swarms of Gulls appeared, and a single Providence Petrel was seen shooting past the ship. We reached the dock by lunchtime, very

pleased indeed with a thrilling voyage, despite some challenging seas to test the hardiest of sailors! We used our bonus time to cross Tokyo by train (including a trek through the vastness of Tokyo station) and visit the waterfront park at Kasai. Here we 'twitched' a fine Red-billed Starling, and also saw an Eastern Marsh Harrier, some Black-necked Grebes and vast numbers of Greater Scaup and Common Pochard. We headed back to Narita via the bus station at Tokyo Disneyland (an experience in itself!), returning to our hotel to toast a very successful tour around the wintry wilds of the Japanese archipelago. As we headed our separate ways, I'm sure I was not alone in feeling slightly sad to be leaving this enchanting and exciting country. It's not hard to understand why this tour is such a favourite, given the suite of avian spectacles to be seen, and I am sure many of us will find ourselves returning here some day.

In the light of the catastrophic events that occurred there just three weeks after we left, I am sure we all would want to extend our sympathies to the Japanese people, to wish them luck, and to hope they can find the fortitude and resilience with which to recover from the awful trio of disasters.

## 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 *Bambusicola thoracica*: The raucous calls of this introduced bird was heard at Koda-oike, then in Maioka Park on our extension we enjoyed a prolonged view of a pair feeding in the open, showing their really colourful and complex plumage to good effect.

Japanese Green Pheasant *Phasianus versicolor*: Our first sighting was of a couple of females that flushed from a reedbed at Lake Toden, and then we had good looks at two males in the late afternoon near Kaga. Endemic to Japan.

### ANATIDAE

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis*: The regular wintering flock of these at Katano Kamo-ike were still in place, offering good close looks at 30 or more alongside the following species. These birds are of the *middendorffii* race.

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser rossicus*: These birds of the *serrirostris* race were alongside the previous species on the pond at Katano Kamo-ike, allowing for comparisons in their structural differences. Slightly fewer than the above.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: We found a flock of thousands in the rice-fields near Mikuni, giving us a good show as they squabbled about in the stubble. The form concerned is *frontalis*.

Black Brant *Branta [bernicla] nigricans*: A single bird was with the above species at Mikuni, and then a handful were seen distantly near Notsuke on Hokkaido.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: Our first appeared on the river in Rausu town, where a small group swam on the ice-free river, then others were seen at various points along the coast of eastern Hokkaido. We met a comically tame group in the car park at the feeding area at Odaito, with a number of others also hanging around on the ice there.

Bewick's Swan *Cygnus bewickii*: Some flocks of birds adding up to 35 birds appeared in the fields around Mikuni where we were watching the Geese, and another couple of flocks passed overhead near Kaga as we waited for Harriers.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*: A hundred or so were scattered along the mud at Yatsushiro, a single at Arasaki, and some 40 birds were seen at the Hitotsuse Gawa estuary.

Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata*: Our first contact with these was on a mountain lake near Karuizawa, where eleven birds roosted along the banks, unusually camouflaged given how bright and exotic their plumage is. In Kyushu we saw 80+ nervous birds on a dammed lake west of Sadowara, and a dozen more were seen on the lake at Koda-oike. Perhaps their nervousness is related to the fact that their Japanese name 'Oshidori' translates as 'tasty bird'!

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Two at Lake Toden were the only ones of the trip.

Falcated Duck *Anas falcata*: This beautiful duck appeared fairly regularly, from a few at Lake Toden, then in some numbers at Katano Kamo-ike and the Kaga area, then three individuals were seen in harbours around Nemuro.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Common at many sites in Honshu and Kyushu, also present in smaller numbers in eastern Hokkaido.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Common and numerous in Honshu and Kyushu, with the largest concentrations at Yatsushiro and Arasaki. Smaller numbers were recorded on Hokkaido. Nice to see some really wild birds!

- Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha*: Commonly encountered on Honshu and Kyushu, and often rather tame.
- Northern Shoveler *Anas chrypeata*: Singles recorded at several wetland sites, with more present at Hitotsuse.
- Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: Small numbers were recorded at a number of sites in Honshu, Hokkaido and Kyushu, with a large number in a distant flock at Yatsushiro.
- Baikal Teal *Anas formosa*: Our first were a group of eleven that we watched at Lake Toden, where they had been absent on the previous tour. A swarm of hundreds of birds were present at their usual wintering site at Katano Kamo-ike, and despite their wish to remain on the far side of the pond, they couldn't completely hide their beauty from us. The rangers count here was of 1300 birds! Some closer birds were seen at Awara, and in Kyushu on the lake at Koda-oike. 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.
- Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: A good number were at Lake Toden, a single near Mikuni, and a small gathering at both Hitotsuse and Koda-oike. A small number were seen on Hokkaido, and a notable concentration of several hundred was seen at Kasai park on our extension.
- Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Regularly encountered in small parties on Honshu and Kyushu, also some were present along the coast in Hokkaido.
- Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*: A small number were seen on Lake Toden and at Hitotsuse, then on Hokkaido we saw many crammed into the harbours and along ice-free strips of sea. There were a huge number at Kasai park on the extension.
- Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*: Some great looks at these very attractive ducks on Hokkaido, with some close inshore birds at Notsuke, Rausu, inside Hanusaki harbour, and on the sea off Cape Nosappu where it was ice free. A few more were seen from Cape Kiritappu.
- Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*: A splendid male, with large white head patches that shone like a beacon on the sea off Notsuke.
- Stejneger's Scoter *Melanitta stejnegeri*: We found these fairly regularly along the coast of Hokkaido, with many rafts of birds seen at Notsuke and Shibetsu, and also a fair number at Kiritappu. Note that Brazil treats this form in with 'White-winged Scoter' *M. deglandi* of North America.
- Black Scoter *Melanitta americana*: Probably 'duck-of-the-trip' due to the sheer number of them seen so well, close inshore at Notsuke and other points along the coast, trapped between the coast and the pack ice or inside the ice free harbours. Some very confiding birds at Hanusake that were having a singing party just a few metres from us, was one of the most enchanting encounters of the whole tour.
- Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*: Fairly common along the Hokkaido coast, with many in Hanusaki harbour where their calls added to the soundscape provided by the above species.
- Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: Fairly common in the harbours and along the coast of eastern Hokkaido.
- Smew *Mergellus albellus*: The best were the first, with 25 birds of both sexes at Lake Toden, then smaller numbers (mostly females) were seen in the Kaga area.
- Goosander *Mergus merganser*: Some very good numbers of these at Lake Toden, then smaller concentrations were found on Hokkaido, with some on the Setsurigawa as we watched the Cranes.
- Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Our first were a couple at Yatsushiro, then they were fairly common along the Hokkaido coasts, and an unusually large group of 150 or so were seen inside the harbour at Hanusaki.



## GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*: A single was noted off the coast near Kaga, then some good views were acquired of several birds when we visited Kiritappu.

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*: We saw quite a number of these seen along the coast near Kaga City, with one group of 35 noted.

## DIOMEDEIDAE

Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis*: The 'changeless one' (= immutable!) appeared in the half-light of dawn as our ship turned into the gale off of Miyakejima, blasting past at high speed as the near-hurricane took it away. As our ship headed back towards Tokyo, many more appeared, often with several in view, with an estimate of 80 birds seen in all. Thrilling!

Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*: Just a few seen from our pelagic, all but one being young birds. This species is listed by BirdLife as 'Endangered'. The world population is thought to number some 120,000 individuals, but it is confined to a few breeding sites and is declining.

Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*: Come on down! As the ship had turned back towards Tokyo, I feared that we had lost any chance of seeing this, until a large Albatross showing masses of white on its upperwing sheared above the distant horizon – Hurrah! An adult, and the first of nine birds seen. The closest views were of a couple of first-year immature birds that cruised by the ship, brown-tinged with a boastfully pink bill. It was just a shame that not all of us managed to make it onto the deck, due to the evil seas causing a spot of 'Mal de Mer'.

Providence Petrel *Pterodroma solandri*: Fairly late on into our return towards Tokyo, Otani spotted one of these shooting past the ship. It stayed in view just long enough for some of us to get a look at this fast-moving, dark *Pterodroma*.

Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas*: A few appeared as we returned from Miyakejima, then as we headed further into Tokyo Bay they became very numerous, even getting mixed up with the Black-tailed Gulls.

Tristram's Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma tristrami*: In the half-light of dawn just to the north of Miyakejima, as huge waves rolled past the ship they flicked dozens of these small dark Petrels from the spray-ripped tops, and for an hour the sea was covered with them. A few managed to come closer as the light improved and as the sea calmed a little, offering a good look at their salient features before they all disappeared, perhaps not liking the Gulls that began to appear.

## PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Regularly encountered on various wetlands on Honshu and Kyushu.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: A couple were seen off the coast near Kaga, and another four from Kiritappu.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: A single was seen off the coast near Kaga, more in Kadogawa harbour and a few at Hitotsuse, then several more were seen at Kasai on our extension..

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*: Two were seen in harbours around the Nemuro peninsula.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*: A handful were present around Kadogawa harbour, another was seen on Hokkaido in Hanusaki harbour, and several more at Kasai park on our extension.

## THRESKIORNITHIDAE

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: A single bird was present with the following species at the Hitotsuse estuary, although only Otani had an identifiable view, for the rest of us it remained asleep!

Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor*: A fine look at a pair at Yatsushiro, followed by another pair (or more?) at Arasaki, and a group of ten roosting at Hitotsuse. 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 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> January 2010, is 2346 individuals.

#### ARDEIDAE

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: Only seen at Hitotsuse estuary, where seven or more gathered in the late afternoon.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus*: A small group gathered at the Hitotsuse Gawa.

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

Western Great Egret *Casmerodius albus*: A revelatory encounter with one of these large birds alongside the following species at Hitotsuse estuary, which looked to be about two-thirds the size! With both forms occurring in Japan in winter, it would suggest that care is needed to accurately assign to taxon. This one seems to often show pale legs above the tibia, but it also does not seem to be absolute, as both can show black legs. If both are together, the size difference is very pronounced! We probably saw another at Katano Kamo-ike.

Eastern Great Egret *Casmerodius modestus*: Seen regularly in suitable habitats on Honshu and Kyushu, with a fair amount of presumption as to the ID.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: Small numbers seen in several places on Kyushu, with a larger concentration around the harbour at Kadogawa.

Pacific Reef Egret *Egretta sacra*: A few slate-grey examples adorned the fish rafts at Kadogawa, then another two were seen at Hitotsuse.

#### SULIDAE

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*: A single bird flew past the coast when we stopped for a scan between Arasaki and Sendai.

#### 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 our first as they sat on rocky islets off the coast near Kaga. A couple were also seen at Kadogawa harbour..

Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*: Our first were seen with the above species near Kaga, then we found them fairly commonly along the coast of Hokkaido.

Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*: A single dull-coloured immature gave us a thrill at Cape Nosappu, sitting on its rock in a blizzard!

#### FALCONIDAE

Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Single birds recorded fairly regularly on Honshu and Kyushu.

Merlin *Falco colombarius*: A male perched in a paddyfield was seen at Awara.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: A single at Yatsushiro, several sightings two or more at Arasaki, two at Takae, and a single outside our hotel in Izumi.

#### ACCIPITRIDAE

Eurasian Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: Rather common on both coasts on Kyushu, and a single seen at Kasai.

Black-eared Kite *Mihus lineatus*: Seen on every day of the tour bar the last, and probably at its highest density on Kyushu. It just shows that large scavengers can survive in a tidy country!

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: Not seen until we reached Hokkaido, with our first one seen flying over the Cranes at Setsurigawa. They dotted the coastline at regular intervals, sat in trees around our minshuku at Rausu, and laid siege to our boat in the pack ice off Rausu

harbour. We counted some 70 birds sat on the ice around us, some of the hungrier birds audaciously coming to within arms length of the awestruck observers. On a tour of many thrills, this 'nature cruise' (as it is called) was probably the biggest of them all. We saw a few more around the Nemuro peninsula, then at Tancho no Sato at least ten birds came to mix it up with the Cranes at feeding time.

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 even *without* a boat ride into the pack-ice! Our first were distant at Notsuke, preferring to keep to the pack ice than the land. As we arrived at our minshuku in Rausu we found numerous birds roosting up in the woodland, and then came our boat trip. Despite not getting far out of the harbour, the spectacle was as good as it ever is, giving us fantastic views of many of the 80 counted, some at extremely close range as they squabbled for food with the White-tailed Eagles. Pure magic! They certainly earned their place as Number 2 '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 type was seen at Kasai park on our extension.

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

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*: Three examples seen on our route, at Lake Toden, in the hills near Karuizawa, and another at Kaga.

Eastern Buzzard *Buteo japonicus*: Frequently encountered in ones and twos on all three islands.

