

Japan Birding & Nature Tour | Trip Report

Jan. 7–23, 2024 | by Kent Skaggs



Guides Bryan Shirley and Kent Skaggs, with 10 participants: Claire, Gail & Dennis, Gene H., Gene M., Gordon, Kate, Mary and Ruth & Howard



Sun., Jan. 7 Arrival in Japan

Haneda Airport, officially Tokyo International Airport, was our initial destination with all members of the group arriving at least a day early to relax a bit and take in some of the sights before starting the trip. Our hotel was the MyStays Haneda, which is conveniently located near the airport as we would be flying to our next destination in the morning. But before then, the first official activity was to gather in the lobby of the hotel for introductions and then take a short walk to Yuuki Gyoza Bou, a Chinese restaurant, for dinner. Bryan ordered several entrees for everyone to sample, all of which were very tasty, followed by ice cream for dessert. Then it was back to the hotel to rest up as the trip would start in earnest in the morning.



Mon., Jan. 8 Morning Birding | Kagoshima | Izumi

Most of the group was up early for breakfast and to take part in a quick walk down to the Tama River to see what birdlife was around before we headed back to the airport where we would fly to Kagoshima on Kyushu for the first leg of our trip. Several species of waterfowl were seen including Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Common Pochard. We also got our first looks at Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Black-headed Gull, Black-tailed Gull, Brown-eared Bulbul, Warbling White-eye, White-cheeked Starling, Daurian Redstart and Blue Rock-Thrush.

Once back at the hotel, we grabbed our things and headed to the airport. It was a relatively short flight to Kagoshima where we were greeted by our local guide/driver, Takumi Koichi, who would accompany us for the rest of the trip. Loaded onto the bus, we headed for Izumi where we would be staying for the next three nights. There were a few planned stops to look for birds along the way, but this was our first opportunity to take in some of Japan's rugged but beautiful landscape. The road we were on snaked its way through tree covered slopes with occasional widening of valleys that allowed for agricultural crops such as rice. Along the way a Eurasian Kestrel was spotted perched in a tree so we made a brief stop to view the bird before continuing on to an area along the Sendai River near Satsuma. At one stop along the Sendai River we spotted several Long-billed Plovers, along with our first Green Sandpiper, Japanese Wagtail and Gray Wagtail. As we neared Izumi, we stopped along the Komenotsu River where we added some distant Falcated Ducks and in the fading light, a nice silhouette of a nearby Crested Kingfisher. Then it was on to our hotel to get checked in, go over the species checklist for the day, eat dinner and then off to bed as we would have an early start the next morning.

Tues., Jan. 9 Izumi Crane Center | Local Wetlands

Early breakfast this day as we wanted to get on the road so we could get to the Izumi Crane Center to watch the cranes fly out. Upon arrival we headed to the rooftop of the visitor center to survey the nearby fields where cranes were roosting. The temperature was in the upper 30's so it was a bit brisk, but there was little to no wind which made viewing from up top relatively comfortable. As we scanned the area, Crane Center staff were distributing food for the cranes and waterfowl. This caused them to leave temporarily but they would return quickly to enjoy the bounty. While we were waiting for the cranes to return, large numbers of Rooks began arriving with some landing on power lines near the center. After carefully scanning the Rooks scattered about, a few Daurian Jackdaws were identified among them.



With the staff having finished with their feeding chores, the cranes started to return. Large groups of Hooded Cranes were flying in and smaller numbers of White-naped Cranes joined them. As the fields continued to fill with cranes, large numbers of Northern Pintail started to arrive, circling repeatedly as ducks will do before landing. The ducks seemed to be on edge and as we would find out, there was a good reason for this. As we were watching all of the birds move about, Gene H. hollered out that a Eurasian Goshawk took a duck out of the air and had landed on the ground. The goshawk was approximately 300 yards away so we got it in the scopes so folks could get a good look at it. The unfortunate duck was out of view behind a small berm, sparing us the grisly scene that was taking place. Just a reminder that life is hard, for both predator and prey. Common Shelducks were now arriving too, circling numerous times before landing just like the pintail. As we continued to scan the area a Hen Harrier was seen cruising about and a Common Snipe emerged from vegetation close to the center providing excellent views. Another crane species, a Common Crane, materialized from the groups of feeding Hooded and White-naped bringing our total number of crane species to three.

