

Holiday Highlights

Japan

12-28 January 2018

Guides: Julian Sykes and Mayumi Brazil

Guests: John Duerden, Caroline Martin, Barbara & Tony Keville, Jean Brown, John Bruce

Day 1: We all meet at Heathrow's T3 at the allotted time and, without incident, get airside, where we spend a couple of hours before boarding our flight for Tokyo. Thankfully the flight leaves on time and we are very impressed with the airline, making for a decent flight despite being 12 hours!

Day 2: We land at Haneda Airport, Tokyo slightly ahead of schedule having seen (poorly) Mount Fuji in the distance and loads of large gulls loafing around on the wide River Kiso, which empties into the Ise Bay. We are off the plane and through passport control very quickly with our baggage arriving as we get to the carousel. We have our bags and head out into arrivals where a smiling Mayumi is waiting with placard in hand. We make the relevant introductions and are informed our hotel is in the next terminal so off we go for the shuttle bus. Shortly after, we are walking through to our luxury accommodation within this very busy building.

Mayumi sorts out our rooms very quickly and with a couple of hours before dinner we enjoy our time just relaxing and sorting out our stuff for the subsequent days. At 7pm we convene in the restaurant and enjoy our first fabulous meal, which is a series of small courses and all absolutely delicious and incredibly healthy. The talk is congenial during the meal but it is obvious we are starting to flag as Mayumi and Julian go through the following days itinerary. It is time to catch up on some lost sleep, which is pretty easy but we are all looking forward to our first full day on Honshu – Japan's largest island.

Day 3: It is not long for the Japanese experiences to start, as after an excellent breakfast we arrange to meet in the reception area and Julian is the first to arrive. He would like some fresh air after a poor night's sleep and heads outside, just to be greeted with spectacular views of Mount Fuji in the distance. The snow-clad volcano looks fantastic against the brilliant blue sky and Julian forgets for the moment he is now stood in freezing temperatures. After a few images that are sadly distorted by buildings and pylons Julian goes back inside and proceeds to tell Tony and Barbara of the incredible sight that awaits them. We start to gather and Mayumi appears to inform us the 'small bus' has arrived, so with our luggage we all make our way outside. This is no 'small bus' but a luxury 25 seater and we have two sets of comfortable reclining double seats to ourselves! Thankfully as we have spread out Mayumi has a microphone and can relay any messages to us without any trouble and introduces us to (Mr) 'Saito-san' – what a great

start to the day and we all feel a bit better after our somewhat sleep-deprived night with some jet lag.

We set off from the airport terminal and away from the sprawl of Tokyo with Carrion Crow being the first bird we see, followed closely by Feral Pigeon and then our first Asian species Large-billed Crow. As we start to leave the city towards the tree covered hills Julian first spots a European Sparrowhawk followed by our first near endemic Brown-eared Bulbul but we would like better views! It is a gorgeous day as we climb up into the hills just beyond Tokyo with Mount Fuji as our companion to the south. Our journey continues and eventually we reach Yamanashi Prefecture (region or county) and the scenery is just getting better all the time, as we can see the Japanese Alps in the distance.

A very welcome comfort stop is decided upon by Mayumi and we pull into the motorway services with a Black-eared Kite circling around the car park. We can still see Japan's highest mountain from here and we are also keen to get a photo with unrestricted views and a high viewing platform provides this. There are more birds around with our first proper Brown-eared Bulbul, Black-backed (White) Wagtails and a Kestrel sat on a pylon. We need to crack on, so we are back in the bus and heading away when Jean spots our first Oriental Turtle Dove of the trip. We continue west towards the higher mountains covered in snow, with Mayumi now giving us a running commentary on Japan, it's people, industry and culture, which is fabulous.

Eventually we reach Suwa and follow the river towards the town and huge lake adjacent to it, seeing our first Great Cormorants with a tree full of them and wildfowl with another speciality Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Wigeon, Mallard and Coot. Suma Lake is mostly frozen, which reminds us of the extreme cold outside despite the bright sunshine. Saito-san stops now at a convenience store where we are picking up lunch but adjacent to the car park is an apple grove with Rowan trees around full of berries. Here there is a huge flock of White-cheeked Starlings and a couple of Dusky Thrush, which are like a Redwing on steroids! We get pulled away by Julian and Mayumi into the shop and buy what we need for lunch, which is an interesting exercise in itself – having strawberry sandwiches!

Soon enough we are back in the bus and following the edge of the lake, seeing Grey Heron, Great White and Little Egrets until we reach a parking area overlooking the water with picnic tables alongside. Lunch is taken here but it's really hard to stop ourselves from birding the immediate area as we watch the aerial acrobatics of kites overhead, Caroline spots another closer Oriental Turtle Dove and Julian our first handsome male Bull-headed Shrike, which is very accommodating. Lunch is partially finished when Julian, John B and John D say there is a large group of ducks further along the lake edge, so off we go. This is brilliant as we get fantastic looks at a small group of Whooper Swans, Pintail, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Teal, Wigeon, Eastern Spot-billed Ducks and a few lovely female Smew. Mayumi points out a female Daurian Redstart and amongst a small patch of reeds there are a couple of Little Grebe and Tony sees our first

Moorhen – superb. We have to drag ourselves away but Mayumi is keen to move on to our next site – Matsumoto Castle. On the walk back Julian checks the many Tree Sparrows for a Russet Sparrow but without success but John B finds a beautiful male Daurian Redstart, which is ace.

We get back in the bus and after about 30 minutes we are arriving into Matsumoto town, where we park in the official castle parking area, which we can see just behind some trees and it already looks impressive. However, as it comes into full view being turreted and surrounded by a large duck-filled moat, we get its complete impressive beauty being reflected in the still waters. The ducks are mainly Eastern Spot-billed, Gadwall and Teal but Julian spots a gaudy drake Mandarin across the moat, followed by one of the real 'hoped for' species – Falcated Duck and it's also a stunning male. It is a fabulous situation in the afternoon sun, taking photos of this stunning 8th century building and also trying to get the Falcated Duck with its head up as its sleeping a lot!

Mayumi now leads us round to the castle entrance and we go into the courtyard area, checking out the shop before walking through the small gardens to the castle itself. Most of us go inside and climb to the top of the building but Julian stops with Caroline and then John D and continue looking around the garden, finding a small flock of Oriental Greenfinch, which are lovely and quite accommodating. These move back outside and Julian finds a Eurasian Kingfisher, which he gets in the telescope, looking a wee bit drabber than the ones in Britain? We are eventually joined by everyone else and we continue back to the bus with Mayumi handing out some rather delicious Apple Kitkats. Saito-san drives off out of town and as we are now tired sleep comes to a few of us. Our last drive goes pretty quickly as we reach Kanbayashi Onsen (our hotel) in darkness but it still looks fabulous and very Japanese – a total contrast to our 4* star western-like airport hotel

We are quickly and efficiently check in and shown to our very traditional rooms, which are converted from living area to bedroom (with a low futon) whilst we are at dinner, later that evening. We have to take off our shoes as we enter our rooms and use a set of slippers, with another set to use if visiting the bathroom – just incredible! However, Mayumi is keen we get the full experience and we quickly have to change into our Yukata (Kimono-like cotton gown), split toe socks, grab our modesty towel and meet Mayumi back at the reception. She leads through the corridors, and it seems bizarrely comfortable walking around like this, to the Onsen where the ladies and gentlemen split into their respective changing rooms.

Here it's basically 'get naked' grab your small towel and go to the large hot bath with washing facilities at the edge. We wash ourselves thoroughly and make sure all the soap is off, before entering the hot spring, which is gorgeous and very relaxing. This is all indoors and very comfortable with shrieks of laughter from the ladies side. The glass windows reveal another hot spring outside in the freezing cold and surrounded by snow, so we go for it and the cold hits you immediately.

However, in the spring it is awesome being a wonderful contrast to the open temperatures – what an experience! After about an hour we need to get ourselves out and back to the changing rooms, where we dry off and don our Yukata again before returning to our rooms.

We remain in this traditional costume as we go to dinner in the beautiful dining room, sitting at a low table. We now have the prospect of a ten course meal, which is very daunting for most of us but in reality not that bad as the portions are small and incredibly healthy in their make-up. The meal lasts for almost two hours and is another incredible experience, with a wonderful cross-section of tastes and flavours, which attack the sensors. Not everything suits everyone but we certainly enjoy the lion's share of this wonderful feast. Mayumi and the hotel staff are fantastic as they tend to our needs, as some of us struggle with the chopsticks and the raw fish!!! By the time we are finished we are all very tired from this very long but fantastic day, with many very memorable life experiences, so to our rooms we go for some welcome sleep.

Day 4: This hotel experience just keeps giving, as our 7.30am breakfast is another grand affair with many interesting dishes of varying taste sensations and takes 50 minutes to complete – thankfully this is a one-off experience! With another full day ahead we are ready to leave the hotel (again with our luggage) at 8.45am. Today we are starting the first of our major wildlife experiences with a walk from the hotel to the 'Snow Monkey Park' about 2km away. The road and track are a bit icy so we have our 'grippers' on for the first time and they work a treat, although John B takes a wee tumble but he's okay. The stroll up through the coniferous forest is generally quiet, with Large-billed Crows and a few European Jays, which look slightly different to the one's we are used to in Britain. Eventually the forest opens up into a small valley with a few houses and a sign pointing us towards the Monkey Park. A short time later we are at the Visitor Centre and Mayumi is paying our entrance fee as we see our first Japanese Macaques (aka Snow Monkeys).

We walk through the building and continue back into the valley, where there are shed loads of monkeys! There are monkeys feeding in the snow, in the trees, on the hillside, there are monkeys wandering round, there are monkeys playing and there are Snow Monkeys in the famous hot spring. What a brilliant sight and we are transfixed, watching these macaques staring back at the attendant paparazzi or just ignoring them totally. We join the throng of photographers of several nationalities pointing their cameras at these gorgeous primates sat shoulder deep in the hot water – it is just fascinating! We spend at least an hour watching these iconic animals of all ages and gender going about their daily life and it's superb.

It is now another glorious day and John D. is right, we have been incredibly lucky with the weather so far. Once we have had our fill of watching the antics of the Snow Monkeys, Julian suggests we turn our attention to another mammal – Japanese Serow. These strange looking goats reside in the valley and if we are

lucky will find one nearby, sadly not today. However, while we are searching Jean and John D. spot our first passerine of the day and Julian quickly gets excited as he says "Japanese Accentor". This is a bird that's not always easy to find and a real bonus to our list, but sadly it disappears before we all get to see it. Despite the bright blue skies and sunshine it is still cold stood around scanning the adjacent hillside, so we retreat to the Visitor Centre for a while, which is most welcome. After a while some of us venture back outside for a while, with Tony and Barbara quickly returning to the building to say they had found another Japanese Accentor. This time we all manage to get a decent view of these 'dunnock-like' birds of which there are three.