Mountain Hawk Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis*: A good look at one in the rain in the hills near Sadowara, then one roosted by our Rausu minshuku, and was seen both late and early.

## RALLIDAE

Eastern Water Rail *Rallus indicus*: Great looks at one of these in Maioka Park on our extension, one of two birds there, and another was seen briefly at Kasai park. 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*: Heard calling at Takae, and in the early morning at Arasaki we managed to see one fairly well in a muddy canal.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: A single at Katano Kamo-ike, also seen at Narita and Kasai.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*: Regularly encountered on Honshu and Kyushu on suitable duck-ponds and wetlands.

## GRUIDAE

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*: A good if distant view of one amongst the thousands of other cranes in the rice fields at Arasaki

White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*: Many superb looks at some hundreds of these at Arasaki. Despite the 'Bird Flu' threat closing our intended lodgings and the core areas, we were able to enjoy the birds just as much by looking around the perimeter, and of course the birds spread out into the fields once they had had enough of the supplementary feed. Such a beautiful bird, if it were seen on the last day of the tour, it would stand a good chance to make it as 'bird-of-the-trip!' This is another globally threatened species listed as 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife, with a world population of about 6500 individuals.

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

Hooded Crane *Grus monacha*: Stunning views at Arasaki, and no attempt was made to count the thousands that we saw! We had no problem in getting good looks at these despite the restrictions in place. 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. 3 'Bird-of-the-trip'. On the first morning on Hokkaido, we saw them at their roost in the Setsurigawa River at dawn (at -11.7 C., but not as cold as it could be!) and watched them come alive, starting to dance and then fly out to the surrounding fields. Near to Tsurui we had further good views on a lovely sunny day, dancing and prancing on the sparkling snow. At Lake Furen, two were seen distantly, and on our last day on the island we visited Tancho no Sato, arriving just in time for their feeding, lining ourselves up behind all the photographers as the White-tailed Eagles came swooping in to steal the fish from the Cranes! 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*: Two at Hitotsuse Gawa estuary.

#### CHARADRIIDAE

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: Some small flocks were present at Arasaki, and another two were seen at Hitotsuse Gawa.

Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus*: We found some handsome examples in the rice fields near Kaga, with at least 19 birds counted during the course of the day.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*: A good number on the mudflats at Yatsushiro, also heard only at Hitotsuse Gawa.

Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*: Some great views of up to nine birds along the river by Lake Toden, and a single in muddy paddies near Kaga. Although this species is quite widespread in Asia, Japan is certainly one of the better places to see it.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: Two were seen in a muddy canal at Arasaki,

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*: A big number were scattered across the mud flats at Yatsushiro, and we saw another 20 or more at Hitotsuse Gawa.

Mongolian Plover *Charadrius mongolus*: A single bird joined the Kentish Plovers at Yatsushiro.

#### SCOLOPACIDAE

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*: One slowly flew past us in a small park at Arasaki, then in Maioka Park on our extension there were two, one of which stayed in view for the whole time we were there, albeit almost totally camouflaged as it roosted in a thicket.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: Scattered sightings along our route, except on Hokkaido.

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*: A first-winter immature bird was watched at length at Hitotsuse, finally waking up to show off his long bill to full effect. A scarce but regular winter-visitor to Japan.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*: Two seen at Yatsushiro, and another two at Hitotsuse.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: At least 8 birds seen at Yatsushiro, and another near Hitotsuse.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: Odd birds seen at Lake Toden, Arasaki, Koda-oike and Narita.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: Just a handful of sightings, all in Kyushu.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: Three birds frantically feeding on the beach at Hitotsuse were a pleasing sight.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: A good number on the mud at Yatsushiro, a few in the rice fields at Arasaki, more at Hitotsuse Gawa and some big flocks in the distance at Kasai park on our last day.