The morning was off to a great start but there were other birds we were hoping to see. So it was back on the bus to check out more of the area. After driving a short distance, we stopped to check for some rails in a drainage ditch. A Ruddy-breasted Crake was heard and briefly seen in flight before disappearing into vegetation. At the end of the ditch there was a small pond that had both Eurasian and Black-faced Spoonbills resting in it and there were several Little Ringed Plovers moving about on some exposed mudflats. From here we continued driving the roads inspecting the groups of cranes that were dispersed in the fields, searching for other crane species. We ultimately were successful as we came across three Sandhill Cranes and a lone Siberian Crane, bringing our total of crane species for the morning to five. Not too shabby.

It was now time for lunch which was at a restaurant that specializes in soba noodles. The restaurant happened to be in a building that also made Sake, so we had the option of sampling some as we enjoyed our noodles. After lunch we went to Kogawa Dam where we saw our first Mandarin Ducks and Baikal Teal, had great looks at our first Varied Tits and a fleeting glimpse of a couple of White-bellied Green-Pigeons.

Then it was back to the area where we had been in the morning to look for buntings along the Kouchi River. As we neared the area where we were going to take a walk, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk was seen in flight. Fortunately it perched in a tree and we were able to confirm the ID. We drove a little further and got off the bus to look for buntings. It was a bit breezy so the buntings were hiding out in the protection of the reed beds along the river. We had brief glimpses of Meadow, Masked and Reed Buntings, took a look at more ducks and had a Peregrine



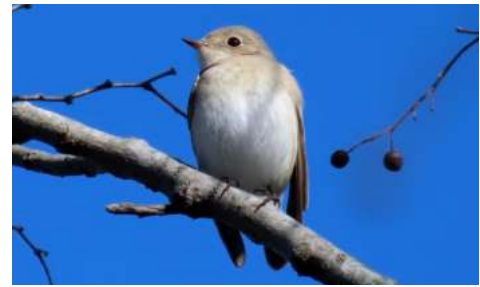
Falcon come diving in from up high to land on the ground in a field where we got a good look at it through the scope. Daylight was rapidly disappearing, so we started back towards town and along the way came across our first Eastern Buzzard. Back at the hotel, we rested a bit before gathering again to go out for dinner at a Korean style BBQ restaurant. After a good time cooking our food at the restaurant, it was back to the hotel, go through the checklist and then off to bed. It had been a full day and a very good one at that.

Wed., Jan. 10 Izumi Crane Center | Samurai Residence | Akune

A more relaxed start this morning, so we were able to get a little more rest before eating breakfast. Then we headed back to the Izumi Crane Center and the surrounding fields to see what else we could find. We started first by returning to the drainage ditch where we encountered the Ruddy-breasted Crake the previous day, hoping to get a better look. The crake was a no show, but the spoonbills were still hanging out at the pond. While we were looking at the spoonbills, Bryan spotted some Japanese Grosbeaks in some trees beyond the pond. We got them in the scope for a better view before continuing on. We headed back to the crane center to watch the cranes for a while longer as this would be our last day to see most of the crane species we had observed here. Before departing the area, we again checked for buntings in the reedbeds and then headed into town for lunch.

After lunch, we took a brief break from birding and visited one of the Izumi-Fumoto Samurai Residences which date back some 400 years. We visited the Saisho Residence and were given a tour in Japanese, with Bryan translating. Our guide took us through the house explaining what each room was and its use and who would have lived in the home. After the tour we explored the area a little more before heading towards the coast near Akune.

Once we arrived at the coast we found an area where we could pull off and scan the rocky shoreline for Japanese Cormorants. It didn't take long to locate some so we got them in the scopes and Bryan explained how to separate them from their close cousin, Great Cormorants. We scanned the water while we were there looking for any seabirds that might be close to shore and it wasn't long before we found a Brown Booby cruising by. Some of us continued to scan for birds while others decided to check out a citrus stand nearby. Then it was back on the bus and back to Izumi for dinner at Fuku Fuku, a Japanese noodle restaurant. After another delicious meal, it was back to the hotel to get some rest as we would be departing Izumi in the morning.



Thurs., Jan. 11 Kumamoto | Saga

Early breakfast this day so we could hit the road for Kumamoto. Our first stop upon arrival was Shimoezu Lake/Suizenji Ezuko Park to try for a few rarities that were being reported there. Bryan led us directly to where the birds were being seen and it didn't take long to find one of our targets, a Dusky Warbler, which was hopping around in some vegetation along the water's edge. As we were watching the warbler, we were also scanning the water to see what was on the lake. Several duck species that we had previously seen were in view with one of those being Falcated Ducks, but this time they were much closer and in much better light. We looked at these beautiful ducks for quite a while until another one of our target birds was spotted, this time a Red-breasted Flycatcher. The bird was very active hunting insects in some trees that were very close to where we found the warbler. We had several good looks at this bird and a few photos to document the sighting before we gradually continued on around the lake and back to the bus. We found two of the three birds we were looking for, only a Great Bittern eluded us, but we had great looks at several other species including Daurian Redstart and Bull-headed Shrike and our first views of Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers.