It is now getting to lunchtime, so we leave the macaques behind and walk the short distance down to a hostel/restaurant Mayumi knows that does more delicious food. Actually it's just nice to be sat down in a warm environment with a hot drink but our Japanese guide is so right, the food is superb. How satisfied are we right now! After the meal we have to leave as Mayumi wants us to go somewhere else this afternoon, so we don our boots and set off. It is not long before we have stopped again as Barbara and John B. have seen a small bird fly into a nearby small conifer – it's another Japanese Accentor! Sadly this poor bird has lost its tail and is just sitting there in full view, allowing Julian to put his telescope on it, which is fabulous. We MUST leave now, so we drag ourselves away only to be briefly stopped again for our last Snow Monkey sat on the side of the track!

The walk back is pretty quiet again for wildlife and some of us go ahead with Mayumi to organise the luggage being loaded onto the bus. Julian and Caroline are just a little way behind, which is fortuitous as our SW guide hears a familiar call. He goes into alert and starts scanning the ridge but initially cannot see anything, then an adult Golden Eagle comes into view. He manages to get Caroline on to this majestic raptor and while doing so Mayumi has joined him, gets relayed the message and goes back to the hotel to inform the rest of us. We all hurry back up the road and manage to get on to the 'goldie' before it disappears – brilliant. We now walk back to the hotel, check our luggage has been loaded and climb aboard the bus saying "hello" to Saito-san.

Our farewell committee has doubled since Tokyo and the pair of them vigorously wave farewell to us as we drive away back down the mountain. This journey is just spectacular being surrounded by the snow-clad mountains of the Japanese Alps and enroute we see an Eastern Buzzard, Oriental Turtle Dove and several Black-eared Kites. We arrive at Chosei ike (pond) around 3pm. seeing plenty of wildfowl on the water. There are the usual suspects of Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Pintail, Teal, etc. plus several gorgeous Goosander. Barbara spots a distant wagtail and Julian thinks it looks different so sets up the telescope, which reveals our first Japanese Wagtail – great start. We spend a wee while checking the pond and happy we set off for a walk along the River Chikuma, on this lovely afternoon. Julian spots another Japanese Wagtail, much closer and shows very well to us all, followed by a Grey Wagtail but that quickly goes out of sight. Overhead there

are quite a few more Black-eared Kites but Mayumi, Barbara, Jean and John B. have seen some smaller birds flying across the river so we go and look. Jean spots one on a phragmites stalk, which is a first^t winter Rustic Bunting, then Barbara finds her bird, which is a fabulous male Daurian Redstart and Mayumi shows us a couple of Eastern Great Tits. It is now late afternoon, so we walk slowly back towards the vehicle seeing a Bull-headed Shrike as we set off.

Back along the river Julian calls a Green Sandpiper that's flying in, followed by another Grey Wagtail, who gives much better views. Back at the main road we walk out onto the bridge checking the other side and finding a couple of confiding Dusky Thrushes. Just before getting back to the bus Julian, John B. and Jean finish with a Great White Egret and three Smew, which include two cracking 'White Nuns' (males). It is now dusk and we set off for our next hotel in Karuizawa, some 60 minutes away. It has been an awesome day again.

Day 5: Most of us get a better night's sleep which is great as we meet outside at the bus for 6.15am and drive out to the Karuizawa Forest Park, where we park and get ready for a walk. It is still dark so we hang around for a while by the entrance seeing just a couple of Large-billed Crows. As it gets lighter we set off along the metalled forest road, which follows the small river. A Wren is our first new bird of the day that is soon followed by the now familiar Brown-eared Bulbul. A roaming 'tit flock' is calling from the canopy and we break our necks trying to identify the species – there are plenty of Long-tailed Tits, along with a few Great Tits and at least one Willow Tit but it's difficult. On the river Mayumi spots one of our targets a Brown Dipper, which is sadly chased off by a second all too quickly as Caroline didn't manage to see it. We have to continue as we turn off the road on to a dirt track that leads up the hill but we don't have much time.

After a while we come across another feeding flock with clearly the same 'tit species' but also our first Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, being followed by a couple of Nuthatch. We carry on as the flock has moved through for a bit further but Mayumi is now keen to get back to the bridge we are parked near as a few Japanese Waxwings were seen days ago. We retrace our steps back down the hill to the road and Jean spots the Brown Dipper but again poor Caroline misses it as it quickly departs. Back along the road we reach the Park entrance and find another flock, this time getting better looks at the Pygmy Woodpecker. We now walk out on to the bridge but there's no sign of any waxwings but we do see a few Dusky Thrush and a single Jay. Eventually we need to leave, so it's back on the coach and driving back to the hotel for a delicious breakfast of eggs, toast, croissants and fruit – yum.

We are ready to leave again at 9.30am and in the car park Julian uses his 'pishing' techniques to entice a flock of Coal, Great and Long-tailed Tits, that also has a few Goldcrests as well. However we need to leave, so it's back into the bus and we set off to our next site – Oneyama Forest Park. The winding road up through the extensive Cypress forest is interesting as our large vehicle negotiates the tight bends with a long drop off the edge! Saito-san does incredibly well until a (literal)

'bridge too far' on a hairpin bend stops our progress, thankfully we are only 1000m from the Visitor Centre. We have to walk this and it's pleasant stretching our legs along the forest road, especially finding a small flock of Brambling along the way. Eventually we reach the buildings and are led around the back, where Julian immediately comes face to face with a gorgeous Varied Tit. We are at the feeding station and there are birds coming and going all the time, with Varied Tit being the most common.

For the next couple of hours we position ourselves overlooking these feeders, really enjoying the constant activity and honing our camera skills. We are delighted but Julian becomes really animate as he spots a Red-flanked Bluetail along with more Brambling, Great, Coal and Willow Tits. However, a little later we cannot believe our luck as we now see three stunning male Elegant Buntings feeding on the ground – fantastic. Overhead we see a few Black-eared Kites and a 'all too brief' look at a Mountain Hawk Eagle as it flies through. Our hosts are also fabulous providing us with tea, coffee and some interesting rice cakes but sadly around midday we have to drag ourselves away. We walk back down the mountain to our bus that Saito-san has safely turned round and found a better place to park.

It is now lunchtime so we make our daily ritual of visiting a convenience store to pick out what we fancy for lunch, before heading to Myogi-ko, a lovely freshwater lake. We park at the end where a group of wildlife photographers are standing, who apparently are waiting patiently for a Mountain Hawk Eagle but without success (we didn't have the heart to say we had seen one earlier!). The lake is quiet with just a few Pintail and Eastern Spot-billed Ducks, probably because it's partially frozen and also some fishermen on the edge. It's a pleasant afternoon so Jean and John B go for a stroll down the road finding another handsome male Red-flanked Bluetail, which is great.

After about half an hour we decide to leave and return the same way, stopping off at the Usui River Bridge. Jean almost immediately spots a Brown Dipper followed by a Japanese Wagtail, a bunting flies into the line of reeds and with patience we see a female Meadow Bunting. Julian now sees a male Black-faced Bunting as we look down from the bridge but this disappears before we get to see it properly. John B finds now a cracking male Meadow Bunting before Julian then finds a Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, which seems slightly bizarre in this riverside location. This bird proves to be a complete nightmare to point out as it moves through the tangle of scrub and reed below us but we get there in the end. The scanning continues and next a Japanese Bush Warbler pops into Julian's binocular view with only John getting a glimpse before it disappears behind the bus. It is now mid afternoon and time to move on, firstly stopping to use the facilities along the way.

Our final destination of the day is back at the Karuizawa Forest and it does not take too long to get there and we quickly ready ourselves for a circular walk. Caroline decides to opt out of this, wanting to sit quietly and try to spot her own

Brown Dipper along the river and we wish her well. The rest of us set off up the wooded hill and almost immediately run into a large flock of Brambling, followed by a couple of Brown-eared Bulbuls and several Dusky Thrush. A little further John and Barbara find our first Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker of the walk along with brief views of a Eurasian Nuthatch. As we go on, it starts to get a little quiet but at the top of the rise, it opens up and there is a lovely pergola sitting area. This really is a productive area with terrific views over to Mount Asama – Japan's most active volcano. Here we see a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers, at least four Pygmy Woodpeckers, another large flock of Brambling along with lots of Long-tailed, Coal, Willow and Great Tits.

The sun is starting to drop in the western sky, this heralds the need to start back to the bus, which only takes about 20 minutes thankfully. Near the bus we meet back up with Caroline who has really enjoyed herself, spending a peaceful time watching for Brown Dipper that made an appearance – which is brilliant. Back at the bus we are soon on our way and as it starts to get dark we arrive back at the hotel for our final night on Honshu for about 10 days.

Day 6: This is our first traveling day and at 7am we meet outside the hotel with our luggage and say “good morning” to Saito-san and Mayumi who hands out our picnic breakfast. Around the hotel garden there are the same tits, Goldcrest and Brown-eared Bulbul as the previous day but we are keen to set off for Tokyo, which is about 3 hours away. With a promise of an enroute stop we can confidently have our drinks and sandwich while traveling, which is most welcome. A small flock of Brambling show at the side of the road but it's pretty quiet as we head east along the motorway. At the motorway services Mayumi very kindly buys everyone a hot or cold drink from Starbucks no less, which is lovely and around the car park we see Oriental Turtle Doves, Tree Sparrows, White Wagtail and our first European Starlings. As we near our second services stop, Jean spots our first larid of the tour with a Slaty-backed Gull, which is great. Around 10am the industry of the capital becomes more evident and the traffic more congested, as it would now in any country. We pass more large larids along the canal as we get closer to Haneda, which could be Vega Gull, but the traffic is favourable and we arrive around 10.30am, well ahead of schedule. Saito-san offloads our luggage and we say our “fond farewells” to our excellent driver and thank him very much for all his hard work.

Inside the airport Mayumi seamlessly guides us through the check-in process and we are airside without any issues, which is brilliant. We still have a couple of hours before the flight, too early for lunch so we find some seats and relax for an hour. Mayumi and Julian identify a couple of adjacent places to eat, with extensive noodle dishes or sushi. At midday we go for something to eat and all enjoy another terrific meal, which is a credit to airport food. Following this we have a little more time before we board and at the allotted time we are called on to the plane, which leaves on time for Kagoshima on Kyushu Island a flight of just two hours. It is another excellent Japanese Airlines flight with a very attentive crew but Julian causes a slight commotion as his music plays to everyone

while he obliviously has his headphones on – Barbara and Tony behind our guide find this very funny!