## LARIDAE

- Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris*: One of the most attractive gulls, we found our first along the coast near Kaga, then a few more near Arasaki, and a good number at Kadogawa. A single was seen on Hokkaido, then on our pelagic we saw hundreds in Tokyo Bay.
- Kamchatka Gull *Larus kamtschatschensis*: First noted at Kadogawa, we saw many more around the harbours around the Nemuro peninsula. They were also rather numerous on our pelagic. This species differs from the Common Gull *L. canus* in its immature plumage that 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 and in good number, with a full range of ages and plumages on display. They seemed to enjoy the pack ice, with some splendid close birds seen from our 'nature cruise' at Rausu.
- Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*: Fairly common along the coast of Hokkaido but never in any great number. There were quite a few along the Notsuke spit.
- Vega Gull *Larus vegae*: We saw our first near Kaga, then at Yatsushiro we found a flock of 30 on the mud. The biggest numbers were seen around the harbour at Kadogawa, also seen at Hitotsuse and around Tokyo. This species typically shows a well-streaked head and pink legs.
- Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*: Our first were at Kadogawa, then they were much the commonest gull in Hokkaido, especially around the harbours and on the pack ice with some very bold individuals attracted to the fish-head feast around our boat at Rausu. Also seen in some numbers on our pelagic.
- Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini*: Just a single seen with the rather small gull flock at Yatsushiro, a yellowish-legged bird referable to the *taimyrensis* form. 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 Gull lovers!
- Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: A few seen around our route.
- Saunders's Gull *Saundersilarus saundersi*: Great views of up to 75+ birds on the mudflats at Yatsushiro. 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*: At least ten were seen on our pelagic. The race here is *pollicaris*, which shows some noticeable plumage differences to nominate Atlantic birds, such as the first-year birds which show 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*: At least four were seen from our pelagic.

## ALCIDAE

- Pigeon Guillemot *Cepphus columba*: At least four birds were seen off Cape Kiritappu, with the closest one to us already acquiring its breeding plumage. These birds should be of the *snowi* race, which may deserve separate specific status as Kuril Guillemot *C. snowi*, although there is an argument that their plumage differences are within normal variation of the nominate.
- Spectacled Guillemot *Cepphus carbo*: Not uncommon along the coast of eastern Hokkaido, we were just hampered in seeing them by the pack ice that was blown inshore. Our first were off the Notsuke Peninsula, more seen in difficult conditions off Cape Nosappu, then better looks

in good light were had at Cape Kiritappu. This species is restricted to the north-western Pacific.

Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*: The first that we saw were little more than dots on a rough sea off the coast near Kaga, and we were hoping for better looks around the Hokkaido coasts. The pack ice caused a problem with that plan, but some intensive searching at Cape Kiritappu eventually located two birds at great range.

Japanese Murrelet *Synthliboramphus numizusume*: A personal favourite, the 'Sea Sparrow' experience was both exciting and enchanting. Almost as soon as we had sailed out of the harbour at Kadogawa we found two birds swimming along and diving frequently, then further out we found another pair that were very confiding, diving and surfacing right under bows. At least five were seen in total, if not more. 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.

Least Auklet *Aethia pusilla*: So tiny, they were only visible after much staring out to sea at Cape Kiritappu, barely visible as they ducked in and out of the waves, or flying along in curious zigzag fashion and then diving straight into the water instead of landing on the surface!

Crested Auklet *Aethia cristatella*: A single was seen at great range at Cape Kiritappu.

Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*: A single bird showed fairly well off the coast near Kaga, both on the surface for a while, and then in flight.

#### COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: The occurrence of this pest was frequently reported to the leader during the course of the tour!

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*: Not uncommon across much of Honshu, and common and widespread in Kyushu. A very small number were seen on Hokkaido.

White-bellied Green Pigeon *Treron sieboldii*: Hurrah! A lifer for the leader on his birthday! One of those 'bogey-birds' that I had been saving for a rainy day, and boy did it rain! At least 65 were present by the dammed lakes in the hills west of Sadowara, and many of them perched out in the rain, rolling onto their backs and extending their wings as they took a shower! Another was glimpsed at Koda-oike by Otani.

#### STRIGIDAE

Blakiston's Fish Owl *Bubo blakistoni*: This was elected 'bird-of-the-trip', after an exciting encounter with it by our minshuku at Rausu. A pair sat up in the big trees behind the lodge, just visible with the ambient light, and calling occasionally. After feasting on perhaps the most memorable dinner of the whole tour, we waited inside and watched the stream in front of us. One came down to fish at 19:45 for a brief visit only, then it returned at 22:15, staying rather longer as it hauled out at least two fish before heading back into the forest. Absolutely marvellous! 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*: A superb prolonged look at a roosting bird, basking in the Hokkaido sunshine on our first day on the island. Clearly paler than European birds, here they are of the *japonica* race.