As it was nearing noon, we stopped to pick up some food and headed to Chikugo Municipal Park for a picnic lunch. As we ate, there were lots of Dusky Thrushes flying about the trees in the park and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk came zooming in to chase off another raptor that had been perched in a tree. We finished up lunch and then headed to Kasegawa Retention Pond where large numbers of Baikal Teal had been reported. On our way there we stumbled across two Oriental Magpies sitting on top of a utility pole which was another new species for our growing list. Once at the retention pond, we did find good numbers of Baikal Teal, approximately 800 and they were much closer than the birds at Kogawa Dam. As we circled the pond, we found a very cooperative male Meadow Bunting right beside the trail. He posed nicely and allowed us as much time as we wanted to take photos before we continued down the trail. A little further down the trail Gene H. spotted the lone male Smew that had been reported here emerging from the vegetation close to shore. The sky was clear so the mostly white bird gleamed in the afternoon sun. Shortly after seeing the Smew, we located a couple of Greater White-fronted Geese resting just out of the water along with several other ducks and a large contingent of Northern Lapwings.

We had one other location to visit this afternoon so we got back on the bus and headed to the Yamato Rest Area to see if we could get some closer views of Mandarin Ducks. We found the ducks but they were a bit flighty.



Even so, we managed to get some decent looks of them in the fading light along with a Crested Kingfisher perched on top of a boulder in the Kase River. A nice caper to another full day. Then it was back for dinner, the checklist and then to bed.

Fri., Jan. 12 Storks and Shorebirds | Bullet Train to Mt. Fuji

Another early breakfast and then we were off to the Shiroishi Reclamation Area to look for Oriental Storks. This area was flat agricultural land protected by a seawall. There were several narrow roads that intersected the agricultural fields, most of which were rice. We also saw taro being harvested and these fields were flooded, apparently making it easier to remove the roots. We drove back and forth looking for the storks, but had no luck. We did however come across some other unexpected birds as a small flock of Taiga Bean-Geese were feeding in a rice field and a Ruddy Shelduck was seen on a larger body of water near the seawall.

From here we moved on to the Higashiyoka mudflats to look for shorebirds. We were in luck as the timing of our visit coincided with the highest tide of the month, forcing the shorebirds in close for easy viewing. We began walking on a paved walkway that paralleled the water, stopping to scan the birds out in front of us. As we looked ahead we could see that there were a lot more so we continued walking so we could get closer to the larger flocks. Most of what we were seeing were Dunlin, but there was also a good variety. Pied Avocet, Black-bellied Plover, Siberian Sand-Plover, Kentish Plover, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Long-billed Dowitcher, Common Redshank and Common Greenshank were all present. There were other birds as well including Saunter's Gull, which we would only see at this location. We were here for a little over an hour and traveled a little over a half mile and saw thousands of birds. It was a great way to end our time on Kyushu.

We got back on the bus and made our way to Fukuoka to board the bullet train to Mt. Fuji. The train ride would take about five hours so we grabbed some food to take with us and settled in. We did have to change trains once, but otherwise everyone was able to relax and get a little rest. Once we arrived in Fuji, we headed to the hotel which was right next to the train station to check in and drop off our luggage. We then went back to the station to eat dinner and then return to the hotel for some needed rest.

Sat., Jan. 13 Chuo Park | Matsumoto Castle | Azumino Swan Park

A relaxed start to our morning as we wouldn't hit the road until 8:00 AM, so breakfast, checkout, and load up. Our first stop would be at Chuo Park looking for Azure-winged Magpies. There were no magpies this morning, but we did add a few new birds in Brown-headed Thrush, Pale Thrush and Red-billed Leiothrix. We also had



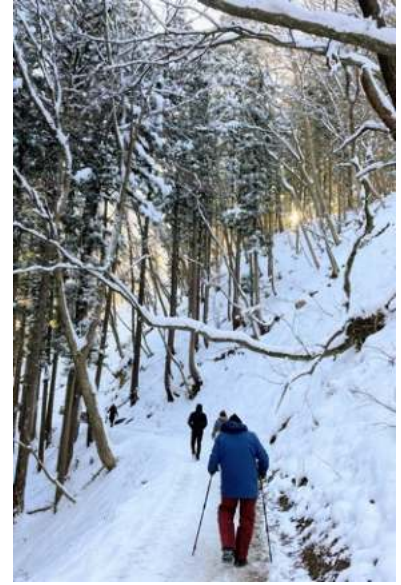
good looks at a Common Kingfisher and Mt. Fuji to boot. Then it was on to Nagano. On our way north we stopped at Shoji Park/Lake. It was relatively quiet in terms of birds but we did add Rustic Bunting and a Bull-headed Shrike posed nicely for photos.