We arrive into Kagoshima Airport on time and efficiently move through to baggage reclaim, with all our bags coming through together, which is brilliant. We go into the arrival hall where Mayumi introduces us to Heguri-san, our driver for the next few days and he leads us to another large bus. We load the bags and quickly set off on our 40 minute journey to the hotel, passing through much different countryside to what we have already seen on Honshu being much more tropical looking. Enroute we see a Grey Heron, Black-eared Kite and a few Tree Sparrows sat on overhead wires. Before going to the hotel Mayumi takes us on a wee detour to the lovely Kirishima Jingu shrine, a beautiful structure surrounded by fabulous Red Cedar trees. We are here for about 45 minutes as it starts to get dark around 5.30pm, which is slightly later than Honshu in the north. Mayumi takes us round this historic painted wooden carefully explaining the traditions surrounding these shrines, which is superb. This now culminates in a simple ritual, which involves bowing twice, throwing a coin into a sacred holder, clapping twice, praying for someone and bowing one final time. Once we are ready we go for a short walk around the grounds but it is pretty quiet with just a few Goldcrests calling and several Brown-eared Bulbuls. So we walk slowly back to the bus.

As dusk falls we reach our huge concrete hotel – a total contrast to our previous ones and what we had become used too. We go inside and Mayumi organises the room assignment, which seems to take a while, in pretty hot conditions, so we are thankful to get our key and go to our respective rooms. Dinner is at 8pm, giving us chance to unpack the telescope etc. and to try out their Onsen, for which the town of Kirishima is noted. We meet up for dinner with a few of us in our Yukatas and with Tony relaying his second Onsen experience. The buffet meal is something different but it is clearly obvious we are all starting to improve our chopsticks skills, which is brilliant. Despite spending most of the day sat down we are all quite tired and once we had been instructed on the next day's itinerary we head to our rooms. Tomorrow we move on again.

Day 7: It's a 7am buffet breakfast, which is delicious and an hour later we are saying "good morning" to Heguri-san with our luggage as we are moving hotels again. Julian, Barbara and Tony are outside first and stand in the car park looking for birds, when a Sparrowhawk flies over. Then Barbara spots a couple of wee things fly into an ornate tree nearby and calls to the other two, who duly oblige. Julian sees one of them and says excitedly "Japanese White-eye" and what a little gem it is. The rest of us are starting to arrive and we all get a decent view before they fly off to the taller trees and disappear. There are a few more things around including Tree Sparrows, Brown-eared Bulbul and a very brief look at a Pale Thrush flying across the car park. However, we must leave for our first site, Mi-ike, a large pond surrounded by mature mixed forest.

We arrive after about 40 minutes and park in a lay-by just outside the main entrance and from here we can see the western end of the lake but it's quiet with

a few Mallard and a winter plumage Black-necked Grebe. In the trees we see a couple of Pale Thrush and now get some very good looks at this handsome thrush along with Varied Tit, another Japanese White-eye and lots bulbuls. After a while we walk into the Reserve and along the main lane surrounded by wonderful mature forest. We haven't gone far when a large(ish) bird flies into an adjacent large tree. It takes a bit of finding but Julian glimpses it and sees a green woodpecker with barring underneath – Japanese Woodpecker, another endemic of the country. Great but it's partially hidden to some of us through the branches and flies before we all see it properly. Then a little further John B. says "I've got a White-bellied Green Pigeon" which is brilliant, this beautiful and difficult to see bird is sat right out in the open. To see it through the telescope is just fantastic and also some excellent images are taken as it sits there for a few minutes.

The walk continues seeing many of the same species before we reach the campsite area. Here it is alive with birds around the chalets and on the lake in front of us. A cracking male Daurian Redstart is a star along with Grey Wagtail, Long-tailed, Great and Coal Tits. At the waters edge on this now glorious day we see the expected Little Grebe Eurasian Wigeon, Eastern Spot-billed and Tufted Ducks. A few Olive-backed Pipits are seen nearby and in the distance we hear another Japanese Woodpecker but we cannot entice it any closer.

While we just hang around enjoying the peace and tranquillity of the Park, Julian walks up behind the chalets and discovers an area with lots of activity as he sees a gorgeous male Red-flanked Blue-tail, another male Daurian Redstart, Nuthatch and the same tit species. He calls us to join him and we walk nearer to the area seeing many of the same birds and start to get some photographs. Our guide then hears a song that is similar to a family he knows from India and goes searching the canopy, when out flies a Ryukyu Minivet (as he suspected) but it flies out of sight over the trees. We can still hear one and John B. says "I've got it" and sure enough sat in full view is another Japanese endemic, and another great one to find, especially as it is so confiding. Eventually it flies off but we get more flight views as the three birds chase each other calling.

Mayumi now reminds us of the time and the need to move on if we are to make our next site so grudgingly we leave this wonderful area. As usual we are spread out in a line being distracted by strange noises and movement, but Jean is stopped by a woodpecker she does not recognise. Julian and John B. have also stopped to help Caroline who goes on and wait for Jean who asks if we can go to try and find it again. The guys agree and walk back the 100m, they can hear some heavy knocking and Julian already thinks it's a White-backed Woodpecker. John finds it through the canopy and we all confirm its identification although it's not easy to see. Unfortunately we have taken a wee bit longer to find the bird and regretfully have left the rest of the group waiting by the bus! Apologies and explanations are given on their arrival and we all set off back out of this excellent Reserve, which has been incredibly productive.

Now we are continuing west towards the Sendai River but first we need to engage our holiday 'Magic Moment' of visiting the convenience store, which is becoming an art-form! We now continue on to the river site and immediately find a good flock of Brambling in the stubble field. We have a place to sit in the glorious sunshine and take our picnic lunches to enjoy them while looking over the river. However, as always it is not long before we are grabbing our binoculars as John B has found a magnificent Crested Kingfisher. Also here we soon spot more Tufted and Spot-billed Ducks, Little Grebe and several Black-eared Kites are entertaining us with their aerial displays and attempts at catching fish. As we are finishing lunch an Osprey flies through, followed by Julian saying "Russet Sparrows, in the small tree" and there behind us is a small flock waiting to come and drink in the small pool. Tony now sees our first hirundine as a Barn Swallow flies down the river and there are all three species of wagtail on the rocks – what a place!

John B and Jean have finished their picnic and go for a walk along the river looking for our major target species – Long-billed Plover. After a very short while John returns saying they had possibly found one but need the telescope. Julian and the rest of us go to where Jean and now Barbara are standing and we see this plover sat down on a rock in the river. We put the telescope on it and find that it's a Little Ringed Plover, a commoner cousin to our target. After a short stay here we decide to continue down the river edge finding both Great White and Little Egrets, Coot and lots of Wigeon. Jean now says "what's these three waders in the distance?" and a look through the telescope reveal a Green Sandpiper with two Long-billed Plovers – superb. After a quick look through the scope we move closer and spend some quality time enjoying these 'globally threatened' waders. However, Julian is always scanning and sees another interesting bird further on and through the telescope confirms it is a female Blue Rock Thrush and we walk a little more to get some decent images of this Japanese sub-species. It is nearing the time we need to leave, so we start back stopping firstly for a group of Barn Swallows and a couple of Asian House Martin, followed by a single Oriental Greenfinch sat in an overhead power line. Ahead of schedule we get back to the bus so just spend a little more time admiring again the very handsome Russet Sparrows.

Once ready we set off, continuing west towards the city of Izumi and the world famous 'Crane Centre' at Arasaki. We pleasantly arrive into the city after a short while and start to see our first cranes as we leave the centre on the stubble rice fields. There are two species of these incredibly elegant birds with Hooded Crane and the much larger White-naped Crane – they look resplendent in the late afternoon sunlight. Also in the fields we see big flocks of Rooks and Barbara spots a Chestnut-eared Bunting right next to the bus. Eventually we reach the centre and Mayumi goes inside to pay our entrance fee. Once ready we head up to the roof terrace where we fabulous unrestricted views of the surrounding fields and 1000's of cranes feeding. We are here for almost an hour, drinking in this avian spectacle and trying to convey it to film but it's not easy. There are also a few Lapwing around here and Julian points out our first Shelduck on a small flooded field. Mayumi is keen to show us another watch point and we quickly get back

on the bus and move on to the eastern fields of Higashi Kantaku, where they put grain out for them in a morning. Here we stay until dusk. watching and listening to these wonderful birds along with seeing lots of Eurasian Skylark, more Lapwing and Shelduck. A flock of Dunlin are flying around and a distant female Hen Harrier is seen quartering the fields. Barbara and John see a few pipits feeding on the ground that are identified as Buff-bellied Pipit another new bird for the trip.

It is now getting late and the sun is getting low in the east and looking fabulous when Julian scans across the fields and discovers a small group of spoonbill. One of our main targets is the rare Black-faced Spoonbill and we hoped there might be one amongst them, so we go quickly along the road for a better view. Julian now gets a much better view through the telescope but it's still difficult as they are asleep (in true spoonbill style). One bird lifts its head and Julian smiles broadly saying at least one was our bird, as the birds get restless and think about going to roost we can count five birds with just three European Spoonbills, which is a surprise – being supposedly much commoner and another fantastic addition to the list. The sun is now setting, looking totally fabulous and when it disappears we get back on the bus and head off to our new hotel in the centre of Izumi.

Day 8: We are outside the hotel at 6am in the cold and dark, a little bleary-eyed but very much looking forward to our second crane extravaganza. Heguri-san drives us round to the 'Crane Centre' where in the darkness we walk to the front of the building where we listen in awe to the fabulous bugling from the cranes we cannot yet see – it is such a haunting sound! We stand waiting here in the cold as the first vestiges of light start to appear in the east and we can see the shapes of the 1000's of cranes in the fields. The feeding area is a drive away so at 7am we leave the centre and go the short distance to the eastern fields, where the concentration of White-napped and Hooded Cranes is incredible with reputedly 1500 of the former and 10,000 of the latter – amazing. It is now full light and the sight and sound here is brilliant and certainly well worth getting out of bed for! As always there are other birds around with Buff-bellied Pipit, Eurasian Skylark, Carrion and Long-billed Crows but just we are about to leave for breakfast a female Hen Harrier flies through very close to where we are standing – superb. It is now back to the hotel for breakfast, which we are all very much ready for.