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: Three were hunting alongside the road along the Notsuke peninsula, showing very well and making it a three-Owl day!

## ALCEDINIDAE

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

Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris*: A good look at a male on a mountain lake near Karuizawa, sat on a bush overhanging the water and flaring his crest. Another vocal individual flew over us as we stood in the fields near Koda-oike.

## PICIDAE

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*: Good looks at a confiding bird in Maioka Park on our extension, a scarce winter visitor to Japan.

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker *Yungipicus kizuki*: Some excellent sightings of this tiny and endearing woodpecker around Karuizawa area, also at the Snow Monkey Park, and a couple were seen at the Lake Furen nature centre on Hokkaido.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: Seen on several occasions in the forest at Karuizawa, and a couple more on Hokkaido.

Japanese Woodpecker (J Green W) *Picus avokera*: Several good sightings of this endemic in the woods around Karuizawa, and one more at the end of the tour in Maioka Park. The scientific name *avokera* refers to its Japanese name 'ao' (green), 'gera' (woodpecker).

## CAMPEPHAGIDAE

Ryukyu Minivet *Pericrocotus tegimae*: We enjoyed some great looks of these handsome birds at Koda-oike, watching them feeding in rich afternoon sunshine as they called with their thin Waxwing-like trills.

## LANIIDAE

Bull-headed Shrike *Lanius bucephalus*: Seen on many occasions on Honshu and Kyushu, often causing a bit of a stir among small 'prey-sized' passerines!

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: A single at the Setsurigawa near Tsurui was unexpected.

## CORVIDAE

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: A few were seen around Karuizawa, and also at the Snow Monkey Park. These were of the endemic Honshu race.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* (NL): A couple were seen from the motorway south of Fukuoka.

Daurian Jackdaw *Coloens dauuricus*: A very pale example was seen flying overhead at Arasaki, and we had better looks at several of the less alluring dark-plumaged birds among the hordes of Oriental Rooks at Arasaki

Oriental Rook *Corvus pastinator*: Hundreds were seen around Arasaki.

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*: A single along the Notsuke peninsula was the only sighting of the tour.

## BOMBYCILLIDAE

Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*: A group of five was seen around the village of Tsurui, perching up for some reasonable views, and another group of six birds was seen in the village of Akan, probably the last birds that we saw on Hokkaido.

Japanese Waxwing *Bombycilla japonica*: This year was definitely a Waxwing year, and Karuizawa seemed to be full of these fellows. We saw three different groups here, plus a few more at Lake

Toden, always favouring the mistletoe that seems to have a very sticky consistency when the seeds were excreted! Oh, and it was a lifer for the leader, which was nice!

#### PARIDAE

Eastern Great Tit (Japanese T) *Parus minor*: Common in the forests of Karuizawa, also seen at one or two other sites on Honshu, and several more on Hokkaido. These pallid Japanese birds are usually lumped in Great Tit *P. major*.

Coal Tit *Pariparus ater*: Several seen at Karuizawa, and also at the Monkey Park, and one at Tsurui on Hokkaido. 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) also at the Snow Monkey park, on Kyushu at Koda-oike, and on the extension at Maioka park.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*: A few seen on Hokkaido around Tsurui and at the Ural Owl site, and also at Rausu and Lake Furen nature centre. 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. Also seen at the Snow Monkey Park.

Chinese Penduline Tit *Remiz consobrinus*: A great find of some 12 birds in a reed-bed near Arasaki, rather unexpected given the dreadful weather conditions!

#### HIRUNDINIDAE

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: An over-wintering bird in the (allegedly) warmer climate of Kyushu, we found some at Koda-oike, but many more were seen as we drove through some of the small towns of the Kyushu east coast, sitting around on wires among the buildings.

Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus* (NL): A small group were seen en-route from Fukuoka.

#### AEGITHALIDAE

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*: Small numbers were seen on several occasions, at Karuizawa and at the Snow Monkey Park. These were of the race *trivirgatus*, and at Koda-oike we saw a flock of birds of the race *kinsiuensis*,

#### ALAUDIDAE

Japanese Skylark *Alauda japonica*: We saw many at Yatsushiro, and also at Arasaki and Takae, with smaller numbers seen at Hitotsuse, plus a bizarre sighting of one struggling past Cape Nosappu on Hokkaido, ditching into the pack-ice choked sea before continuing northwards! This species is often lumped in Eurasian Skylark *A. arvensis*, but several characters clearly suggest otherwise. Generally speaking it shows characters that seem intermediate between *A. arvensis* and Oriental Skylark *A. gulgula*.