We grabbed lunch along the way and stopped in Matsumoto to tour the Matsumoto Castle in the early afternoon. It was snowing when we arrived, which made the black castle stand out even more. We proceeded inside and gradually made our way up the six story structure. Since the castle was built for defensive purposes, a lot of the displays centered around the weapons that were used to defend it, most of which were different types of guns. By the time we finished up our tour the snow had stopped, making the surrounding grounds very pretty. We then headed to the Azumino Swan Park to see the Bewick's race of the Tundra Swan. There were over 80 swans at the park, with several very close. There were other waterfowl there as well including Northern Pintail, Tufted Duck and Common Pochard, all of which seemed oblivious to our presence. There was a brisk wind and since it was late in the day we kept our visit short and continued on to Nagano. Travel was now slower as there were snowy conditions, but Koichi got us there safely.

We checked into our hotel and shortly thereafter gathered in the lobby for a short walk to where we would be having dinner. Kattsun was the name of the restaurant and their specialty is Okonomiyaki, or Japanese pancakes. The pancakes were prepared on a flat top grill in the middle of each table, adding to the experience. As for the pancakes, two thumbs up!! We also had a fried noodle dish, Yaki Soba, which was also excellent. Then it was back to the hotel to rest up for the next day.

Sun., Jan. 14 Snow Monkey Park | Zenkoji Temple

Another relaxing morning as we again had an 8:00 AM start. Breakfast, then off to Jigokudani or 'Hell's Valley' to see the famous Japanese Macaques, also known as Snow Monkeys. It was a bright, clear morning with a blanket of freshly fallen snow making for a picturesque scene. Upon arrival at the trailhead, several monkeys were seen soaking in the hot spring on a live feed monitor and lots of people were already heading up the trail to see them. We joined the parade and after a mile hike up the canyon, we arrived at the hot spring to find most of the macaques out of the water searching through the snow for food left for them outside of the hot spring. The macaques were completely oblivious to all of the people there to see them allowing for endless photo opportunities. While we watched the macaques and enjoyed the scenery, Gene H. spotted two Japanese Accentors nearby which were an added bonus.

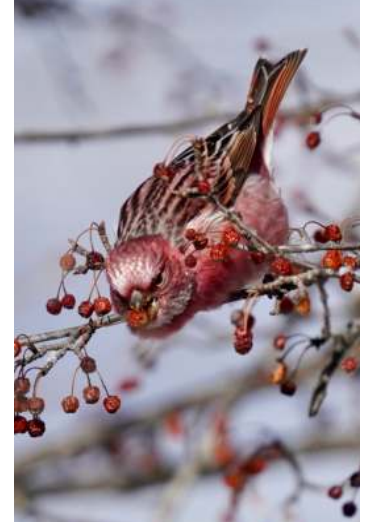


After a considerable amount of time with the macaques, we headed back down the trail to the bus. It was nearing noon so we stopped in Nakano for lunch at a restaurant where we experienced another first, a robot server. After lunch we headed to the Zenkoji Temple in Nagano. Built in the 7th century, the Buddhist temple has over 1,400 years of history within its compound and is said to hold Japan's oldest statue of Buddha. The city of Nagano formed around it and the temple remains a pilgrimage site to this day. When we were done taking in the sights at the temple, some of the group chose to walk back to the hotel and explore some shops along the way, while the rest rode on the bus. After a short break, we headed out for dinner to a Sushi restaurant called Kappa Sushi Kamitakada. This fun little restaurant is a conveyor belt style sushi bar. There are two belts, the lower one constantly circulating with already prepared items and an upper belt used to deliver items you order off of a touch screen. It was super fun and rather tasty, even for those that may have been skeptical about sushi. Then it was back to the hotel to pack up as we would be leaving Nagano for our next destination in the morning.