At 9am we are again ready to leave and our plan is to head north along the coast for about an hour to the port city of Yatsushiro. This time passes quickly as the journey is broken up with Mayumi retailing stories of this prefecture and the culture of Kyushu, which is fascinating. Eventually we reach the city and first make a stop at the Kuma River, where a small grassed area is being utilised by locals playing the strange-looking park golf. From the bus we walk the short distance to the edge of the water, which is lined with phragmites and quickly see a Great Crested Grebe on the river along with the usual ducks and a few Little Egrets. An Osprey is overhead and a European Reed Bunting is seen briefly in the reeds but generally it's quiet and we move on.

Heguri-san has been here before with wildlife tour groups and agrees with Julian that a visit to the port could be productive, so off we go driving slowly through the city and getting stopped at every traffic light! We do reach the massive port area, which is very industrial and initially looks birdless but we persevere and finally see a small group of gulls up ahead. We check these and they are nearly all Black-headed Gulls with one other and Julian excitedly says “Black-tailed Gull” – one of our targets of the day and really nice it is too, especially when it flies revealing the black tail with narrow white terminal band – a great start! We continue towards the harbour mouth seeing other gulls now flying around that are almost certainly Vega Gull, a close relative of Herring Gull and looks similar too. We stop at the port river mouth for a look, confirming that these gulls are Vega, along with a few more Black-tailed. Barbara spots a lone duck in the water and thinks something different, and she’s right it’s our only Northern Shoveler of the holiday so far. Then Julian scans south and cannot believe he is seeing a Gannet-like bird flying our way and shouts “Brown Booby!” and we all get a good view as it drifts past. Our guide cannot understand this as he has not seen it mentioned in any trip report but finds out they actually breed on off-shore islands and a few must over-winter, as there are at least another three around. It is smiles all round. We continue to look out to sea and we see a lot of gull and booby activity in the distance and through the telescope Julian says there are sea mammals here, which are huge and orangey looking, so he assumes they are Steller’s Sea-lions as there are a few of them splashing about obviously feeding on a shoal of fish – how fantastic and just as unexpected as the boobies. It is incredible how a couple of events can transform an ordinary day into something special.

Very satisfied with this we walk back to the bus and our driver now has another place in mind nearby, so off we go stopping to pick up lunch on the way. We soon arrive at the seawall overlooking the mouth of the Kuma River and it’s actually quite warm now so we get some our lunch and set off along the path. As we pass a small boat mooring area there are lots of Grey Herons stood on the seawall but Jean notices something smaller and says “there are Black-crowned Night Herons here” and sure enough there are at least eight of these diminutive water birds roosting amongst their much bigger cousins – fabulous.

On the walk we continue to see lots of wildfowl, Great Cormorant and Great Crested Grebes close by as the tide is still high but should be receding soon according to the tidal information. We see a couple of Ospreys overhead with several kites in the air too and a huge flock of Rooks swirling round. Out in the bay there is a floating platform with spoonbills roosting in the early afternoon heat and on closer inspection we are sure they are all Black-faced, which is superb. The tide is now starting to fall and the first waders are arriving on to the newly exposed mud, with initially a good flock of Kentish Plover, Common Sandpiper and a couple of Greenshank. More fly in and Caroline spots the first Eurasian Curlew and as numbers increase we see lots of Grey Plover, Dunlin and a couple of Curlew Sandpiper – another good find here. Gulls are also coming into roost and we see now plenty of Vega Gulls with smaller numbers of Black-tailed and

Black-headed Gulls but we do find a Common Gull, which are usually seen on the eastern side of the island – this is brilliant.

Looking inland is also proving productive as in the distance there is a huge murmuration of Tree Sparrows, which must involve 2000+ birds and looks incredible as they swirl around in the air. Tony finds a small flock of Oriental Greenfinch and John D very skilfully picks out a couple of Common Snipe, totally camouflaged in the stubble field. Jean now finds a Common Kestrel and there are Buff-bellied Pipits along the water channel. We are conscious of the time and we need to leave, which is difficult and we very slowly walk back along the seawall. The Black-faced Spoonbills are now on the mudflats feeding quite close, using their distinctive action of moving their bills from side to side in the shallow pools. Julian has to quickly check the gull roost for one last time in the hope of a Saunder's but sadly not, however, he does find a large carrot-billed Caspian Tern stood amongst them, which is yet another surprise here and cited as scarce to Japan in the field guide. Most of us have gone ahead now to try and photograph the spoonbills leaving our guide, Jean, Barbara and John B looking at the tern. They start to catch up when Julian and John glimpse a large raptor flying into the hillside trees and our SW guide says "think that was a Gos (hawk)" and puts the telescope on it. Sure enough stood on a branch in full view is a gorgeous female Goshawk looking just superb at 40x magnification. After a couple of minutes this ace predator flies and circuits the area scaring the wigeon into flight but returns to another perch – what a show she is putting on! This also allows the rest of us to see her in flight but sadly doesn't stay too long in the tree and departs out of sight across the river mouth.

Eventually we get back to the bus and a decision is made to drive back south to the Komenotsu River, which is near Izumi. This takes about 45 minutes and it's still pretty warm when we arrive, so off we walk to the edge of the river. Here again there is plenty of wildfowl with the usual suspects plus Pintail and a few Teal but not much else so we head off downstream towards the road bridge. This proves pretty productive with excellent looks at a couple of Japanese Bush-warblers, male Daurian Redstart, a couple of Oriental Turtle-doves and a lovely female Meadow Bunting illuminated in the evening light. Mayumi would like us to return to the crane feeding area one last time so we need to return to the bus and on the way John B and Jean find a cracking male Blue Rock Thrush (of the local race). We have not long now before dusk so we quickly drive to the east fields for more crane activity. Yet again it's fascinating watching these beautiful and elegant birds in these huge flocks and we 'fill our boots' with them before leaving. There are so the same species seen as previous visits and at 5.30pm we leave, say "sayonara" to the cranes and drive to the hotel, where we need to pack again for our journey to Hokkaido in the morning. It has been another fantastic day!

Day 9: A massive traveling day and another bleary-eyed start, as we leave our Izumi hotel at 5.30am. We drive for about 40 minutes to the first convenience store where we pick up our breakfast before heading to Kagoshima Airport and our flight

to Haneda. Everything again goes smoothly and we are waiting at our gate for the flight in very good time. Just before 9am we board our plane and it leaves as we say farewell to Kyushu, heading to the capital. It is another comfortable and trouble-free journey with the added bonus of Mount Fuji showing well above the clouds as we drop in towards Haneda Airport. We have to change gates from our second flight to Kushiro on the northern island of Hokkaido in about 2 hours. We easily find the gate with Mayumi leading us and settle down to wait while having a spot of lunch.

Again the flight leaves on time, which is great and what was perceived to be a nightmare day traveling is in reality pretty relaxed and comfortable. The flight is again seamless and even from the plane it is obvious Hokkaido is in total contrast again to the other islands being forested and covered in snow – time to dig out the thermals! We land in Kushiro on time as now is expected and we are greeted to a very different temperature than the previous couple of days. As we get into the arrivals hall we are introduced to our driver Sasaki-san or Dickie to his mates!

We spend some time putting on extra clothing as we are hitting the ground running by heading off to a birding site about an hour away, which is fabulous as it's another lovely day. We set off from the airport around 2.30pm and head off N/E but it's not long before we are stopping for our first three gorgeous Red-crowned Cranes – what a start! Off we go again and about five minutes later Barbara shouts “big bird in this tree” pointing at our first fabulous adult White-tailed Eagle, we think we are going to like Hokkaido too. We are getting near the Kushiroshitsugen National Park when our driver spots a gorgeous Red Fox at the side of the road. Sadly a broad fence restricts our view but even with this the animal looks gorgeous with a beautiful thick and shiny coat. We continue north now for a while see more Red-crowned Cranes dotted about with quite close to the road.

Eventually we reach our destination and there are cars here already, so Mayumi goes off to check out the site. While she is away the rest of us ready ourselves for a walk on the ice and in the cold, donning out winter coats and fitting our ice grippers. Our Japanese guide returns with a ‘thumbs up’ to Julian who sets off down the lane with the rest of us strung out behind. What greets Julian is unforgettable, he can see the photographers already set up and beyond sat in a tree hole is a fabulous adult Ural Owl – absolutely superb! The scope is set up as the rest of us arrive after the short walk and it looks even better through that seeing its delicate feather derrick around the facial disk with fierce looking bright yellow hooked bill. We stay here for the best part of 40 minutes just observing and photographing, as it opens its eyes occasionally, looks around sometimes but generally tries to sleep. The forest is quiet but we do see a Great Spotted Woodpecker fly over and Nuthatch alarms from nearby but cannot be located.

It is time to leave so we leave it in peace and return to the bus. We leave and head back the way we came, seeing again a few more Red-crowned Cranes until we get to river bridge where there is a good number of cranes in a ploughed field and set squad of photographers looking on – apparently they are waiting for the money shot of cranes flying through the setting sun (except it was cloudy!). Dickie pulls over to allow us a chance of a final look before going to the hotel, which is great and very lucky as Julian announces that there is a Common Crane there as well. Mayumi is 'over the moon' at this as its 30 years since the last one was seen here. We stay until the cranes depart for their roosting site and continue on to our hotel in Tsurui, which is lovely. It is owned by a Japanese wildlife photographer who displays his works on the corridor walls and it's such a family friendly place with a lovely atmosphere.

We go to our rooms and this also has a famous Onsen, which most of us try out and it is again very relaxing sat in the mineral-rich hot pools both inside and outside under the stars. Later we meet for dinner, which is just delicious and very wholesome, something we can attribute to all our meals so far. After the meal we spend a little time chatting and checking out the hotel's shop before heading off to our respective rooms for (hopefully) a good night's sleep – we have another early start in the morning!

Day 10: We are in the bus by 6am and under a starlit sky we drive out to the Otowa (crane) Bridge, along some country lanes in the hope of a mammal at the side of the road. We arrive there about 30 minutes later and see a squad of wildlife photographers waiting in prime position. We don our layers (in John B's case layer upon layer upon layer!) as it's going to be cold standing there and walk out on to the bridge. A proportion of Red-crowned Cranes roost in the river out of harms way from predators and we are here to witness their departure just after dawn. Even in the very low light we can make their shapes out and as it gets lighter they become more visible. Carrion Crows start to fly over followed by a few Goosander and a couple of Marsh Tits in the adjacent willows to keep us focused. Julian is just checking the flock and sees a smaller darker bird that he knows from the previous evening is the only Common Crane on the island. It is amazing how it stands out in the poor light stood next to its much commoner cousins.