#### CISTICOLIDAE

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*: A few seen at Takae and at Koda-oike.

#### PYCNONOTIDAE

Brown-eared Bulbul *Hypsipetes amaurotis*: Very common in Kyushu and regularly seen in Honshu, with some comical vocalisations. Just one seen in Hokkaido.

#### SYLVIIDAE

Japanese Bush Warbler *Cettia diphone*: First encountered in riverside phragmites at Arasaki, with another seen at Koda-oike. Also seen in Maioka Park on the extension.



Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*: A very scarce wintering bird in Japan, we saw one well in fields near Arasaki. Only the third time it has been seen on the winter tour.

#### TIMALIIDAE

Chinese Hwamei *Garrulax canorus*: Two very furtive examples of these introduced birds were seen in the valley at Myogi near Karuizawa.

#### ZOSTEROPIDAE

Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonicus*: We didn't see any until we reached Kyushu where they were reasonably common and noted daily, and they were also seen in the Tokyo area at the end of the tour.

#### REGULIDAE

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

#### TROGLODYTIDAE

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: Heard near Karuizawa, with one seen briefly at Takae.

#### SITTIDAE

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: Several were seen in the forest at Karuizawa and also at the Snow Monkey Park, the race here is *bondoensis*. On Hokkaido we had good looks at several very attractive snowy-bellied birds at Tsurui and at Lake Furen that belong to the race *asiatica*.

#### CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: A single bird was seen on our walk up to the Snow Monkey Park. The race here is *daurica*.

#### STURNIDAE

Crested Myna *Acridotheres cristallus*: Several were seen as we travelled from Totsuka to Maioka Park. An introduced species.

Red-billed Starling *Sturnus sericeus*: Great looks at a bird in Kasai Park in Tokyo, a rarity that we 'twitched' as we had some spare time on our last day. It was easy to find – just look for the crowd of photographers! A scarce winter visitor to Japan.

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*: Only Otani was lucky enough to see this species (which he did twice) at Takae and at Koda-oike, these shy birds could not be re-found however.

Pale Thrush *Turdus pallidus*: Our first was in the garden of our hotel at Karuizawa, and another was seen near Kaga, however on Kyushu they were positively common, particularly in wooded areas. Also seen in Maioka and Kasai parks near Tokyo.

Brown-headed Thrush *Turdus chrysolaus*: We found one of these handsome birds near our Narita hotel, and then another showed well in Maioka Park.

Dusky Thrush *Turdus [naumanni] eunomus*: Much the commonest Thrush to be encountered in Japan at this season, they were especially numerous around Karuizawa, Yatsushiro, Arasaki and Hitotsuse, with a single seen on Hokkaido.

## MUSCICAPIDAE

Red-flanked Bluetail *Luscinia cyanura*: Just two female types seen at Karuizawa, then one more was seen at the Snow Monkey Park.

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus auroreus*: Regularly seen along our route with multiple good looks at this attractive bird on Honshu and Kyushu, but absent on Hokkaido.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*: Several singles were seen along our route, here of the race *philippensis* which differs from other forms in having a rufous belly.

## CINCLIDAE

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*: Two or three birds were seen along the river at Karuizawa, but best of all were the pair on the stream outside our minshuku at Rausu, the male singing away happily from a stone in midstream.

## PASSERIDAE

Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*: Four birds seen at Yatsushiro were the only ones of the tour. A winter visitor to Kyushu.

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

## PRUNELLIDAE

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*: One or possibly two were seen briefly at the roadside near Karuizawa.

Japanese Accentor *Prunella rubida*: Unable to find any actually at Karuizawa itself, we explored further, and found one sitting in a thicket in the Myogi valley. A little later that afternoon we found a cracking bird feeding on the short grass next to a lake, tame enough to allow close approach by photographers. This near-endemic also breeds in the Kuril Islands.

## MOTACILLIDAE

Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla tschutschensis* (H): A bird was twice heard calling at Hitotsuse estuary, but never showed itself. A write-in for this tour.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: A single was seen at Lake Toden, then odd ones were seen on Kyushu.

Black-backed Wagtail *Motacilla lugens*: Found on all three islands, they were in good number around Arasaki, although on Hokkaido they were few in number.