Mon., Jan. 15 Rosefinches | Search for Waxwings

Breakfast, load up and hit the road just ahead of another round of snow forecast for Nagano. Our destination this morning was Shiojiri Enrei Park, where there were good numbers of Pallas's Rosefinches being reported along with Red Crossbills. On the way to the park we stumbled upon two male Green Pheasants feeding in the road ditch. Fortunately for us we were able to pull off onto the shoulder and get a good look at the national bird of Japan. We continued on to the park where upon arrival, we headed down a closed off road that doubles as a trail. It wasn't long before we encountered a flock of Red Crossbills perched in the top of a tree on one side and a lone Hawfinch perched in a tree on the other side. This location also happened to have a great view of the valley below and Lake Suwa. We continued down the trail until we came across some photographers and sure enough, they had a flock of Pallas's Rosefinches feeding a short distance in front of them. They moved a short distance away so we followed, taking these beautiful birds in for as long as we could. They eventually moved on so we did too, to see what else we could find. There had been reports of Yellow-throated Buntings here too, but we weren't able to locate any. However, we did come across some other good birds as we added Red-flanked Bluetail, Long-tailed Rosefinch and White's Thrush to our list.

After stopping for lunch, we went to Yatsugatake Natural and Culture Park to look for Japanese and Bohemian Waxwings which had been reported there the last couple of days. We walked around the visitor center area where there were several trees that had Mistletoe, a favorite food of the waxwings, growing in them. Our timing was apparently off as we didn't come across any waxwings. So we took a slow drive towards Karuizawa where



we would be staying for the next two nights. Once we got checked into our hotel and settled into our rooms, we gathered to go over the species checklist and eat dinner before retiring for the evening.

Tues., Jan. 16 Karuizawa Wildbird Forest | Saku Regulating Pond

Today had the same start time as the previous couple of days with our first destination being the Karuizawa Wildbird Forest. The weather had turned a bit with snow flurries, colder temps and gusty winds but the area we were hiking sheltered us a bit from the elements. Shortly after we started hiking on the trail, we added a new species in the form of a Eurasian Nuthatch, which was a part of a mixed flock of familiar species already seen. Things were a bit quiet until we got to an area where there were some suet feeders near a couple of small buildings. Several Japanese Tits showed up hoping we would be putting out more food, along with Oriental Green Finches, Willow Tit and Varied Tit. While we watched the birds near the feeders, Bryan noticed a small flock of Eurasian Siskins fly into the top of a nearby tree and there was a Great Spotted Woodpecker close by as well.

We continued on down the trail and as we were nearing the end we came across some Long-tailed Tits. As we were watching these, Koichi came running back to inform us that there were some Japanese Waxwings just around the corner. We hurried to the location to see several perched in the tops of trees that had some Mistletoe in them. Our perseverance had paid off. Then it was time to load up and head back for lunch. After lunch we took a short break before half of the group headed back out to the Saku Regulating Pond to look at more waterfowl. We didn't see anything new but we did get great looks at several Smew (male and female) and several other species of waterfowl. There were also close to 70 Black Kites that were flying overhead getting ready to head to their roost for the night. Back to the hotel for dinner and then to bed as we would be leaving in the morning for Tokyo.

Wed., Jan. 17 Watarase | Mizumoto

Breakfast, then back on the road towards Tokyo, with a couple of stops along the way. First stop would be at Watarase Wetlands near Nogi, to make a second attempt at locating Oriental Storks. On the way to Watarase, a pair of storks were seen via a live webcam roosting on a nesting platform. Would they still be there when we arrive? The answer was no, so we set out to see if we could locate them somewhere in the wetland. We drove on a series of roads through the wetland with no luck, but did happen on a rather large Wild Boar that Gene M. spotted running through the reeds. It eventually crossed the road in front of the bus providing everyone with a good look.



We continued down the road with our next stop being Mizumoto Park on the outskirts of Tokyo. There was a Japanese Night-Heron reported in the park so we figured we would try our luck at locating it. Once there, we began walking on trails that border Koaidame Reservoir. Lots of waterfowl, mostly Eurasian Wigeons, were seen on the water as well as Great Cormorants, plus we got great looks at a Brown-headed Thrush taking a bath in a marshy area on the opposite side of the trail. We eventually ran into some photographers that were trying to get photos of a Varied Tit that had an unusual color pattern as it lacked white on the head and the characteristic black throat. A unique and very pretty bird indeed. A little further down the trail Bryan spotted a pair of Eurasian Bullfinches feeding on the ground which were new for the trip. It was time to continue down the road so we headed back to the bus. No Night-Heron, but a very pleasant stop nonetheless.