We continue to wait patiently and now Julian spots three smaller 'teal-like' duck flying down the river and says "Smew" and we get terrific views of these 'White Nuns' as they attempt to land but decide not too right in front of the bridge – brilliant. Soon after this the first Red-crowned Cranes start to leave their roost and the first ones fly straight towards us like 3 B-52 bombers – what a marvellous sight. Slowly more cranes leave as the sun is breaking the horizon and the gathered paparazzi explode into action as the cranes pass closely by. Julian hears a familiar call and says "I can hear a Great Grey Shrike!" but cannot locate it so concentrates again on the cranes. Our superb driver is also keen and takes his binoculars off and finds the bird sitting on top of a nearby tree. Julian and Mayumi go to confirm this and when they get there the bird flies and chases a Great

Spotted Woodpecker around a tree – which is quite bizarre. Our guide returns to the rest of us on the bridge and relays the fact that there is a shrike but are all reluctant to go as we are enjoying the close encounters with the cranes in flight. This continues until it's time to leave at 7.30am, when we climb back on to the bus and head off to the hotel, seeing an adult White-tailed Eagle sat in a tree.

After some much welcome food and drink we aim to leave again at 8.45am, which is easily achievable and drive the short distance to the Ito Crane Sanctuary, where Ito-san has been supplementing the cranes food since 1966 – a fascinating story! We are here for about 45 minutes being thrilled and amazed by the wonderful sight and sound of the Red-crowned Cranes right in front of us. They are flying in, feeding, bugling and most memorably dancing in two and threes, which is just like an avian ballet of majestic Red-crowned Cranes – simply astonishing and a true privilege.

Eventually we have to drag ourselves away and head out along the Kushiro River until we get to the Kattaro Marsh, where we find a couple more cranes in the river and Julian spots our first Northern Raven along the way but generally it's quiet. We continue through to Lake Toro where we see a few Whooper Swans on an ice free area in the far corner – sadly we cannot stop here. A little further on we reach Kayanouma Board Walk, which is great as it means we can go for a short walk, so we struggle with our ice grippers and set off initially seeing another Raven and a couple of Goldeneye. The boardwalk takes us through an ancient woodland of Japanese Elm, Japanese Alder and Japanese Walnut (bit of a pattern there!), which is lovely filled with lichen and bracket fungus. Soon enough Julian hears a Marsh Tit calling and there in front around some fallen logs we get fantastic views of several, plus Great Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Jean finds a Eurasian Treecreeper. A beautiful (Siberian) Nuthatch is found by John B and just beyond here we see a few Elegant Buntings but they depart way too soon. At the end of the boardwalk most of us enjoy an adult White-tailed Eagle, while John and Caroline see a Crested Kingfisher, which is brilliant. At this point we turn round and return the same way seeing much the same species before getting to the bus and a very welcome warm.

We leave the car park and drive to a nearby facilities stop at Toro Nature Centre, where John B and Julian decide to get a better look at the ice fisherman on the frozen lake. Julian spots a very large raptor against the opposite hillside and shouts to John “Steller's Sea Eagle” pointing in its direction. They watch this huge stunning black and white raptor, with a massive yellow bill (that can be seen at this distance!) it is then joined by two more and at least five White-tails all looking superb against the bright blue sky – wow. We all now convene with these two keen spotters and get to see this much sort-after specialty of a Japan winter visit.

We again leave and visit the convenience store for lunch, which we eat enroute to Kushiro Port of which there are two! The first is pretty quiet but we do add some species to our checklist with a female Harlequin Duck, a couple of Black Scoter, a single Kamchatka Gull, a couple of Glaucous-winged Gulls and lots

of Slaty-backed Gulls. Our skilled and knowledgeable driver now takes the short but convoluted journey to the next port area, which is much more industrial and not easy to get into. He does a sterling job and gets us to the seawall and upon a very brief inspection we can see it's going to be much more productive. Before we have even got off the bus we have seen a mixed flock of Greater Scaup and Black Scoter, along with more of the same gulls floating around. As we get off the bus, Barbara finds a small group of gorgeous male Harlequin Ducks with just a few females. Julian is scanning (what's new!) and several Goosander and a Long-tailed Duck across the other side, followed by an adult Glaucous Gull and Pelagic Cormorant. As we walk out to the end and get blasted by a very cold wind we see another Pelagic Cormorant close in to our side of the harbour. It is now mid afternoon and Mayumi is keen we finish off the day as we started it, with Red-crowned Cranes and we were not arguing.

It takes an hour to get back to the Crane Sanctuary but there are no cranes there as they have left to roost earlier than normal due to the very cold high winds that have blown up. So we head out towards Kikushi Farm, stooping right there as a family of three birds are feeding very close to the fence and showing very well. We actually stay here until the sun has set behind the ridge, it's a little earlier than expected but it has been such a wonderful day we are more than happy to go to the hotel for a very welcome Onsen – an essential part of any winter's day on Hokkaido!

Day 11: It is a 'Groundhog Day' start we again head out at 6am to the Ottawa River bridge for the Red- crowned Cranes. Although it feels much colder this morning and a quick check of the thermometer on the hotel's wall displays -19C but it is going to be another glorious day. As we get to the bridge we can see there are more people there than yesterday but still enough room for us to get a good position overlooking the water. The mist rising off the surface of the river makes the scene incredibly atmospheric especially with the shapes of cranes in the distance. As it is so cold the cranes are not so active and even as the sun rises above the skyline they remain in the warmer waters than the outside temperature. A few Goosander fly over with a few of us going for a walk (to try and warm up!) finding a lovely Great Spotted Woodpecker firstly in the trees then dropping down to feed in the stubble field – looking quite bizarre. We gather together again and Julian suggests a slightly earlier breakfast and just 10 minutes ahead of our planned departure we set off back to the hotel. Once there we freshen up a little effort settling down to another wonderful and wholesome western-style breakfast along with a very welcome hot drink.

After breakfast we have a little time to get our luggage together and we meet outside at the bus, on this beautiful sunny day and the temperature according to Tony has now risen to an almost tropical -14C. But it certainly doesn't feel like it! Just before we leave Jean finds our first Brown-eared Bulbul of Hokkaido and we climb on board and settle down for our journey. As we have plenty of time we return to the bridge to discover the cranes are still in the river and the sun is in an awful position but there are still some stalwart photographers waiting

patiently. The drive north is very scenic and enroute we see a couple of White-tailed Eagles sat in the top of roadside trees and a nice flock of Whooper Swans in a stubble field. We drive through this winter countryside of snow, fallow fields and bare trees, seeing more White-tailed Eagles until we leave the main road and head up to a high viewpoint. It is obviously a tourist spot as there is a lovely Visitor Centre with facilities, a café and an excellent shop but the vista is stunning. One side looks out over Lake Mashu towards Mount Shari and the surrounding mountains, then the other way we look towards Mount Oakan and its adjacent snow-clad mountains. We endeavour to take a photo that does this scenery justice but it's almost impossible as it is so breathtaking. Once we have done our imagery we head to the Visitor Centre where we spend a few yen on gifts, which goes down very well with the owner who gives Mayumi a gift of chocolates for us to share – how sweet is that.

At our allotted time we are back in the bus and driving back down the mountain and on to our next site – Lake Kussharo. Our first stop is at a Whooper Swan feeding station and we are not disappointed as there are 50+ of these gorgeous winter swans here with a few Mallard but again the back drop is superb. We are here a while and see an immature White-tailed Eagle fly across the lake and as we get back to the bus a Nuthatch gives us a wonderful show. Eventually we leave and drive a short distance to another part of the lake, where a private residence sometimes also puts food out for the Whoopers. Again we are not disappointed, although there are not quite as many but the real star here is a gorgeous drake Falcated Duck amongst the Mallard and we get some great views and photos of this scarce duck.

On we go to our final Lake Mashu stop and this one is just as stunning scenically as we are at the foot of Mount Wakoto in the Park of the same name. Mayumi takes us out towards the edge of the lake and along the side saying she has sometimes seen Grey-headed Woodpecker here. There are several Goldeneye on the lake and a few Whooper Swans but the star of this stop is a cracking Crested Kingfisher landing right in front of us. While we are looking at this large kingfisher Mayumi receives a phone call from our driver that he has seen a Grey-headed Woodpecker but it's flown out of sight. We head back towards the bus and meet up with 'Dickie' and he explains the situation. We make the decision to go and look for it along a snow-covered boardwalk but it's easy enough to walk along. We get to the end seeing just a couple of Marsh Tits and there is some light tapping from the trees but no sign of the culprit. Sadly we don't find the woodpecker before leaving for our accommodation some 90 minutes drive away.

The drive through is interrupted by five sighting of Red Fox, including one very bold individual that sits right in front of our parked bus, which is brilliant. Eventually we arrive at the Yoroushi Onsen and what a place this is! We are dropped at the entrance and greeted to fantastic open plan reception area with huge picture windows overlooking a bird feeding station and we sit ourselves down on the comfortable settees and watch the activity. Poor Mayumi is trying

to ask us questions and collect passports but we are oblivious to this as we are thrilled by Nuthatch, Marsh, Coal and Great Tits coming and going. Eventually our Japanese host gets the messages through with the important one being that this is where our most prized target species – Blakiston's Fish Owl will hopefully show up later tonight.

We are given our room keys and 5pm as a time to reconvene so off we go to the get ready. Julian and John are not interested in anything else apart from a quick shower and change, then back down to the watching area to secure some good places for everyone. They are back down for around 4.30pm and are only there a few minutes when they are joined by Mayumi. They are preparing their cameras when the lady of the Onsen comes across and says (in Japanese) "Solitary Snipe in the stream", thankfully Mayumi translates this and they get good views of the bird stood on a rock – what an absolute stroke of luck as it has not been seen here for about three months. Jean arrives after about 10 minutes and gets very lucky as the bird reappears briefly on the opposite bank before flying off downstream. They then see a mouse running round near the stream but are waiting patiently for the owl. The rest of us get to the sitting area for 5pm although Caroline has a bit of trouble getting lost in this huge place with many corridors and entrances. Once we are all here we settle down for an evening vigil until 7pm, when we will need to go and have our dinner.

