

# Japan Winter Birding | Nov. 29 – Dec. 15, 2023 | Trip Report | by Bryan Shirley



With guides, Bryan Shirley and Takumi Koichi, and Participants: Dee, Alan, Aaron, Kay, Linda, Jody and Daphne



Wonderful winter birding trip! We spent the first few days of our trip in southern Kyushu and were treated to nearly 15,000 Hooded and White-naped Cranes. The middle section of our trip was in central Honshu with thousands of wintering waterfowl, famous Japanese Gardens, Snow Monkeys, temples and castles. We ended our trip in the far north on the island of Hokkaido watching Red-crowned Cranes, eagles and owls! We tallied 134 species of birds during the tour, enjoyed lots of great food and loved getting to experience a bit of the fascinating Japanese culture.

## Wed., Nov. 29 Tokyo

Finally, time for our Japan tour! We enjoyed getting to know each other over dinner at a local restaurant. Daphne, whose plane didn't arrive until later, met us the next morning.



## **Thurs., Nov. 30            Tokyo | Travel to Izumi**

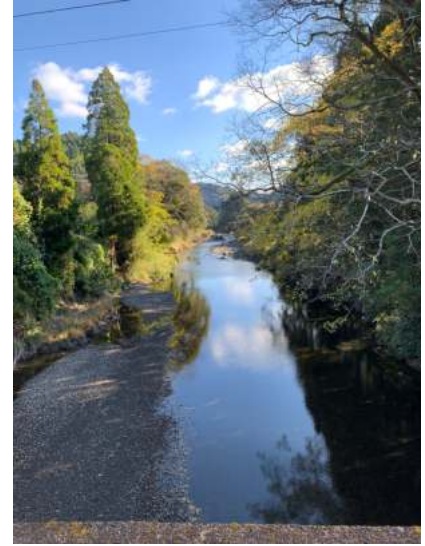
Most of the group opted to sleep in this morning, but a couple of us got up early and went for a walk to the Tama River – one of the large rivers that come flow from the mountains into Tokyo Bay. The weather was pleasant, and we had a great morning getting to know some of the regular Tokyo birds. Daurian Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush were both exciting finds, and we found a good mix of waterfowl and a few Great Crested Grebes on the river. After breakfast at the hotel, the group took the shuttle to the airport for our flight to Kagoshima on the south end of Kyushu. It was a short flight and we arrived in the early afternoon. From there we drove about an hour and a half to Izumi, with a few brief stops for birds. We saw our first Eastern Buzzard of the trip along the road and stopped at a bridge to scan the river, seeing Common Pochard, Eurasian Wigeon, White Wagtail and more. After arriving in Izumi, we ate dinner at the hotel and went to bed excited to start birding in earnest!

## **Fri., Dec. 1            Izumi Area**

We woke to a cold and rainy day, but that didn't deter us on our drive to Arasaki – the protected area harboring nearly 15,000 wintering cranes. We scanned from the top of the Visitors Center. Thousands of Hooded and White-naped Cranes were feeding in the fields and flying all around us. The noise was spectacular. Besides the cranes, huge flocks of Rooks were perched on all the telephone wires and buildings. It wasn't long before Bryan picked out a Daurian Jackdaw, a rare but regular winter visitor here. After a little while we visited another crane viewing area on the other side of the river where a Siberian Crane had been reported recently. We found a few Sandhill Cranes mixed in with the cranes, but the Siberian was nowhere to be found.

The moat along the river had a flock of Eurasian Spoonbills and under close inspection we were able to find the endangered Black-faced Spoonbill as well. We did a short walk along the river, but the wind was blowing so hard that the birds were deep in the cover. We returned to the crane center and found a Common Crane, our fourth crane species of the day! Driving through the fields on the east side of the river on our way to lunch, we found the Siberian Crane mixed in with a flock of White-naped Cranes! This was a great sighting because the species is quite difficult to see, not only in Japan but throughout their historic range in China.

Lunch today was at a Sake factory. Access to fresh well water is required to make Sake and is also a key ingredient for making good Soba (buckwheat noodles). In the afternoon we visited the historic Samurai houses. The wonderful interpretive guide shared the history of the area and even talked one of our group into trying on a



Samurai outfit for photos! On our return, we stopped along a river to look for Long-billed Plover, another species with a limited distribution we were hoping to find in Kyushu. We found three species of wagtails: Gray, Japanese and White. Not far from them we located the plover, and everyone had the opportunity to view it through the scope. Dinner was a great meal at a Yakiniku (grilled meat) Restaurant. We cooked small pieces of steak and a variety of veggies on grills built into our table, making the meal both delicious and fun! Although the weather wasn't great, we still managed to have a great day – it's not often one has the opportunity to see five species of cranes in one day!