We continued into the city toward our hotel for the night which was where the tour had started, MyStays Haneda. Once there we got settled in before returning to the hotel restaurant to do the checklist and eat dinner. Then it was off to bed as we would again have an early start in the morning.

Thurs., Jan. 18 Kushiro

Our schedule this day was to get up earlier than usual so we could make it to the airport for our flight to Kushiro. Once arriving in Kushiro we were planning to go to a crane sanctuary for Red-crowned Cranes, then eat lunch nearby and enjoy the cranes and whatever other birds we would encounter in the afternoon. All was going to plan, until a little over halfway to Kushiro we were informed by the captain of the plane that the flight was being diverted to the airport in Sapporo due to a mechanical issue. As soon as we landed in Sapporo, Koichi was busy trying to get us booked on another flight to Kushiro. Thankfully he was successful. While we waited for our flight which departed a little after 1:00 PM, we grabbed something to eat and relaxed a bit. Then it was back in the air for a short flight to our destination.

We arrived mid afternoon and since light was running short at this northern latitude, we decided to go towards the coast as it was close by to see what we could see on the water. Bryan and Koichi found a place where we could access the beach and scan the water. The first bird that was seen from the bus was a male Red-breasted Merganser not too far off shore. We got out and could see some other birds on the water including a couple of Common Goldeneye, but most were too distant to ID with binoculars. Bryan retrieved his scope from the bus and Red-throated Loons, Black Scoters and a Red-necked Grebe were all identified. While we were getting ready to load back onto the bus, Bryan spotted an adult Steller's Sea Eagle perched in a distant tree. He got it in the scope and we all enjoyed a closer first look at this magnificent bird. It was a nice reward after having our arrival



to Kushiro delayed and our itinerary for the day mostly scuttled. We headed to our lodging for the night which was at Yamahana Onsen Refre where we would also eat dinner and get our first taste of traditional Japanese food. Then off to bed to rest up for an early departure in the morning.

Fri., Jan. 19

Red-crowned Cranes | Yoroushi Onsen

This morning we had a pre-dawn date with some cranes, Red-crowned Cranes that is, at the Ottawa Bridge which spans the Setsuri River north of Kushiro. The Ottawa Bridge is a well known viewing location to see Red-crowned Cranes roosting in the river and when we arrived there were several people already in position on the bridge to watch the cranes wake up. The morning was brisk with partly cloudy skies, but little wind. As we looked downstream, you could see the cranes standing in the river, most of which still had their heads tucked under a wing. They eventually began to stir and started to wander around a bit in the river channel. As we watched, right below us in the river were a pair of Whooper Swans that were feeding near the bank, oblivious to the crowd of people above them.

We eventually got back on to the bus to head to the Ito Crane Sanctuary where many of the cranes in the area head to once they depart the river. The cranes are fed during the winter months at Ito and other locations in the area, which allows people to get close-up views of the birds without disturbing them. Once we arrived we found around 140 cranes roaming around the grounds there. Some were still feeding while others were preening or resting. One unusual sighting there was the presence of a single White-naped Crane that apparently took a wrong turn heading to its wintering grounds. We then traveled to another location nearby, Tsurui-mura or Tancho Village, to watch more Red-crowned Cranes and to eat lunch at a restaurant across the street. There was another lost bird at this location, a lone Sandhill Crane.

After lunch, we had a date with another bird species; this time it was a Ural Owl. In less than a half hour, we were staring at the owl in the hollow of a tree that it used to roost in. The sky was mostly clear so the owl was soaking in some rays from the sun and seemed oblivious to the group of bird watchers that had come to see it. It had seen many of our kind before.

Then it was time to head down the road to our next destination, Yoroushi Onsen, where we hoped to have a date with another owl. Yoroushi is well known for providing great views of the endangered Blakiston's Fish-Owl. We arrived late afternoon, got settled into our rooms and then gathered for an early dinner. After a traditional Japanese meal with numerous courses and ice cream for dessert, we gathered in a lounge that had windows



facing a stream that flowed right by the lodge and where the feeding station was located for the owls. As the evening wore on with no sign of the owls, members of our group slowly retired to their rooms to get some rest and maybe try again in a few hours.