The wait is initially fun looking out at the tiny pool where the Blakiston's Fish Owl will drop down too but after an hour and a half of nothing it's getting a bit stressful and boring to some of us. However, Mayumi breaks the frustration by saying "Sable – on the feeder" and our attention is immediately diverted to this gorgeous stoat-like mustelid with gorgeous fur. We soon realise there are in fact three individuals running around and it's wonderful to watch their antics as they try to extract food from the various bird feeders. Eventually the Sable move back over the stream via a metal water pipe that spans it and we are again invigorated for our last push before dinner. We are actually now thinking about not going to eat but then the immortal words are uttered by John "It's there!" and sure enough just three metres from the window sat on a branch positioned by the tiny fish-filled pool is the holy grail of nocturnal birds – Blakiston's Fish Owl and he does not disappoint, it is huge! We watch as it eyes the pool carefully, looks around, views again, looks around and looks down into the pool and pounces on a small fish bringing it out to the side in its lethal talons. It then carefully takes it in his hooked beak and devours it and starts the whole process again. This time though instead of eating the second fish it carries it off (apparently to his mate – how sweet is that?).

It is now very broad grins, hand shakes and 'hi-5's and the pressure is off our guides. It is now just 7pm and time for dinner, our timing could not have been better. The banquet meal is an excellent compliment to the magnificent predator we have just had the pleasure to see in both content and quality, arguably our best meal yet and just enhanced the whole night. Once we had finished almost two hours later we quipped that we will go out and our Fish Owl would be back

– well just five minutes after sitting down on the settees it does and we are again treated to the same routine of catching two fish and taking one away to his mate. Absolutely enthralled by this we cannot believe our luck and slowly we take ourselves off to bed to dream of the world's largest owl. Julian is super keen and decides to see just how many times they bird returns and by 1am when he finally goes to bed it has returned a further four times and the female is sitting watching him fish in an adjacent tree – what a thrill for our guide and a memory never to be forgotten.

Day 12: John is up the earliest and in position at 5.30am and is lucky to have the male Blakiston's Fish Owl coming to feed at 6am – superb. As it starts to get light passerines start to come into the feeders with lots of Jay, Marsh and Coal Tits, Nuthatch and Brown-eared Bulbul. As it starts to get towards our meeting time of 7am he is joined by the rest of us and we enjoy the birds close to our picture windows. Mayumi suggests a short walk, so we put on our warm clothes and venture outside but it's not as cold as the previous day as it's cloudy and snow is forecast.

The walk is slow in the ice and snow, with several more Jays flying round and then a Crested Kingfisher passes overhead calling. It is generally quiet, so we don't go far along the track and return to the road where we check the river from the bridge and Tony spots a Red Fox in the adjacent garden, which is brilliant as it just sits there in full view. We decide to return to the hotel for breakfast and more feeder activity but just outside the main entrance we see a few Nuthatch and Jean expertly picks out a female Hawfinch.

Back in the hotel we throw off our layers and go to the big windows where we see much of the same birds and the Red Fox has arrived also but stays on the opposite bank. There is also a Red Squirrel (which is grey!) and new birds include Great Spotted Woodpecker and Great Tit, in the reception area we are getting a fascinating demonstration of Mochitsuki (Rice Pounding) in a Usu (barrel) and Kune (mallet). It is brilliant to watch this being done while Mayumi gives us a running commentary of the process. We are asked for volunteers, with Jean and Mayumi representing 'Team SW' – and they were superb. We are now ready for breakfast, which is a wonderful buffet with something delicious for everyone and it's most welcome, as are the hot and cold drinks. Once we are finished we have enough time given to get ready before our departure time of 9am.

We are all ready to leave as the snow starts to fall gently, fingers crossed it would not develop too badly before the day is out. We drive east towards the coast, stopping at the pharmacy to stock up medication for Tony who's been suffering with his sinuses. Soon enough we continue east to the Nemuro Peninsula and as we get close to the coast along a country lane our driver spots a magnificent adult Steller's Sea Eagle sat in a nearby tree. It looks absolutely stunning with its black and white plumage and oversized bright yellow bill – what a bird! The prerequisite photos are taken before it flies off out of sight so on we slowly go.

There are lots of Black-eared Kites here and Large-billed Crows but we soon stop again as there is an interesting immature Steller's again in the trees, followed by another one flying over the bus – brilliant.

Eventually we reach the main coast road and turn north along the peninsula seeing now lots of gulls including Glaucous-winged, Slaty-backed and Glaucous Gulls. Along the Shiretoko Peninsula we call in at Minehama Port, where we see a few Harlequin Ducks, Wigeon and Greater Scaup along with more gulls. We start back towards Shibetsu stopping at another harbour, where we are very lucky to see a group of Steller's Sea Eagles fighting over a large fish, which is fabulous. Also here in the water there are moreover the same ducks with the addition of Red-breasted Merganser and our first Kamchatka Gull.

We continue back south stopping at another 7/11 convenience store, where we again buy our picnic lunch. The weather now is pretty miserable with constant sleet and low cloud, which makes observation very difficult. Our lunch is taken at the port, where we see much the same species as previous stops with the additions of Goosander and Pelagic Cormorant both in good numbers. While we are there Mayumi gets a message that there is a Snow Bunting being watched further down the coast, so the decision is made to 'go for it' being a very good species for Hokkaido. At the Notsuke Peninsula we drive out along the single track road with a brackish lagoon on one side and the raging North Pacific on the other. The rest of the area is covered in marsh grass with some scattered buildings. We call into the Visitor Centre where Mayumi gets permission to go on to the Reserve and then she meets up with her colleague Chris Cook. He gives her the details of where they last saw the Snow Buntings and off we drive further along this 'Spurn-like' headland.

We park at the furthest place the bus is allowed and head off walking with the very strong wind at our backs. There are several groups of Sika Deer dotted about, some sporting some very expectable antlers and very impressive they look too. We walk for about 1 km along the road not seeing anything apart from a few gulls and Common Scoter on the sea. It is just as bad on the way back for wildlife but much worse walking with the biting wind in our faces. Thankfully we all get back safely and drive back to the Visitor Centre, where we use the facilities before driving back to the hotel. It is a quiet journey as some of us catch up on our sleep!

We arrive back at the wonderful Yorouchi Onsen at 4pm, with plenty of time to get ourselves sorted out and freshened up before 5pm when the nightly vigil starts. However, John B is keen to try and see the Solitary Snipe and Sable again so is down there in just 30 minutes. The rest of us arrive later having either had a relax in the room or a relax in the hot baths, including the ones outside as the snow falls. We are watching constantly as we chat amongst ourselves and by 7pm when we have to go to dinner there is still no activity, which is slightly worrying – has the heavy snowfall put things off coming.

We all enjoy another fabulous meal despite having one thought on the owl and whether or not it had showed up. In fact we are offered a complimentary drink with Julian, Caroline, John D and Tony sharing a couple of small bottles of saki – something new to most of us! After dinner we go back to the watching area and decide to do the checklist whilst watching out for Blakiston's Fish Owl. We are doing well and getting to the end of the checklist when a nearby voice says "Sable coming in". Sure enough there is one of these beautiful mustelids heading straight for a bird feeder attached to the building. Here it spends about 30 minutes lapping up the sunflower seeds – obviously a great source of energy. Just as we leave the Sable and return to doing the checklist we get a shout of Blakiston's Fish Owl as this huge rare predator sits on its normal fallen branch. It proceeds to go through the usual routine before jumping into the water and grabbing a fish. He devours this in three gulps but instead of catching another for his mate, he just leaves, flying off into the darkness. This satisfies most of us and we quickly complete the checklist, which only takes 5 minutes with most of us leaving for our rooms straight afterwards. Our stalwarts Julian, John B and Jean stay longer seeing another (different) Sable in the feeder and a Red Fox taking fish out of the small pool before retiring after another long day.

Day 13: An unintentional early start for Julian and Jean with 'Owl Insomnia' have them peering out over the floodlit garden before 6am with a Sable (scarface) already feasting on the sunflower seeds. Within 30 minutes of them being there the male Blakiston's Fish Owl flies in, catches three fish and leaves to his roost for the day – great to see it three days running. We continue watching the Sable as a second is seen briefly and a Dipper lands in the stream for a few minutes but 'scarface' just eats and eats until it gets light. The Jays, Nuthatch, Marsh and Coal Tits start to arrive, as do the rest of us after another good night's sleep. The Sable (scarface) only leaves the feeder when the owner takes out food for the birds and then just hides until he has gone then starts on the bread left for the Jays! It is now time for breakfast and again the buffet is superb but it is now time to pack our bags and leave this incredible place – we are all very sad we were not snowed in for one more night!

We are doing the same journey as yesterday but the weather is glorious today and it is a true 'winter wonderland' as we drive slowly (and carefully) along the snow-covered roads. The scenery is stunning as we pass alongside Hokkaido's highest peak – Mount Musa at a little over 1000m, so nothing like Mount Fuji. We continue along the country roads turning in to the same productive quiet lane just outside Shibutsu that is again fabulous for us as it provides superb photographic opportunities of Steller's Sea Eagle, White-tailed Eagle and Black-eared Kites. Once we have taken the shots we like, we drive through into the town where we visit another convenience store for our picnic lunch, even though it is not yet 11am.

We head out again to the Notsuke Peninsula stopping on the way to photograph a close White-tailed Eagle sat on a telegraph pole. It is a clear day and we can see right across to the Russian Kuril Islands with their snow-capped mountains and

volcano. Julian calls a halt to the bus as he has seen a large Black Scoter flock bobbing about on the sea and wants to scope them. However, before we have left the bus Barbara has found a winter plumage Pacific Diver, with Jean quickly finding a second. Julian is carefully checking each Scoter as a drake Long-tailed Duck flies in and just as he is giving up finds our target – drake Stejneger's (White-winged) Scoter, which he seems very pleased about! We are also seeing gulls with Kamchatka, Glaucous and Slaty-backed all flying along the coastline. Another Red Fox puts in a brief show before Barbara stops the bus for our first Goldeneye of the day along with another new species – Red-throated Diver, a good bird to see here. We pass a Glaucous-winged Gull sat on the rocks and eventually we reach the Visitor Centre, where we make full use of the facilities.

Julian walks out to the sea-watching platform (aka tsunami evacuation point) and scans the open choppy water, almost immediately finding a Spectacled Guillemot. In fact there are lots of Spectacled Guillemots dotted about, either sat on the sea or flying past, which is great. Another Red-throated Diver is seen again close inshore and we get some fantastic looks at the very handsome drake Long-tailed Ducks. It is incredibly cold in the biting wind and the snow is being blown around making it difficult to see some things. After a while we leave as we are getting very cold and return to the bus where we go further down the peninsula to look for Sika Deer. These are easily found at the side of the road and the necessary photographs are taken along with seeing a Steller's Sea Eagle flying through. There is not too much else due to the strong winds so we leave the peninsula and head south along the coastline.