## **Sat., Dec. 2** **Izumi | Yatsushiro**

This morning we woke early to watch the cranes flying at sunrise. We parked on the outskirts of the crane area and had an awesome sunrise with lots of cranes flying through the pink clouds, an amazing site. After breakfast at the hotel, we drove into the nearby mountains and visited Kogawa Dam. The water levels were quite low, but there was still a good mix of waterfowl on the lake. Our target here was Mandarin Duck and we were not disappointed! Most were on the far shoreline, but we walked the road along the reservoir and eventually were rewarded with close views from a large bridge. A White-bellied Green-Pigeon flew by, and we found mixed flocks containing Varied Tits and Warbling White-Eyes in the forest. Just as we were getting ready to leave the bridge, a Crested Kingfisher flew across the lake towards us, landing on a dead tree hanging over the water and allowing great looks through the scope. It was one of our favorite sightings of the day. In the afternoon we visited a large mudflat just as the tide was falling. Here we found our main target, Saunders's Gull, and had great looks at Black-headed Gulls as well, offering nice comparisons. There were lots of shorebirds as well, mostly Dunlin and Black-bellied Plovers.

## **Sun., Dec. 3** **Izumi | Fly to Komatsu**

Today we would travel from Kyushu to Honshu. We left Izumi at 7AM and drove to Kagoshima for our flight to Tokyo, arriving in Komatsu where we met Koichi, our driver and local guide for the Honshu portion of the trip. It was cold and rainy, but we took the scenic route to the hotel hoping to find swans. Eventually we found two flocks of Tundra Swans – one flock of 100+ swans on both sides of the bus. these are the “Bewick's” race found in Japan that have a lot of yellow in the bill compared to the “Whistling” subspecies we see in North America. The roads through the rice fields are very narrow and we were all happy to have Koichi-san behind the wheel!



We visited an Italian restaurant for dinner, opting for pizza and pasta, which turned out to be a big hit. This hotel was our first Onsen, or hot spring, and many of our group enjoyed a relaxing soak before bed.

## **Mon., Dec. 4                      Komatsu Area**

We woke to blue skies with the sun reflecting off the beautiful, snow-covered mountains. We started the day at Cape Amagozen where we found several Japanese and Pelagic Cormorants roosting on the sea walls. The pine trees around the parking area quite productive and we enjoyed great looks at Japanese Pygmy Kingfisher and our first Japanese Tits of the trip. Katano Wild Duck Pond was packed with birds. Over 1,000 Greater White-fronted Geese and good numbers of both Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese filled the near end of the pond. The staff informed us that a Lesser White-fronted Goose, rare for the area, had also been seen, and after a few minutes of scanning, we located it. The Baikal Teal were all hanging out at the far end of the pond, but with the scopes we were able to get decent looks at them. A female Smew was another nice find.

From there we drove into Kanazawa where we enjoyed a nice lunch, before continuing to Kahokugata Lake. Mallards were the most common duck here, but there were also lots of Baikal Teal and several Falcated Ducks mixed in as well. While we were scanning the ducks somebody spotted some Azure-winged Magpies near the bus. We all ran out of the blind and were delighted to see 12 of these stately corvids working the bushes and on the telephone line! In the evening we visited a nearby park and walked the trails. We found a small mixed flock that included Japanese Tits, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, a Varied Tit and the highlight was a flock of Long-tailed Tits. Dinner was a lot of fun. The sushi, noodles and tempura we ordered came zipping along on a conveyor belt to our table. One of the most entertaining meals of the trip!

## **Tues., Dec. 5                      Kanazaw | Bullet Train to Nagano**

We started the day at Kenrokuen, one of the most beautiful Japanese Gardens in Japan. We arrived early to beat the crowds and enjoyed a leisurely walk through the gardens. This was primarily a cultural outing, but of course we had binos and saw a few birds along the way including a flock of about 20 Bramblings! We had some extra time before our train arrived, so we explored the Higashi Chaya district – a traditional Geisha district with old tea houses and shops built in the early 1800s. From there we caught the Shinkasen (bullet train) for Nagano, making what would be a four-hour drive in just over an hour! Dinner was another wonderful culinary experience. We



visited a small shop run by a mother/daughter and enjoyed Okonomiyake (sometimes translated as cabbage pancakes) cooked on the grill for us at our table.