Sat., Jan. 20 **Owl Watch | Rausu | Owl Watch**

The day actually started at 12:00 AM as some of the group were checking off and on to see if an owl had come in for a snack. Two of our party, Gene H. and Gene M., were finally rewarded as they were able to see an owl around 3:30 in the morning. Others came down after 4:00, but no owl. The early risers waited around for breakfast and were joined by the others soon after. We were going on a road trip and a boat ride this day along the coast at Rausu. We looked for birds out on the ocean and in a couple of ports on the way, seeing our first Harlequin Ducks and Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls.

Once at Rausu, we checked in with Ever Green Shiretoko Nature Cruise as they would be taking us out on the water to view Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles. On the way out of the port there were lots of gulls hanging around, mostly Slaty-backed but several Glaucous as well. We didn't venture too far out of the port before the Captain positioned the boat parallel to shore and the crew started chumming for eagles with fish popsicles. It didn't take long for the eagles to arrive and the show began. The crew was tossing individual frozen fish into the water and either a Steller's or White-tailed Eagle would swoop down and snatch it from the surface of the water. Gulls were present too, but the eagles were the recipients of most of the free food. And there were lots of eagles. In an hour, we had seen around 100 eagles with a 60/40 split between the Steller's and White-tailed. It had been a great hour on the water with close up views of some spectacular birds!

Back on land, we stopped to grab some lunch to eat on the bus as we traveled along the coast to check out some more ports and to take a short drive on the Notsuke Peninsula. Familiar species were seen at the ports but we did come across a couple of new birds on the peninsula. A flock of about 50 Common Redpolls were seen flying about and eventually landing to feed on seeds that were still hanging onto some taller plants just off the road. A little further down the road Gene M. spotted a raptor perched in the top of a small tree which turned out to be a Merlin, which eventually chased after the redpoll flock looking for an early dinner.

Then it was back to Yoroushi for dinner and for some, to continue the vigil for the Blakiston's Fish-Owl. Shortly after dinner, several members of the group gathered in the lounge area again. The previous evening, an owl appeared around 11:00 PM, but none of our party was there to see it. We were hoping that the owl was going to



keep close to the same schedule this evening and we weren't far off. At approximately 10:20, an owl flew in and landed in a tree not far from the feeding platform. It didn't take long before it came down to the platform and grabbed a fish from the pond. It didn't linger too long however and flew off into the darkness. But alas, those who had not seen this magnificent bird before were rewarded for their perseverance. It was a great day with some great raptors!

Sun., Jan. 21 **Notsuke | Nemuro**

At least one member of our party, Gene M., got an extra treat when in the wee hours of the morning on the 21st he witnessed two Blakiston's Fish-Owls at the same time. A parting gift from Yoroushi Onsen. The group gathered later in the morning for breakfast, then we loaded onto the bus to head to our next destination which would ultimately be Nemuro. But along the way, we would pay the Notsuke Peninsula another visit and this time spend a little more time there.

As we drove along the peninsula we found some Stejneger's Scoters in with several Black Scoters bouncing on the waves and our first Spectacled Guillemot. As we continued to drive we saw several Red Foxes and Sika Deer, both of which were close to the road and not concerned when we stopped to take some photos. We eventually came upon a small flock of Asian Rosy-Finches before turning around at the Notsuke Peninsula Nature Center. We returned to the mainland and stopped briefly in Shibetsu to grab some food for lunch and continue on toward Nemuro. We had one last stop on the north side of Lake Furen where we saw a good variety of waterfowl including 80 Whooper Swans. We also got good views of a Gray-headed Woodpecker which was new for the trip. We arrived at our hotel in Nemuro, got checked in and took a break before gathering for dinner in a private room in the hotel. Another very enjoyable day had come to an end. It was hard to believe, but the next day would be the last day of the tour.

Mon., Jan. 22 **Nemuro Peninsula**

A relaxed start to our last day on Hokkaido. Breakfast, then we got on the bus for a short drive to the Shunkunitai Wild Bird Sanctuary. Once there, we ventured onto a trail that took us through a wooded area. We had three target species for this patch of woods and it wasn't long before we had two of the three, Eurasian Treecreeper and Goldcrest. The third, White-backed Woodpecker, was a no show until we finally located one feeding toward the end of the trail. We stopped for a quick bathroom break at the visitor center before moving on.



Our next stop was at the Hanasaki Port. Several familiar waterfowl were seen including over 100 Greater Scaup, similar numbers of Slaty-backed Gulls and two closeups of Glaucous-winged Gulls. From there it was on to the Hanasaki Lighthouse where there was a bird hide (blind). We found more familiar birds and a brisk wind, so since it was shortly after noon we decided to go get some lunch and head back to the hotel for a little break.