We now stop at the large Odaito Harbour, where we get fantastic looks at Long-tailed Ducks, Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser, Pintail, Pelagic Cormorant and a variety of gulls, particularly Glaucous Gull. On we slowly travel along the coast, stopping every now and again to check the sea and the gull flocks on the dark volcanic rock beach – Julian spots a close Glaucous-winged Gull and explains the difference between it and its similar cousin the Glaucous. Further on, sadly while we are driving a main road, our guide sees a buzzard-like raptor flying past and shouts “stop please” but it's not easy here. We do manage and get a binocular view of bird and it flies across the road and lands on a telegraph pole but sadly distant. However, Julian has seen enough to be sure it's a Rough-legged Buzzard, probably the only buzzard-type in northern Hokkaido.

On we continue, seeing another Red Fox, more Sika Deer, White-tailed and Steller's Eagles, with a restful period of about an hour before we reach the services at Lake Furen, where we stop to use the facilities. It is now late afternoon and we are only half an hour from the hotel just outside of Nemuro. Before we get there we make a brief stop at the lake in the fading light, where we see a small group of Whooper Swans and a couple of Red-crowned Cranes, which is a bit of a surprise at this time of year. As it starts to get dark we drive the short distance to our hotel in Nemuro, with a few of the staff out on the street to greet us – could you imagine that in the UK!

We quickly check in and go to our Japanese style rooms, where we have plenty of time before our banquet at 7pm. The meal is just astonishing with so many small dishes of delicious Japanese food but the highlight has to be the crab we are served, which is a speciality of this area and quite 'out of this world' and washed down by a very prestigious sake, which we all agree is at least a couple of steps up from the previous nights, which was actually quite nice. Around 8.30pm the meal is complete and finished off with sake ice cream and finally Amazake (with a lovely origami crane) - something akin to Horlicks according to Barbara, which is pretty spot on. We manage to complete the checklist and go through the following days plan before retiring to our rooms, that will now have been converted into bedrooms!

Day 14: After a very nice buffet breakfast we hear from Mayumi that our pelagic trip is definitely running, even though there is likely to be a decent swell around the offshore islands. At 8am we set off from the hotel and drive back down the Nemuro Peninsula to the coastal village of Ochishi, where we stop at the port. There are plenty of gulls around with the majority being Slaty-backed with both Glaucous-winged and Kamchatka as well. Jean spots a couple of White-tailed Eagles above the ridge as we go into the office to first use the facilities and then to collect our life jackets. Sasachi-san then drives us down to the harbour edge where we walk a short distance to a converted fishing boat for our three hour sea journey. We are wearing as much as possible but at this point it doesn't feel too bad but who knows when we get away from port. We are welcomed on board by our captain and chief bird spotter Hamabe-san and his first mate Reg, who is on the wheelhouse.

A little after 9am we slowly leave our mooring and head out of the port, seeing Long-tailed and Harlequin Ducks, Common Scoter, Mallard and Greater Scaup. Julian shouts "falcon" as a small raptor comes into his binocular view but it's masked by the dark hillside behind, making it very difficult to see. Tony does incredibly well to pick it up as it zips through but sadly no-one else was that fortunate. Just after this we see three small 'peep-like' waders flying round that Julian thinks could be Temminck's Stint but not absolutely sure given the views.

Now we start out into the open water, seeing lots more Black Scoter and Harlequin Ducks with a few Long-tailed Ducks, with our first alcid of the day being a Common Guillemot. There are plenty of Pelagic Cormorants and Julian calls seven Stejneger's Scoter flying past, clearly showing their white wing patches. We are traveling north towards a group of small rock islands, where in summer there is a large seabird colony but obviously today they will be deserted. John spots a grebe in the water, which is a Red-necked Grebe before we get close to the islets and start to find several Spectacled Guillemots in the water. It is brilliant to get a good close view of these along with a couple of Common Guillemot.

On we travel past the rocks scanning the water constantly for anything different when Jean sees our first Ancient Murrelet, followed by John seeing one and finally

Julian finds a pair that hang around and allow us all to get a decent view on the moving boat. This heralds the end of our journey out and turn round, steaming our way back to port, with some spray now coming over the side and soaking some of us – but we don't mind at all as it's been an excellent start to the day. Around 11am we get back to the port with a few White-tailed Eagles and a single Steller's Sea Eagle above the ridge. We dock and climb off the boat, returning to the office block with our life jackets and thanking our crew for an excellent tour.

We walk to the bus and 'Dickie-san' is there waiting with news of some Asian Rosy Finches he has found along the road towards the town, so off we go in search of these difficult passerines. He brings us to the spot he saw them and we search the area but no sign, however we are undeterred and drive very slowly along the road and our driver sees a couple of small birds fly up and stops the bus. We check these and find our target, with a small flock of gorgeous pink Asian Rosy Finch – a great bird to find. Very happy with this we get back on the bus and set off to the services but again soon stop for a Steller's Sea Eagle sat in a tree at the side of the road.

On we go back to Nemuro for our daily visit to the convenience store, this time visiting the 7/11, which we agree is better for drinks and sandwiches but not as good for salads and fruit! It is well past midday by the time we are setting off again back south stopping at Sakaki Harbour, where we find a single Eurasian Teal along with some Wigeon and the usual Greater Scaup, etc. There are a few gulls loafing around on the harbour wall and we find a couple of Glaucous-winged and Kamchatka with the Slaty-backs but generally it's pretty quiet. We drive on and within 30 minutes we are crossing the river bridge into Kiritappu, where we see a flock of 30+ Whooper Swans from the bus and Julian glimpses a few waders. We are keen to have a better look so 'Dickie-san' skilfully negotiates the small road and takes us back to the edge of the river, where we stop and scan the area. There is a lot here, including lots of Greater Scaup along with smaller numbers of Wigeon, Shoveler and Goldeneye. Julian is searching for the waders he saw and finds three Falcated Duck amongst the Mallard, then the birds, which are Dunlin. Jean now sees another much larger flock of Dunlin over the river and Julian looks towards them as a male Goshawk comes into view, which is brilliant. Sadly it doesn't hang around, having a cursory attempt at catching a Dunlin before continuing out of sight behind the moored boats – but still fantastic to see.

On we drive heading still south but only a short way to the Kiritappu Peninsula, our final destination of the day. Despite being fairly exposed it isn't too cold here, surprisingly just being a few degrees below freezing point – positively tropical! We are ready for these conditions now and comfortably warm we set out towards the lighthouse, checking the sea either side of us periodically but just initially seeing Black Scoter and Pelagic Cormorants on the water. Just after the lighthouse we stop again and Julian spots a Temminck's Cormorant on the sea but is distracted by Jean and John B finding our first Sea Otter and a Harbour Seal just off the point. As we all gather here we manage to see most things but the

cormorant alights the sea and flies round before heading away down the coast. Our attention turns back to the mammals but not for long as Julian shouts "Peregrine, coming towards us!" and sure enough a cracking male is powering itself in our direction before heading along the cliffs and out of sight but then reappears again and gives us another fabulous fly-by – wow what a place.

We continue along the railed track to the point, where we spend some time watching one of the four Sea Otters bobbing around in the icy Northern Pacific Ocean, along with more looks at the seal and spotting a couple of Red-necked Grebes. Mayumi is keen to be back at the bus for 3.30pm as we have a long(ish) drive back to Nemuro, so we leave and walk back to the bus. The sun is starting to set as we are at the tracks highest point and the sea cliffs look dramatic in the late afternoon light and certainly worthy of getting our hands cold using our cameras. Eventually we reach the bus and the warmth inside is most welcome, so we regale ourselves of a couple of layers and settle down to the journey back north to Nemuro. A little after 5pm we reach our hotel and again go to our rooms for a relax or to the hot bath for a soak before going to dinner, which is another lavish affair.

Day 15: After breakfast we set off to the local Meiji Park, which is in the centre of Nemuro and as we get off the bus we see a flock of Tree Sparrows coming to a garden feeder. We walk slowly along the snow-covered paths around this lovely wee Park, firstly seeing a Steller's Sea Eagle fly over followed by fabulous views of an adult White-tailed Eagle. We actually see a local Japanese birdwatcher, who advises us on where to try for some passerines and this becomes the most productive area with a single (white-headed) Long-tailed Tit, several Marsh, Coal and Great Tits along with a brief look at a (Siberian) Nuthatch. We now slowly make our way back to the bus as it is generally quiet, with Barbara seeing a couple of Brown-eared Bulbuls on the way. Once we are all ready we set off for the coast and our first port (of call!)

After about 15 minutes we arrive at Habomai Port, where we are meant to be taking our second boat sea cruise from, but it is cancelled due to the sea swell. Within this very busy fishing port we see the usual suspects of Harlequin, Scaup, Wigeon, Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser but also a Common Pochard, which is unusual in the sea! We also spend a little time checking the roosting gulls, again seeing the expected Slaty-backs, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged but these are occasionally disturbed by one of the few White-tailed Eagles hanging around.

It is another lovely day on the Nemuro Peninsula, as we continue towards the point. We soon arrive at Cape Nosappu and after making full use of the facilities we walk down to a platform overlooking the sea and there are lots of seaduck and Pelagic Cormorant but the wind is strengthening and making it difficult to see through our binoculars and telescope. We decide to walk slowly round to the bird hide, which is situated under the lighthouse, all the while checking the cormorants for something different. It is much more pleasant here being slightly

out of the wind and in the direct sunshine, which warms our bodies. Straight away we find a couple of Harbour Seals bobbing about close inshore along with lots more seaduck. Julian spots a small long-necked pale bird with a black cap and says “think I’ve got a Slavonian Grebe here” so we put the scope on it and sure enough that’s what it is and showing really well. We continue to search and now we also find a few lovely Ancient Murrelets, which can be viewed much more easily through the scope than the previous day on the boat as we are not moving about, even though they are further away. This is then followed by a couple of lovely Spectacled Guillemots that actually have their spectacles on but still we struggle to find any Red-faced Cormorants amongst the Pelagics. After about an hour Mayumi thinks we should move on to another bird hide she knows of just along the coast, so we slowly make our way back to the bus and again set off.

Within 15 minutes we are stopping again at a sign pointing to Onnamoto Bird Hide and dutifully follow Mayumi along the track to a small wooden hide overlooking the ocean again, with a series of rocks in the near distance. The expected ducks, cormorants and gulls are seen, but the highlight is seeing a single Larcha Seal amongst the Harbour Seals, which is great although not easy to pick out with binoculars. Again we stay here in this comfortable hide sheltered from the biting wind, watching things come and go but two incredibly close White-tailed Eagles floating past is an fabulous bonus to this visit. It is now after noon and Mayumi is keen we find a convenience store so we can buy our picnic lunch for the final time in Japan.