### **Wed., Dec. 6                      Jigokudani | Zenkoji Temple**

Snow Monkeys! We wanted to be at Jigokudani (Hell’s Canyon) before the crowds, so we left our hotel at 7:30 and made the one-hour drive. There wasn’t much snow, just a few patches in the shady areas, and none on the trail, which made the walk easy. We saw Eurasian Jay, Coal Tit and one Willow Tit. Soon we started seeing monkeys (Japanese Macaques) before we reached the entrance to the monkey park. Inside the park they were everywhere – running up and down the rocky hillside, all along the river and of course, soaking in the hot springs, and we spent the remainder of the morning watching and photographing them. On the walk back down, we found a Eurasian Treecreeper hopping up the trunk of a pine just a few feet away. In the parking area an endemic Japanese Woodpecker flew past, then landed briefly giving a few of the group a brief glimpse before it moved on.

After lunch, we visited a local park where a few Green-winged Teal occupied the pond. Further up in the forested area of the park we encountered a small, mixed flock that had several Hawfinches, a pair of Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, a bunch of Long-tailed Tits and a Dusky Thrush. Back in Nagano we visited the famous Zenkoji Buddhist Temple and spent about an hour walking around the area. Since the weather was so nice, most of the group opted to walk the mile or so back to the hotel and look at shops along the way. Dinner was at a delicious Tonkatsu (pork cutlet) restaurant.

### **Thurs., Dec. 7                      Matsumoto | Drive to Karuizawa**

The wind was howling this morning, foiling our plans to go birding before visiting Matsumoto Castle. The castle is ranked in the top three castles in Japan, its black color unusual, thus earning it the nickname “Crow Castle.” There were a few Eastern Spot-billed Ducks and Gadwall in the mote, and a Common Kingfisher made an



appearance alongside the introduced Mute Swans. The best sighting was a small flock of Japanese Grosbeaks that were working through the trees near the castle wall.

The exhibits in the castle were interesting, and it is pretty crazy to imagine how life would have been at that time. Afterwards we drove toward Karuizawa, stopping at a small reservoir that was loaded with ducks. Here we were able to get good looks and photos of Falcated Duck, and a couple members of the group commented that they now have a new favorite duck! We stopped at a lake in Saku where we found several Smew in with the other ducks, but the wind was cold and we didn't linger.

## **Fri., Dec. 8            Karuizawa**

The winds calmed overnight, and we woke to cold, but calm blue skies. The active volcano, Mt. Asama, was beautiful in the morning sun, and every once in a while, a puff of smoke would burst from the summit. After a short drive, we arrived at the Karuizawa Wild Bird Park. We made our way up the road along the river, and it didn't take long before we saw a Brown Dipper. On the trail we had our first looks at a cute little Eurasian Wren hopping along the mossy rocks near the stream. Tits were the most common birds of the morning, we had lots of Japanese, Willow, Coal, Varied and Long-tailed. Eurasian Nuthatches were common here as well, and a pair of endemic Japanese Woodpeckers was an exciting find, along with several beautiful Great Spotted Woodpeckers. We had a nice picnic at a small shrine, then took a short walk around Kumoba Pond, which gave us close looks at Tufted Ducks, Green-winged Teal and a few others. In the late afternoon, some of the group opted for a bit more hiking, so Koichi dropped us off and drove the rest of the group back to the hotel for a siesta. We hiked through the forest of Mt. Hanare and Bryan found a female Red-flanked Bluetail! It was a nice day and felt great to be out enjoying the good weather.

## **Sat., Dec. 9                    Karuizawa to Tokyo**

This morning, we drove out of the mountains and into the Kanto – the large plain that is home to Tokyo and nearly 40 million people. Our first birding stop was at Tatara Marsh where masses of ducks, mostly Northern Pintails, were following the caretaker, hoping for some grain. There were 50 or more swans, mostly Whooper



Swans with a few Tundras, which made for a nice comparison at close range. A Eurasian Goshawk (recently split from Northern Goshawk) was keenly watching the ducks. The larger pond held loads of Great Crested and Little Grebes, but our target, Oriental Stork, eluded us. We made a short drive to look for Green Pheasant, which unlike the stork, was quite cooperative.