Japanese Wagtail *Motacilla grandis*: Never common, although several were seen around Karuizawa and a few in the Kaga area. A couple were also seen on Hokkaido. This lovely bird is a near-endemic with an array of calls totally unlike the previous species.

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*: Only seen at Koda-oike, where a small party was seen on both visits.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*: A single was seen at Arasaki, plus a couple more at Takae.

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

## FRINGILLIDAE

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*: Three were coming to the hotel feeders at Karuizawa, we saw singles in Greenfinch flocks at Yatsushiro and Arasaki, and a flock of 25+ at Koda-oike.

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

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus*: A small flock flew over at Koda-oike.

Asian Rosy Finch *Leucosticte arctoa*: A flock of a dozen at the Snow Monkey Park was unexpected (and also somewhat elusive) then on Hokkaido we saw a flock of 21 just outside our minshuku at Rausu, showing well as they foraged on the slopes behind the house. At Cape Kiritappu

we found a large flighty flock of 80+ zipping around the cliffs. The race concerned is *brunneonucha*, which breeds in eastern Siberia and the Kuril Islands.

Long-tailed Rosefinch *Uragus sibiricus*: Atypically elusive this year, we struggled to get anything more than a glimpse of several different males at Karuizawa, they would appear then disappear

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* (NL): One seen flying over Tsurui.

Grey-bellied Bullfinch *Pyrrhula griseiventris*: Some great looks at nine males in the forest at Karuizawa, and another two were seen near Kaga.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Always pleasing to see lots of these, we had multiple looks at these at Karuizawa, a few more seen at Arasaki, one at Tsurui, a couple at Narita, and some in Maioka Park.

Chinese Grosbeak *Eophona migratoria*: Something of a scarcity in Japan, we had multiple good looks at one that repeatedly visited the bird table at our Karuizawa hotel - when it wasn't being chased away by Hawfinches!

Japanese Grosbeak *Eophona personata*: Excellent views of some of 30+ birds coming to the hotel feeders at Karuizawa, others were seen at the Snow Monkey Park, around Arasaki, in good numbers at Koda-oike, and a huge number were seen in the mountain valley west of Sadowara as we explored the hills in the rain.

## EMBERIZIDAE

Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides*: Commonly encountered on Honshu and Kyushu, typically close to wooded areas, and also in weedy fields in the Arasaki area.

Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*: Some good looks of these attractive fellows in the rough fields at Arasaki - despite the bitter cold! Some more were found at Koda-oike, in rather nicer conditions!

Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica*: Some scattered encounters with this common winter visitor, with a few that popped up at Toden Lake and around Karuizawa, a single at Kaga, and plenty more at Arasaki and Takae,

Elegant Bunting (Yellow-throated B) *Emberiza elegans*: Great looks at these beautiful birds, with four seen on our first visit to Koda-oike, then another 15 on our second visit.

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*: Seen commonly on Kyushu, at Arasaki and Takae, Koda-oike and Hitotsuse, also 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, we found two along a forest track at Takae, the male showing well as it fed on a steep bank. A near-endemic of Japan.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: A half-dozen of these were seen in reed-beds and ditches at Arasaki, These wintering birds are of one of the pale eastern races.

## MAMMALS

Japanese Squirrel *Sciurus lis*: A couple were seen at Karuizawa, including a cute one on the bird table at our hotel.

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

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: Rather common on Hokkaido, with frequent sightings. Often seen along the roadsides, but most amazing were the pair that were foraging on the pack-ice in Rausu harbour, nonchalantly wandering around the perched Eagles! They look rather more handsome than those in the UK, with their thick woolly coats.

Harbour Seal (Common S) *Phoca vitulina*: Several were seen just off Cape Kiritappu.

- Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata*: Our first were seen at the roadside as we explore the Karuizawa area. At the thermal baths in the Monkey Park near Nagano we saw many more, with enchanting encounters with these animals as they languished in the hot pools, completely unconcerned with the hubbub of tourists around them.
- Eurasian Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*: A single animal broke cover and raced across the fields at Koda-oike.
- Sika Deer *Cervus nippon*: First seen soon after landing on Hokkaido, we saw them regularly on the island with good views of some fine looking beasts.
- Japanese Serow *Capricornis crispus*: A good long look at one of these at Karuizawa, as we drove around in the snow on our last morning.