We are back in Nemuro and after the lunch stop we make an impromptu visit to the cemetery, before heading out of the other side of the city to the Nemuro Nature Centre. On the way we see several Red-crowned Cranes at the edge of the river, a very good flock of Whooper Swans and Tony spots a Sika Deer on the hillside. At the Visitor Centre we go inside as the Hokkaido Bird Festival is taking place and it’s absolutely heaving with one other person, who actually leaves when we walk in! Joking apart it is lovely to see the effort being put in to promote conservation in this country without a great reputation. We are here for about half an hour and as we leave a couple of Steller’s Sea Eagles are seen above the small woodland along with 30+ Black-eared Kites, which is fantastic.

We are back on the bus and continue south down the Nemuro Peninsula to another hide at Tobai, that is overlooking the partially frozen Lake Furen. Before we get there Julian shouts “STOP please”. There on the ice is a Red Fox stood with an adult White-tailed Eagle next to it and the image is terrific. Sadly the fox immediately departs as our driver pulls over but the eagle stays long enough for us to get some very passable images, which is great. We reach the hide and park up before walking the short distance to the lake edge, it is still pretty cold within the hide but we gladly persevere. Directly across from us is an island with conifers on and in one tree we find four Steller’s Sea Eagles sat with at least two more nearby and a White-tailed Eagle – just what we had wanted

to see at some point. Also here are a couple more Red-crowned Cranes, plus plenty of the usual ducks in the brackish water.

After a while the cold is starting to get to us so the decision is made to move on to our final site of the day – Shiminnonori Forest. This is not far at all and after only 10 minutes and on the edge of Nemuro we park again and put on all our cold weather gear as we are having a walk through another deciduous woodland. This place is lovely and made even better when we flush both Steller's and White-tailed Eagles from the trees with one staying and offering a chance of some photographs to all of us. We reach a small hide with a few feeders in front that are attracting lots of Marsh Tits, along with Great Tit, Nuthatch and a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers. We actually opt not to sit in the hide choosing to continue along the snow-covered track to a junction with an information map. It is now late afternoon and starting to lose the light a little as the clouds are darkening all around. We see there is a circular walk but that would be at least an hour and could be difficult if we lose more light. Julian deals with the options and says we should slowly return to the bus as its not worth risking anything on our last day in Hokkaido. Sadly we are resigned to this and wander back to the bus, get on and start back to the hotel. We get to our destination at 4.30pm with now plenty of time to pack, etc. before dinner.

Day 16: After another 7am breakfast we are waiting to leave (with great sadness) at 8.30am, where we take our luggage to the bus and get ourselves ready for a three hour transfer to Kushiro Airport. As we leave the city we see a flock of Tree Sparrows and just outside at the river there are a couple of Red-crowned Cranes. We pass the previous day's Nature Centre seeing again lots of Black-eared Kites and Barbara spots a White-tailed Eagle above the trees. Mayumi is again keeping our interest going with stories of her childhood, history of the country and demonstrations of the traditional music of Japan. Julian sees an adult Steller's Sea Eagle sat in a tree but we are past before he can say something and along the coastal areas we see some Slaty-backed Gulls, but generally it is quiet.

After about 90 minutes we stop at a roadside services, which is most welcome before continuing south again for the second half of the journey. We are planning a 30 minute stop at a Red-crowned Crane feeding area and as we approach we can see some examples of this Japanese iconic bird. Mayumi pays our entrance to the centre and it's actually quite pleasant in the sunshine as we stand at the viewpoint watching at least 100 of these beauties. Some are dancing, but half-heartedly, some are bugling, which is fabulous but most are just feeding on the grain. Also here are several Whooper Swans with one poor individual being goaded by a nearby crane, which is quite amusing and the only other thing of note we see is a Japanese Wagtail – this is great as we end the trip on an endemic. At the agreed time we leave the crane centre and get back on the bus, making the final journey to the airport in about 20 minutes, with plenty of time before our flight to Haneda.

We say “sayonara and domo arigato” to ‘Dickie-san our driver, he has been an absolute revelation being not only a good and safe driver, he has found some of the key species on Hokkaido – well worth his weight in gold. We grab our bags and head into the small airport, where we seamlessly check in before going to lunch at one of the upstairs restaurants. This is another lovely and again large meal but it is quite nice to pick our own preferences off the menu. Once we have finished we go back downstairs to security where sadly leave John B in the lounge – he is leaving an hour later for Sapporo where he is spending a couple of days with a friend before heading back to the UK. We are all very sorry to say goodbye to this good man, who has been a great asset to this tour. However we get through to airside where we settle down for an hour before our short internal flight. Incredibly the flight is slightly late setting off but not much and an hour and half later we are touching down at Haneda Airport, Terminal 2. We need to get to our hotel at terminal three, so after collecting our bags we take a shuttle bus across to it. We easily find the hotel and it’s quite nice to know this place and the layout having been here 15 days previously. Dinner is scheduled for 7pm so we have plenty of time to freshen up before meeting in the restaurant.

Day 17: We meet at reception at 9am and head off to the International Terminal, where Mayumi says “goodbye” and we say “sayonara” to the ‘Land of the Rising Sun’.

Species of the Trip:

Jean – Steller's Sea Eagle / White bellied Green Pigeon

Tony – Blakiston's Fish Owl / Sea Otter

Barbara – Blakiston's Fish Owl / Steller's Sea Eagle

John D – Blakiston's Fish Owl / Steller's Sea Eagle

Caroline – Red-crowned Crane / Steller's Sea Eagle

John B – Blakiston's Fish Owl / Steller's Sea Eagle

Mayumi – Common Seal / Largha Seal

Julian – Blakiston's Fish Owl / Elegant Bunting

Place of the Trip:

Jean – Yoroushi Onsen

Tony – Hokkaido

Barbara – Hokkaido

John D – Yoroushi Onsen

Caroline – Kairourawa Forest

John B – Yoroushi Onsen

Mayumi – Yatsushiro River Mouth

Julian – Yatsushiro River Mouth

Magic Moment:

Jean – Seeing the Blakiston's Fish Owl very early morning

Tony – Blakiston's Fish Owl appearing for the first time

Barbara – Blakiston's Fish Owl being covered in snow

John D – Blakiston's Fish Owl appearing at just the right time!

Caroline – Blakiston's Fish Owl appearing for the first time

John B – First night banquet at the Kambayashi Onsen

Mayumi – To have the boat cruise go out and seeing the seabirds and then seeing the Asian Rosyfinches

Julian – Of course the BFO but also seeing the Red-crowned Cranes dancing like ballerinas and making their wonderful calls to each other – awesome!

BIRDS

Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Falcated Duck	<i>Anas falcata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Stejneger's Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>
Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Smew	<i>Mergus albellus</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Pacific Diver	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Black-faced Spoonbill	<i>Platalea minor</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Great White Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Temminck's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capillatus</i>
Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>
Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>

Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus lineatus</i>
White-tailed Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Steller's Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Mountain Hawk Eagle	<i>Nisaetus nipalensis</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
White-naped Crane	<i>Grus vipio</i>
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
Hooded Crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>
Red-crowned Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Long-billed Plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Solitary Snipe	<i>Gallinago solitaria</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Black-tailed Gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>
Kamchatka (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus kamchatkensis</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus heinei</i>
Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae</i>
Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Spectacled Guillemot	<i>Cephus carbo</i>
Ancient Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>
White-bellied Green Pigeon	<i>Treron sieboldii</i>
Blakiston's Fish Owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>
Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>

Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Crested Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>
Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides kizuki</i>
White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Japanese Woodpecker	<i>Picus awokera</i>
Ryukyu Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus tegimae</i>
Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Carion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Eastern Great Tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>
Varied Tit	<i>Poecile varius</i>
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Asian House Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Brown-eared Bulbul	<i>Microscelis amaurotis</i>
Japanese Bush Warbler	<i>Cettia diphone</i>
Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris (japonica)</i>
White-cheeked Starling	<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Pale Thrush	<i>Turdus pallidus</i>
Dusky Thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>
Northern Red-flanked Bluetail	<i>Luscinia cyanura</i>
Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureus</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>
Russet Sparrow	<i>Passer rutilans</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Japanese Accentor	<i>Prunella rubida</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White (Black-backed) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba (lugens)</i>
Japanese Wagtail	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>
Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>

Buff-bellied Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Oriental Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis sinica</i>
Asian Rosy Finch	<i>Leucosticte arctoa</i>
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>
Chestnut-eared Bunting	<i>Emberiza fucata</i>
Rustic Bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
Elegant (Yellow throated) Bunting	<i>Emberiza elegans</i>
Black-faced Bunting	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>

MAMMALS

Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>
Japanese Macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>
Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon yezoensis</i>
Black Rat	<i>Ratus norvegicus</i>
Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutis</i>
Spotted/Largha Seal (Gomafu)	<i>Phoca largha</i>
Harbour Seal (Zenigata)	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>

Mouse (sp) – seen at Yoroushi Onsen

Seal/Sealion (sp) – seen from Yatsushiro Port, assumed from size and coloration to be Steller's Sea-lion but unlikely on distribution?

NOTES

Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* - 5 at Arasaki, 11 at Yatsushiro.

The Black-faced Spoonbill is a globally threatened species listed as 'Endangered' by Birdlife. The total population as counted in the 2012 census is 2693 birds, with an estimated 1600 being adults.

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. It is currently listed as 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife, with a decreasing world population of less than 3500 mature individuals. Of these, some 1,200 spend the winter in eastern Hokkaido.

Hooded Crane *Grus monacha*

The most numerous Crane at Arasaki and although we never got a definitive number of those present this year, it is typically as many as 10,000 birds. The official total population 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!

Blakiston's Fish Owl *Bubo blakistoni*

A great show by the male at Yoroushi Onsen and the timing was impeccable!. Apparently the old female disappeared and the old male is now paired with one of his female offspring from two years previously. We hope they are very happy together!

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*

The one seen well on Hokkaido that was of the paler 'japonica' race.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

On Honshu the race concerned is 'trivirgatus' and on Kyushu we saw birds of the race 'kiusiuensis'.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Seen on all three islands – on Honshu, we saw birds of the race 'hondoensis', on Kyushu we saw one of the race 'roseilia' and on Hokkaido we had good looks at the attractive 'Siberian' birds that belong to the race 'asiatica'.