We continued our drive towards Tokyo, stopping for lunch at a rest stop where 10 different restaurants and a bunch of other small shops offered many choices for the group. Dessert, the “world’s best apple pie,” hit the spot. Our next stop was at Mizumoto Park, which was crowded since it was a weekend and a beautiful day. Besides all the people just enjoying the park, we saw at least two local birding groups and we all enjoyed watching a few Ryukyu Minivets together. A female Red-flanked Bluetail was a great find since not everyone had seen it yesterday. We also came upon a flock of 20+ American Pipits on the grass. A few Bramblings posed for photos before we got to the van and drove the rest of the way to our hotel near Haneda Airport. We opted for dinner in the hotel since we had an early flight in the morning.

## **Sun., Dec. 10                      Flight to Kushiro | Tsurui Cranes**

We were in Kushiro by 9:30AM, and after adding a few layers of warm clothes we were ready to start birding! We drove to Tsurui Village (Tsurui means the Crane Place). Whether it was due to the mild weather, or perhaps because they aren’t feeding the birds as much due to bird flu concerns, Ito Sanctuary only had eight cranes. We stopped to look at them for a while and learned from the ranger that there was a sizable flock at another location. But before we left, we saw our first Marsh Tits of the trip. Hokkaido is the only place in Japan where they are found. We also saw our first of many of the Hokkaido subspecies of Eurasian Jay. Tsurumidai Sanctuary had better numbers of cranes – close to 50. What a beautiful bird! We had lunch at the café and souvenir shop across the street, but it was hard to eat with the constant activity of birds coming to the feeders, not to mention the occasional Steller’s Sea-Eagle fly-by! After lunch, we visited an area where a Ural Owl is known to roost. Fortunately, the owl was home, and the afternoon light was perfect for photography. We returned to the hotel and onsen (hot spring), which feels great after birding in the cold all day!

## **Mon., Dec. 11                      Tsurui Cranes | Northern Shore | Yorouushi**



Those who wanted to begin the day early with an outing to photograph roosting cranes at the famous Otowa Bridge. We were fortunate that a few cranes flew right up the river towards us with the sunrise behind them. Another crane landed close to the bridge, posing for some nice landscape photos.

Back at the hotel, we warmed up at breakfast, then loaded the luggage and started driving north. We decided to visit the north shore of Hokkaido, near Abashiri, birding along Lake Tofutu where we had quite a few Whooper Swans, a few Common Goldeneye and our first Harlequin Ducks. The wind was pretty brutal with a low-pressure front moving in that would bring snow the next day. Bryan knew a location where Dusky Thrushes and a Fieldfare, a rare winter Thrush in Japan, had been reported. Just as we arrived, a large flock of thrushes flew in and almost immediately we located the Fieldfare, in fact there were two! From there we headed to the river mouth and port in Shari. The wind was howling here as well, but that forced a lot of birds into the port. There was a flock of a few hundred Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Mergansers and a few Harlequins. We got our first good looks at lots of gulls here too. Slaty-backed was by far the most common, but we found Common (split from Mew), Black-headed, Vega, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged as well.

From there we drove inland to Yoroushi Onsen, arriving just before dark. After checking into our rooms, we met for an amazing dinner, quite a production! After dinner we moved out to the main room and sat around the fire to do the checklist and start our vigil for one of the most sought-after birds of the trip, Blakiston's Fish-Owl. While the owl is seen here nearly every night, the times vary. In recent days it sometimes arrived as early as 8PM, but other nights not until after 3AM! We finished the list and waited for a few hours. The owl wasn't cooperating, but a Japanese Marten came to steal the fish meant for the owl, which was pretty cool. Our group slowly shrank. Some left to enjoy the hot springs, others headed to bed. When the owl eventually showed at 3:30AM, it was only viewed by one holdout from our group. Hopefully we would have better luck tomorrow.

## **Tues., Dec. 12                      Yoroushi | Notsuke Penninsula**

The forecast storm arrived overnight, and we woke to snow, and the feeders were busy. Eurasian Jays were common, and lots of tits and nuthatches were coming in for the seeds as well. A Great Spotted Woodpecker seemed to prefer the suet. During our late breakfast a Brown Dipper was foraging in the river. We were watching it when suddenly Bryan noticed a Solitary Snipe in the river. These birds spend winters on fast flowing rivers in





northern Japan and are seldom easy to see, so it was a great find. Part of our group decided to spend the day relaxing at the lodge. Hard to leave the bird feeders, hot springs and the promise of a massage! The rest of us ventured out into the snow, headed east to the coast.