Mid afternoon most of the group headed back out to check a couple of other bird hides on the peninsula. The first was located right next to a lighthouse at Cape Nosappu. Scanning the water we found lots of Black Scoters, Harlequin Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers and Red-necked Grebes scattered about. There were also Spectacled Guillemots fairly close to the lighthouse, allowing us some extended looks through the scopes. We searched for other alcids, but possible candidates were just a little too far away for positive ID. As we were about to leave the hide, Bryan saw four Black-legged Kittiwakes flying by. Another new bird species for our list. Before we left the Cape, we checked an area close by that is a known roosting site for cormorants, looking for a Red-faced Cormorant. We were in luck as a lone bird was perched towards the top of a rocky cliff along with several Pelagic Cormorants. Then it was on to our last stop, the Onnemoto Bird Hide. We took a quick look in the Onnemoto Port where there were a good mix of waterfowl, including a lone Falcated Duck, and then continued on to the hide not far away. There were more Black Scoters and Pelagic Cormorants on the water as well as more birds off in the distance that went unidentified. As we left the hide a Eurasian Kestrel was seen hovering not far away, looking for a meal before it settled in for the night. It seemed appropriate that one of the last birds we saw that day was one of the first seen when we arrived in Kyushu two weeks earlier.

We slowly drove back to Nemuro hoping to see a Short-eared Owl at dusk, but it was not to be. We arrived at the hotel and headed to our rooms to rest a little before gathering for our last dinner as a group in Japan. As we ate, we recalled some of the highlights during the trip. All great memories that will certainly last.

Tues., Jan. 23 Drive to Kushiro | Back to Tokyo

We were looking to get on the road back to the Kushiro airport a little earlier than we had planned due to a snowstorm that was moving through the area. Snow was just starting in Nemuro as we left so we were hopeful that it wouldn't be too bad as we headed toward Kushiro. But as we drove the snow became heavier and we eventually got notification that our flight back to Tokyo had been canceled. We continued on and eventually made it to the airport. Once inside, Bryan and Koichi went to the counter of the airline we were booked with to find out what our options were. To make a long story short, part of the group that was scheduled to fly back home later that evening was able to get on another flight with another airline back to Tokyo in time to catch

their flights. The rest of the group which was flying home the next day was able to get on a later flight back to Tokyo with our original airline.

Our tour of Japan was officially over, but the memories of what was seen and experienced will stay with us the rest of our days. A huge thank you to Bryan and Koichi for making this a wonderful experience in every aspect.

Photos: Group at Izumi Crane Observation Center (Kent Skaggs - KS), Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (KS), Red-crowned Cranes (Takumi Koichi – TK), Pallas's Rosefinch (TK), Blakiston's Fish-Owl (KS), Snow Monkey (KS), Red-billed Leiothrix (TK), Hooded Crane (TK), View of Mt. Fuji from Fujishi Central Park (KS), Daurian Redstart (KS), Crested Kingfisher (KS), Rooks (TK), Common Shelducks (TK), Izumi Crane Observation Center (TK), Yakiniku Nebeshima BBQ (KS), Kogawa Dam (KS), Siberian Crane (TK), Group Birding (KS), Mandarin Ducks (TK), Eurasian & Black-faced Spoonbills (TK), Birding along the Kouchi River (KS), Izumi Samurai Residences (KS), Crested Kingfisher (TK), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (KS), Daurian Redstart (KS), White Wagtail (KS), Red-breasted Flycatcher (KS), Eurasian Curlews (TK), Black-winged Stilt (TK), View of Mt. Fiji (KS), Japanese Grosbeak (TK), Common Kingfisher (TK), Matsumoto Castle (KS), Group (TK), Snow Monkey (Gene Muller - GM), Top of Zenkoji Temple (KS), Jigokudani Monkey Park (KS), View of Lake Suwa from Shiojiri Enrei Natural Park (KS), Pallas's Rosefinch (TK), Japanese Tit (TK), Japanese Raccoon Dog (TK), View of Hokkaido (KS), Group on Beach (TK), Ottawa Bridge over the Setsuri River (KS), Long-tailed Tit (a.k.a. - Snow Fairy) (GM), Ural Owl (TK), Red-crowned Cranes (TK), Great Spotted Woodpecker (TK), Eurasian Jay (KS), Harlequin Duck (TK), Steller's Sea Eagle (TK), Blakiston's Fish-Owl (KS), Red Fox (TK), Kurumaishi Hide (KS), Common Redpolls (TK), Mt. Rausu (KS), Whooper Swans (KS), Final dinner (TK)