The forecast called for a dusting of snow, but it snowed all day, and we ended up with several inches, plus wind drifts. We spent most of our time on Notsuke Peninsula, but the harsh conditions and limited visibility made birding challenging. Our reward for braving the weather was seeing a flock of 20+ Asian Rosy-Finches. We returned to the lodge in time for a quick dip in the hot springs to thaw us out before dinner. Dinner was early again to give us more time to watch for the owl, and a good thing because the owl arrived at 5:30PM! It perched in a tree across the river until eventually someone from the lodge removed the cover of the fishpond. Then it flew right in, caught a fish and ate it right in front of us! Not seeing it the night before only added to the suspense and made this sighting even more exciting!

### **Wed., Dec. 13                      Yoroushi | Shunkunitai | Nemuro**

Cold temperatures with mostly clear skies greeted us in the morning. Yoroushi was so wonderful it was hard to leave – it was the favorite place for most of the group. The roads were snow packed and icy, making traveling slow, but we worked our way slowly and carefully south along the coast. We stopped a few times where it was safe to park and scanned the flocks of ducks in the ocean, adding Long-tailed Duck and Black Scoter to our list. We planned visit a peninsula west of Nemuro, but a car had collided with a train! Luckily the driver of the car was ok, but the road was closed, so we headed back towards Nemuro and had a nice walk through the forest at Shunkunitai. We found several Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a White-backed Woodpecker and a few Goldcrests flitting through the forest. A herd of about 40 Sika Deer was feeding on the edge of the forest too.

### **Thurs., Dec. 14                      Nemuro**

Another low-pressure system moving into eastern Hokkaido brought strong winds with it. Luckily the peninsula that juts out to the east has a few bird blinds that would shelter us from the wind. We started at Kuruma Ishi (hanasaki) where we found a few White-tailed Eagles riding the winds. One perched on the bluff overlooking the ocean. Lots of Red-necked Grebes were visible offshore, as well as good numbers of Black Scoters and Harlequin Ducks. The blind at Cape Nossappu was closed for repairs so we used the lighthouse as a wind break and



scanned the ocean from there. One of the Kuril Islands, taken by Russia at the end of WWII, was visible off the point. Quite a few ducks were sheltering in the harbor at Onnemoto including a large flock of Northern Pintails. After lunch and a break at the hotel, we took a short hike to another blind in a small forest patch near town. There was a nice mixed flock of Nuthatches plus Japanese, Marsh and Coal Tits coming to the feeders. Some of us decided to hike a bit, and while we were gone a pair of the *caudata* subspecies of Long-tailed Tit made an appearance near the blind. Dubbed “Snow Fairy,” by some marketing genius, the souvenir shops are full of stuffed animals, keychains and lots of other goods featuring this cute little bird.

## **Fri., Dec. 15                      Haneda – Nemuro | Flight to Tokyo**

Luckily the storm front hadn’t arrived yet and we made the trip back to Kushiro with no problems. We stopped to bird a bit near Akkeshi, but it was just 14 degrees, so we mostly birded from the van! We scanned the bay and then looked for “snow fairies” in a nearby small park before continuing to Kushiro Airport. Our flight to Tokyo was on time and upon arrival in Haneda we said goodbye to those with flights home today and the rest of us headed to our hotel and enjoyed one last delicious meal together. We ended up with 134 species of birds including six species of cranes. The birds of the trip for the group were pretty spread out. Not surprisingly, several voted for Blakiston’s Fish-Owl, but others added Falcated Duck and Eastern Spot-billed Duck to the list.

*Group (Takumi Koichi – TK), Japanese Macaque or Snow Monkey (Alan Gertler – AG), Hawfinch (TK), Tufted Duck (TK), Red-crowned Crane (AG), Blakiston's Fish-Owl (AG), Red-flanked Blue-tail (TK), Group Lunch (AG), Eurasian Spoonbill (AG), Crested Kingfisher (AG), White-naped Cranes (AG), Mandarin Duck (AG), Scenic (AG), Tundra Swan (TK), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (TK), Falcated Duck (TK), Scenic (TK), Group walk (TK), Tree scenic (TK), Colorful leaves (TK), Common Gull (TK), Northern Lapwing (TK), Mountain Scenic (TK), Eurasian Treecreeper (AG), Japanese Tit (AG), Posing with Snow Monkey (Bryan Shirley), Matsumoto Castle (AG), Group birding (TK), Ural Owl (AG), Varied Tit (AG), Green Pheasant (AG), Great Spotted Woodpecker (AG), Harlequin Ducks (AG), Blakiston's Fish-Owl (AG), Brown-eared Bulbul (AG), Group (AG), Meadow Bunting (TK)*

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